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Motherhood, Subjectivity, and Work

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More than "just a mom": Identity distancing and reactivation during re-entry transitions

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Abstract

Re-entering the workforce after a career interruption is a common work/family transition for women with caregiving responsibilities. Despite the frequency of these transitions over women's careers, extant scholarship has tended to be descriptive of the motives and barriers behind these transitions and has not built a more theoretically-informed understanding of re-entry transitions. In this study, we draw upon identity theory to explore women's subjective experiences of re-entry transitions as we examine how women's identities evolve from being "just a mom" to a (re)activation of their work identity. Our findings highlight how, through a combination of psychological and relational mechanisms, women distance themselves from their stay-at-home identity and begin to reactivate a dormant or lingering work identity. Our work contributes to understanding of work/family transitions and identity theory as we theorize how this transition occurs and the mechanisms that support this identity transition process. We also call for changes in the practices of organizations and government agencies to better support this identity reactivation through improvements in processes related to supporting women in preparing for re-entry following a career break

and recruitment of women at this important transition point.

KEYWORDS
career, identity, motherhood, returners, transitions, work/family

1 | INTRODUCTION

Women's careers are often far less linear than those of their male colleagues as they are more likely to include periods of interruption or discontinuity (Bian & Wang, 2019; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), often due to childcare responsibilities (Weisshaar, 2018) and the complexities of integrating the competing demands of work and motherhood (Blair-Loy, 2005; Ladge & Little, 2019). When women do attempt to re-enter the workforce after a career break to attend to their families, they often encounter considerable obstacles including biases from traditional stereotypes of mothers and work (Cabrera, 2007; Sian, 2021), as well as amplified maternal penalties and gender inequalities (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; O'Brien & Liddy, 2021). Due to these barriers, many returners may give up their quests to return to paid employment (Weisshaar, 2018). Even when mothers are successful in re-entering the workforce they still face financial penalties, with women losing an average of 18–28% of their earning power following a career break (Hewlett & Luce, 2007).

While extant scholarship has enhanced our understanding of other types of work/family transitions, including the transition out of work (e.g., Hewlett & Luce, 2007) and post-maternity leave re-entry (e.g., Freeney et al., 2022; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015), there is far less research on work re-entry following a career interruption. The limited scholarship that does exist on re-entry has been mostly descriptive, focusing on the motives for returning to work, the barriers women experience, and the diminished work opportunities for returners (e.g., Bian & Wang, 2019; Sian, 2021; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Scholars have focused much less on enhancing theoretical understanding of mothers' subjective experiences of this transition process and the implications this has for women's careers.

Yet, transitions in the social roles women are committed to—and the associated identity shifts related to work and motherhood—have consequences for how women understand themselves and their relationships (van der Werff et al., 2019), creating a window of considerable re-negotiation of one's subjectivities, or their "sense of self" (Parton et al., 2019). For working mothers, their evolving sense of self, or identity, is frequently defined by the subjective experiences of integrating work and motherhood, which is embedded within and challenged by sociocultural biases. Cultural narratives regarding ideal workers (Williams, 2001) and intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) create seemingly incompatible expectations that can make it difficult at best, and insurmountable at worst, for working mothers to develop a positive, integrated identity (Kerrane et al., 2022; Ladge & Little, 2019).

In fact, research on post-maternity leave re-entry suggests that even short transitions significantly impact women's evolving sense of self and that these transitions are complicated by the contradictory role expectations of work and motherhood (Freeney et al., 2022; Little & Masterson, 2023). Women experience post-maternity leave re-entry as a significant identity transition as they engage in identity work to integrate their new, or revised, mothering identity with their existing work identity and build a positive sense of self (Hennekam et al., 2019; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). This would imply that the transition of returning to work following a longer career interruption is not simply about overcoming barriers and being motivated to return to work but also involves an identity transition that may include re-negotiation of work and mothering. In fact, scholars note more research is needed on women's subjective experience of the return transition and women's careers (Bian & Wang, 2019).

In this study, we seek to contribute to research on working mothers' career transitions and career equality (Kossek et al., 2017) as we focus specifically on the return-to-work process following an extended career break and how women's subjective experiences of these transitions shape their re-entry. We engage in a qualitative

methodology, in which women returners who were out of the workforce for between 3 and 20 years were invited to reflect on the process of returning to work. As is often the case with qualitative research (Pratt et al., 2022), we began with a broad research question focused on how mothers experience the return-to-work transition after a career interruption. Through data analysis, the distancing from full-time mothering identity coupled with the reactivation of work identity emerged as central to this transition process. As such, we narrowed our focus and drew upon identity theory to examine how women reactivate a positive work identity as part of the return-to-work process. Beyond attending to this distancing and reactivation of identity, our findings uncover the psychological and relational mechanisms that contribute to the identity work of distancing from a dominant identity and reactivating and integrating a latent work identity. Together, this forms the foundation for a positive work re-entry.

