

# Future Research Directions on Work and the Transition to Motherhood

Christiane Spitzmueller and Russell A. Matthews

**Abstract** A multipronged approach is proposed within this concluding chapter in order to propel research on work and the transition to motherhood. Specifically, the continued application of interdisciplinary approaches, the utilization of value and identity based theoretical frameworks, a stronger focus on long-term cost calculations, further intervention research, an emphasis on influential demographic differences, and additional cross-cultural research form crucial steps towards advancing research on the work-motherhood interface. Leveraging these inter-related approaches will allow scholars to promote individual and family well-being at the intersection of work and transition to motherhood, while defining practically and theoretically meaningful research questions that can inform public policy and management practice.

**Keywords** Work-motherhood interface • Theoretical frameworks • Cost-benefit calculations • Cross-cultural research

What are next steps scholars should consider regarding research on the transition to motherhood? What can researchers do to promote individual and family well-being at the intersection of work and transition to motherhood? How can we define practically and theoretically meaningful research questions that can inform public policy and management practice? We propose that further interdisciplinary approaches, the utilization of value and identity based theoretical frameworks, a stronger focus on long-term cost calculations, further intervention research, an emphasis on influential demographic differences, and additional cross-cultural research form crucial steps towards advancing research on the work-motherhood interface.

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## Interdisciplinary Approaches

Across the chapters in this book, it is apparent that the dynamic nature of pregnancy, identity, and family management require the integration of a myriad of complementary research perspectives. Ultimately, a broad, interdisciplinary focus that includes, among others, developmental psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, and family systems researchers in research teams along with organizational behavior experts will lead to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the transition.

For example, collaborative relationships that appear likely to result in significant research outcomes include networks of organizational behavior researchers and developmental psychologists. We argue that developmental psychologists can be instrumental in contributing to the definition of criteria within family systems and in the domain of child health and well-being. To this end, the integration of survey-based field research in organizational settings with experimentally oriented laboratory work that taps child outcome is likely to further the definition of meaningful outcomes (i.e. executive functioning performance, attachment) that can lead to positive long-term outcomes. These collaborative efforts can contribute to broadening the methodological skill sets of organizational behavior researchers to include observation-based research in children. Further, adapting methodologies commonly found in economics and political science, it may be possible to estimate financial costs and benefits of programs aimed at stakeholders involved in the transition to motherhood. For example, an interesting example for cost estimates of transition to motherhood include work on the costs of sub-optimal breastfeeding rates among U.S. parents. This research documents monetary savings, as well as potential to improve health outcomes among mothers and children using cost calculation methods (Bartick and Reinhold 2010).

Similarly, collaborations between organizational behavior researchers, family studies researchers and sociologists are likely to broaden methodological approaches. For instance, the breadth of qualitative research training common in sociology, anthropology and family studies graduate programs can enhance phenomenon-driven research on the work-motherhood interface. Mixed-method studies containing both qualitative and quantitative elements can lead to a richer understanding of nuanced aspects of the transition and gauge stakeholder perspectives comprehensively and directly (Matthews et al. 2011). We also encourage organizational behavior researchers to consider extensive collaborations with family studies scholars since theoretically relevant aspects such as family life course development frameworks, among others, receive more attention in family studies and sociology than in organizational behavior research.

Much is also to be gained from collaborative work with researchers who study employees' transitions to retirement (for relevant discussion see Matthews and Fisher 2012). Research in this area commonly utilizes dyadic designs where nested data structures are accounted for both empirically and theoretically. At the same time research on the transition to retirement utilizes norms, values, attitudes, other

individual differences and demographic information provided by both partners to investigate how well-being in retirement can be achieved (Gustman and Steinmeier 2000; Henretta et al. 1993; Moen et al. 2001; Smith and Moen 2004; Szinovacz 1996). The data structures analyzed in these studies are not dissimilar to what studies on couples' transitions to parenthood consist of, and book chapters as well as methodological information originating in the retirement literature can be translated and applied to research on work and the transition to parenthood. Of course, these approaches are most applicable to traditional family models (mother, father, child/children) than to single-parent households, which would lend themselves more to the use of diary studies and other experience sampling methodologies that can track individuals' well-being and health over time. Similarly, the field could benefit substantially from more extensive use of archival datasets, such as the ones collected by the National Institutes of Health. Although these data sets are not generally collected with work-family research in mind, they oftentimes contain demographic information that would allow for meaningful analyses based on parents' work experience and work characteristics.

