# POST-MATERNITY LEAVE DEMOTIONS & THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

# REINSTATED BUT DOWNGRADED: MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF POST-MATERNITY LEAVE DEMOTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT VIOLATION

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*Abstract*

While the transition back to work following maternity leave is a stage of a woman's career that can have significant impact on the rest of her working life, this remains an under-researched topic. The current study examines mothers' return to work experiences, with a specific focus on the downgrading to their jobs they encounter, perceived as demotions, which no previous study has pursued. Drawing from research investigating mothers' psychological contracts and their turnover intentions, the current study examines the relationship between demotions, psychological contract violation and employment outcomes. Also of interest was whether psychological contract violation initiated a process of grieving, as mothers struggled to separate from their identities as valued employees. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight mothers. Mothers who perceived their restructured jobs as demotions experienced psychological contract violations in response, and also described emotions consistent with a process of grieving. However, not all mothers who experienced psychological contract breach or violation quit their jobs. Implications for working mothers and for future research are discussed.

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*Introduction*

Our understanding of mothers' return to work experiences remains fairly limited, despite the fact that, once their maternity leaves are over, these transition experiences can have long-lasting impacts on the working lives of mothers (Grether & Wiese, 2016; Ladge, Humberd & Eddleston, 2018). In this thesis I hope to expand our knowledge of this crucial transition period by drawing attention to the common and yet largely unnoticed experience of demotion following maternity leave. In order to better understand the impact of this experience on returning mothers, I interviewed eight mothers, all professionals, who have returned to work from maternity leave within the last five years. The purpose of the interviews was to explore and compare the experiences of mothers who had returned to demoted jobs with those who had returned to the same or equivalent jobs. This thesis builds upon past research that uses the concept of psychological contract as a means of articulating mothers' responses to perceived organizational injustice (Millward, 2006; Morgan & King, 2012). I sought to discover whether mothers form specific psychological contracts surrounding the jobs to which they return, particularly around employers' obligations to reinstate them to a job that is the same or equivalent to their pre-maternity role in terms of quality of tasks and opportunities for advancement. The psychological contract has also been used by previous researchers as a vehicle for understanding the

emotional impact of organizational injustice, highlighting that women suffer not only economic and career setbacks but also a psychological contract violation. A psychological contract "describes an employee's and employer's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement…binding the parties to some set of reciprocal obligations." (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). The reciprocal obligations are based on promises about the future, and can be communicated via oral discussion, organizational practices and policies, written documents, etc. The emotions experienced as a result of a perception of psychological contract breach are known as the psychological contract violation. (Barnett, Gorden, Gareis & Morgan, 2004). I hypothesized that mothers who perceived their restructured job as a demotion would be more likely to experience the intense and negative emotions associated with psychological contract violation. I also wanted to find out whether violation of the contract led to quit intentions and an exit from the job. This would constitute a valuable addition to our understanding of the specific types of psychological contracts mothers form pertaining to their workforce re-entry, and the impacts of a violation of this contract.

More mothers are working in paid employment than at any other time in history, and yet they still face career-damaging discrimination in the workplace. These forms of discrimination are thought to derive from cultural norms that perpetuate the male breadwinner ideology and promote "ideals of care" that define who should be fulfilling the care-giving role (Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann, 2012). When women become mothers, they are judged to be less committed to

their work (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). They are also subject to cultural stereotypes that view women as less competent and more "motherly" following their transition to motherhood (Sabat, King, & Jones, 2016). The Ideal Worker Norm is a widely used concept that has been linked to judgements made against women, particularly when their caregiving roles are emphasized during the transition to motherhood, because they are assumed to be no longer committed to their paid work (Hampson, 2018; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010). We know that these ideas underpin well-researched barriers such as the motherhood penalty (Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann, 2012) and the maternal wall (Williams & Westfall, 2006). But we are far from a complete understanding of how these barriers operate within every stage of a mother's career. At the stage of work-force re-entry, when a mother's caregiving role is particularly emphasized, in what ways does discrimination against mothers operate? I suggest that one way is through the practice of reassigning returning mothers to roles that are downgraded both in qualities of tasks and opportunities for advancement.

In the past three decades, our culture has increasingly portrayed women as challenged by the competing roles of work and motherhood and often choosing to leave their careers to devote themselves to caring for their family. Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) assert, "The most frequent assumption by members of the popular press is that women are leaving corporations because they need to resign for family reasons" (p. 107). Both popular media and research have emphasized the concept of "work-life conflict," thought to be experienced by mothers more than

any other group, because mothers still shoulder the majority of childcare responsibilities, particularly when their children are young. In response, a wave of media articles, books and social science research has proliferated, about how to overcome this conflict and achieve "work-life balance." More recently, sociologists and cultural critics have begun to urge us to look more closely at what is at the root of the conflict women experience when the demands of career and home compete. In her recent bestseller, Brigid Schulte (2015) asks, "Why do so many mothers who work for pay…feel they can never spend enough time with their kids? Probably because so many people have been telling them they don't" (p.179). Collins (2019) points out that a focus on work-life conflict/balance has an individualizing effect and directs the conversation away from social policies that either support or undermine mothers' work success. Slaughter (2015) notes, "Why not tackle this issue from a different angle? Perhaps the problem is not with women, but with work" (p. 51).

My interest in mothers transitioning back into the workforce originates from my own personal experience. I returned from maternity leave to find that I had been demoted in that I was reassigned to a different department, given a different title, and tasked with what amounted to the office "housework" (booking travel for staff, procuring office furniture and machines, coordinating with office service providers and the building's janitorial staff). When I spoke with my supervisor about my desire to return to my pre-maternity leave job in communications and human resources, I was told that I would be welcome to

apply if a position were to be posted for the communications department, but that I would need to do extra work to "prove" that I was worthy of the position. Over the following eight months I attempted to throw myself into the new position, despite feeling dispirited, devalued, angry, and often depressed. Ultimately, I felt that there was no future for me with the organization, and, weighing my job circumstances against the considerable financial and emotional cost of keeping my infant daughter in full-time daycare, I tendered my resignation and left the organization.

It took many years, and many conversations with other mothers I met during my career as a stay-at-home-mother to realize that what I had experienced was not unique; in fact, it was disturbingly common. My "mom friends" spoke of returning to find that either their jobs were restructured beyond recognition, or that their capacity to carry out their previous jobs effectively seemed to have diminished in the eyes of their supervisors. As a result, many mothers, like myself, knew they were no longer committed to their organizations within the first weeks, days, or even hours back on the job. There was no question that we felt work-life balance was difficult to achieve as working mothers; while we may have been surprised at just *how* difficult, it was something that we expected. We knew our time would be crunched, that we would spend less time with our children and that we often would go to bed with the dishes still in the sink or a pile of laundry left undone. The degree to which it seemed impossible to get just about anything done may have been a mild surprise, but in essence we expected

those challenges. What we did not expect, though, was the degree to which the value of our paid work seemed to be so diminished in the eyes of our managers and organizations. Our subsequent intentions to leave had less to do with difficulty balancing our jobs and care work at home than it did with our feeling of being shuffled around like pawns on a chessboard, moved to new projects, positions, and even departments without our consultation or input, and in a manner that downgraded all aspects of our work experiences and opportunities.

Previous research linking the experience of mothers adapting to work following childbirth and the psychological contract provides a useful framework for exploring the impact of demotion on mothers returning to work. This research has suggested that mothers form specific psychological contracts based on their status as new mothers and that these contracts are affected by work factors and a perception of injustice (Morgan & King, 2012). Thus, in exploring the impacts of demotion on returning mothers, I hoped to discover whether mothers form psychological contracts pertaining to their reinstatement to their pre-maternity roles. This aspect of the study builds on existing research surrounding the impact of psychological contract violation on job satisfaction and organizational commitment in returning mothers. Research suggests that certain types of psychological contract violation can lead not only to a severing of commitment in the form of turnover intentions, but also emotions that are so extreme that they have been compared to Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief (Guerrero & Naulleau, 2016). Thus, I examined the responses of participants in the current study for

signs of psychological contract violation, turnover intentions and whether their thoughts and emotions surrounding the violation were also indicative of a grief experience. Evidence of grief would serve to further emphasize the importance of understanding the impact of job restructuring and of providing support to mothers returning to work.

A second overarching goal of the current research is to draw attention to the inadequacy of social policies designed to protect the jobs of returning mothers. In Ontario, our employment law recognizes that the return to work is a vulnerable time in the working life of a mother. Ontario's Employment Standards Act 2000 (ESA) protects the jobs of employees who take pregnancy/parental leave by the "Right to Reinstatement" which requires employers to provide them with "the same job the employee had before the leave began; or, a comparable job if the employee's old job no longer exists." Concomitant with this is the "right to be free from penalty," which prevents employers from penalizing parents in any way for taking, planning to take, being eligible to take, or who will become eligible to take, pregnancy/parental leave ("Pregnancy and Parental Leave," 2018). In my case, the Right to Reinstatement had been observed. I was still designated a manager, although in a different department, and my salary remained the same. And yet, I experienced this unexpected change as a qualitative demotion. It seemed clear to me that my organization did not perceive me as the same kind of employee I had been before motherhood. My resignation was not motivated by a desire to right an imbalance between work and mothering, but by a sense that I

had no future with the organization after my job had been changed, and no way to recover that future. Under Canadian legislation, the Right to Reinstatement was designed to protect me from the injustice of losing my job because I became a mother. But the Right to Reinstatement does little to protect mothers like me who did not receive a demotion to a less senior position or a reduction in pay. I believe, however, that when an employee is moved to a different department and given a different title, without their prior knowledge or input, that this is an injustice; and more importantly, that it significantly impacts a mother's adjustment to her job and employment outcomes.

With the Right to Reinstatement providing no true protection for the careers of returning mothers, it is not surprising that many of us considered pursuing accusations of constructive dismissal. "Demoting the employee, reducing the employee's job responsibilities or changing the employee's reporting relationships" ("Constructive Dismissal," n.d.) is included in a list of changes that commonly trigger a constructive dismissal case. Unfortunately, constructive dismissal cases are very difficult to prove, and require meticulous documentation on the part of the employee. During a time of upheaval and stress in the life of a new mother, this burden of proof can seem an impossibly difficult route when the ultimate reward is a severance package and not what was actually lost—a career, dignity, and sense of professional value. One mother I interviewed had in fact consulted a lawyer about the possibility of a constructive dismissal case and was told that, while she might technically have a case, it would be difficult, and did

she really want to go through all that and risk her name's being associated with a constructive dismissal case when seeking future employment? And so, many women are left with holding the short end of the stick. We are discouraged from pursuing constructive dismissal cases, and yet we feel a deep sense of injustice over our treatment. Without an understanding of the deep and lasting impact of mothers' return to work experiences, we are unlikely to hold accountable those employers who hold biased perceptions and discriminate against mothers returning to work.

A common limitation of the existing research, and one from which the current study also suffers, is the homogeneity of the studied group. Professional, white, middle-class partnered women have often been the demographic considered in research surrounding motherhood and work. For this reason, commonly used terms such as "the wage gap" should be qualified as referring to a specific group of working mothers. For instance, mothers working low-wage jobs in which women of colour are disproportionately represented, in fact experience a smaller wage gap compared to other workers in their sector because low wages are widespread in their part of the labour market. While no one demographic group is protected from being driven from the workforce after having children, partnered, white middle-class mothers are certainly more likely to have the privilege of considering their options—to stay or leave the workforce, or to take the risk of changing jobs. It must be acknowledged that terms such as "wage gap," and the "maternal wall" refer almost exclusively to white, middle-class and upper-

middle-class women (Glauber, 2007). While results of the current research are constrained by homogeneous characteristics of the sample of participants and their white-collar work environments, I believe it is possible to derive an indication of a cultural crisis of work. Too few professions offer the kind of standard employment contract and opportunity for advancement that women could once find in white-collar work; feminized sectors such as healthcare and education are thought to be the last refuge for women to find secure work that can provide even a base level ability to care for a family. In some U.S. states, for instance, female teachers and nurses have become the breadwinners of their families, as male-dominated manufacturing sectors crumble (Collins, 2012). If mothers are being pushed out from even these feminized sectors, in which a large majority of women will become mothers in their working lives, what does this indicate about the future of job security for professional women in these last-refuge sectors?

As a researcher in the field of social science, it is my goal and I believe my duty to explore the lived experiences of people who fall through our policy gaps, rendering them outside of the protection our state and society claims to want to provide. If we are to understand both the needs of working mothers and the responsibility of employers to be sensitive to those needs, we must ask mothers directly about their experiences. Armed with this understanding, we can bring specific solutions to the table. In summary, the current research asks: How does the experience of returning to a demoted position following maternity leave

impact the emotional and psychological well-being, as well as the employment outcomes of mothers? And further, do mothers experience psychological contract violation as a result of demotions following maternity leave?