Our findings diverge from existing literature and extend theory, providing contributions to scholarship on identity and work/family transitions. We contribute to theory on identity transitions by enhancing understanding of how work identities, which have not been enacted for some time, are reactivated after a significant career hiatus. Previous work on mothers' identity transitions illustrated a reconciling of two identities that have remained active in post-maternity leave re-entry (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). Our research extends that theory and argues that, in navigating the uncertainties of re-entry after longer periods, women have to move beyond reconciliation to more fully recalibrate their motherhood and worker identities. Specifically, we theorize how women must distance themselves from their current prominent or salient identity as a full-time mother in order to make space for reactivating a dormant or "lingering" identity (Wittman, 2019) as a worker. As such, we build on previous insights on the dynamics of working mothers' sense of self (e.g., Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Little & Masterson, 2023), to integrate and expand on this concept of lingering identity. Our research suggests that returning women experience a more discontinuous form of identity continuity, in that, where the current prominent identity as mother seems incongruous with the future possible self as "worker", there is a need to mask or reject the current identity to enact the lingering identity.

Our research also contributes to the literature on work-family transitions in illustrating the psychological and relational mechanisms involved in shaping re-entry experiences. We theorize how psychological and relational mechanisms enable women to pull away—or distance themselves—from their full-time motherhood status and provide a push toward reactivating their dormant work identity. While psychological identity mechanisms were important in both distancing and reactivation, our model highlights how crucial and abundant relational mechanisms were to this transition. This theorizing extends Ibarra and Barbulescu's (2010) idea of audience participation in identity construction to provide new insight into how relational mechanisms, particularly through non-work social networks, affect two aspects of identity (re)construction: identity distancing and reactivation processes. In our model, audience participation influences both how women come to ascribe a negative valence to and distance from their roles as full-time mothers and how they evolve to see themselves much more positively following reactivation of their work identity. In doing so, we also extend current research on work/life transitions which has tended to overemphasize individual agency at the expense of exploring the role of relational and structural mechanisms on these transitions and on women's careers (Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021).

Finally, our research on women's re-entry also contributes to practice, where the need to attract women back into the workplace is an important aspect of building diverse talent pipelines in organizations (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). The ongoing failure to understand and support returning mothers after extended breaks is problematic for women's careers and for improving gender equity in the workforce (Soparkar, 2024). We identify the importance of the period prior to re-entry where women's wider social networks and early interactions with organizations and recruitment professionals are critical in supporting or hindering the reactivation of work identities. As such, we call for interventions at a more macro level where, in particular, government agencies and professional and community-based organizations could be influential in supporting reactivation processes that enable the reintegration of worker identity which forms the basis for re-entry.

2 | THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Two primary bodies of literature inform this research: return to work post career interruptions and work/family identity transitions. We examine the phenomenon of returning to work following a career interruption through the lens of identity theory and identity transitions.

2.1 | Women's careers and women returners

Over the past decade, there has been a burgeoning literature across psychology, sociology, economics, and management, attending to women's varied career experiences (e.g., Kossek et al., 2017; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). The biases, stigmatization, and complexities associated with the integration of work and family roles have resulted in women typically having more varied career experiences than those of their male colleagues (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Through both theorizing and empirical evidence, scholars have come to recognize that the traditional linear career model is generally obsolete and particularly so when examining women's careers (e.g., Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

A frequent point of divergence in women's careers, relative to men, is that of career interruptions—leaving paid work to attend to caregiving responsibilities. The press has popularized these types of career interruptions using terms such as "opting-out" (Belkin, 2003) or "off-ramping" (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Media portrayals may imply that career interruptions are driven by women's desires to be full-time caregivers, but research suggests that career interruptions are not that simple (Kossek et al., 2017; Stone & Lovejoy, 2021; Vaterlaus, et al., 2024). Working mothers are also motivated to leave paid work because they find it difficult to reconcile the seemingly competing demands of work and motherhood (Sian, 2021; Weisshaar, 2018). Inflexible work arrangements, extreme jobs, diminished career opportunities—real or perceived—and implicit biases that women are less valued, less committed, or less competent due to their mothering role, (e.g., Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Hoobler et al., 2014) are just some of the organizational and relational forces which push working mothers out of the workforce.

