Parental Leave and Return to Work

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Abstract The transition to parenthood represents an exciting time for many adults, yet can also pose challenges for working parents trying to balance this new and important role. Due to a mix of political, economic, workplace and personal factors, the majority of parents return to work following the birth of a child in the Western countries. Public policy for parental leave and the timeframe for returning to work vary significantly across countries. For example, in some Scandinavian and European countries, mothers are away from work for 10 months to 3 years, whereas most mothers in the U.S. who return to work do so within 6–12 weeks. In this chapter we take a global perspective to discuss the parental leave and return to work process. Our theoretical background includes a multi-disciplinary perspective, integrating theories from the work-family and return to work literatures. Structured as a four-stage process (pre-leave, away on leave, initial transition, and post-transition back to work), we review current parental leave policies and practices, as well as individual and workplace factors that affect the return to work process. We also describe interventions that have been conducted during this process to improve parents' transitions and adjustment. We conclude with practical implications and discuss future research directions.

Keywords Parental leave · Maternity leave · Return to work · Breastfeeding and work

Over the past 40 years, family structure and the proportion of parents who work has shifted dramatically. For example, in 1968 only 27 % of mothers with children under the age of 18 participated in the U.S. workforce, compared to 71 % of mothers in 2014 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). Both parents participate in

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the workforce in more than half of married-couple families (60.2 %) with children under 18 and in married-couple families with children younger than 6-years-old (55.3 %; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). Among unmarried mothers with children younger than 18 years of age, 69.4 % were in the labor force in 2012 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013). In the U.S., more than half (57.1 %) of mothers with infants are in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). Labor force participation among women in Europe has increased from 55 % in the 1990s to 66 % in 2008 (Cippollone et al. 2013). In Norway, 80 % of women of child-bearing age are in the workforce (Statistics Norway 2010). In Australia, 66.8 % of women with school-age children are working (Chapman et al. 2001). Although the share of part-time work varies between the countries, the degree of work participation has increased markedly among women everywhere.

Given the high proportion of mothers in the labor force as well as the increased rate with which fathers take time off from work to care for children following childbirth or adoption (Bygren and Duvander 2006; Hyde et al. 1993), understanding women's and men's use of parental leave and time away from work after the birth or adoption of a child and the adjustment upon return to work is an increasingly important work and family issue. We use the term "parental leave" to refer to all periods of childcare (including subsidized, paid, or unpaid) away from work life. There are multiple reasons why this topic warrants attention in the organizational psychology literature. Although becoming a parent can be a very happy and exciting time, the transition to parenthood has been found to be quite stressful (Alstveit et al. 2011; Barnes 2013). This transition is associated with increased marital distress and dissatisfaction for many new parents (Belsky and Kelly 1994). Second, prior research has found that how women prioritize family and work when they return to work following parental leave is dictated to a great extent by family leave policies (McGovern et al. 2000; Singley and Hynes 2005). Parental leave policies are related to women's continued employment (e.g., whether and when they return to work), division of household labor (Cleveland et al. in press), parental bonding, as well as infant and maternal health (Kamerman 1999, 2006; Tanaka 2005). Lastly and importantly, the return to work transition may significantly impact one's work—including one's own work performance, as well as key stakeholders in the organization (e.g., supervisor, coworkers, and subordinates). Return to work after parental leave represents an important developmental transition, especially for women, which has largely been neglected in previous research (Alstveit et al. 2011; Millward 2006; Wiese and Heidemeier 2012).

Although research on work/family issues has grown exponentially over the last three to four decades, little work/family research has specifically examined the transition of returning to work following parental leave. Prior research that has examined this transition has been published in many different fields of study. Therefore, the primary aim of this chapter is to provide an integrative review of the literature across many disciplines to guide future research and practice, particularly for organizational scholars and HR practitioners.

In this chapter we conceptualize parental leave and return to work as a process that unfolds over time and involves many stakeholders. We will describe this process and the societal, family, work, and individual factors related to adjustment

in returning to work following parental leave. We will discuss various outcomes of return to work, including preparedness for return to work, domain satisfaction, work/life balance, breastfeeding continuation, physical health and psychological well-being—many of which are common outcomes in work/family research more generally. We will also describe interventions that have been conducted to improve mothers' adjustment to work as well as recommendations for additional interventions, practical implications and future research directions.