*Literature Review*

A good deal of research has been devoted to how the interaction of motherhood and employment threatens the career success of mothers, particularly when they have young children (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014). In many OECD countries, there is little difference between the percentages of partnered women and men who work full-time outside the home, but when children enter the picture, only approximately one third of partnered women are employed full-time in the workforce (Apps, Kabatek, Rees & van Soest, 2016). In Canada, 58% of stay at home mothers have at least one child at home under the age of 5 ("Employment Patterns," 2014). In the United States, 36.1% of mothers with children aged 5 and under are not in the labour force (Child Health USA, 2014) and in the UK, less than 10% of partnered mothers work continuously between the birth of their child and the age of school entry (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). The labour force patterns of Canadian mothers with young children are impacted by numerous factors, many of which are similar to those faced by mothers internationally: difficulty accessing safe and affordable childcare (Horne & Breitkruz, 2018), societal pressure on mothers to provide an intensive level of care to their families (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Collins, 2019; Meussen & Van Laar, 2018), and, most pertinent to the current research, stigmatization of mothers on the part of employers, leading to discrimination (Summers, Howe, McElroy, Buckley, Pahng, et al, 2018).

When women become mothers, they are often judged by employers as less competent and less committed to their work (Buzzannell & Miu, 2007; Sabat, Lindsey, King, & Jones, 2016). Pregnancy, maternity leave, and the transition back to work are stages in woman's working life when their mothering role, and potential discriminatory attitudes associated with motherhood, are particularly salient. Women report higher perceptions of mistreatment following an absence for the purpose of childbirth or childcare than do women without children, or men with or without children who have taken leaves. Women who took leaves for the purpose of childcare felt "dumped on," "ignored," and "micromanaged" (Kmec, O'Connor, & Scheiman, 2014).

A great deal of research suggests that what underlies these discriminatory attitudes and behaviours is cultural stereotype that when women become mothers, their primary focus becomes their children. This in turn means that they can no longer embody the "ideal worker" that has become the standard in North American society. The ideal worker norm forms our cultural ideas of how committed employees behave. An ideal worker is always available to respond to workplace demands, works long hours, and puts her job before anything else. Because the care-giving role of women is especially prominent when they become mothers to young children, they are judged to be less likely to live up to the definition of an ideal worker. It is assumed that their primary loyalty has shifted to their caring role. Mothers are then less likely to receive rewards in the form of pay and promotions that those deemed ideal workers receive (Kelly, Ammons,

Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Kmec, O'Connor, & Schieman, 2014; Hampson, 2018).

A recent study conducted by Langan & Sanders (2017) provides a window into how the ideal worker norm is wielded against mothers in practice. They examined the experiences of mothers in Canadian police forces through their transition to motherhood on the job. Police work is well-known to be a 'boys' club,' in that it is an intensely masculine culture. "Police mothers" are thought to experience the highest stress levels among all police employees, partly because their workplace culture sees the roles of mothering and policing as incompatible. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with police mothers, exploring their experiences of pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work. They found that all stages of the transition to maternity were fraught with stress and difficulty, and, pertinent to the current research, that some police mothers returned to find they had been demoted. One mother spoke with her supervisor about the fact that she was no longer being assigned the specialized work she had been trained to do and was told that she had to "re-prove herself" to compensate for her time away. While the culture of police work is inarguably more masculine than most other work environments, research shows that mothers across a wide array of work environments feel compelled to downplay and even hide their maternal status in order to avoid being stigmatized as less committed and competent (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014).

Not only are mothers judged to fall short of our cultural stereotypes of a committed worker, but efforts to re-prove their commitment to work following childbirth must be exerted against the societal norm that positions women as naturally suited to the caregiving role. This cultural norm is expressed in the workplace both explicitly, through for instance comments about mothers' new responsibilities to her children, and implicitly via an organizational culture that stigmatizes mothers when they make use of family-friendly policies (Hampson, 2018; Slaughter, 2015). These workplace norms echo wider societal norms and social policies; in Canada, for instance, families with children under 18 receive a tax benefit, which covers only a small fraction of the daycare fees that would be required for one child. For too many families, decent and affordable childcare is simply inaccessible, which forces parents to make difficult choices about who should remain in their full-time paid employment and who should sacrifice all or part of their paid work time to care for children. In our liberal welfare state, the rhetoric surrounding the empowerment of women and mothers stands in striking contrast to the near total lack of support for the careers of mothers. These realities however, tend to become obscured by the prevalence of a cultural narrative that emphasizes the allure of full-time motherhood, and what many have described as pressure to carry out an "intensive mothering" role (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). Researchers examining the depiction of women in women's magazines from the 1950s to the 1980s found that, while depictions of traditional roles declined during this time, magazines continued to portray a woman's career role

as less important to her than marriage or family (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). Kuperberg et al. conducted a meta-analysis of media articles published between 1988 and 2003 that included a discussion of heterosexual women who left work to become stay-at-home mothers. They noted an emphasis on mothers feeling pulled toward home, rather than pushed out of the workplace: "Typical was the woman who talked of 'longing' and 'regret'…Few women, however, offered work-related reasons for leaving." (p.505). A comprehensive analysis of our cultural promotion of women devoting themselves to their mothering role is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to note that both workplace and wider cultural influences promote the concept that women tend to disengage from work when they become mothers due to the irresistible pull of childrearing duties. Work factors that act to push mothers in that direction, however, are left out of the conversation.

Work-life conflict research has increased over the past few decades as traditional gendered family roles have shifted from single-earner to dual-earner couple models. Work-family conflict has become the centre of this research, in an attempt to understand mothers' role conflicts that have emerged between the competing norms and expectations of work and family (Byron, 2005). Mothers are thought to be particularly susceptible to work-family conflict because women are still subjected to gender role expectations that they carry primary responsibility for childrearing (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken & Moss-Racusin, 2017; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Kelly, 2005). Studies conducted on mothers'

experiences of work-life conflict tend to uphold a wider cultural belief in the pull of family responsibilities as explaining why women's careers are negatively impacted by motherhood. This aspect of the narrative continues and further entrenches the belief that it is mothers' natural orientation toward caregiving and the pull toward home that make pursuing a career so difficult, rather than employer practices and cultural messages that push them toward the domestic sphere. Slaughter (2015) points out that positioning work-life balance as the key to mothers' career success has meant a number of truths have been overlooked. She argues that, in truth, work-life balance is a struggle for any worker who also performs a caring role outside of work. Yet, even when employers are confronted with the fact that an equal number of their male and female employees are experiencing work-family conflict and leaving because of a culture of overwork, they obstinately maintain their viewpoint that work-family conflict is a problem faced only by women (Padavac, Ely, & Reid, 2015, as cited in Slaughter, 2015). Social science research, too, has often focused on work-life conflict as an idiosyncratic problem of mothers, rather than a product of an ideal worker norm culture or other discriminatory work factors faced by women. A dismayingly large number of studies have looked to individual characteristics to explain variations between mothers in their ability to overcome the conflict. Differences in levels of maternal confidence, (Ladge, Humberd & Eddleston, 2018), self-efficacy levels (Houle, Chiocchio, Favreau & Villeneuve, 2009), and the use of self-regulatory strategies (Wiese & Heidemeier, 2012) are among the offered

explanations for why some mothers are more challenged than others by work-life conflict.

Metz (2011) notes it is important to correct the enduring perception that family responsibilities are what drives women from the workforce, because "inaccurate perceptions contribute to the mismanagement of human resources and, hence, to costly personal and organizational outcomes" (p.286). In support of this viewpoint, a number of studies indicate that assumptions about mothers' work-life conflict as the main barrier to career success are indeed obscuring other serious obstacles (Maineiro & Sullivan, 2005). Chang, Chin & Ye (2014) examined whether career expectations or work-family conflict were the prime determinants of mothers' commitment to their jobs, and found that mothers' perceptions of work-family conflict had *no effect* on their affective commitment. They conclude that "career facets of working mothers, compared with conflict issues, have been underemphasized" (p.694). These mothers measured higher than other employees in their level of work commitment, but lower than other employees in their career expectations. Other studies have found that work-family conflict had no effect, or had minimal effect, on mothers' commitment to their organization when compared to other work factors such as promotion expectancy (Leschyshyn & Minnotte, 2014; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Metz, 2011). Hoobler, Wayne and Lemmon (2009) designed a study to look at how managers' cognitions relate to their perception of women as promotable, and the subconscious stereotyping known as "think leader, think male." They found that

even when family responsibilities and women's own perceptions of their family to work conflict were controlled for, managers *assumed* that women experienced a higher degree of family to work conflict and therefore were less promotable. This result was true whether the managers were male or female, and despite the fact that female employees reported slightly less family to work conflict than their male coworkers.

A dominating focus on work-life balance has also underpinned the concept of "family-friendly" policies such as flex-time. While family-friendly policies have the appearance of creating an organizational culture supportive to mothers by allowing them to better meet the demands of mothering young children, research shows that mothers who access these policies are stigmatized, and may be penalized (Slaughter, 2015). Overlaying family-friendly policies onto a culture that still favours those who conform to the ideal worker norm and discriminates against those in a caregiving role leads to a gap between "law on the books and law in action" (Hampson, 2018, p. 511). The discrimination and prejudice encountered by mothers who use family-friendly policies render this "solution" yet another factor acting to push mothers out of the workplace.

In this thesis I wish to expand on our understanding of the prejudice-based behaviours and attitudes of employers, by drawing attention to the experience of mothers who are demoted after maternity leave. Unfortunately, little research exists assessing the impact of demotions on employees in general, or the impact of demotions on new mothers specifically. Whether discussing the effects of

occupational downgrading on employees in general, or on mothers specifically, much of the research utilizes the framework of the psychological contract to illustrate the mechanism by which restructuring impacts employee behaviour and well-being. The research distinguishes between a psychological contract *breach* occurs when either party perceives that a promise has not been kept, whereas a psychological contract *violation* refers to the feelings associated with the perception of breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). It is important to distinguish between the two because research shows that it is the violation of the contract— the anger, shock, hurt and sense of betrayal that leads to the intention to leave (Barnett et al., 2004). Rousseau points out that "the concept of a psychological contract is tied to the individual's commitment to the organization. Commitment has been characterized by three factors: Acceptance of the organization's values, willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, and desire to remain an employee" (p. 125).

Psychological contract theory takes as its foundation the approach that employer-employee relationships are bi-directional, and while mothers are at the receiving end of expectations (or doubts) about their work commitment, they also form their own expectations about how their status as new mothers should inform their treatment at work. Millward (2006) was among the first to apply psychological contract theory to the experience of new mothers returning to their jobs. She found that pre-maternity leave, mothers' psychological contract feelings were primarily focused on their own perceived failure to uphold their end of the

contract. Preparing for maternity leave, these mothers felt guilty about the trouble

their organizations would have to go through in order to cover their positions

while they were on leave, as well as guilt over fatigue and their difficulty

maintaining their job performance at pre-pregnancy levels. Upon their return to

work, however, mothers' feelings shifted toward an expectation that they would

be treated not only as valued employees but also that their new life circumstances

would be taken into account. When these expectations were not met,

psychological contract violation feelings in the form of psychological withdrawal

and forming a self-definition as "mothers who work" were the result.

Another early study examined the psychological contracts of employed

parents: Borrill and Kidd (1994) found that mothers were particularly susceptible

to experiencing psychological contract violation. They conducted semi-structured

interviews with seven women and six men, all of whom were professionals who

had been actively pursuing a career prior to parenthood, and had returned to work

following a leave within the previous nine months. They found that whereas

fathers reported feeling supported in both their leave-taking and in their more

frequent absences or leaving work early, mothers reported that accessing this

flexibility often meant being on the receiving end of the message that having a

child meant they were no longer committed to the organization. Psychological

breach formed as a result of a perceived discrepancy between the official

organizational policies and organizational practice. While family-friendly policies

were in place, a culture of support for those accessing those policies was not. This

breach resulted in mothers' feelings of insecurity, anxiety and mistrust—all

feelings associated with psychological contract violation. The researchers note

that the psychological contract violation has implications for both job satisfaction

and retention, particularly when taken in conjunction with research findings

indicating that "for women managers, at least, it is workplace variables (for

example, lack of time flexibility and responsibility, and unmet expectations with

regard to career advancement) rather than the presence of competing non-work

commitments, that predict women's intention to leave their organizations" (Rosin

& Korabek, as cited in Borrill & Kidd, 1994, p. 229).