Most working mothers who do take a career break expect to do so temporarily as they plan to return-to-work after several years (Stone & Lovejoy, 2021; Weisshaar, 2018). The term "woman returner" references mothers who come back into paid work after spending a significant number of years raising a family (Herman et al., 2013). Almost half of all working mothers in the US will take a career break to take care of their children (Fairchild, 2020). In the UK, close to half a million female professionals (doctors, lawyers, scientists, and academics) who have taken time off from paid work are trying to return to the workforce (Sian, 2021). While extant scholarship has frequently attended to the circumstances that lead women to take a career break, and the implications these breaks have for women's careers (e.g., Klettner et al., 2016; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008), there remains scant empirical research that has enhanced theorizing of women's experiences in transitioning back to paid work (Weisshaar, 2018).

A small stream of extant scholarship has focused on describing what motivates women to want to return to paid work. Some women returners are intrinsically motivated as they find themselves unfulfilled by full-time caregiving. They see returning to work as an opportunity for increased intellectual and social engagement and to create a life with greater meaning and purpose (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Returners may have experienced a loss when they relinquished their work identity (Vaterlaus et al., 2024) and are driven to return to work out of a desire to reconnect with a part of themselves that was inactive when they were home full-time—what identity scholars often refer to as a dormant or lingering identity (Wittman, 2019). Other returners are more extrinsically motivated, citing the need for increased financial stability for themselves and their families as the driver behind returning to paid work (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).

Despite their motives, many returners encounter the same organizational barriers that propelled them to leave the workforce (Herman, 2015; Stone & Lovejoy, 2021). Returners often face gender biases from hiring managers who associate their caregiving career interruptions with women's embodiment of the mother image (Gatrell

et al., 2017) and thereby assume women returners are less competent, less committed, and less hirable than men or women without children (Fairchild, 2020; Weisshaar, 2018). Returners may also find their skills are viewed as outdated or they are perceived as lacking the technical knowledge that is needed for today's jobs (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016)—even though empirical research has discounted the human capital depreciation argument of career breaks (Bian, 2023). Hiring managers also may not be attentive to the various skills many women develop while they are home full-time that improve their marketability, such as adaptability, empathy, and time management (Bian, 2023; Vaterlaus et al., 2024). Due to these biases, mothers who take a career break for family reasons are less likely to be hired than currently employed parents or individuals who were unemployed due to layoffs (Weisshaar, 2018). Ultimately, many returners find they are unable to return to their prior careers and instead experience the re-entry process as rerouting (trade-offs) or retreating (opting out entirely) (Herman, 2015). Even when women returners are successful in securing employment, they are still impacted by these biases as they incur financial penalties in the form of downward career mobility and wage penalties upon return (Bian, 2023). At the organizational and societal level, the struggles of women returners furthers career inequality, under-utilization of female talent, and can negatively impact national GDP (Kossek et al., 2017; Sian, 2021).

As a result of these dynamics, many women returners find the re-entry transition to be more challenging and prolonged than they expect (Stone & Lovejoy, 2021). Returners often express self-doubt and a lack of confidence during the re-entry transition (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). They may question their ability to return-to-work, rebuild their careers, and integrate work and mothering into a coherent identity (Cabrera, 2007; Stone & Lovejoy, 2021). This would suggest women's success at relaunching their careers is as much about the returner's own psychological reorientation as they rebuild their self-confidence and career identity (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016) as it is about leveraging prior professional relationships and career experiences to overcome organizational and societal barriers (Das et al., 2024; Dodds & Herkt, 2013).

To further theoretical understanding of re-entry transitions, scholars would benefit from moving beyond an exploration of motives, barriers, and consequences of career breaks, to attending to women's subjective experiences as they transition from full-time mothering to recreating and rebuilding a positive work identity as they return to paid work. Despite the recognition that redefining work identity is part of the re-entry transition (Stone and Lovejoy, 2021), scant research has focused on the subjective experience of women returners as they go through this psychological reorientation (Bian & Wang, 2019). Attending to women's subjective experiences and their rebuilding of a work identity during re-entry is foundational to the development of more nuanced theorizing of this work/family transition and to providing practical guidance on how to regain female talent and improve gender career equality (Bian & Wang, 2019).

2.2 | Subjectivity, identity, and work/family identity transitions

Experiences of the self are informed by society and exert an influence on our social behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Subjectivities emerge through lived experiences, they represent a sense of self in relation to something else (e.g., my child, my work etc.) and are shaped, in part, by how individuals think others perceive them (Stone, 2013). In exploring subjectivity, we attend specifically to an individual's evolving sense of self, or identity, which is commonly defined as one's self-referential description of "who am I?" (Ashforth et al., 2008). Theories of identity construction suggest that one-way individuals come to perceive and experience their sense of self is through internalization of expectations associated with one's roles in various social relationships (Macmillan, 2006).