Theoretical Background

We begin by drawing upon three theories to guide our understanding of the process of taking parental leave and returning to work: role theory, job demands-resources theory, and open systems theory. Next we describe each of these theories and then explain how they may be integrated to understand the return to work process.

Role theory (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Kahn et al. 1964) is central to our understanding of parental leave and return to work among mothers and fathers. Role theory stipulates that an individual's roles (e.g., worker, mother, spouse) each consist of demands that must be met to successfully perform that role. Becoming a parent adds a social role to what one needs or is expected to do. Therefore, one of the primary adjustments that becomes necessary when a new parent returns to work is learning how to manage demands in the new role. According to role theory (Kahn et al. 1964), family and work role demands often compete for time and can produce strain or behavior-related role pressure incompatibility (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). For employed parents, the need to reconcile work and family roles impacts how they manage and prioritize demands across both life domains. A great deal of work/family literature has conceptualized work/family conflict as a stressor that occurs when demands in one role (e.g., work) are incompatible with demands in another role (e.g., parent).

The job demands-resources model (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001) is useful for guiding our understanding of parental leave and return to work. This model stipulates that job demands are "physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological or psychological costs" (Demerouti et al. 2001, p. 501). Examples of job demands include physical demands, emotional demands, and work pressure. Job resources, on the other hand, refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that facilitate achieving work goals or serve to reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs. Examples of job resources include supervisor coaching, having clear expectations of one's work role, and autonomy. Based on the job demands-resources model, workers are less likely to experience deleterious effects of work if job demands are low or resources are available to buffer against negative job demands. Demerouti et al. (2012) described the job demands-resources model in relation to the work/family interface. Specifically, these researchers described job demands and job resources, as well as family demands and family resources related to the experience of work/family conflict.

Open systems theory (Katz and Kahn 1978) refers to the extent that individuals and organizations exist in the context of social systems comprised of permeable boundaries such that interactions and exchanges take place between the external environment, the work organization, the worker, and the worker's family. This is consistent with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977), which purports that there are multiple interconnected levels of influences on an individual. Open systems theory suggests that there are factors at multiple levels that may influence whether and for how long one takes parental leave as well as one's ability to adjust when returning to work after leave. Examples include individual values, family needs, organizational policies and norms, as well as national policies and societal norms.

Parental Leave and Return to Work: A Process

Return to Work from Illness or Injury

To facilitate understanding of the return to work process, we briefly review the return to work literature, which has traditionally focused on the process of returning to work following illness or injury. Return to work after injury or illness has been the focus of both academic research and clinical medical practice for many years. This robust literature has addressed the factors and interventions that lead to decreased lengths of leave, improved recovery from symptoms, as well as what enables workers to remain in the workforce in the long-term (e.g., Franche et al. 2005; Krause et al. 1998, 2001; Spelten et al. 2002). Return to work after parental leave differs from return to work after injury in several important ways. For example, new mothers require time to physically recover from childbirth, but the challenges to returning to work for both mothers and fathers after parental leave relate to new and changing roles and family structures rather than primarily physical limitations alone. Whereas the goal of research and interventions focusing on returning to work after injury or illness is typically to reduce work disability duration, lost work days and associated costs for both the employer and employee (Franche et al. 2005; Krause et al. 1998), length of time away from work for parental leave is not as important as the goal of easing the transition of assuming additional family role responsibilities. Moreover, more regulations and guidance appear to be in place for return to work following occupational injury or disability relative to parental leave. Despite these differences, the literature about return to work after injury can inform our understanding of the process of return to work after parental leave because the processes share some commonalities—primarily the need to transition back to work after an extended absence. As such, there are conceptual models presented in the return to work after injury literature that may help clarify how we understand return to work after parental leave.

For example, Young et al. (2005) proposed a developmental conceptualization of return to work following illness or injury in which they call attention to the role of key stakeholders, both people and organizations, in the dynamic and evolving process of returning to work after absence. They point out that stakeholders have changing relevant concerns, motives, and goals that lead to important outcomes at each stage of the process: away from work, re-entry into the workplace, retention or maintenance once the worker has returned, and ultimately advancement. These same stages and the impact of changing stakeholder needs, motives and goals may apply well in the dynamic process of returning to work after parental leave.

One exception in the context of parental leave and return to work is the additional stage of pre-leave planning, because the parent knows in advance that they will have a child. The pre-leave stage involves the physical changes among mothers, as well as the social and psychological factors that become salient in anticipating and preparing for parenthood which affect both parents. Another key difference is that in the return to work after injury process, stakeholders are likely employees, employers, and medical providers, whereas in the process of returning to work after parental leave, key stakeholders also include the worker's family.