Once employees become mothers, they often find that they experience

"occupational downgrading" (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Kahn, Garcia-Manglano, &

Bianchi, 2014).  Studies show, for instance, that even when the jobs of mothers

are restructured in a manner that is viewed by mothers as beneficial to their work-

life balance, these mothers can still experience a sense of demotion and a reduced

status in the eyes of their organization. Barnett, Gordon, Gareis & Morgan (2004)

studied the connections between "schedule-driven job design," psychological

contract violation, and turnover intentions of female doctors and licensed practical

nurses who were also mothers of at least one child under school age. They found

that even though the availability of an option to work a reduced schedule is

assumed to assist mothers with their work satisfaction and quality of life, some

employees experienced the change as a psychological contract violation. After

reducing their hours, employees felt that they were marginalized and judged by

their organizations. They found that the degree of psychological contract violation did not vary as a function of occupation or number of hours worked, but that participants from both groups were more reactive to their psychological contract violations when they had accepted job restructuring in the form of reduced work hours. Such findings have significant implications for the current research in that they suggest that turnover intentions as a result of psychological contract violation can vary according to other work factors. Also, the finding that psychological contract violation was experienced as a result of job restructuring that was originally perceived by both the employer and the employees as beneficial suggests that the impacts of unanticipated changes that are perceived as a demotion would be associated with significantly more negative  psychological contract violations, psychological and emotional impacts, turnover intentions and employment outcomes.

To date, only one study has been conducted to examine closely the emotional experiences of employees who experience psychological contract violation, and what might account for variation between participants in the intensity of emotion following a violation. Guerrero and Naulleau (2016) compare the feelings associated with the psychological contract violation— betrayal, disappointment, frustration, resentment, anger and profound psychological distress—with Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief. They observed that, while not all experiences of psychological contract violation lead to such feelings, when the violation involves the deprivation of an "object" in which the individual is highly

invested, grief-like feelings can result. In these cases, the "object" is a collective

term for the organizational values, an ideal of recognition or success, etc. that

were previously "so valent at work that, to accept their loss, the individual is

compelled to mourn them" (p. 640). The researchers found that not all of the

employees who experienced psychological contract violation entered a mourning

process in order to recover, but the six out of sixteen participants who did enter

the grief process did so in order to recover from the loss of psychological contract

elements that were "valent in their psychic identity" (p. 645). One participant, for

instance, showed the stages of grief after her employer changed her job to one that

offered a lower salary, and in the process the participant discovered her supervisor

had criticized her work to someone else. Because the need to be valued at work

was a valent element in her identity, the reduced salary and supervisor criticism

meant these elements were taken away. Participants in this study reported initial

stages paralysis, which typifies the denial phase of grief, followed by anger stage,

expressed as resentment, outrage, and injustice. "Them" vs "us" language was

typical at this stage, indicating feelings of isolation, disillusionment and

resignation. None of the participants in this study were observed to enter the

recovery stages of grief (acceptance, leading to inner peace), possibly due to the

fact that the 12-month observation period was not long enough.

Botsford (2009) was the first to claim that mothers form psychological

contracts that contain specific expectations related to supervisors' family

supportive behaviours. This study suggested that supervisors may be perceived as

expecting returning mothers to still conform to the ideal worker norm, and that

this violates mothers' psychological contracts because they believe their

supervisor has an obligation to take their new status as mothers into account.

Botsford positions these findings as "the first empirical research to indicate that

mothers' intentions to leave depend on fulfillment of their psychological contracts

related to family and fair treatment in the workplace, rather than personal

preferences to spend time with children" (p. 1).

Morgan & King (2012) also explored whether mothers experience contract

breach in their relationship with supervisors over issues related to family in

addition to work factors. They surveyed 181 American mothers from multiple

organizations, and found that mothers' psychological breach related to family,

over and above breach related to traditional work factors (such as pay and training

opportunities), explained mothers' intentions to leave their organizations. They

note that "this is not to say that the traditional, or work-related, aspects of the

contract are unimportant to mothers…Work-related aspects of the contract are

indeed important, as they accounted for the majority of the variance explained in

turnover intentions" (p. 642). Mothers who experienced a psychological contract

breach reported that they received less support from their supervisor than they had

expected across five factors: support for family life, family-friendly policies,

flexible work arrangements, flexible work hours, and availability of part-time

work. Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner and Hanson (2009) had also found that

family-supportive supervisor behavior formed a distinctive type of supervisor

support and predicted job satisfaction, work-family conflict and intention to leave. Dick (2010) conducted in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with managers and officers in the police force about the experiences of police officers returning from maternity leave to begin part-time work rather than their original full-time pre-birth jobs. The mothers in this study were acting in accordance with a police department norm (and a norm in general in the UK) that following maternity leave women have the option to return to their previous jobs but on a part-time basis. Dick reasoned that the shift to part-time work can initiate a re-evaluation of the psychological contract by both employees and their employers. In this case each party would be evaluating their expectations surrounding the amount of time the employee is expected to put in, and what implications this will have for the nature of their contribution to the organization. A shift to part-time work had the potential to violate a competing workplace norm; police officers as professionals are included in the white-collar "ideal worker norm," with evaluations of their performance heavily influenced by the amount of face time and being constantly available. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of mothers in Dick's study did not experience feelings that conformed to our understanding of the psychological contract violation. They did believe that their shift to part-time work compromised their opportunities for advancement, on the one hand, but on the other they perceived their shift as a privilege, particularly since it allowed them to return to their pre-pregnancy role. But, for the 2% of participants who felt their managers had reassigned them to less important work,

the shift had resulted in a reduction of job satisfaction and a detriment to their relationship with their manager. One officer in this group threatened to quit, tired of feeling like she was "doing all the rubbish things"

Yet for all the attention paid to the types of support that mothers need or expect at work, very little research has been conducted about mothers' initial return experiences (Alstveit, Severinsson, & Karlsen, 2011; Grether & Wiese, 2016; Hennekam, Syed, Ali & Dumazert, 2019; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Nowak, Naude & Thomas, 2012), and seemingly no research includes an examination of the impact of demotion on mothers' return-to-work experiences. Research investigating employees' responses to structural changes to their jobs, however, offers a partial picture of how psychological contracts might be impacted when mothers are not given a chance to participate in the decision-making around the structure of their jobs. Morgan & King (2012) note that when mothers are dissatisfied with the changes made to their jobs, psychological breach develops, but that when supervisors simply tell them what the changes will be, with no explanation, then the combination of breach and perceived injustice can lead to even more negative outcomes. This thesis, therefore, makes contributions to the research in that participants returned from an absence to find unexpected job restructuring had been implemented, and further that the manner in which their particular jobs were affected were perceived as demotions. Neither I nor the mothers interviewed for this study were in the decision-making role about the changes we experienced. In no case were the changes perceived by us as a benefit

or privilege in the way that the participants in Barnett et al.'s (2004) or Dick's (2010) perceived the changes to their jobs. Our experiences for the most part aligned with the 2% of participants in Dick's study, in that changes implemented in our absence were perceived as akin to a demotion. And, we started off eager to uphold our end of the psychological contract. Our situations were more similar to that of the participants in Mainiero & Sullivan's (2005) study. They found that mothers "didn't ask for or want special treatment. They worked long hours and held themselves to high performance standards…But they were immensely frustrated by the lack of job challenge, discrimination, and the exhaustion that comes with having it all" (p. 111).

In sum, this literature review explores the prevalence of the cultural narrative that when mothers leave work it is commonly in response to their inability to achieve work-life balance. This narrative may obscure other discrimination-based work factors that function as barriers, and in fact act to exacerbate the work-life conflict that mothers, as primary caregivers, must endure. One such barrier may include psychological contract violation in response to unsupportive supervisor behaviours. Research suggests that mothers form specific psychological contracts pertaining to their family status; for instance, expectations of family-supportive supervisor behaviours. Building on this research, the current study seeks to increase knowledge around the nature of mothers' psychological contracts pertaining to reinstatement, by exploring whether a demotion following maternity-leave causes a psychological contract violation.

## *Methodology*

The purpose of this research is to draw attention to the impact of demotion following maternity leave, and to explore whether experiencing a demotion following maternity leave leads to psychological breach and violation, which would indicate that mothers form specific psychological contracts pertaining to reinstatement to their pre-maternity leave roles.

A critical social theory approach implies that the research is conducted with the larger aim of identifying, describing and ultimately transforming the ideological and systemic barriers that act to marginalize particular members of the community. As a critical social theorist, I value the everyday experiences of those in my social world, but also understand that "direct experience does not exhaust the understanding of forces which shape our lives" (Marshall, 1994, p.3). Flowing from this is the belief that, far from grasping or reaching to make something of nothing, theory is what links everyday experiences to their temporal, spatial and social setting; it is what gives them meaning in our world. The essential "critical" component is a call to action, to hope and strive for a better world. The current research is guided more specifically by critical feminist theory—the term "critical" is further articulated as a call to action that gives equal weight to socialist, feminist and anti-racist imperatives. In seeking to explore the ways in which mothers interact with the social structure of work during a particular 'moment' in their social reproductive lives, the researcher recognizes that, in our

capitalist context, becoming a mother means becoming viewed as primarily a caregiver, a stereotype that is exacerbated during pregnancy, maternity leave, and her children's preschool years. According to this perspective, because social reproductive work (raising children, caring for others) is not considered "productive" labour, and because women remain responsible for the majority of childrearing and care work in our society, they are ideologically and materially assigned an inferior status. The work women are considered responsible for is also considered to be outside of the money economy (Benston, 1997). Extending this theory to the research at hand, when women transition to motherhood in the workplace, they may become associated with a caregiving role, which in turn means they are no longer perceived as "productive" workers who are as competent and committed as they had been prior to becoming mothers. The current research is interested in the institutional practices that are underpinned by the productive vs social reproductive work dichotomy, and sees norms, such as the "ideal worker norm," and behaviours as informed by this foundational ideology.

This thesis uses qualitative research methods based on the concepts of sensemaking and relational interviewing. The sense-making process (Johnson & Cassell 2001 as cited in Millward, 2006) refers to an approach whereby no preconceptions about a single measurable reality are brought to the interview process; rather, mothers' experiences in the workplace are individually constructed in the process of interacting with others—in this case, the interviewer.

The interviewer, then, is considered an active participant in the process of mothers making sense of their experiences transitioning back to work following maternity leave in an organizational context. At the same time, the interviewer is thought to play an interpretive role in that she makes sense of how the participants make sense of their own lived experience. Because I hold a distinctly "insider status" role in the current research, bringing my own history of transitioning back to work as a new mother, I felt this approach was particularly suited to my research design. As such, the interviews often took the form of a conversation wherein each party came to new realizations and shared impressions of her own experience. At the same time, as an "insider" I needed to be wary of making assumptions about my level of understanding of the experiences of other mothers. It was important not to let the shared aspects of our experiences become the emphasis of the interview, which could result in missed opportunities to explore other aspects of the participants' experience as distinct from my own, and the ways our experiences may diverge (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Keeping in mind these potential pitfalls, I was also reassured, and guided by, Dwyer et al.'s assertion that "the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience" (p. 59).

In keeping with the handful of previous studies that have examined the impact of demotions on employees, this thesis relies on participants' appraisals of

their post-maternity jobs to determine whether the new job qualified as a demotion (Josten & Schalk, 2010). Questions pertaining to participants' comparisons of their pre-and post-maternity leave were intended to elicit participants' assessments of their post-maternity jobs as downgraded or not. The assessment of whether or not participants' experiences had led to a psychological contract violation is based on a scale developed by Robinson and Morrison (2000) to identify feelings of violation in participants' relationships with their supervisor. Participants' responses were coded for descriptions of feelings that conformed to three items: extreme frustration with how they had been treated by their supervisor, feelings of being let down by their supervisor, and feelings of intense anger towards their supervisor. Assessments of whether mothers' return-to-work experiences constituted a psychological contract violation that fit the description of grief were adapted from Guerrero and Naullau (2016). Participants' responses were coded for expressions of lost "objects" (such as projects or work relationships), enduring experiences of betrayal, injustice and anger, and denial (e.g., "I still can't believe this happened to me").

Demographic information was collected, including age, current employment (full-time outside of the home, part-time outside of the home, self-employed, stay-at-home mom), race or ethnicity, marital status, gender identity, and number and ages of children.

### *The Sample*

Purposive snowball sampling was used. A recruitment email was sent to ten mothers of my acquaintance, and those ten mothers shared the email with women in their own networks who fit the participant requirements (working mothers who had returned from maternity leave to work for their pre-birth employers within the previous five years). This method had the advantage of garnering responses in a very short span of time. Participants were selected based on order of responses alone: interviews were scheduled with the first eight women who responded to the recruitment email and were available for an in-person interview within the following six weeks.

Recruiting participants via the purposive snowball sampling method as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual and middle-class woman has meant that the sample of participants was largely limited to my own fairly homogeneous social and professional network. This has resulted in a sample of participants whose experiences are framed by their various and overlapping privileges—class, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Excluded are the stories of women who are low-income, women of colour, and women who also and otherwise face systemic barriers in their experiences of work and motherhood. The limits this exclusion places on our understanding of the experiences of all mothers, and on the opportunity of those excluded mothers to voice their experience, must be acknowledged and taken into account at every stage.