For working mothers, the subjective experience of integrating work and motherhood is core to their identities as mothers, professionals, and as working mothers (Ladge & Little, 2019). To do so requires working mothers to reconcile two seemingly incompatible cultural narratives. Working mothers face organizational pressures to be "ideal workers", whose lives center on work (Williams, 2001). The ideal worker norm has only intensified with increasingly blurred boundaries between work and home, yielding expectations to overwork (Cha & Weeden, 2014)

and to be available 24/7 (Kossek et al., 2017). Despite the disruption of the pandemic, ideal work norms remain steadfast (Al-Asfahani et al., 2024; Zanhour & Sumpter, 2024). Simultaneously, societal expectations regarding intensive mothering create pressures to be solely centered on one's child and caregiving (Ladge & Little, 2019). The identity and role expectations of being a "mother" or "caregiver" are experienced as incongruous with those of being a "worker", both by working mothers themselves (Kerrane et al., 2022) and by colleagues and broader society (Gatrell, et al., 2017; Ladge & Little, 2019). The difficulty of integrating these seemingly competing roles into a coherent identity is often at the center of working mothers' divergent career choices and varied work/family transitions (Frkal and Naylor, 2021; Kossek et al., 2017).

To establish a theoretical grounding to guide our investigation of women's subjective experiences of re-entry transitions, we draw from extant scholarship on work/family identity transitions (e.g., Hennekam et al., 2019; Ladge & Little, 2019; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). Identity transitions are defined as the process of shedding a previously held identity and replacing it with a new, alternative identity (Ibarra, 1999, 2003). Work/family identity transitions are unique from other identity transitions as there is not a sequential disengagement and replacement of identity (Ladge et al., 2012). Rather they are cross-domain identity transitions, defined as transitions when an individual's work identity evolves in order to integrate with a non-work identity (Greenberg et al., 2016; Ladge et al., 2012). As women's lives and careers transition, they are frequently engaged in identity work as they recalibrate work and mothering roles to form a positive sense of self (Ladge & Little, 2019).

Work/family identity transitions are often most pronounced for women during the transition from pregnancy to motherhood to return-to-work (Ladge et al., 2012; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). A woman is defining who she wants to be as a mother while simultaneously trying to re-establish her work identity and form an integrated working mother identity (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). During this transition, working mothers may struggle with self-doubt, psychological tension, and feelings of inadequacy as they work to establish a positive identity which integrates work and motherhood (Haynes, 2008; Millward, 2006). As part of this process, they will engage in identity work as they recalibrate work and mothering roles to form a positive sense of self (Ladge & Little, 2019).

A woman's evolving sense of self during this transition is partially shaped through their interactions with colleagues (Hennekam et al., 2019; Little & Masterson, 2023). Starting in pregnancy, women begin to encounter biases as their growing pregnant bodies violate professional work images as they highlight women's sexuality and maternal identity (Arena et al., 2021; Gatrell et al., 2017). As women transition to motherhood and return-to-work following maternity leave, they are confronted with the paradox of being perceived as neither competent professionals nor competent mothers (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). To reconcile the discrepancies between their colleague's perceptions of them as working mothers and their own desires, they will engage in identity work to recalibrate how others perceive them and form a positive identity as a working mother (Arena et al., 2021; Ladge & Little, 2019). Identity management, which is both internal and other-focused, becomes an important psychological process that shapes working mothers' evolving sense of self (Hennekam et al., 2019). When women struggle to form a positive work/mother identity during this transition, they may ultimately decide to step away from paid work (Frkal & Naylor, 2021).

Yet, over time, many of these women will want to return to the workforce and when they do, they will embark upon yet another work/family identity transition. However, with this cross-domain identity transition women are not integrating a new non-work identity with an existing work identity. Rather they are integrating a dormant or lingering work identity (Wittman, 2019) with a highly formed non-work identity. In so doing, they may experience tensions between their current salient identity as a full-time mother and a future, uncertain possible identity as a worker. To navigate the transition effectively, they must figure out how to integrate what may be perceived as incongruous identities at first to construct a new working mother identity. Thus, our research explores this unique cross-domain transition by attending to how women reactivate a positive work identity as part of the return-to-work transition.