Stages of Parental Leave and Return to Work

We suggest that there are four stages in the parental leave/return to work process: pre-leave, away on leave, transitioning back to work, and full integration back at work. These stages take place sequentially, although the length of time spent in each stage may vary considerably across individuals. Open systems and ecological systems theories suggest that there are factors at multiple levels that may influence any or all of the stages of this process. Each of the stages and ways in which multilevel factors may affect the process are described next.

Pre-leave

The first stage of the parental leave process is pre-leave. As stated previously, one characteristic of parental leave, compared to other types of family, medical, or disability leave, is that typically the time away from work is anticipated. Because a pregnant worker knows that she will be away from work for some period of time, anticipating the leave offers an opportunity for planning. Prior research has identified three types of planning: planning with one's employer, planning with one's partner, and planning for childcare (Harrison and Ungerer 2002). The amount of planning done during pregnancy is positively related to whether a mother returns to work following parental leave (Coulson et al. 2012).

Based on the job demands-resources model, the pre-leave stage is an ideal time to assess anticipated demands and identify resources needed for this process.

During the planning stage, the worker may think about or plan for the length of time during which he or she anticipates being away from work, become familiar with government and employer leave policies, consult with the Human Resources department as needed, and communicate plans with one's supervisor, and other key stakeholders in the organization (e.g., coworkers and subordinates, and possibly customers, if relevant; Coulson et al. 2012). One of the challenges with the pre-leave stage is that in many cases the worker may not know precisely when he or she will commence parental leave. In some cases, parental leave may begin earlier than anticipated (such as when a baby arrives prior to the expecting mother's due date, or due to pregnancy complications or other health issues that preclude continued work while pregnant). Galtry and Callister (2005) highlighted the fact that the earlier a worker begins maternity leave prior to having the baby, the less time she will have available to remain away from work *after* the baby arrives.

During the pre-leave stage, the worker may develop expectations for what work and non-work life will be like after the child arrives. These expectations may be shaped by non-work roles and demands, such as household chores and household division of labor (e.g., who will do grocery shopping, meal preparation, laundry, etc.) as well as work demands, including work hours. Such expectations may be driven by family or couple norms for household division of labor (Cleveland et al. in press), as well as workplace norms and culture (e.g., culture of long work hours; family supportive organizational perceptions; Allen et al. 2013). Factors that may be important during the pre-leave stage include the expecting mother's mental and physical health and energy level, amount of time until anticipated leave begins, negotiation skills, support (e.g., spousal, family, supervisor or coworker support) and workplace characteristics (e.g., percentage of women in the organization; Bygren and Duvander 2006).

Away on Leave

The second stage involves actually being away on leave. An important factor in whether and how long a parent takes time away from work depends upon formal leave policies (Han et al. 2009; McGovern et al. 2000; Singley and Hynes 2005). Parental leave policies may be enacted by national or state government legislation, or established by the work organization. Parental leave policies may be conceptualized as a resource associated with providing workers with time away from work to adjust to new family roles. Next we describe parental leave policies and use of leave.

Parental Leave Policies

There are two primary types of public policies related to parental leave. The first relates to protected leave time—how long an employer will retain the worker's job

in the organization. The second concerns whether the time away from work is paid or unpaid. Countries around the world vary widely regarding parental leave policies. For example, ten countries (Poland, Estonia, Spain, Lithuania, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Hungary, France and Finland) provide at least three years of protected leave time for mothers or in some cases fathers, with a median of thirteen months of protected leave time across all countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; Livingston 2013). Although policies may permit either the mother or father to take leave time, in practice mothers are more likely to take extended time away from work compared to fathers. The United States lags far behind 37 other countries in the OECD, with 12 weeks of protected leave time. For detail regarding paid and protected leave time by country, please see the article by Livingston (2013). Regarding fathers, 25 of the 38 countries in the OECD studied by Livingston (2013) offer guaranteed paternity leave, which is time away from work available specifically for new fathers. For example, Norway, Ireland, Iceland, Slovenia, Sweden and Germany each offer at least eight weeks of protected paternity leave. Other countries have considerably less generous paternity leave policies. Specifically, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, South Korea, Austria and Hungary have paternity leave that is guaranteed for one week or less (Livingston 2013). One important note is that the issue of maternity and paternity leave is further complicated by policies in which leave time is divided between mothers and fathers, such that if one parent doesn't take his or her share, the other parent cannot use that time.