*The Interviews*

An ethics application was approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. All interviews were conducted at a location and time of the participant's choosing: either in their workplaces in a private office or conference room, or in participants' own homes. One interview was conducted at a local coffee shop. The interviews took between one and two hours. Eight individual interviews were completed. After signing the consent form, participants were informed their participation was voluntary and they could choose to end the interview at any time or to decline answering any of the questions. It was emphasized to the participants that their participation would remain completely anonymous. Participants completed a short questionnaire about their demographic and employment details.

The interview guide began with basic questions about the length and recency of the participants' maternity leaves and ages of their children, and the nature of the job they had returned to following their most recent maternity leave (title, level of authority, nature of responsibilities, length of employment). The remainder of the interview questions were then arranged in a more or less temporal sequence, inviting participants to share their perceptions of, and feelings about, their jobs before, during, and immediately following maternity leave. Questions included: Can you tell me about your feelings and impressions surrounding your departure from the workplace for maternity leave (for example, interactions between you and your supervisor)? Can you tell me about your

expectations surrounding your return to work following maternity leave? Can you describe in what ways your job felt different from, and in what ways it felt the same as, your job prior to maternity leave? Probes included: Were you confident that your job would be well covered during your absence? Did you have a meeting with your supervisor in your first days back on the job?

Rarely were these prompts required, however. Because the research focus was on experiences that I had also personally lived, the interviews often became quite conversational with both parties sharing information and stories back and forth. One question could often open up a facet of participants' experience they had forgotten or the need to relate a story with its roots in pre-motherhood employment experiences, such as their evolving relationship with supervisors. I attempted to return to the interview guide while remaining sensitive to the participants' often quite emotional recounting of memories and histories. All participants appeared to feel quite comfortable and open sharing their experiences with me.

All participants agreed to have their interviews recorded with a digital audio recording device. I then transcribed the interviews verbatim, mapping codes for the major themes of interest as well as unexpected but valuable thoughts and insights.

*The Participants*

Eight participants took part in the study. All participants had taken a full-year maternity leave within the last five years; all had returned to work for their pre-birth employer following their leave. Three participants were currently employed in administrative or development positions in a university setting; of these, two held the same position they had held prior to their most recent maternity leave (although reporting to different supervisors) and one had changed departments. Of the two who held the same position, one was completing her final month on the job before leaving to both relocate to a new community and begin a small business from her home. One participant had left her job in social media to work self-employed from home, with her two pre-school age children in part-time daycare. One participant had left her non-profit agency job and worked from home running a home daycare. Two participants remained employed for the same non-profit agency they had returned to work for following maternity leave, in their pre-maternity leave roles. One participant had left her chemical engineering industry job to become a part-time tutor. Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 40 years old. All participants were living in a two-parent family relationship, all were raising at least one child under the age of six. All participants identified as white, heterosexual, cis-gender. All participants lived and worked in the Greater Toronto Area.

*Results*

Findings are presented in a temporal order that follows mothers' transitional experiences from their return to work expectations, the impacts of demotions, restructuring, or minimal changes to their jobs, and their subsequent employment outcomes. Also explored are themes that emerged unexpectedly but formed a common thread in these mothers' experiences; for instance, mothers' attempts to save their jobs despite their anger, betrayal, and feelings of no longer being perceived as having any value to their organizations. Pauses in the quotations are indicated by ellipses, and names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

**Mothers expected to return to their pre-maternity leave roles**

Participants' tenure with their organizations ranged from two years at the lowest end to thirteen years at the high end. In order to assess whether the participants approached their maternity leave with confidence that their job would remain as it was when they returned, I asked for their impressions of how well they felt their organizations or supervisors prepared for their absence. This could be taken as indication that psychological contracts were forming, pertaining specifically to their return to work. Feelings of confidence in how their job would be executed while they were on leave would signal to these mothers that their organizations valued the work their positions entailed and would suggest to them

that they, personally, would remain valued upon their return. On the other hand, if there was no preparation until the last minute, or at all, or if the person hired to cover their absence was underqualified or perceived as incompetent, a psychological contract breach could be triggered even prior to their departure. The participants approached their maternity leaves with differing levels of expectations surrounding their return to work, and whether they would return to a demoted position.

Four of the participants reported no significant doubts or anxieties in the lead up to their maternity leaves. Stephanie and Martha had both worked for their organizations eight years and both felt that the person hired to cover their jobs during maternity leave was a good fit for the position and that their jobs would be well-executed. Nadine and Rose both felt a high degree of confidence that their jobs would be well covered in their absence. They each felt that their transition into maternity leave was handled well by their supervisor and felt a good candidate had been chosen as their replacement. They described a sense of excitement and celebration shared by the mostly female staff surrounding their pregnancies, which they attributed to the number of women including their supervisors who had had children and were working moms, so they "get it." Nadine, who works in public health, mentions that her pregnancy coincided with a kind of "baby boom" at her workplace, which helped pave the way for her pregnancy announcement to her supervisor.

Three participants, Ella, Victoria, and Andrea, reported feeling a degree of concern for their jobs, but ultimately were not troubled by worry during their time away. In Ella's case, anticipating change was something that had become normalized in her work environment. In the weeks leading up to Ella's third maternity leave, announcements of structural changes to her organization were made. These announcements did not cause Ella to become anxious about her job, however, as such changes were so common in her sector (health care). Ella reports being "used to the fact that things change very rapidly … I knew that roles and responsibilities and the entire makeup of the program could be changing." While Ella was prepared for a changed structure upon her return, she expected also that, as before, the changes would not significantly impact her personally. Ella did not learn of the true impact to her position until she returned from maternity leave.

Victoria, on the other hand, approached her first maternity leave with a low expectation of support from her workplace. She perceived that the transition was handled poorly by her department: her replacement was assigned half of the projects in her portfolio, leaving the remaining half unassigned. In addition, Victoria noted other ways that her department failed to meet obligations that formed her psychological contract pertaining to how a valued employee would be treated as they prepared to leave. Victoria remembers,

> All of the supports I think someone should get from HR, all the really
> sort of financial stuff that was really complicated…I remember
> missing pays, not knowing, waiting for paperwork that [my employer]
> had to send in not being sent…So that

was really frustrating.

Victoria connects her organization's failure to adequately cover her responsibilities as well as the lack of support she received from HR to an overall sense of disengagement from her workplace. When I asked what her expectations were surrounding her return to her job, Victoria reports, "I didn't expect anything to go smoothly with that job, so I didn't think that the re-entry would be great. I didn't think of it a whole lot, it was just like, of course it was going to be a mess. And it was."

Andrea, also approaching her first maternity leave, felt very supported and reassured verbally by her supervisors, but began to grow anxious once she discovered that the candidate who had been hired to cover her leave was a new hire and a level beneath her:

> I thought that the transition was really rocky, so around one month prior to leaving I just started to get, 'Oh no, all the projects that I'd been working on, are they going to be taken care of? Do I feel confident?' I wasn't really part of the onboarding at all. It was shocking.

Ultimately, though, this pre-leave anxiety was forgotten over the course of Andrea's maternity leave, and did not translate into an expectation she would return to a bad situation: "I really thought I'm just gonna leave, and what could really happen in a year? I'll come back and everything will be fine. So I guess I was just overly optimistic."

Only one participant experienced a substantial amount of doubt and anxiety as they prepared for their maternity leave. In the months prior to her third maternity leave, Alison was particularly concerned about the fact that the candidate chosen to cover her leave was assigned to the job for only two days a week, instead of the full-time schedule Alison had worked, and that she believed the job required in order to be properly executed. In addition, Alison felt frustrated by her department's refusal to continue to pay for her mobile phone while she was on leave, despite the fact that she had a large management fund which she had barely dipped into, and that she anticipated being contacted with work questions while on leave. Alison connected this refusal to her organization's decision to have her maternity leave replacement devote only two days a week covering her full-time job:

> Which, that [refusal to pay for her cell phone] in combination with, 'Your job's only two days a week,' it was like, what value do I have because you're not willing to be any kind of flexible. …So this all ties into how I felt when I was kicked out the door for mat leave.

It is clear that Alison experienced the intractability of her department as an indication, prior to maternity leave, that her status in the organization had been reduced. The availability of the management fund signalled to Alison that her organization had committed to covering certain costs for valued employees. Their refusal to do so was perceived by Alison as a psychological contract breach

(although not yet accompanied by the emotions of psychological contract violation) that sent a clear message—you are no longer a valued employee.

To summarize, this section explores the question of whether mothers form psychological contracts specific to their reinstatement experiences, by examining beliefs and expectations about the nature of the jobs they would return to post-maternity leave. The responses of participants indicate that they had formed expectations surrounding how organizations should demonstrate that they value their employees, how an employee should be supported as she approaches maternity leave, and how an organization should handle job coverage. No participant described an explicit expectation that when she returned from work, that she would be reinstated to her pre-maternity leave role; however, in the following section it is apparent that the realization that their role had been downgraded led in every case to a perception of psychological contract breach, which suggests that psychological contracts pertaining to reinstatement did include the expectation that they would return the same or equivalent positions. In addition, the concern expressed by some over the manner in which their jobs would be covered indicates a sense of ownership and commitment to their pre-maternity leave jobs, to which some had devoted many years of their lives. When they realized that their organization was not implementing steps to ensure that their jobs would be adequately covered, mothers often linked this perceived failure to other ways that their organizations had let them down.

## _Mothers who were demoted experienced psychological contract violation_

In this section, I explore participants' reactions to discovering that their jobs had been downgraded. To begin with, I examine whether the restructuring was perceived as a demotion by participants, and, when demotion was perceived, whether that led to an experience of psychological contract breach. Evidence of a psychological contract breach would indicate that mothers had formed expectations surrounding their reinstatement to their pre-birth role. I then explore participants' accounts of their thoughts and feelings connected with the breach of contract, and whether these reactions are consistent with feelings associated with violation of the psychological contract.

All eight mothers returned to their workplaces to find that changes had occurred in their absence. The nature and severity of the changes to participant's jobs, however, varied significantly. Andrea, Stephanie, Alison and Ella all returned to find that substantial changes to their responsibilities had occurred in their absence: all three women immediately perceived these changes as a demotion. Martha's responsibilities, on the other hand, remained the same but she recalls feeling a sense of being downgraded due to changes in her reporting structure: "It felt like it was a demotion almost, I used to report to a director, now I report to a manger who used to be my colleague and is the same age as me, and who can't teach me anything."

Alison had taken two previous maternity leaves, and each time had experienced a changed work atmosphere and even changes to her job upon her return, but felt that her return from her third maternity leave was more difficult because this was the first time she had not been a "contributor to the change." This time, Alison's return to work experience was coloured by unwelcome changes to both her physical environment and by qualitative job changes. During her absence, her office had relocated to a new building and Alison had been assigned an undesirable office space with no view to the outside, positioned next to the reception desk. She was asked to cover the reception desk while the office administrator was on break every day, a duty which she felt was a significant downgrading of her responsibilities. She had set aside her early misgivings about her replacement only covering her job two days a week, so it still came as a blow when she was informed that, because her replacement had reported that two days a week was in fact a sufficient amount of time in which to execute Alison's role, Alison would now be given extra work with which to fill the remaining three days of work. Management's solution to this was to require Alison to take on any extra work in the department that her colleagues found themselves unable to accomplish—this included work from employees that were junior to Alison. Alison describes her reaction to the significant changes she encountered as one of "calm shock." In language that clearly indicates that the changes represented a psychological contract breach, Alison recalls:

> [My supervisor] didn't give me any prior knowledge. I didn't know we were going to sit down and talk about that I have a new job, but that's what happened…Totally wool right out from under you. Here's your job…. It's a great opportunity when someone's not there to voice your opinion or criticize, to just give them the crummy stuff, and everyone else is happy and they don't think about others.

Alison also describes feeling angry and "personally attacked" after her demotion—clearly, emotions that attend a violation of the psychological contract:

> It felt like an attack and I felt like I didn't want to be there, and it also felt like I couldn't believe that we had people so bad at managing, and such bad leaders, so it made me know that no amount of extra work from me was going to help the situation…

In the weeks leading up to her return to work, Andrea met with her supervisor to discuss the structural changes to her workplace that had occurred in her absence. In these meetings, Andrea recalls her supervisor's assurances that the structural changes would not negatively impact her job. When she returned to her job, she discovered that in fact her new job constituted a demotion. The relationships with donors that she had spent years cultivating beforehand were lost when her portfolio was almost entirely redistributed and she was moved to a different project. While this change was difficult enough to accept, even worse was that her new portfolio meant she had been assigned to a department that had not traditionally yielded high returns, and yet her fundraising targets had substantially increased. Her work environment was substantially altered, too; whereas before she had worked in an office with many people in a "community

environment," now she worked mainly alone sharing a largely empty office space with only a couple of other colleagues. Alison recalls discovering the discrepancy between her supervisor's assurances and the reality of her new job:

> Oh, I was shocked. …While I was off we restructured completely, which was the biggest shake-up that our team has had, which was such an unfortunate situation that I wasn't here…. But when [my supervisor] told me, they were very optimistic as well, 'Oh, this is good news, it's gonna be great, don't worry about it.' So verbally I felt supported. But in practice I didn't … Maybe they didn't say you'll come back to the same job. I don't think they actually ever committed to that, that was obviously just my interpretation. So, yeah, I do feel they [pause]…It was a very hard transition back.