3 | METHODOLOGY

We engaged an abductive, qualitative methodology to explore women's subjectivities as they reflected on their own experiences with career interruptions and return-to-work. We began our research with a broad interest in understanding how women experience the return-to-work process. As is often the case with inductive research (Pratt et al., 2022), through our initial data analysis our research question became more focused. We found that the reactivation of work identity prior to re-entry began to emerge as central to women's return transitions. We also noted that women spoke much more positively about their post-return identity in comparison to their pre-return sense of self. As such, during our analysis process, we narrowed our research question to center on how women's work identities began to emerge, or re-emerge, following a career interruption and the role of relational actors in influencing those subjectivities. We discuss how this narrowing occurred when we discuss data analysis.

3.1 | Participants

We interviewed 26 women from Ireland who had taken a break from their careers to focus on mothering and caregiving and had re-entered the workforce. As we wanted to study career interruptions that were significantly longer than the traditional maternity leave periods, which can often be up to a year in this part of Europe, our focus was on women who had been out of the workforce for at least 3 years. In our final sample, women's career breaks ranged from three to 20 years and they had returned to work within the previous 18 months.

We adopted a purposive, convenience sampling approach, seeking out women who had taken at least a 3-year hiatus from paid work to be full-time mothers but who had returned to work at the time of the interview. We required that the women had returned within the preceding year to limit recall biases and to allow us to capture their experiences as they prepared for re-entry and settled back into the workplace. Participants were recruited through the professional and personal networks of the authorship team including through our interactions with post-experience, executive Masters degree students. As we collected data, we also employed a snowball sample technique (Parker et al., 2019) as some participants connected us to other women returners who met our criteria. We aimed to include mothers who returned to similar positions, women who downgraded and women who returned to jobs with a higher status. This purposive sampling technique is commonly used in qualitative research as it allows researchers to select a sample from which they can gain the most insights about a specific phenomenon (Blaique & Pinnington, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Table 1 provides an overview of our participants, their career backgrounds, duration of leave and age range and children's age stages. We recognize that, through the sampling approaches we used, we recruited a relatively homogenous group in terms of their socio-economic status, which may influence the degree to which relational actors were important in shaping return-to-work experiences.

3.2 | Data collection

We used a semi-structured interview format with all participants, which provided us with the necessary flexibility to follow participant's experiences as we sought to generate micro-level information about women's subjectivities and identity activation during this time (Brooks et al., 2018). Furthermore, we sought to limit the effects of retrospective bias by using non-directive questions focused on events (Freeney et al., 2022; Huber & Power, 1985) as we asked our participants to describe significant events that they had experienced during what Chen and Klimoski (2003) refer to as the anticipatory, encounter and adjustment phases of their re-entry to the workplace. Our interviews ranged from 40 to 65 min during which we asked a series of open-ended questions related to four main areas: (i) women's experience of deciding to take a career break (ii) their decision process for returning to paid work, (iii) the process they went through prior to returning to work including how they prepared to return, the type

TABLE 1 Participant overview.

Name age	Child stage[a]	Career break length (yrs)	Relative status	Previous role	Current role
Aideen 35–39	<8	4.5	Lower	Facilities manager	Trainee administrator
Anne 50–54	12+	14	Lower	Insurance broker	GP receptionist/Phlebotomist
Annmari 50–54	16+	16	Lower	Journalist	Tutor
Cliona 50–54	12+	20	Lower	Bank manager	Special needs assistant
Cora 50–54	12+	3	Lower	Architect	Tutor
Denise 45–49	12+	14	Equivalent	Project manager	Project manager
Diane 45–49	10+	20	Equivalent	Midwife	Teacher
Eilish 50–54	12+	10	Equivalent	Beauty therapist	Receptionist
Emer 55–59	18+	10	Lower	Theater nurse	Reflexologist
Gillian 50–54	10+	16	Equivalent	Office worker	Civil service clerical officer
Janice 45–49	<8	4	Lower	Fraud investigator	Tutor
Joan 45–49	<8	8	Lower	Teacher	Counselor
Kara 45–49	10+	12	Lower	Research director	School administrator
Karen 40–44	12+	3.5	Equivalent	Senior business analyst	Senior business analyst
Kate 40–44	12+	8	Higher	Marketing consultant	Marketing consultant
Laura 40–44	<10	6	Lower	HR business partner	HR generalist
Liz 40–44	<12	8	Higher	Business Dev. Manager	Senior consultant
Lynda 50–54	18+	15	Equivalent	Office worker	Civil service clerical officer
Madeline 45–49	12+	10	Lower	Marketing manager	Estate agent
Martine 54–59	16+	7	Lower	Social worker	Swabber
Michelle 50–54	12+	15	Lower	Insurance	Receptionist
Nina 50–54	12+	10	Equivalent	Teacher	Teacher
Sarah 50–54	12+	15	Lower	Marketing university	Special needs assistant
Sophie 45–49	8+	11	Lower	Marketing manager	Customer Service
Tracy 40–44	<10	3.5	Lower	Banker	Theater manager
Yvette 55–59	18+	16	Lower	IT consultant	Computer analyst