Recently Allen et al. (2013) made an excellent contribution to the literature by examining work/family conflict in relation to parental leave, sick leave, and annual leave policies in multiple OECD countries. Based on their study, Allen et al. (2013) concluded that reports of work/family conflict were negatively related to the amount of sick leave available to employees and therefore sick leave policy may be a more useful solution to help employees manage work and family demands compared to parental leave policy. However, we would not expect work/family conflict to be strongly related to parental leave policy—work/family conflict is more likely to take place during later stages in the return to work process (i.e., our stage three or stage four—once the employee returns to work). We recommend additional research to further understand the mechanisms at play regarding the relation between work/family conflict and leave policies.

The second type of policy concerns whether parents receive pay while on parental leave (i.e., paid maternity or paternity leave). Most countries have national policies mandating paid and protected parental leave (Kamerman 2006). For example, the European Union mandates three months of parental leave within its member states. Among the countries that offer at least eight weeks of paternity leave, all except Ireland mandate that at least some of the paternity leave time away from work be paid.

The situation regarding paid leave in the U.S. is quite different compared to the E.U. Specifically, the U.S. lags considerably as one of four countries in the world that does not mandate paid maternity leave for working mothers (Hegewisch and Hara 2013). At the time this chapter was written, three U.S. states (California, New

Jersey, and Rhode Island) have established paid maternity leave policies. Most states in the U.S. rely on employers to voluntarily provide paid parental leave—yet only 21 % of employers offer paid maternity leave and only 17 % offer paid paternity leave (Society for Human Resource Management 2015).

In addition to public policies regarding the length of protected and paid parental leave, some public policies have been enacted to govern non-parental childcare benefits and early childhood benefits. The focus of this chapter is on parental leave and does not address public policies related to childcare or childhood benefits. However, as we will discuss later, arranging for acceptable and affordable childcare is an important step to facilitate worker and child well-being during later stages in the parental leave/return to work process.

Use of Parental Leave

Access to job-protected parental leave rose substantially in the U.S. after the enactment of the Federal Family and Medical Leave Act (Han et al. 2009). The FMLA was signed into U.S. law in 1993, providing 12 weeks of job-protected unpaid leave for workers who meet certain qualifications such as having worked at least 12 months for an employer with 50 or more employees (U.S. Department of Labor). It is important to note that this federal policy and many related state policies exclude workers employed by small businesses. The expansion of paternal leave policies was associated with an increase in leave taking as well as increase in time spent on leave for mothers and fathers, although this increase benefitted college-educated or married parents more than less-educated or single parents (Han et al. 2009).

Despite the increased access to job-protected parental leave in the United States, utilization and length of leave remains less than ideal in the U.S. Only two-thirds of new mothers report taking leave after the birth of their child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2011). For mothers who take leave, the average parental leave is 10.3 weeks, and almost 80 % of first time mothers who worked during their pregnancy return to work within 12 months of the birth of their child (Laughlin 2011). A recent survey of fathers in U.S. corporations found that 84 % of fathers take some time off following the birth of their child, with most taking less than two weeks of parental leave after the birth of the child (Harrington et al. 2011). Almost all of the dads returned to work in the same job after parental leave.

Although use of parental leave varies across countries, several studies suggest that there is a trend toward an increased utilization of parental leave after childbirth, especially among fathers (e.g., O'Brien 2009; Kaufman et al. 2010). Use of parental leave has important implications for parents, families, workplaces, communities and governments throughout the world.

Potential Moderators

The away-on-leave stage of the parental leave/return to work process is typically characterized by maternal recovery from childbirth, parental bonding, and a focus on family roles. There are a variety of individual, family, and work-related factors that may moderate the length of time workers remain on leave as well as their experiences during this stage. Examples include maternal physical and mental health (Carlson et al. 2011; Coulson et al. 2012) including post-partum depression, infant temperament and health, job satisfaction (Brough et al. 2009), financial considerations (Hofferth and Curtin 2006), and social support (Houston and Marks 2003).