When I asked Andrea whether she felt there was a connection between her absence for maternity leave and the way her job had been altered, there was no question in her mind that there was a causal connection. She described how although everyone had been reoriented in her absence, some had received qualitative promotions because they had been shifted from poorly performing portfolios to better ones, whereas she, despite her promotion just prior to maternity leave and her history of high performance, had received a qualitative demotion.

Stephanie's supervisor contacted her with details of her new job quite close to Stephanie's return. Stephanie recalls that, in describing the changes to her job, her supervisor "kind of pushed it on me as a good challenge." She reports feeling excited about the change, because it "sounded almost like a promotion." Stephanie was no stranger to change, as over her eight years of tenure her role constantly shifted, but says, "That was part of why I loved it." In her first days

back she attempted to keep an optimistic outlook, despite a good deal of frustration around losing her old desk and phone line to her maternity leave replacement, who was kept on after Stephanie's return:

> And my boss said, so-and-so's in your desk, so, you can go sit where the interns sit. And I was like, I want my old desk back, like all my stuff, a lot of my stuff was still kind of…I was like, that's my desk, I want my desk back…. And they didn't give me my phone number back, it was like, why does [my replacement] have my phone number?

Stephanie also had to grapple with changes to her responsibilities, reflecting, "the reality of it was quite [a] demotion…very executional, very junior." She had been tasked with marketing responsibilities that typically would be assigned to an employee with one or two years of experience, and these new responsibilities required her to be available for early morning and evening events, times when it is difficult to find childcare. In addition, she had to be available to respond immediately to major news events. Her supervisor had decided to retain the employee who had covered Stephanie's job during maternity leave, and who would now continue on in Stephanie's former role. In reflecting on the contrast between her supervisor's characterization of the changes to her job and the reality of what she encountered, Stephanie clearly perceived a breach of psychological contract.

For Ella, as for the others who experienced a demotion, changes to the environment seemed to symbolically represent her new and reduced status in the

eyes of the organization. She returned to find her old parking spot gone, and was required to park a ten-minute walk from the office, a situation which she wished she had been forewarned about. Back in the office, she was asked to sit at a "swing desk" where interns are normally seated, and which had no direct phone line and made it difficult for Ella to communicate with her clients. In terms of the qualitative changes to Ella's job, she describes her new responsibilities as clearly indicating that her organization now viewed her as someone who could be shuffled to wherever was needed, and that this change in the organization's perception of her value was directly tied to her having been away for maternity leave: "This was like, we need to get a shitty job filled, oh, Ella's coming back. She's an easy person to put in there. Because she's been gone."

Ella's description of her supervisor's failure to initiate a reorientation meeting with her reveals perception of a psychological contract breach:

> The people who are your superiors that should be setting you up for success and helping you understand what your new expectations are and changes to staffing and changes to the structure of the program, all that should be coming from your superiors in a timely manner and it just never…never happened.

As the months passed, Ella realized that the demands of her new position were causing her a significant amount of stress. Her supervisor had up to that point been somewhat sympathetic about her dissatisfaction with her new position, but when Ella described herself as reaching the breaking point, it was her

supervisor's lack of support in that moment that triggered her psychological

contract violation:

> [My supervisor] didn't say anything supportive or empathetic. If
> she had just phrased any of those sentences differently, to say, I
> know this is hard. She didn't say that even once. She just threw me
> down and kicked me, it felt like…So after that everything was
> spinning and I was really confused, and then I just couldn't stop
> crying.

The remaining three participants reported being reinstated to jobs that

were either the same or very similar to their pre-maternity leave roles. Nadine and

Rose, who had each reported a workplace culture very supportive to mothers, both

returned to their same positions, and recall no indications that their status in the

eyes of the organization had suffered. Interestingly, Victoria noted that upon her

return, she was tasked with work over and above her regular portfolio that

included tasks normally performed by more senior roles. While this change was

not perceived as a demotion, it did initiate an evaluation of her worth in the eyes

of the organization, because she was not paid an equivalent wage to others who

were performing these senior-role tasks. Victoria's dissatisfaction with her wage,

however, became another contributor to her general sense of psychological

contract breach, in that she had, prior to maternity leave, formed the belief that her

organization did not adequately value her contribution. Victoria had connected the

fact that she was underpaid with her status as a wife; she believed her lower pay

was a result of her supervisor's misperception that her husband was the

breadwinner of the couple and Victoria's pay cheque represented "pin money." Victoria's account suggests that pay inequity is perceived as an organizational injustice and can initiate a contract breach, but may not necessarily elicit the emotions associated with psychological contract violation.

In contrast, Victoria and Martha suffered perceptions of unfair treatment, which led to psychological contract breach; feelings of psychological contract violation, however, did not seem to develop. In these cases, the work factors that initiated the perception of breach did not constitute a substantial change to their role—they both returned to the same title, department, and same job description. Victoria returned to a job that was substantively similar to her pre-maternity leave role, but she noticed that she was being given tasks that were above her pay grade. Victoria describes a situation which is a different twist on the downgraded tasks that many women encounter upon their return: Victoria was tasked with new, upgraded responsibilities, but her request for a pay increase was refused. Victoria perceived this as a psychological breach: "I learned of what people were getting paid and that I was given more tasks but not the recognition. I just said, I can't work in a place when I feel like there's no justice."

Martha recalls feeling "a little bit bitter" about her employer's refusal to grant her the benefit of an 18-month maternity leave, which she perceived as a breach because "everyone around [her] was getting these 18-month maternity leaves…I was like, it's not really costing you anything. I even asked to come back a month later, or something…Every accommodation I asked for, they said no."

Her perception of breach was further compounded by the fact that the reporting structure had changed in her absence. Her pre-leave supervisor, a director, had retired while Martha was on leave, and when she returned she discovered that she would now report to another manager, who had been Martha's equal—someone who was her own age and in Martha's view, did not hold the expertise required to be considered an appropriate supervisor. To Martha, this "felt like a demotion." Although Martha perceived that her new reporting structure seemed to lower her status, she also described a sense of detachment from her job in ways that are strikingly different from the feelings of other demoted mothers. She mentions, for instance, that she was not involved in any part of the hiring process for the person who would cover her second maternity leave, and, when the hiring was complete, Martha felt a "low to moderate" level of confidence that her job would be well-covered. When I asked whether she would have preferred more involvement in hiring her replacement, or whether she felt any anxiety about the execution of her job in her absence, Martha responds, "I don't think I would have cared either way. It was not an important thing to me," and, "They're a big corporation, they can deal with it, that's not my problem."

Nadine and Rose, who had reported feeling quite supported as they approached their maternity leaves, and who had attributed this to working in a female-dominated environment where pregnancy, maternity leaves, and motherhood in general were the norm, reported no job changes immediately upon their return. Rose, however, after two months back on the job, was asked to move

to a different department within the organization to cover a number of simultaneous vacations for the summer months. Rose did not associate this restructure with her status as a new mother; rather, she attributed the request to a simple need to meet the organization's shortages:

> They just needed a consistent person to fill in those gaps of vacation. So all of a sudden I was in a new job. And it was a lot of work… I was just returning to work so that kind of threw me for a loop. But I enjoyed the experience.

To sum up, the discovery that their jobs had been downgraded initiated immediate evaluations of whether promises by supervisors, whether explicitly made or implicitly understood, had been kept. In other words, mothers were either directly reassured their jobs would remain the same, or were left to make the reasonable assumption that they would return to jobs that were the same, in the absence of any indication otherwise. Four mothers who perceived their new jobs as a demotion experienced clear signs of psychological contract violation. Mothers who experienced some changes to their reporting structure or responsibilities, but did not perceive these changes as a demotion, experienced psychological contract breach but did not describe their experiences in the emotional language associated with violation of the contract. Mothers who returned to an unchanged job reported no perception of breach or experience of violation.

*Demotions led to stages of grief*

This section explores further the impact of the demotions experienced by Alison, Andrea, Stephanie, and Ella. As described above, these mothers all perceived a breach of the psychological contract on the part of their supervisors and organizations, who they perceived as sending a message to them by the restructuring of their jobs and other environmental cues indicating they were no longer valued employees following maternity leave. In the descriptions of their feelings following their realizations of their demoted status, it is evident that they each experienced the emotions consistent with psychological contract violation, and in some instances, consistent with a process of grief.

Stephanie described a feeling of utter devastation coming over her as the extent of her demoted status began to sink in. At this point in the interview, she began to cry, recalling the depth of her distress. Stephanie described emotions surrounding the loss of her original job in terms that are consistent with Guerrerro and Naulleau's (2016) findings of grief following psychological contract violation. In response to the loss of her desk and phone, but also to the loss of her status and sense of value, Stephanie recalled thinking, "let me go back to the thing that I know, that I'm familiar with, that I love, cause that's why I'm coming back. You gave all my stuff away, it's like you had a garage sale of my whole career."

Later in the interview, as Stephanie recalled what it was like for her to work as a new mother, she returned to the object-loss experience: "I really just

want my old job back, the one from before. The one that this mat leave replacement has, I want that job back." Stephanie speaks of her former job and work identity in terms very much in keeping with that of a grieving person: "It's like I've reached acceptance, but I don't know when I will ever be able to tell somebody without crying….There's always a sadness. I just don't want to cry like this." Later in the interview Stephanie recalled "feeling completely valueless at work, and that was such a large part of my identity."

For Andrea, the realization that she'd been effectively demoted initiated anger and outrage. Emotion still came into her voice as Andrea spoke of her return, saying, "I just wasn't prepared for this massive change, cause [my supervisor] made it sound like it wasn't a big deal. I was very unhappy. I felt very blindsided…. I just thought, how can I be successful here?"

When she talked over her feelings with a former supervisor whom she'd viewed as supportive, she was advised to just do her best, because of course she would soon be leaving again to have another baby. Her reaction to this piece of advice constitutes classic language of psychological contract violation:

> I was just raging…I felt so violated, like, how dare you make comment and assume on my family future? I've always been high-achieving, always been one of the top earners on our team, so why would that change just because I had a child?... So that created a lot of mistrust between me and my supervisor …we'd always had a very close relationship. And that took a long time to heal.

Alison's grief-like experience of psychological contract violation took the form of a feelings of betrayal and anger never seemed to ease. She continued in her job "for the pay cheque," but describes herself as at times unable to repress her resentment and anger:

> I just find that I communicate less and it's less friendly, and I do have an angry chip on my shoulder, still, and it comes out in strange ways … If we have visitors and they're like, 'Oh, is it a supportive office?' I'm like, 'No!' Like I'll scream, 'No!'…My anger comes out once in a while. And I can't control it.

Ella's grief-like feelings center around both the lost "object" of the sense of value she formerly derived from her work, as well as a deep sense of betrayal on the part of her supervisor. Ella referred to the sense of "fulfillment" and the "beautiful working relationships" she had enjoyed in her previous role— descriptions which stand in striking contrast to her characterization of her post-maternity leave role as "sucking [her] soul," and even a sense of guilt for "coming to work and receiving all this money for doing nothing." When I asked Ella whether she believes she would still be at her job had she been reinstated to her pre-leave role, Ella again describes the loss of her former role as the main factor in her exit from the organization. She also identifies that her new career running a home daycare has replaced a measure of that lost sense of value:

> If I didn't have to sacrifice all the things that I did over the last year that I was there, I'd probably still be there … I felt really good before. …Now I've started a three-day week daycare business so it's a completely different kind of work. It's mothering work. But I'm getting a lot of value from it.

In summary, Alison, Andrea, Stephanie, and Ella, all four of whom endured significant demotions upon their return to work, describe the intense emotions consistent with Guerrero & Naulleau's (2016) suggestion that psychological contract violation can reach a grief-like intensity as employees struggle to break away from a cherished object.

## *Demotions exacerbated experiences of work-life conflict*

Unsurprisingly, demotions following maternity leave did not happen in a vacuum; rather, mothers who were demoted described workplace cultures that were hostile to their family status. In describing the ways they had experienced this hostility, mothers frequently linked suggestions from supervisors or colleagues that they were no longer committed to their work to their weighing the logic of staying in their jobs. The many ways their workplaces were unsupportive to them as mothers were taken as further indication, after their demotions, that their role at work had been significantly devalued. This devalued status was weighed against the value of their role mothering their young children. In other words, mothers were engaging in a process of deciding, where am I needed and valued the most? They were alert to, and very clear about, their need to direct their commitment and energy to work of value and meaning.

Alison's feeling of contract violation was compounded by a sense of being judged for working rather than devoting herself to her caregiving role. When her children were sick, she would often have to contend with pointed remarks from colleagues and managers about the wisdom of trying to work while raising young children. She began to hide and downplay her motherhood role. As she recounted her thoughts weighing the pros and cons of continuing in her job, it is clear that Alison  struggled with her new reduced value to the organization:

> If I'm doing something that I hate, I'm not proud of it…If I'm going to work here for 30 years, and I'm going to retire, will I be proud, is this what I want my kids to see, me working somewhere I hate for a pay cheque?