[a]Child stage: Age+ = age of youngest child; <Age = age of oldest child.

of work they were looking for, and challenges or supports they encountered as they began searching for paid work, (iv) relational or structural supports that were helpful prior to and during re-entry; and (v) their overall perceptions and sensemaking of the re-entry process (see Appendix 1). In order to better capture women's lived experiences of re-entry, our interviews included probing techniques to gain depth and to explore the ways in which women used language to express their experiences (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). The research design, interview protocol and other research materials were reviewed and approved through the faculty research ethics processes of the university of the first author.

3.3 | Data analysis

Our data analysis followed an abductive approach (Van Maanen et al., 2007), which can be thought of as a hybrid of inductive and deductive analysis, facilitating the use of existing theories (deductive), while finding new insights directly from the data (inductive). This involved iterating between data and theory as we allowed key themes to emerge from the data and then looked at how those themes connected to an advanced theory (Locke, 2001). As noted above, there is scant empirical research on work re-entry following career breaks and most research attends to describing motives and barriers to the re-entry process. As such, this methodological approach is appropriate as it is useful for gaining insight into less-understood work phenomena (Corbin & Anselm Strauss, 2014). Through our analysis, we anticipated that we would refine our core research question as we remained open to unexpected insights that arose from our data. Thus, our findings and associated theoretical contributions were developed through the interchange between the lived experiences of our participants and the conceptual frameworks and insights in existing literature, allowing us to build explicitly on existing theory to develop new theoretical insight (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gioia et al., 2013).

To do this, we followed an iterative coding process in which we engaged the data, literature, and emergent grounded categories as we embarked on three "stages" of coding -open, second-order and theoretical coding (Pratt et al., 2006). Although these stages are presented in linear order, in reality, we moved back and forth between stages to develop a theoretical framing of our findings (Locke, 2001). We describe these three stages in more detail below.

In the first stage of coding, open coding, our coding remained close to the words of our participants. We extracted longer segments of data in the form of rich quotes. As our initial attention was on the re-entry process, we focused first on statements pertaining to how women described various aspects of the re-entry process. In this early period of open coding, we began to see that these statements were less about a process of re-entry and more about women's subjective experiences of re-entry and how their understanding of who they were was evolving during re-entry. In addition, we found that, in describing the re-entry process, returners were frequently mentioning how their professional and personal interactions affected their subjective experiences of re-entry. These emerging insights prompted us to shift our attention to women's subjective experiences of re-entry. In so doing, we began grouping the open coding in a process of unitizing our first stage of analysis (Saunders et al., 2009).

In our second step of data analysis, we moved away from the words our participants used to describe their experience to develop more abstract language to capture the patterns in our data (Locke, 2001). As we looked at the early open coding groupings, we noted that participants frequently mentioned their evolving subjectivities as it related to being a stay-at-home mother, exploration of returning to work, and then returning to work. We used this sequencing to identify patterns across participants. For instance, a key insight that emerged during this analysis was that women returners varied in the positive or negative valence they attached to their identity following re-entry and this variation did not relate to the prestige associated with the roles they assumed as they returned to work. In the process of meeting and discussing this emergent finding, we began to see a pattern in how participants' descriptions of their evolving identity as it related to motherhood and work connected to their forming a positive work identity following re-entry. During these discussions, we also noticed that some of the open coding related to evolving motherhood and work identity were focused on how participants saw themselves while others were based on their interactions with friends, family, and professional associates. As such, we began to delineate between psychological and relational mechanisms as we developed labels that encapsulated the first order codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). These second-order codes are presented in the middle column of Tables 3 and 4.

In the final step of analysis, we examined our second-order codes to see how they fit together into a theoretical framing of our findings (Charmaz, 2007). To do so, we attended to existing scholarship on identity (Ashforth et al., 2008), specifically lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) and work/family identity transitions (e.g., Hennekam et al., 2019; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Ladge & Little, 2019), to deepen our theorizing from our data. As the researchers continued to meet to discuss and debate the findings in relation to extant literature, what emerged was

that the process of women returners' distancing themselves away from full-time mothering identity along with the reactivation of their work identity was the foundation to the development of a positive sense of self upon re-entry. We also noted we were able to provide insight into the psychological and relational mechanisms that shaped women's evolving subjectivity. This led us to consider identity theories that explicitly call out the role of social validation in identity construction (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) and how relational actors contribute to identity narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). These all emphasize that our sense of self is determined by how others see us and that our group memberships (e.g., mothers vs. workers) further shape how we come to perceive and value ourselves, at first fueling the identity distancing from motherhood and then reinforcing identity reactivation processes as they re-enter work. Drawing on these insights, we developed theoretical codes that attended to women's distancing from their mother identity and reactivation of their dormant work identity as we also distinguished between the psychological and relational mechanisms that contributed to women's evolving subjectivity during re-entry (see Tables 3 and 4).

