“Opting Back In”
The Influence of Time at Home on Professional Women’s Career Redirection after “Opting Out”

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The Opt-Out Revolution?
The Reality

- College-educated mothers have highest LFP rate of any group of mothers
- Recent cohorts more, not less likely to be working
- 20% of 22-59 year-old married, college-educated moms are taking care of home & family
Re-Entering Labor Force after Time Out

- Do women want to re-enter?
- How much continuity or change is there in women’s work orientations and preferences?
- How are these shaped by their prior work experiences and their experiences at home?
What Do We Know from Limited Past Research?

- Women want to re-enter
- Pronounced shift toward different sectors and jobs
- Varying success in ability to obtain employment
- Search accompanied by frustration and disappointment
Research Goals

- Better understand the process by which this shift occurs
- How are women’s career orientations and preferences shaped by:
  - Prior experiences at work?
  - Ongoing experiences at home?
Data and Methods

- Sample criteria: OLF, formerly in professional or managerial occupation, married with children < 18

- Referral or “snowball” sampling (N=54)

- Starting points: 4 highly selective colleges or universities

- Interviews in 7 cities throughout US

- Intensive semi-structured interviews covering:
  - Background and demographic information
  - Family and work histories
  - Reasons for quitting their jobs
  - Aspects of process of quitting
  - Lives "at home" in terms of identity, activities and adjustment
  - Future plans with regard to work and family
Interviewee Profile

- Median age 41
- Two children, ages 3 months-16 years
- Highly educated, half had advanced degree
- Married to professionals/managers
- Median time out of the labor force: 5 years
- Median number of years in LF before career interruption: 10 years
- Women of achievement & privilege, having worked in a variety of professional/managerial jobs:
  --Traditional male-dominated specialties—65%
  --Transitional or mixed fields—20%
  --Traditional female-dominated specialties 15%
“Opting [sic] Out”—Background and Context

- 90% aspired to combine work and family
- Highly conflicted re decision to quit
- Workplace pushes>family pulls
  - Long hours, inflexibility, and inadequate, poorly implemented flex options
  - Speed-up and family-unfriendly climates linked to restructuring
Women’s Future Career Plans

- Echoes prior research—uncertainty and change

- 2 out of 3 plan to return to work; rest seriously considering it; a few regard their work lives as over

- Of those who intend to return:
  - One-third unsure of their career direction
  - One-third lack confidence about ability to re-enter
  - Half plan to change fields to enter new profession or occupation
  - Of those returning to previous professions, most anticipate self-employment, and not a return to former employers
Market Pushes on Redirection—Human Capital Depreciation & Skill Obsolescence

- Moira Franklin, engineer:
  - “It’s kind of scary out there....It’s not as if I’ve done nothing, but it’s not the same thing as some of my coworkers...[who] are a lot more up-to-date and qualified....Here I am with an engineering degree and I don’t have email.”
Market Pushes on Redirection—Age Discrimination

- Marina Isherwood, HMO executive:
  - “By the time I go back to work, I’ll be in my 50s. I don’t know what kind of job you can get. The biggest obstacle I see to stopping work is whether you can get back in or what you get back in as.”
Market Pushes on Redirection—Motherhood Penalty/Stigma

- Vita Cornwall, banker and non-profit executive, on why she’s unsure about returning to work:

  - “I’d be seen as a stereotype [of a stay-at-home mom] and I don’t want to go in with that label on my forehead.”
Domestic Pulls on Redirection

- Re-drawn household division of labor
- Intensification of intensive mothering
- Increased volunteer work
- Increased time for self
Domestic Pulls—
Household Division of Labor

- Holly Davenport, PR executive:

  “I guess because I haven't chosen to go firmly into the career route, he hasn't firmly decided to pick up any of the [household] duties. ...I draw the line at the dry cleaner and the dump, but otherwise I do everything else.”
Domestic Pulls—Intensification of Mothering

Nathalie Everett, marketing manager:

“I guess the more I’m home now I know what the mothers were talking about in terms of all the things that need to be done. Also there’s a certain element of no one does it with the love and care and attention that a mother will do it with.”
Domestic Pulls—Increased Volunteer Work

- Stephanie Spano, management consultant:
  - “The other component of what I’ve always hoped to find in a job, and which I do find in volunteer work, is the notion of somehow giving back...enriching the world...because of what I do....Teaching has that.”
Domestic Pulls—
Increased Time for Self

- Hobbies, recreation, and courses that opened avenues for career exploration
Changing Values and Interests, Changing Career Paths

- Shift to caring values prompted shift in work aspirations
- Women gravitated to professions involving care and service
- Most popular new career: Teaching
Reinforced by Disillusionment with Previous Careers

- Maeve Turner, lawyer, now interested in teaching:
  - “I don't have any commitment to it. My soul isn't in it anymore. I don't feel identified with it. It's just not who I am anymore.”
A New Model

- Olivia Pastore, lawyer:
  - “The message I preach is ‘Why should we women imitate male careers, which is start them and do them ‘til you retire or die?’”
Ongoing Time Bind

- Most wanted to return on part-time or family-flexible schedule
- Career/job change motivated by desire for greater work flexibility absent from former profession/job
Job Criterion #1: Flexibility

- Mirra Lopez, engineer, thinking about becoming a teacher:
- “Then you're in a position where even though you're making probably very little, at least you're on a schedule that you can have with your children....Teaching is a little more geared towards being able to kind of fit in with the kids, that kind of thing.”
What do these results tell us about what mothers want?

- Work and family
- Values congruence
- Flexibility
- But what if they hadn’t had to quit to begin with?
Costs of Redirection

- Move to female-dominated professions permits reconciliation of work/family needs and identity but at what cost?
  - Loss of prestige
  - Loss of earning power
  - Loss of investments in former careers
  - Need for new investment/training
Policy Recommendations

Help women maintain rather than interrupt careers:

- Reduce hours
- Provide flexibility
- De-stigmatize part-time and flex options
- Facilitate re-entry and attack motherhood penalty in hiring
Insider-Outsider location gives women “critical consciousness”

- Suggests need for transformation of work realm:
  - More responsive to work-family integration of women and men
  - More humanistic and care-oriented
  - Pay equity for female-dominated jobs