Vast cross-national differences in the length of time that parents, and especially mothers, are away from work demonstrate that national policies and norms are also important factors. Additionally, there are large gender differences such that women typically take significantly more time away from work than men—due to the need for recovery from childbirth, breastfeeding, and traditional gender roles. Women may be away from work for months or even years, whereas men are more likely to be away for days or weeks (Han et al. 2009; Harrington et al. 2011). While on leave, parents may also need to reassess their pre-leave intentions regarding whether and when to return to work depending on situations they face. More specifically, a parent may need to return to work sooner or later than originally planned due to family financial factors or mother or child health issues, among other factors.

Boundary management is another issue relevant to being away from work. Work/family literature over the last decade has highlighted the importance of boundaries between work and home in understanding both the negative and positive aspects of the work/family interface (i.e., conflict and facilitation; Bulger et al. 2007; Matthews et al. 2010). Some workers may establish clear boundaries and abstain from work during parental leave, whereas others may have more flexible boundaries (e.g., check work-related email, engage in some work, although possibly at a reduced level of effort) while being generally away on leave. Future research should examine attachment to or detachment from work during this time to identify work patterns. Such research could examine antecedents (e.g., individual characteristics) as well as consequences related to boundaries and work engagement during parental leave.

Initial Transition Back to Work

As previously described, most fathers and a majority of mothers return to work after the transition to parenthood. Most of the important factors discussed regarding this stage are more relevant for maternity rather than paternity leave, primarily because mothers are much more likely to have been away from work for a longer period of time than men.

Two key factors in the transition process include the length of time that the worker has been away (Feldman et al. 2004) and infant temperament (Coulson et al. 2012). Feldman et al. (2004) found that a shorter maternity leave time (<12 weeks) was related to higher levels of maternal depression, a higher negative impact of birth on one's self esteem and marriage, less knowledge of infant development, less preoccupation with the infant, and higher levels of career centrality. Among men, longer paternity leave time was associated with positive perceived employer reactions, higher levels of marital support, more preoccupation with the infant, and higher levels of family role salience. In terms of infant temperament, Coulson et al. (2012) found that mothers who reported that their child had a more difficult temperament were more likely to return to work than those with children with less difficult temperaments. Regarding leave duration and parent mental health, Galtry and Callister (2005) suggested that the issue is not really whether a parent should work vs. stay home, but rather whether one's actual role fits their desired role.

Other factors that have been identified as related to when and how well workers transition back to work include job satisfaction, hours worked per week prior to maternity leave, anticipated length of leave, hours per week anticipated upon returning to work, and availability of affordable high quality childcare (Coulson et al. 2012). Feldman et al. (2004) found that marital support and career centrality positively related to both mothers' and fathers' adaptation back to work (including self-perceptions of job performance). In addition, work hours and depression were negatively related to adaptation among mothers (Feldman et al. 2004). Taken together, these results are consistent with the job demands-resources model. We suggest that higher work and/or family demands (such as longer work hours, less childcare availability) would be associated with lower levels of well-being during the adjustment process, whereas resources (e.g., social support) would be associated with better adjustment.

Carlson et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal study to identify organizational factors related to work/family experiences, health, and turnover among working mothers of infants. Carlson et al.'s results indicated that mothers in better physical and mental health were less likely to turnover. In addition, they found that workers with non-standard work schedules (e.g., jobs requiring night and weekend work hours) were more likely to experience work/family conflict, and schedule control served to buffer the negative effects of some job demands on work/family conflict.

Other research has identified individual and contextual factors as important for adjustment during the return to work process. Specifically, Wiese and Heidemeier (2012) conducted a longitudinal study across three waves (between 5 and 24 weeks after returning to work) and found that self-efficacy and self-regulatory strategies (selection, optimization, and compensation; SOC) predicted better work adjustment. In addition, these researchers identified an interaction such that contextual characteristics interacted with intentional self-regulation. Among mothers with many family obligations (indicating high levels of stress at work, and working for only a few hours per week), it was particularly useful to apply self-regulatory strategies.

We propose that the ideal timing for returning to work is based on many factors—including work and family demands and resources. For example, returning to work sooner than a parent is "ready" to return to work may interfere with the adjustment process. Although returning to work earlier may provide financial resources, it may also be associated with physical or emotional costs (e.g., not having fully recovered physically; anxiety related to separating from one's child). On the other hand, returning to work later may offer important benefits to one's family/child (e.g., facilitating emotional bonding and attachment, increased odds of continued breastfeeding), but make the process of adjusting back to one's work role demands more challenging. Empirical research supports this general proposition. For example, a Finnish study showed that the transition to motherhood not only affects personal goals in the family domain, but also affects goals in the work domain (Salmela-Aro et al. 2000). Furthermore, taking leave or time away from work may impact one's career in the long run. For instance, European economists have shown that wages are reduced approximately 3–5.7 % per year on leave (Ejrnæs and Kunze 2013). Therefore, it takes about years to make up the wage difference due to a child birth compared to others who didn't have a baby.