4 | FINDINGS

The overarching research question guiding this study was to explore how women experience the return-to-work transition having left the workforce to focus on caregiving responsibilities. As our exploration of the data progressed, we refined this question further to consider how returners manage their identities during the return-to-work process, specifically asking how women reactivate a positive work identity as they transition from being at home full time back to the workplace. Our analysis shows that even though all the returners had returned to work, they varied in the extent to which they formed an overall positive sense of self as a worker—regardless of whether they returned to an equivalent, more prestigious, or less prestigious job. Instead, women returners' evolving sense of self was foundational to the valence they attached to their post-return identity, that is, we noted shifts in valence to varying degrees, with some mothers reporting a much more positive sense of self having reactivated their work identities. We found that as women began to consider returning to work, they increasingly attached a negative valence to being "just" a stay-at-home mother and engaged in identity distancing processes to move away from and expand on this as their core identity. They also engaged in a process of reactivating their work identity and ascribed a more positive valence to this newly expanded identity. In the sections that follow, we unpack these identity distancing and (re)activation mechanisms, bringing to bear evidence from our data. We theorize a myriad of psychological and relational mechanisms that fuel these distancing and activating identity shifts and function by pushing and pulling returning mothers toward work identity reactivation.

4.1 | Shift in identity valence during re-entry

Women returners reflected on how they saw themselves before their return-to-work and then post re-entry, highlighting marked differences in their sense of self when referring to their roles as full-time mothers compared to their roles as working mothers. Participants typically ascribed a negative valence to their identities as full-time mothers, sometimes because they felt something was lost to them, or that they experienced low self-esteem and a loss of confidence. As a result of focusing on the negative aspects of their identities as full-time mothers, this fueled a distancing from that identity and, for many of our participants, this distancing made way for them to reactivate more positive work identities. This combination of identity and valence represented a shift in women's subjectivities during this transition period. We present data to illustrate the positive sense of self that emerges through re-entry transitions in Table 2, depicting an evolving sense of self, where mothers construct identities to which they attach a valence as positive or negative (Lewin, 1946), that is, the extent to which they value this

TABLE 2 Data supporting the activation of work identity to result in a positive sense of self.

Returner	Full-time mother: Negative sense of self	Working mother: Positive sense of self
Laura *Lower*	*I was getting a bit **fed up of the 'stay at home mum' label**. When you're a stay at home mum, I think you lose a lot of your confidence, well I did anyway.*	*I feel like I have changed, my priorities have shifted. I think I have a more holistic approach to my work, I can certainly empathise a lot more with working parents. It's funny, I used to be so career oriented, now that's definitely changed, I've changed. But yes, **I am happy and I'm also proud of myself for getting out there** and challenging myself again, I think it's good for my kids to see me going to work*
Aideen *Lower*	*I think when you give up work to raise a family your identity changes completely. You are the Mum. People call you someone's Mum **like you're not really in existence at all anymore**. So, you really lose that work identity and your status in the workplace*	*I didn't think I would enjoy it as much as I do, it's like **I kind of woke up again**, and that's not taking anything away from my family… I just felt happy coming into work every day and kind of being my own self without being a mother at the school and again there's nothing wrong with that.*
Liz *Higher*	*I was very, very put off looking at advertised jobs, didn't feel that I could put myself forward…Over 8 years your confidence, **your self-esteem isn't great**, part of me thought, I'll just go and get a job in Tesco's* [supermarket] *and that'll do me.*	*For the first time, I think ever in my career, I felt like I was really delivering a skillset that somebody really wanted. You suddenly start to realize that maybe **I am really valued**, I've got something that's very very good, I'm bringing something to the table that other people don't necessarily have and people are really valuing that.*
Kara *Lower*	*My confidence levels were very depleted. I was very nervous about going back to work… **You don't get any respect from society,** even from friends or family, for what you do, like I had friends say quite a lot, you must be so bored, what you do all day? That's such a kick in the stomach.*	*sometimes I do laugh and think I've landed on my feet. But then other days I just wish there were better part-time jobs, I could be doing so much more… **Yes, I am happy. The accolades and the respect you get when you are working** and do a good job, you don't get that as a parent…*
Kate *Higher*	***I had always worked, that was who I was** since I was thirteen and got myself a paper round, I've always paid my own way, working has always been a part of my identity… And I want [daughter] to see her mom working and contributing. Trying to be a role model for her.*	*You know it's amazing how time changes you. How you grow. Have a different attitude. That you're not the person you were. You have a better idea about what it is that you want. Ultimately, it's a new identity and I had to figure who I was after the journey, spend some time reflecting and say how am I different? And it's almost like you need to be in the work situation, in that world to be able to compare yourself to who you are outside work. **I almost had to go back to the work situation to say I'm different now. I think I am better than I was***
Anne *Lower*	*The trigger for going back. It was predominantly because you know I wasn't really fulfilled at all, **I felt like like a part of me was missing** and that staying at home, taking care of my family was not valued at all… I was often in situations where somebody would say, you know, are you working, and I would say I'm working from home or I'm minding my child, or whatever. But there were silences at the end of it*	*I wanted to go to work and I hadn't experienced that for a very long time. I enjoyed meeting people. I enjoyed helping them. I enjoyed making a difference…**it made me feel good about myself**… You're doing something for somebody else. You're putting yourself out there.*