Alison was clear that her devalued status at work made her question the value of staying, rather than drawing her toward full-time motherhood. At the same time, the complexity of thoughts and feelings that accompany these evaluations is also evident—Alison has decided to keep working, but she is aware that she appears to be needed more at home:

> Spending so much time away from them, too…I'm not really a crunchy granola mom…I was happy to be a mom but I'm not overly touchy feely about it. So I was fine with them going to daycare…But, it costs a lot of money and I'm away from the house, and I really want my time with them to feel like it means something. I want it to have some value. So, I'm already feeling devalued. And then feeling like the work I'm doing is a little boring…

After a year in her new position, Stephanie departed for her second

maternity leave. Nearing the end of this leave, she received a list of the projects

she would be working on upon her return. She quickly realized it would be next to

impossible for her be available for the hours her new list of projects would

require, while simultaneously responsible for majority of the childcare of her

infant and toddler. Stephanie's decision to resign rather than return to work

following her second maternity leave took into account not only her demoted

status, but also a hostile environment in which she felt judged and compelled to

hide her motherhood. Stephanie describes the frustration caused by an assumption

that her commitment to her children meant she was just a "slacker" at work:

> [They think] your focus is split now, you have more important
> things. And, you know what, I do. It's all true. I've realized there
> are more important things. The two little people in my life, number
> one. This job, number two…But it doesn't mean that I'm not
> giving you 100% or 110% or whatever this job needs…. There was
> that stress of being in that place and having that constant eye on
> you like you were just walking around like some criminal.

Stephanie experienced complications during her second pregnancy that

necessitated working from home. She recalls that while needing to work from

home was a medical requirement, for which she had provided the paperwork, she

was treated by her supervisor and colleagues as if she was no longer committed to

her work:

> I had no support at work, they all thought I was just slacking off,
> and it really hurt me because I had put in more than a decade and I

was a hard worker, and I got results, I was good at my job, but all
of a sudden, it didn't matter….

Alison, at the time of our interview, had given her notice and was
wrapping up her last weeks at the job. In the months following her return to work,
she was asked to cover for a supervisor, which she identified as an improvement
in work experience and her sense of value in the eyes of her supervisor. That new
work, combined with the desire to be helpful to colleagues whose workloads
would be affected by her departure and, finally, the fact that her spouse was
considering a career move, led to Alison's decision to delay her resignation. As
she talks through her reasons for staying, she weighs a number of factors,
including an unsupportive work environment, and the needs of her family as well
as her own desire to be at home. She connects lack of support at work directly to
her desire to be at home full-time:

> Being away from the kids, that always bothered me about work. I
> tried to make it work for me but also for my colleagues. I try to
> look out for others, so that it's even more hurtful to me when
> people don't look out for me…So, that was hard, and I didn't want
> to come back after this maternity leave. I wanted the pay cheque,
> but I enjoyed being home.

Six months after Ella's exit from the organization, her assessment of the
underlying reason for her demotion fall squarely on her organization's lack of
support for motherhood. In her treatment she sees "so many…actions show that
the job being there is so much more important than your identity as a mother and

responsibilities as a mother and [they're] not willing to find that balance that lets you be in both worlds in the way that you want to."

Even in the face of this hostile work environment, Ella's evaluation of the pros and cons of leaving her job was most heavily influenced by her felt sense of duty to others. When her spouse expressed concern for her well-being, working under conditions of such stress, and asked her to consider quitting, she responded, "No, I can't, the [clients], my responsibilities…It'll get better." Like Alison, Ella's concern for the impact of her departure on others meant that she forced herself to work under extreme stress that soon began to impact her physical health.

### *Demoted mothers tried to repair their careers before leaving their organization*

This section focuses specifically on the three out of four demoted mothers, Ella, Stephanie, and Alison (who had tendered her resignation at the time of the interview) who ultimately left their organizations. Ella quit after eight months, Stephanie after one year (not including the term of her second maternity leave), and Alison after eighteen months. These three mothers worked the final months of their jobs under conditions of extreme stress, ill-treatment, and stigmatization. Despite what it cost them to continue in their jobs, they made attempts to save their jobs and repair their relationships with the organization. In these attempts, mothers are providing their supervisors with the opportunity to make reparations to the

psychological contract—the vulnerability and honesty they bring to these discussions is revealing of their emotional investment in their work and their organizations.

Ella recalls a meeting with her supervisor a few months after her return in which she expressed her dissatisfaction with her new position:

> I told [my supervisor] I didn't think it was a good use of my skills, that I was probably losing out in my skill set, losing out in my opportunity to grow as a professional because I wasn't using my skills. And I told her it was sucking my soul, I didn't want to come to work, I did not want to be doing that job. I told her I wouldn't be able to persist if I stayed in that role.

In response, Ella's supervisor reassigned her to yet another new role, but one in which she felt again unable to develop her skills, and which increased her schedule from the manageable three days she'd been working to a four-day week. This new position led to Ella's stress leave and her ultimate resignation. It is clear that Ella does not view her departure as a real choice, but as a decision into which she was forced:

> I did not ever expect to quit suddenly. I had a lot of guilt and disappointment in myself, guilt for leaving my coworkers, guilt mostly for leaving my [clients] who I was really connected with, formed relationships with. I was responsible for their continuing care. I wasn't able to transfer that care properly. So it definitely felt like I'd been forced into a corner where…It was unthinkable that I would leave in that way.

Similarly, Stephanie recalls a determination to re-prove herself, even in the face of a hostile work environment and a difficult second pregnancy. She remembers, "I actually tried." She applied for a job in a different department of the

same organization. She also attempted to prioritize work, even when her doctor advised her to work from home as much as possible, because of pregnancy complications. She recalls,

> Our insurance company assigned me a case worker to review and accept the doctor's recommendation. They wanted me to stop working, and I wished I'd let them. I was like, we're going into a busy time, I know I can do this still, I just need to be able to do it on my own terms.

In these accounts, themes of "re-proving" are apparent—in response to the message that they were no longer committed, mothers felt it necessary to demonstrate their loyalty, even as the situation began to take a toll on their health. Interestingly, each of these mothers had formed turnover intentions following their demotions; nevertheless, they fought to keep their jobs, or another job within the organization, rather than passively accept that the relationship had been severed.

### Employment outcomes

At the time of our interview, Alison had tendered her resignation and was completing her final few weeks of work. Her plan at that point was to resettle her family in a new community where the cost of living was low enough that she could remain out of the workforce; although, she also planned to start a small home business. When I asked Alison if she could pinpoint when she started having thoughts about quitting work, Alison responded: "The first day back. The first day

back I thought, anything else I could do to get out of here." Alison considered speaking with a lawyer about her demotion, but discarded this idea after reflecting on the legal muscle of the university as well as the level of documentation that would be required to build her case. At the same time, Alison's sense of injustice was clouded by confusion—had she done something to deserve what was happening? "I felt like there must have been something that I did. There must have been something."

Ella also recalls that it was not long after her return that she realized she wanted to leave: "I know I felt that very early on, that I was like, I don't know about this." At the time of our interview, Ella had left her job and had started a home business. Ella recalls the moment her commitment was severed, described in her meeting with her supervisor, above, but her experience of working under conditions of psychological contract violation meant that the eight months she remained following her return was a painful period. During this time Ella struggled to make sense of what had happened, looking for explanations both in an organizational culture that seemed to punish mothers on leave, as well as in the possibility that she was being personally targeted due to poor performance:

> I was just fresh meat, like I was free for the available shitty
> positions. But then there was another part of me that thought, well
> maybe it was crafted for a reason, maybe they do think I'm shit.

When her doctor recommended that she take a stress leave, Ella knew it was the right decision. When her supervisor pressured her to return from her stress leave before she felt ready, she responded, "I physically can't be near the

building without having breathing troubles, I'm not ready." In addition to the pressure to return, her supervisor's solution to the extreme amount of stress Ella reported was to switch her to yet another new job. Ella recalls:

> I just didn't want to work for [my supervisor] anymore knowing that they'd dropped the ball when I was at my most vulnerable. There was no care for me, and I knew they could just fill my position with somebody else who would deal with all of those stressors…So that was the ultimate breaking point where, okay, I can't stay on stress leave, I can't return. So, I gotta quit.

Andrea remains employed with her organization. At the time of our interview, she was pregnant with her second child and looking ahead to maternity leave four months away. When I asked her about what it was like to continue her work while experiencing the feelings of ill-treatment and "rage" that she had described, Andrea described a need to prove to herself and to the organization that, despite being set up for failure, she could excel: "Because of all this injustice, again it kind of motivated me…I just really felt like I had something to prove. I didn't want this to define me." Moreover, Andrea reports that her desire to re-prove herself delayed her decision to have a second child—she waited a year longer than she would have preferred. Throughout this time, Andrea still planned to leave, as soon as she felt she had proven herself. After these experiences, Andrea began to feel that she needed to downplay and even conceal her motherhood: "I started to feel like I had to pretend I didn't have a child. Working later hours, not talking about him, and just pretending that I didn't have a kid."

What ultimately made Andrea decide to remain at her job was a promotion, just after she became pregnant with her second child. After what she had endured following her first maternity leave, Andrea delayed announcing her pregnancy until after the promotion was finalized. When I asked Andrea whether she had any concerns about what she will return to following her upcoming maternity leave, Andrea said that assurances from her supervisor that she will not again return to find herself in a difficult situation now mean very little. "I don't believe [them] when they tell me it's okay. Cause that's not what actually happened before…Our trust has been broken."

Stephanie tendered her resignation at the end of her second maternity leave rather than return to a job that had already felt like a demotion, and that would have become even more stressful and difficult to perform with her new schedule of increased attendance at events outside of regular daycare hours. At the time of our interview, her infant and toddler were enrolled in part-time daycare as Stephanie began the process of building a freelance consultancy business. Stephanie clearly considers her current situation as one that she did not actively choose. Stephanie described her decision to start her own business in the context of a trend of 'mompreneurs' striking out on their own—a trend that is "borne out of desperation, and that doesn't speak well to the reason behind it. It's not a get rich quick scheme, it's trying to stay above water somehow."

Victoria and Martha, both of whom encountered a moderate level of job restructuring, and both of whom experienced psychological breach but not

violation, have both left their positions – although Victoria eventually applied for and accepted a new position within the same organization. She has decided to stay there, albeit with dissatisfaction with her wage relative to others who hold similar or a lesser amount of responsibility. For Victoria, as for others, the intention to leave following the breach of psychological contract in some ways acted as a buffer for the stress of working in conditions of perceived injustice: "I sort of had this mantra of, like okay, I can leave it anytime. I'd just given myself permission to leave." While Victoria remains dissatisfied with her wage, she describes a work atmosphere that provides a fair amount of "moral support" to her as a working mother. She reports a conversation with her current supervisor wherein she expressed anxiety about how she would be perceived should she need to, for instance, leave work to care for a sick child, and felt reassured by her supervisor's response: "Don't think about it. Just go." Victoria identifies that this kind of support for her motherhood role represents some compensation for feeling underpaid: "You know, that's pretty good that if it's not *not* valued, it's at least respected. I never feel like it's something that I have to hide."

Martha tendered her resignation six months after her return from her second maternity leave. While Martha had already formed the intention to leave following her first return from maternity leave, she returned from the second leave to find that many of her more challenging and interesting projects had been moved to other colleagues, leaving her with less interesting work. Martha reflects,

> Nobody paid me less, nobody treated me differently, but I had fewer projects and responsibilities. So inside I felt bored and it did definitely contribute to me knowing that I was leaving.

She describes a layering of issues that constituted a psychological breach, that eventually led up to her 'nail in the coffin' moment:

> If you would have made a couple of those accommodations and maybe had me doing a little bit more challenging projects, or given me a different kind of responsibility, then maybe I would have stayed longer, but right off the bat it was like no, no, no. And that was like, Pffff, I'm done with these guys.

Finally, Nadine and Rose, the participants who experienced neither psychological contract breach nor violation, remain employed with their pre-maternity organizations. After a brief stint in a different department for a few months, Rose has happily returned to her pre-maternity leave role. She acknowledges that work is more difficult now that she is a mother, with reduced energy and time to devote to work, but, as Rose says, "I just accept it as a reality." Rose also mentions some dissatisfaction with her wage, and mentions that this, combined with feeling that her time is now squeezed, led to thoughts about leaving. She says, "I looked at the other options, but in my heart I didn't want to leave, I just wanted it to get better…It's not the best, but I still feel pretty loyal."