Breastfeeding/Lactation Needs

One of the reasons why women take such a long maternity leave is to support breastfeeding their infant. In the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that mothers exclusively breastfeed their infants for the first six months (i.e., not feed infants anything other than breastmilk) and continue breastfeeding (while supplementing with solid foods) until the child is at least 12 months old. When a breastfeeding mother is at work and not near her infant, she will need to periodically express milk. Failure to do so disrupts the body's demand/supply process that sustains breastfeeding, and can otherwise be physically uncomfortable and lead to health problems (e.g., mastitis) if a breastfeeding mother does not express milk frequently enough.

Maternal employment is one of the most influential factors affecting breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates, with full-time employment posing a particular risk for breastfeeding discontinuation (Fein et al. 2008; Mandal et al. 2010; Spitzmueller et al. 2015). Specifically, despite AAP recommendations, only about 79 % of women in the U.S. initiate breastfeeding, 19 % exclusively breastfeed at 6 months, and only 27 % breastfeed during the entire first year (U.S. Centers for Disease Control 2014). Working mothers who are breastfeeding need physical facilities available for expressing milk, as well as psychosocial supports to facilitate the process. Spitzmueller et al. (2015) sought to identify pregnant women's perceived employer support for breastfeeding as a predictor of women's breastfeeding goal intentions prior to birth. Although pre-birth breastfeeding goal intentions and the baby's age upon the woman's return to work predicted overall breastfeeding duration, workplace factors did not predict breastfeeding duration. However, social

norms and perceived support for breastfeeding after return to work predicted whether women managed to successfully combine employment and exclusive breastfeeding. Additional research is needed to better understand the role of workplace factors related to mothers' breastfeeding behavior.

Sleep Deprivation

Another issue that many parents of infants face is sleep deprivation, due to interrupted sleep to feed or care for a baby who doesn't sleep through the night. Parents are likely to first experience sleep deprivation before returning to work (i.e., during the prior stage). However, needing to perform one's job when not obtaining sufficient sleep (in terms of sleep quantity and/or quality) can be quite challenging and even dangerous (Harrison and Horne 2000). Sleep deprivation is associated with reduced productivity, performance, and safety at work (Rosekind et al. 2010). Furthermore, sufficient sleep may be conceptualized as a resource, and important to minimize psychological strain (Barber et al. 2010).

Post-transition Back to Work

The final stage in the parental leave/return to work process is what we term the post-transition stage, referring to the period after the worker has adjusted to being back at work. This adjustment can be understood as technical or psychological. For example, consider an individual who worked full-time prior to taking parental leave. If the worker initially returns to work part-time prior to eventually resuming full-time work, this stage will begin once the worker has resumed his/her full-time schedule. For others it may be indicated by a worker feeling "back in the groove." The timeline for reaching this stage is likely to vary across individuals. For example, some may adjust quickly, and others may not. Even after women physically recover from childbirth, the parental role for both mothers and fathers may include other issues, such as work interference with family (WIF), or family interference with work (FIW). According to role theory, and as many parents know from experience, WIF and FIW are likely to be chronic or episodic issues related to the work/family interface, and not specific to managing the work/life interface with an infant or toddler. For a review of antecedents of WIF and FIW, see the meta-analysis conducted by Byron (2005).

Two important organizational factors related to workers' experiences during the post-transition stage include family supportive organizational perceptions (FSOP; Allen 2001; Booth and Matthews 2012) and family supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSB; Hammer et al. 2011). This relates back to open systems theory, in so far that factors at multiple levels impact the success of one's transition back to work. It is important to have a work environment in general that supports employees' needs to meet family demands (i.e., FSOP) as well as supervisor support specific to helping

employees balance work and family demands (Hammer et al. 2011). Other factors related to positive experiences during this stage include high levels of marital/spousal support, fewer work hours, lack of job stress and role overload, low levels of negative affectivity, and low levels of depression (Brough et al. 2009; Byron 2005; Feldman et al. 2004). Similar to what we have discussed in prior sections of this chapter, extant research has identified many important resources for facilitating the process of returning to work after parental leave.