## **Value and Identity Based Theoretical Frameworks**

The concept of value and identity congruence are promising venues that can be explored as boundary conditions that impact whether outcomes of return to work are positive, neutral or negative. As highlighted in several chapters of this volume, scholars may wish to engage in research that allows us to better understand a mother's value congruence, and how to promote "fit" between her values, her personal environment and her work environment (for relevant discussion see, Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). In the past, the more prevalent approach to studying values was not necessarily in conjunction with parents' value systems (Cite). Extensions of research work on value and identity can determine whether women's perceptions of centrality of work and home roles play a role in whether and how "fit" with home and work environments is achieved (e.g., Edwards and Rothbard 2005). For instance, women who perceive their maternal role as more essential to their identities and values than their work role are likely to approach the transition differently and may, as a result, experience different outcomes. Simultaneously, congruence may not only be affected by maternal perspectives, but also by fathers' value-based expectations of women's roles in homes and work environments. Particularly research focusing on the entire life course could lead to meaningful additional theoretical and empirical insights.

Identity changes also occur in men's lives as they become fathers. Still, research on fathers' transitions to being working parents is relatively nascent. More research is needed that explores how, why and when fathers shift their roles and identities and integrate their new parental responsibilities in their self-concept. Again the notion of "fit" between values, identity and centrality of work and home roles could

be an exciting way to shed light on what can make fathers' transitions successful for them, their families and their employers.

## **Cost and Benefit Calculations**

From the perspective of organizations considering an investment in family and mother friendly workplace policies, practices and benefits, short-term cost calculations oftentimes trump long-term benefit calculations. As a research field, we need to further contribute to research on organizationally relevant, long-term benefits of family and mother friendly workplace practices. Investigations of absenteeism, voluntary turnover, mental health outcomes, disability leave and health care costs can constitute outcomes in more research. Inclusion of these criteria will most likely provide further evidence-based support for the implementation of family and mother friendly interventions.

However, even if research on broader, organizationally relevant behaviors that tie directly to cost is conducted, its effects on organizational practice will be limited unless researchers take steps beyond publishing in peer-reviewed journals and books. Efforts to write practitioner-oriented papers, publications in trade and industry journals, talks at human resource practitioner oriented conferences may contribute to the availability of relevant research to professionals. This can, in return, enhance organizations' discussions of long-and short-term costs of not implementing family and mother friendly organizational policies and practices.

Cost-benefit calculations are also crucial if research on the work-motherhood interface should inform policy development at community, state and country levels. Ultimately, a long-term focus on benefits for families and societies is crucial and needs to supplement more short-sighted of a focus on immediate costs of family-friendly policies to employers, communities, states and national budgets. Similar to the much-needed expansion of outreach to human resource practitioners and other organizational stakeholders, researchers interested in affecting outcomes for organizations, mothers and families may also need to proactively engage political decision makers. The development of evidence-based recommendations for dissemination to political decision makers can form one step. Another step may constitute the dissemination of research findings in more popular press outlets with the ultimate goal of informing both decision makers and voters about the costs and benefits of family and mother friendly workplace practices and policies.

## **Intervention Research**

Even though intervention research has been a stronger focus in the last few years than in prior decades, research on the interface of work and the transition to motherhood needs more systematic, methodologically rigorous intervention

research. Intervention research in organizations is inherently challenging, irrespective of the content domain. Research on the work-motherhood interface poses additional challenges. First, most small, mid-sized and large organizations only have a relatively small number of pregnant women and mothers transitioning to parenthood at any one time. In many organizations, low sample sizes at the outset can lead to low statistical power in quantitative intervention research, rendering sample sizes of pregnant women and mothers in most organizations to be limitations on what intervention research can accomplish. Ideally, the formation of organizations organized in a consortium for research at the work-motherhood interface could alleviate the lack of organizational settings available for rigorous intervention research. At the same time, qualitative intervention research schemes rely less on large sample sizes and control-group designs. Thus, the utilization of qualitative intervention research may constitute an option in organizations where sample sizes of pregnant women and mothers would be insufficient to facilitate more systematic studies.