Nadine has applied for and moved to a new department within the organization, into a position that is an upward move—a decision that is not connected to her post-maternity leave experiences, but simply a feeling of "it was

time to move on." Despite working in an environment that Nadine felt was very

supportive to mothers, she holds some concern about perceptions of her

commitment now that she is a mother. She connects her success in attaining her

new position with her taking care to make it known that she was, in her words,

"one and done" (a phrase that refers to her decision not to have more than one

child):

> I got this position, but I was also very vocal that our plans are to be
> 'one and done.' I'm not planning on having another baby. And
> while I know that legally employers can't hold that
> back…sometimes I wonder if I wasn't so vocal…would I have
> been a successful candidate, or are they thinking, she's just going
> to go on another mat [leave] in another year?

To summarize, there is a wide variation in mothers' employment outcomes

following psychological breach and contract violation. Perception of breach did

not in every case lead to the feelings associated with violation. Psychological

contract violation did not lead in every case to a departure from the workplace. In

all cases, however, a perception of breach or violation initiated for mothers a

process of evaluating the value placed on their work as indicated by both their

supervisors' behaviour and organizational culture. At the same time, mothers

describe examining the value they now placed on their own jobs in light of their

downgraded work, and realizing that in light of their demotions they may be able

to provide more value in a primarily childcaring role. In many cases mothers

connected their demotions to other aspects of their workplace that were actively

hostile to mothers, in the form of judgements about their decision to try to work while mothering small children, assumptions that they would soon be leaving again to have another child, and an organizational culture in which they felt the need to hide their identity as mothers. As mothers engage in a process of sensemaking, attempting to understand what has happened that has led to the betrayal, anger, and confusion they feel, they take into account a wide range of cues, from an analysis of their own assumptions surrounding the value of their contribution, to an assessment of the degree to which their organizations were supportive of mothers in general. Quit intentions, whether formed immediately upon discovering their demotions or over months as the reality of their downgraded status sank in, were not always carried through. Reaching the decision to leave also involved weighing factors that ranged from considerations of their own well-being to concerns over the impact of their departure on their colleagues and families.

*Discussion*

The purpose of this research project was to gain a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between mothers' return to work experiences, their psychological contracts, and their employment outcomes. By letting mothers tell their stories about how they coped with the unexpected demotions they faced upon their return to work, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how restructuring impacts their experiences of, and feelings about, work following maternity leave. We can also learn from the stories of mothers who returned to work and were not demoted; the contrast between their experiences, feelings, and employment outcomes, and those of mothers who faced restructuring, can further deepen our understanding of how demotions impact the careers and well-being of returning mothers.

This discussion section is organized according to major themes that emerged from my analysis of mothers' return to work stories: mothers do form psychological contracts surrounding their reinstatement experiences, and, in response to demotions, mothers do experience the emotions associated with psychological contract violation, at a level that can be described as grief. Following these, I discuss other emergent themes of the interviews, including experiences of psychological contract breach, quit intentions, and mothers' efforts to re-prove their worth and repair damaged contracts. Finally, I discuss limitations and suggestions for future research.

*Mothers do form psychological contracts surrounding reinstatement to their pre-maternity leave roles.*

All four mothers who had experienced substantial restructuring of their role to the point where they perceived themselves as being demoted used language to describe their reactions consistent with indications of a psychological contract breach. No participant described an explicit expectation that they would return to their exact pre-maternity position. But the shock and confusion they reported feeling in response to learning of their demotion reveal that they had, without articulating the expectation even to themselves, believed that it was a given that they would not be demoted. This held true even for Andrea, who sought and was given assurances by her supervisor that, amidst the restructuring that would happen during her absence, she need not be concerned about her own job. In other cases, expectations stemmed from supervisors' and workplace cues prior to maternity leave suggesting that their organizations valued their commitment. By logical extension, as valued employees, these mothers assumed they would be treated fairly in their return to work.

Two of the mothers in the study experienced psychological breach, showing clearly that in their perception, their organizations had failed to meet the obligations set out in the psychological contract.

*Demotions led to psychological contract violation and even grief.*

Second, the current study aimed to explore the possibility that significant job restructuring, perceived as a demotion, can initiate a psychological contract violation, including strong feelings of betrayal, injustice, and even grief. Results suggest a confirmation of this possibility: demoted participants described emotions that fit the description of psychological contract violation: shock, sadness, feelings of betrayal, and even rage. They spoke of longing for their former jobs, and even grieving the loss of their former desks and phonelines—objects which they associated with their lost jobs.

Recalling the two mothers who experienced a breach of the psychological contract, it is worth asking, why in these two cases did breach not lead to a violation of the contract? A full exploration of how a psychological breach may not lead to a psychological violation will require a much larger study. But certainly one preventative factor for the two mothers studied here is that their return to roles that were not restructured to the degree that the jobs of mothers who experienced violation were, and were not perceived as a demotion. Martha's initial experience of psychological contract breach was connected to her organization's refusal to extend her maternity leave, and later became compounded by her return from her second maternity leave to find that her reporting structure and her projects had been downgraded.

*Psychological contract violation initiated quit intentions but not an actual exit from the job in every case.*

All of the mothers in this study who returned to work to find they had been restructured into a position or job experience that they perceived as a demotion experienced immediate psychological contract breach, psychological contract violation, and formed intentions to leave. All but one of these mothers did ultimately leave their organizations within the preceding two years. In the interim between their experience of psychological contract violation and their exit from the organization, these mothers worked under conditions of sadness, rage, disbelief about their treatment—in short, conditions of extreme psychological and emotional distress. This was often compounded by other cues from their workplace such as comments from supervisors questioning their choice to work while caring for young children.

*Psychological contract violation initiated an evaluation of work-life conflict.*

Mothers are known to take into account the needs of others when they make a decision about work (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), and the mothers in this study were no exception, often mentioning their feelings of responsibilities to their families in the form of "staying for the pay cheque," or to their colleagues or their clients. As the intention to leave formed, they also actively looked for clues to help determine in what direction the scales should tip—in favour of leaving or

staying. This process seemed to begin with the realization that their own value

had diminished substantially in the eyes of the organization, which in turn led

them to then reflect that in comparison to the lack of appreciation for their

commitment and competence on the work front, they *were* needed and

appreciated on the home front. These evaluative comparisons were expressed, for

instance, by Alison who noted that her quit intentions were partly based on

realizing that the value of her new job did not make up for the cost of childcare

and the time she would be away from home. Not only the needs of others,

however, were taken into their stay-or-leave evaluations. Mothers also described

looking inward and asking themselves whether their jobs were still sufficiently

valuable in *their* eyes to justify staying. This inward look is evident in Alison's

asking herself, if I retire in this job, will I be proud of my work? Ultimately,

negative experiences associated with the transition back to work often represented

the beginning of a complex and confusing period for mothers, who then

incorporated workplace, family, and personal factors in their decision-making

around how to survive.

That quit intentions following psychological contract violation did not

translate into actual departure until months or a year later, or in one case not at all,

stands as a testament to the fact that for these mothers, leaving was not their

preferred outcome. Even after the devastation, grief, and anger they had endured

in response to their strong perception of organizational injustice, mothers

attempted to repair the psychological contract by asking their organizations to reinvest in them as valued employees.

Finally, the mothers who returned to their same jobs, without restructuring, reported no perceptions of psychological contract breach. While these mothers noted that their workplaces were generally supportive to mothers, some of their comments indicated that they were not entirely free of work-life conflict and the "maternal wall." One mother described being challenged by balancing the demands of work and family, and the other, feeling compelled to announce that she would not be having a second child so that she would be considered for a promotion. What the experiences of these mothers suggest is that an awareness of, and frustration with, barriers to mothers' success may not in and of themselves cause psychological contract violation for returning mothers. Without a doubt, mothers who returned to demoted jobs were returning to workplaces that were generally more hostile to mothers, and possibly this explains both their demotions *and* their psychological contract violations. At the same time, the mothers I interviewed who were demoted spoke of the significant shock, pain, and betrayal of their demotions, specifically. While demotions are more common in unsupportive workplace cultures, the results of this study suggest that demotions have a specific impact, over and above the other impacts of an environment generally unsupportive to mothers.

*The role of social policies: Are mothers truly protected from post-maternity leave demotions?*

It is essential to consider mothers' reinstatement experiences in light of their rights under provincial and federal family status protective laws. As outlined in the introduction, Ontario's Employment Standard Act sets out the Right to Reinstatement with the intention of protecting returning mothers from punishment on the part of their employers. The existence of this provision means that employers need not include statements in their employment contracts—statements that would be redundant because they are the law—promising that mothers will not face demotions upon their return to work. It also means that mothers should expect, and do expect, that employers keep their covenant with the state and that they will return to their original jobs.

If everything was going according to plan, however, it would not be necessary to invoke the concept of the psychological contract in order to illustrate that a covenant has been broken. Because explicit promises to preserve mothers' jobs are deemed unnecessary in light of the law, employers say nothing, and mothers don't realize they should request them. In a situation echoing the discrepancy between the "law on the books and law on the ground" that plagues parents' access to family-friendly policies, the ESA is liberally interpreted— or just ignored— by employers, and is nearly impossible for the vast majority of demoted mothers to force their employers to uphold. In short, justice in this case

is not available to mothers, and as a result, mothers are suffering psychologically, emotionally, and physically, whether they leave their workplaces or stay. Professional mothers who "opt out" in response to this situation represent a very small fraction of working mothers; it is vitally important to ask, what is the experience of mothers who must stay? From this perspective, a cultural and research focus on work-life conflict as the central issue concerning mothers' experiences of working while their children are young requires redirecting. There is no question that mothers struggle to meet demands in both realms, but we need to understand better what is happening in the realm of work that turns conflict into crisis.

In *Making Motherhood Work,* Collins (2019) argues that "framing work-family conflict as a problem of imbalance is an overly individualized way to conceive of a nation of mothers engulfed in stress, and it doesn't take into account how institutions contribute to this stress" (p.6). Instead, Collins offers her research as a "rallying cry centered on *work-family justice*." In expanding our thinking beyond the individual on what it takes for mothers to access work-family justice, Collins urges us to reexamine the social norms and state policies that undergird various forms of injustice within the structure of the workplace. Collins describes Canada and the United States as liberal welfare states, meaning the well-being of citizens is ensured via social benefits that both reflect and preserve the primacy of the market. In this view, despite the maternity benefits Canadian mothers are

provided, our social policies tend to uphold and promote ideals associated with market-driven cultures: individualism, privatization, and choice.

The triad of mothers, work, and social reproduction is drawing an enormous amount of focus and debate in the United States. From Cheryl Sandberg's *Lean In,* to Amy Westervelt's *Forget Having It All,* to Anne-Marie Slaughter's *Unfinished Business*, bestseller after bestseller call for a reconsideration of our approach. Though their framing of the fundamental issues may differ drastically, what we are witnessing is a cultural response to a long-brewing crisis of care work, impacting primarily women. Canadian mothers might look to the south to prepare ourselves for a similar crisis that Canada, guided by our liberal welfare state values, in an increasingly neoliberal and conservative context, might be rapidly approaching. Earlier this year, Jenny Brown's book *Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight Over Women's Work* positioned a recent trend toward restrictive abortion laws and crackdowns on access to birth control in a number of states as an effort to coerce women into motherhood. In her view, record low fertility rates in virtually all of the OECD countries may be attributed to a mass refusal to enter into parenthood. This refusal takes the form of delayed age of marriage, delayed entry into parenthood, and the decision to remain childless or to have a single child. Legislators are attempting to reestablish rates of birth to a level that maintains the workforce as well as ensures a steady supply of military-age recruits. Brown's views seem prescient in light of events just months after the publication of her book: Alabama Senate passed the most

restrictive abortion laws the US had ever seen, including a 99-year prison sentence for doctors caught performing abortions ("Alabama Senate passes most restrictive abortion ban," 2019).

In December of 2017, Canadian parents became eligible for 18 months of parental leave, an increase from the 12 months leave that has been in effect in all provinces since 2000. While this shift has been called a win for parents by some, I believe we need to take a close look at the possible ramifications of this shift to new mothers. On the one hand, historically, periods of job-protected leave entitlement reform have been shown to have positive impacts on mothers' workforce engagement. Substantial increases in leave entitlements introduced in 1990–91 (from 17 –18 weeks to 29 – 52 weeks in most provinces) and then again in 2000 (when all provinces increased to 52 weeks) has increased mothers' job continuity. Both periods led to a higher number of mothers returning to work rather than becoming stay-at-home mothers following childbirth, as well as more mothers returning to full-time work for their pre-birth employer rather than switching to part-time work while their children are preschool age (Baker & Milligan, 2008). In light of the results of this thesis, however, as well as previous research suggesting mothers are penalized for their time away, it is critical that we ask, will an increased time away also mean increased ill-treatment upon mothers' return?