Interventions

Despite the obvious challenges of returning to work after childbirth both to psychological well-being of the parents and to some extent to workplaces, very few interventions have been developed and evaluated to support workers during the transition back to work following parental leave. One exception is an intervention designed to address general well-being among employees in which Vuori et al. (2012) used a randomized controlled field trial designed to facilitate career management and improve mental health among working new parents. This intervention relied on prior research demonstrating that cognitive-behavioral interventions, which often have been based on enhancing self-efficacy (Bandura 1986) or proactive coping, have shown beneficial outcomes regarding employee well-being and mental health (Jané-Llopis et al. 2003). Self-efficacy refers to individual's cognitive-motivational ability to strive towards one's goals and serves as an important resource for goal-oriented behavior. In addition to self-efficacy, employees need resilience to cope with setbacks and challenges they encounter (Vuori et al. 2012). Together, self-efficacy and resilience are resources that build what has been termed *career management preparedness* (i.e., an individual resource to manage one's career successfully and adapt to the challenges of sometimes unpredictable environments especially during career transitions; Vuori et al. 2012). Interventions developed to increase career management preparedness among workers could potentially help ease the transition back to work following parental leave.

According to the conservation of resources theory, personal resources may serve as 'general resistance resources' (Hobfoll et al. 2003). This means that enhancing these resources probably has positive effects on many outcomes and may be especially beneficial during a transitional phase from one domain to another (i.e., from family life to working life). This is consistent with the job demands-resources model as well (Demerouti et al. 2012).

A resource-enhancing goal-oriented approach seems feasible for supporting the transition from parental leave to working life. Prior research among Austrian and German mothers found that self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulatory strategies predicted positive work adjustment over time (Wiese and Heidemeier 2012). Other research also supports planning and goal-setting as means for better adjustment after returning to work from parental leave (Houston and Marks 2003).

Occupational career transitions can be seen as opportune phases for supporting psychological well-being. Previous research shows that workers' preparedness for transitions can be strengthened (Vuori et al. 2012). Preparedness means having confidence with one's own career management skills, motivation for managing one's career, and readiness to deal with setbacks (Vuori and Toppinen-Tanner 2015). Researchers at the Finnish Institute for Occupational Health (e.g., Toppinen-Tanner, Vuori, and colleagues; FIOH) developed a group method to be implemented among parents still on parental leave but planning to return to work. The group method trainers were recruited from child welfare clinics and the public daycare units of six municipalities and trained at the FIOH. All parents (i.e., women) in the area during their visits to child welfare check-ups or local playgrounds and open daycare centers were provided with the opportunity to participate in the training. Altogether 233 women were recruited and completed the baseline questionnaire survey. These mothers were then randomly assigned to either the group training workshop or control group, the latter of which received an information package instead of group activities during the intervention. The workshops were based on a method that had been previously developed at the FIOH and called "Towards Successful Seniority" (Vuori et al. 2012). More information about this intervention currently in progress at the time this chapter was written is available on the FIOH website: http://www.ttl.fi/successfulseniority.

Preliminary results evaluating the immediate effects of the randomized controlled study were positive, showing that the group activities significantly increased career management preparedness among mothers planning to end their parental leave and return to work. Participants in the workshop reported significantly higher levels of self-efficacy related to return to work and work-life balance. It is possible that in this group of participants "resources build resources," as suggested by the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll 1989). The positive effect of the intervention was further confirmed by the qualitative feedback provided by the participants. Specifically, participants indicated that the intervention gave them practical tools and tips about balancing work and family, and empowered and strengthened their self-esteem as mothers and employees.

In the future, and after the parents fully transition back to work, we believe these resources accumulate as positive longitudinal effects on satisfaction with different life domains, well-being, and better work-life balance and psychological well-being.

Practical Implications

Understanding the parental leave and return to work process has many practical implications for workers, families, and organizations. First, not all workers have access to protected or paid leave time. Research summarized earlier in this chapter highlights the benefits of parental leave for workers and families. In some countries,

responsibility for provision of paid leave falls to employers and organizations. Therefore we recommend that organizations develop and clearly communicate policies to workers, and foster an organizational culture that permits employees to *use* the policies available to them without penalty or perceived penalty. We also need to recognize that parents and particularly mothers with a lower socioeconomic status in the U.S. are less likely to have access to protected or paid leave, and are also less likely to have job flexibility or autonomy to serve as resources to facilitate taking leave time and managing work and family roles.