Second, intervention research oftentimes withholds or delays benefits to subgroups of the study population in order to gain a more systematic understanding of benefits and effects. Oftentimes, organizational stakeholders are uncomfortable with the notion of withholding or delaying the provision of benefits to subgroups of populations in order to ascertain intervention effects are due to the intervention and not other organizational changes that occur simultaneously. In these cases, advocacy for rigorous methodological solutions needs to be paired with pragmatic approaches that meet organizational needs while still maintaining a level of research rigor that allows research conclusions to be valid. Most importantly, as researchers, we need to devote further attention to building effective scientist-practitioner collaborations with human resource practitioners interested in deriving evidence-based approaches to the effective integration of mothers into the workforce.

Further advances in the area of intervention research can also be realized if statistical and methodological toolboxes that are necessary for effective intervention research are summarized in books. For instance, handbooks on topics such as intervention methodologies in work-family research and multilevel modeling of longitudinal data in work-family studies are direly needed tools. Handbook and summary chapters on multilevel modeling would be particularly useful since data structures inherent in research on work and the transition to motherhood inherently involve nested data structures (e.g. at the family, department, organizational, national level). The availability of these tools to researchers interested in extending their current research programs to include intervention, longitudinal and multilevel studies on work and the transition to motherhood will likely advance our knowledge base substantially.

Studies examining a broad set of costs and benefits of maternity policies are also direly needed. Although the use of experimental designs may not be feasible to study policy changes, quasi-experimental designs can take advantage of policy changes and different time frames for implementation across different states, regions, industry sectors and nations.

From an intervention standpoint it may also be meaningful to conduct research/training around workplace “champions”. In many organizations, these workplace champions advocate for better maternity benefits, reduced discrimination and better integration of working mothers. Even though ample anecdotal and popular press evidence supports that these champions play a pivotal role in improving the mother-friendliness of many workplaces, little is known about their motives. Even less is known with regards to the behaviors and strategies that they may use to advocate for women who are transitioning to being working mothers.

Further intervention research could take advantage of the prevalent utilization of “off-the-shelf” training programs (or training programs that are developed in a generic fashion to be sold, oftentimes in an online format) to organizations. Managers often purchase access to these “off-the-shelf” training programs. However, despite the utilization of these programs in many organizations, scholars have not tapped these programs for intervention research to examine their effectiveness systematically. Again, partnerships with organizations developing these training programs will be essential if the effectiveness and impact of these interventions is to be systematically studied and understood. The cost for developing online training programs has decreased substantially over the past decades. Hence, it may also be feasible for academics to develop online intervention tools, market these to organizations and derive research data from their distribution to create an evidence-based perspective on the interventions’ impact on women, families, children and organizations.

## **Demographic Differences at the Work-Motherhood Interface**

With regards to demographics, we argue that a number of key demographic variables have received less research attention than they should. More specifically, research on single parents, single fathers, the role of religious affiliation at the transition to parenthood, same-sex couples, small-to-mid-size employers, couples that work for the same organization, low-income households and households with multiple children need to be the subject of more investigation.

Generally speaking, although many of these demographic groups are examined in the broader work-family research literature, research at the interface of work and the transition to parenthood is particularly challenging in that access to populations of pregnant women and new mothers and fathers is difficult as is. If further demographic limitations are imposed, the design and execution of studies, and particularly participant recruitment, may end up being substantially more resource-intensive. Still, theoretical models that describe how women transition to being working mothers need to account for the psychological and economic impact of these demographics to understand whether models work irrespective of the demographic backdrop of respondents. Methodologies such as MTurk (a google-developed panel that provides access to participants for a small fee) may provide access to some of these otherwise hard to reach populations.

## Cross-Cultural Research at the Work-Motherhood Interface

As discussed in several chapters in this volume, governments and organizations across the globe vary widely in how they accommodate women in their transition to being working parents. Cultural expectations and cultural norms pertaining to parenting roles are, in most countries, closely aligned with leave policies. For instance, consistent with strong gender equality norms, in several European countries fathers are strongly encouraged through government policies and parental leave benefits to actively participate in raising their children. The interplay of cultural norms and government policies around work leave and return to work provide an exciting opportunity for studying national culture, cultural norms regarding maternity, government maternity benefits and policies through some of the theoretical lenses proposed in this volume, such as identity theory and weaving models. What is probably needed to advance research in this area are research consortia consisting of work-family research groups across the globe to develop a joint research agenda and data collection plans around working women's transition to motherhood. These cross-cultural studies will likely shed light not only on cultural differences, but also on the effectiveness of policies and organization-level interventions in impacting the well-being of mothers, families and organizations.

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