New extended parental leave entitlements should also prompt us, as a society, to ask how this change either disrupts or further entrenches cultural

norms. First, we need to be very clear that when we are talking about new parents in Canada spending more time with young children, we are talking about mothers. Recent statistics show that 90% of Canadian mothers take leave, at an average of 43.6 weeks taken, whereas 26% of Canadian fathers take leave at an average of only 2.4 weeks ("Type and length of leave taken," 2015). While parents are eligible for more time away, they are not receiving an increase to their federal employment benefit—that pay out remains the same but is spread more thinly over the extended period. Just as the Canadian government in most provinces drastically underfunds daycare, it has structured parental leave to allow parents to increase their burden of underpaid childcare responsibilities. In short, it is now becoming increasingly normalized for mothers to spend more time caring for children full-time without a concomitant increase in their already very low subsidies. Canadian mothers, therefore, almost exclusively shoulder the enormous cost of raising our future workforce—with their lost wages, their derailed careers, their reduced psychological and physical well-being.

The question of who pays for the work of social reproduction is not a new one. In the 1960s, the Wages for Housework movement was founded on the position that if women were paid for their reproductive labour, the entire capitalist economic system would collapse—a desirable outcome, from the Marxist feminist point of view of the movement's founders. Radical feminists such as Sylvia Federici and Anna Mariarosa Dalla Costa called for a cultural repositioning of the work of social reproduction as deserving of reward and recognition, just as

traditional men's labour was viewed as valuable and productive (Federici, 2012).

The aforementioned current wave of bestsellers is, I believe, a revival of this movement. They ask us to reconsider the positioning of the "problem" of women and work as residing in women's individual capacities. They argue that this positioning is part of a much larger trend of downplaying the systemic barriers to women's release from the burden of unpaid care work. In Slaughter's words, "If all you do is care for other people, an activity just as if not more essential to the survival of the human race as earning an income, you lose your very identity as a person of value" (Slaughter, 2015, p. 84). As this new iteration of a Marxist feminist movement gains ground, the situation of mothers employed in low-wage, precarious sectors (sectors in which racialized mothers are vastly over-represented) must be understood as more deeply impacted by the burden of care work than that of the mothers included in this study. These mothers face a host of more serious issues threatening the very survival of their families; instead of careers derailed by demotions following maternity leave, they face total loss of income and are often forced to take no leave at all. Moreover research is beginning to show that while elite and middle-class mothers may not suffer the stresses of lower-income mothers, the reverse is not true. The pressure to perform "intensive mothering," for instance, was once positioned as a burden only middle-class mothers faced. Recent research shows, though, a need to revise that assumption, because lower-income mothers also report this pressure (Schulte, 2015). Slaughter (2015) suggests that "it is [the] devaluing and discrimination

against caregiving that provides the common thread linking the experiences of women at the top and at the bottom" (p. 84). While this may be true, future research must explore the experiences of 'women at the bottom' with at least as much effort, time and resources as those of the 'women at the top.' The suggestion that mothers from opposite ends of the class spectrum are linked by a particular issue should not, for instance, obscure the fact that layers of oppression render mothers' experiences vastly different. For example, discussions of pressures on mothers to have children, and to devote their lives to their children, must take into account the fact that for African American mothers, "pressures to encourage or limit reproduction have varied with the historical moment…during slavery, African-American women were often forcibly encouraged to reproduce the labor force, but in the contemporary period of deindustrialization and rising unemployment their reproductive capacity has become a matter for national attention" (Mullings, 2002/2019). This thesis provides a limited insight into the situation of women transitioning to motherhood in the workplace; I hope, however, that it can also be understood as an indication of the necessity of pursuing a broader, inclusive analysis.  These findings of this thesis suggest that an overly simplified view of mothers as responding to work-life conflict by either giving in to the pull of full-time mothering, or by drawing on individual characteristics of resilience and determination to make work "work," is seriously misguided. These results also suggest that professional mothers' quit intentions, workforce exits, and workplace behaviour may be rational reactions to systemic

barriers rather than idiosyncratic and individual choices determined by coping style, maternal confidence, or psychological health. The reality is that, in their return to work transitions, mothers in even the best of circumstances are contending with a highly complex set of expectations, messages, and conflicting demands. They also bring with them their own set of expectations about their jobs and the manner in which they, as valued employees, should be treated. Expanding and refining our collective understanding of how these elements interact to either support mothers' work success or prevent it should be a primary goal of social science researchers and policy makers alike.

**McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)**

c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support MREB Secretariat, GH-305
1280 Main St. W.
Hamilton, Ontario, L8W 4L8

email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca Phone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142

**CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH**

Today's Date: May/17/2019

**Principal Investigator:**
**Co-Investigator:**
**Research Assistant/Coordinator:**
**Supervisor:** Dr. David Goutor
**Student Principal Investigator:** Ms. Morgan Jaques
**Applicant:** Morgan Jaques
**Project Title:** Post-Maternity Leave Workplace Reintegration: What Works for New Mothers **MREB#:** 2019

Dear Researcher(s)

The ethics application and supporting documents for MREB# 2019 entitled "Post-Maternity Leave Workplace Reintegration" have been reviewed and cleared by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants.

The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification. The above named study is to be conducted in accordance with the most recent approved versions of the application and supporting documents.

Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the Annual Report in advance of the yearly anniversary of the original ethics clearance date: May/17/2020. If the Annual Report is not submitted, then ethics clearance will lapse on the expiry date and Research Finance will be notified that ethics clearance is no longer valid (TCPS, Art. 6.14).

An Amendment form must be submitted and cleared before any substantive alterations are made to the approved research protocol and documents (TCPS, Art. 6.16).

Researchers are required to report Adverse Events (i.e. an unanticipated negative consequence or result affecting participants) to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible, and no more than 3 days after the event occurs (TCPS, Art. 6.15). A privacy breach affecting participant information should also be reported to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible. The Reportable Events form is used to document adverse events, privacy breaches, protocol deviations and participant complaints.

| Document Type File Name Date Version |
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| Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Letters of Support Consent Forms Interviews Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Interviews |
| Consent Forms Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Recruiting Materials Response Documents |
| Morgan Jaques Email Recruiting Script - sent direct to participants Email Recruiting Script - sent by Holder of participant contact Snowball Recruiting Script copy |
| Morgan Jaques reminder email script |
| Morgan Jaques screening questions |
| Morgan Jaques thank you note to participants |
| Morgan Jaques Support Services List |

Letter of Information-Consent sample
Morgan Jaques Interview Guide
Morgan Jaques Email Recruiting Script - sent direct to participants Version 2 Morgan Jaques Email Recruiting Script - sent direct to participants Version 3 Morgan Jaques thank you note to participants Version 2
Morgan Jaques screening questions Version 2
Morgan Jaques Interview Guide Version 2
Letter of Information-Consent sample Version 2
Morgan Jaques Email Recruiting Script sent direct to participants Version 4 Email Recruiting Script - sent by Holder of participant contact Version 2 Snowball Recruiting Script Version 2
Morgan Jaques Summary of Revisions

Apr/01/2019 1 Apr/01/2019 1 Apr/04/2019 1 Apr/04/2019 1 Apr/04/2019 1 Apr/04/2019 1 Apr/04/2019 1 Apr/08/2019 1 Apr/09/2019 1 May/11/2019 2 May/12/2019 3 May/12/2019 2 May/12/2019 2 May/13/2019 2 May/14/2019 2 May/14/2019 4 May/14/2019 2 May/14/2019 2 May/14/2019 1

Dr. Steven Bray

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MREB

DATE: _____

**APPENDIX 10**
**LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT**


**A study about mothers' reintegration into the workplace following maternity leave**


**Principal Investigator:**
Morgan Jaques
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Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
**(905) 308-5924**
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**Supervisor:**
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**Purpose of the Study:**

To explore mothers' experiences transitioning back to the workplace following maternity leave, in order to better understand the challenges and barriers that mothers of young children face as they become working mothers. I am doing this research for a thesis as part of the requirement of a Masters degree in Labour Studies.

**What will happen during the study?**

The study will involve a 1.5 to 2 hour interview. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. I will be the sole interviewer and will interview you alone, in a confidential and comfortable setting of your choice. The interviews will involve open-ended questions, encouraging you to reflect on your experience of returning to work following maternity leave. The interviews will be audio recorded, only, and I may also take brief handwritten notes. The following are two examples of the questions I will be asking:

1. Can you tell me about your job prior to taking maternity leave: what was your role, and what was your understanding about your future with that employer?

2. When you returned to work following maternity leave, what was your first day back on the job like?

I will also ask you for some demographic/background information like your age and education.

**Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable recalling your experiences, and find it stressful to recall certain events. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy. I will provide you with a list of local counselling services that you may wish to contact following the interview.

**Potential Benefits:**

I believe that you may benefit from discussing your experiences, simply by talking through some feelings and perceptions about the transition in a way that reduces feelings of isolation or sadness that you may carry. I hope you will benefit from a sense that, although mothers face barriers to equality in the workplace, that you will be part of a growing effort to examine the issue and work toward solutions that assist other mothers in the future.

Benefits to the wider scientific community/society come with sharing your experiences in a way that allows us to situate seemingly isolated experiences of workplace reintegration into a larger narrative that is about what mothers face as a group. I hope the study will provide some answers to questions that it is imperative that society asks: Why is it so common for mothers of young children to feel overwhelmed, depressed, confused, and that their contributions outside of the home have little value once they become mothers? What are some of the specific experiences leading to underemployment among mothers of young children, and how can employers help retain mothers rather than create an atmosphere that results in their feeling undervalued and marginalized?

**Who will know what I said or did in the study?**

You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. If mention of a name is necessary, a pseudonym will be used. No one but me will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them.

Your responses and all personal information will be digitally stored on an encrypted hard drive that will be secured in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Paper copies of your consent forms will be shredded after being converted to digital files. I will store this information for a period of one year following the study, after which, all files will be destroyed. The interviews will be conducted in a private setting where it is impossible/unlikely that others will overhear anything.

Every effort will be made to protect (guarantee) your confidentiality and privacy. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. For instance, an employer could identify you by the unique details you share, and you could experience repercussions as a result. Others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

**What if I change my mind about being in the study?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can withdraw from the intereview for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until the end of July 15, 2019, when I expect to be submitting my thesis.

If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.  If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

**How do I find out what was learned in this study?**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately September, 2019. If you would like a brief summary of the results, or a copy of the entire thesis, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

**Questions about the Study:**

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

| |
|---|
| Jaquem1@mcmaster.ca |
| 905-308-5924 |

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

**CONSENT**

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Morgan Jaques of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until July 15, 2019.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- 

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.
[ ] Yes
[ ] No

2. [ ] Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.
Please send them to me at this email address _____
Or to this mailing address: _____
   _____
   _____
[ ] No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

# Interview Questions

## Mothers' Experiences of Transitioning Back to Work
## Following Maternity Leave
### Morgan Jaques, Master of Arts student
### Department of Labour Studies – McMaster University

**Information about these interview questions**:

This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about the experiences of mothers transitioning back to the workplace following maternity leave. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just "yes or no" answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: "*So, you are saying that …?*), to get more information ("*Please tell me more?*"), or to learn what you think or feel about something ("*Why do you think that is…?*").

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Although I will be taking steps to protect your identity, by omitting your name, any reference to your place of work (former or current) and any identifying names you mention, it is important to remember that sometimes we can be identified through the stories we tell. If you have concerns about any identifying information that might be contained in your answers to the following questions, please feel free to skip that question.

If you feel tired or fatigued breaks can be taken or the interview ended. I will ask periodically if you would like to take a break.

**Information about you:**

Your age now?

How old are your children?

When did you take your maternity leave, and how long were you away from your job?

Are you still employed at this same workplace? If not, how long did you remain employed there?

What is your current work role?

Can you briefly tell me about your job prior to taking maternity leave?

Please tell me about your feelings and impressions surrounding your departure from the workplace for maternity leave (for example, interactions between you and your supervisor).

Please tell me about any interaction you had with your workplace while you were away on maternity leave (for example, communications from your supervisor, meetings you participated in, informal gatherings with colleagues, etc.).

Can you tell me about your expectations surrounding your return to work following maternity leave? On what were these expectations based?

Please describe, to the best of your recollection, your first week back at work following maternity leave.

Can you describe in what ways your job felt different, and in what ways it felt the same as your job prior to maternity leave?

Thinking about your relationship to your supervisor, in what ways did this relationship change or remain the same?

Did your role change in any way after maternity leave? E.g. did your title change, did you have a new supervisor, a new job description? If so, how did you feel about these changes?

Can you tell me about what it was like for you, in those early days back at work, to balance the demands of work and mothering? In what ways did your new role of mothering impact your work? Your relationship with your supervisor or employer?

As time went on, how did you feel about your job, and your relationship with your supervisor or employer?

If you feel comfortable doing so, please tell me about your current relationship with that supervisor or employer. If the relationship has come to an end, how did this happen?

What, if anything, could your supervisor or employer have done differently to support you in your transition back to work? What, if anything, do you feel they did well?

If you could pass on advice to women preparing to take maternity leave about their transition back to work, what would you say to them?

Is there something important we forgot? Is there anything else you think I need to know about your experiences?

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