Prior research points to the benefits of family-friendly policies, including flexible working hours and other workplace policies, to help support employees' work-life balance by helping employees manage work-family conflict (Bulger and Fisher 2012; Greenhaus and Allen 2011). This includes building and sustaining family supportive organizational perceptions and perhaps training supervisors and coworkers how to best support new parents who are employed in their organization (Hammer et al. 2011). Our review also suggests the importance of planning and preparing for being away on parental leave, setting realistic expectations about the parenthood transition and return to work process early on, and educating others (e.g., supervisors, coworkers) about one's needs.

From the working life perspective, a longer time away on parental leave means that there are often substantial work-related changes (e.g., in work tasks, composition of work teams, organizational-level changes etc.) that occur during the time away. Often there are no policies for ongoing dialogue between the workplaces and the mothers during the family leave. It would be beneficial to create such policies to promote integration after return, as many parents express concerns about work-related changes and how they may affect their future return to the workplace.

One of the reasons to support the return of mothers to working life is related to equality between genders. It has been shown that especially in societies where full-time participation of both genders in the workplace is valued, there is a risk that women on long family leaves endanger their labor market position and economic independence (Ejrnæs and Kunze 2013). Shared parenthood and more equal division of household labor benefits the well-being of the whole family (Cleveland et al. in press). A great deal of research points to the importance of spousal/marital support pre-birth, but our four-stage model of parental return to work leads us to believe that such support is just as important during parental leave, upon transition back to work, and on an ongoing basis as well. Clear communication of needs and negotiation of shared responsibility may help new parents understand one another's demands and identify resources to weather what can be a very happy but also stressful and uncertain time.

Future Research

Future research is needed to further our understanding of the parental leave and return to work process. Much of the research that has been conducted to date has been done across a variety of disciplines, including organizational psychology,

developmental psychology, family studies, sociology, economics, medicine, public health, and public policy. We suggest the need for an interdisciplinary, holistic conceptual model to serve as a framework for future research. Following the development of a holistic model, we call for interdisciplinary longitudinal research that takes into account the dynamic, multi-level nature of this process. Because we conceptualize parental leave and return to work as a dynamic process, it is critical to understand how this process unfolds over time, in addition to the workplace, family, and individual differences related to how employees experience this process. We call for improving our understanding of antecedents to planning for parental leave, as well as individual differences and organizational contextual variables (e.g., job level) that serve to moderate relations between parental leave, return to work, and various outcomes. We also call for cross-cultural research to examine this process in the context of varying leave policies and cultural norms. Lastly, we encourage researchers to develop and evaluate interventions at multiple levels and across stages of the parental leave and return to work process, evaluating outcomes from multiple constituents at multiple levels (consistent with Carlson et al.'s (2011) approach to examining individual and organizational outcomes).

We recommend additional research to further understand the mechanisms at play regarding the relation between work/family conflict and parental leave policies. To the extent that an important segment of the U.S. workforce is not covered by the FMLA or related state policies, we need to investigate the return to work process among these workers as well. We also encourage additional research to identify work and psychosocial issues (e.g., positive and negative supervisor and coworker support) related to breastfeeding among working mothers. Clearly, research opportunities to further our understanding about the parental return to work process are abundant.

Although there is a long agenda ripe for future research on this topic, there are a number of methodological issues worth noting. First, expecting parents represent a relatively small segment of the workforce and it may be challenging to obtain a representative sample of workers who are pregnant or partnered with a pregnant woman. Secondly, we conceptualized return to work after parental leave as a process that unfolds over time. Therefore longitudinal research is required for investigating this process. Lastly, we have identified numerous factors at multiple levels of analysis, further adding to the complexity of empirical research to holistically study this topic.

Summary and Conclusions

We conceptualized parental leave and return to work as a process, and reviewed literature from multiple disciplines to discuss issues regarding parental leave and return to work. The process of taking parental leave and returning to work is a complex issue embedded in an open system with constituents at multiple levels inside and outside work organizations. The topic is particularly complex due to vast

differences in protected leave and paid parental leave policies around the world. Furthermore, these policies are subject to change, which poses challenges when interpreting results. This chapter identified stages of the parental leave/return to work process, discussed interventions, and summarized practical implications as well as future research suggestions. Overall we think this is an important topic and we hope research in this area will flourish to facilitate the well-being of working parents and their families.

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