identity themselves. This positive shift manifests even where women return to roles that have a lower status to what they were working at before their career breaks.

The origins of the negativity associated with a full-time mothering identity prior to re-entry are rooted in both psychological and relational factors. Nina, for instance, was driven to reclaim her work identity as a math teacher

largely by her daughter: "*My daughter kept saying to me, oh, you're just in the house all the time? What kind of a role model are you for me*?" On returning to work, however, Nina described feeling more positive about herself "*It really gives you a sense of identity of yourself. You're not just the mom anymore, you're not just the wife anymore. You're your own person. You're somebody*." For some participants, this identity distancing through the salience of negativity associated with full-time mothers, was also associated with an increasing awareness of a lingering work identity (Wittman, 2019) that they might seek to reactivate; "*I think there's a huge pressure on women as well to work, to be a worker, or you know, to be seen as working*" (Martine).

In general, through the return-to-work transition, women began to form a more positive sense of self in part by distancing themselves from their negative associations with a full-time mothering identity and the reactivation of their work identity. Ultimately, we found that mothers pulled away from their identities as full-time mothers as the first step in the return-to-work process. Observing this notable shift in valence alongside the identity transition involved in re-entry, we now explore identity processes at play and the mechanisms underlying this evolution, to theorize how mothers transition from seeing themselves as full-time mothers to working mothers in navigating the return-to-work experience.

4.2 | Distancing from full-time mother identity during re-entry

As described above, women returners reported how their identities evolved as they began transitioning back into the workplace. In analyzing how women reflected on their experiences, we identified a distancing process where, through a combination of psychological and relational mechanisms, women pulled away from their motherhood identity which they came to see as undervalued. These mechanisms are illustrated in Table 3 and include devaluing motherhood, diminished self-efficacy and self-stigmatization. Pulling away and distancing from the label of "full-time mother" seemed to be an important step to make space for seeking validation through returning to work. Many women appeared to devalue their motherhood identity. This is expressed in how Cliona speaks about her initial self-stigmatizing thoughts about returning to work: "*you doubt yourself, you know you're at home for* 20 *years and all the sudden, you're qualified to do nothing, to do crap, even though you have done everything else. But you just feel* '*Oh my God, am I even capable of doing this*'?" There were other participants who evidenced significantly diminished self-efficacy, like Aideen who feels she has lost previous skills: "*I'd have been a very capable manager before and yet confidence was just so low. I remember thinking, how am I going to remember business language, as I had just been talking about school stuff for so long*." To distance from their full-time mother identity, some women returners even went so far as to mask or suppress their motherhood. For instance, Laura (see Table 3) describes her discomfort around her recent status as a full-time mother, while Aideen seems to hide her motherhood at work "*At work no one really knew about my family (laughs)… so I was a separate person so it was almost like I was back to myself pre-children and that was quite a nice feeling*."

Relational mechanisms also contributed to women devaluing their full-time mother identity—particularly when they experienced dismissive treatment from relational partners. Laura describes a setback in her initial encounter while job searching which she perceived as devaluing her role as a mother: "*I remember this one recruiter giving me feedback along the lines of, oh, they felt like maybe it was a step too far for you, that you maybe didn't appreciate the scale of the role or something like that. Demoralizing*." As Liz began the return-to-work process, she experienced bias against her career break: "*I met other organizations who looked at that gap on the CV and went 'so you were a full-time Mummy…'*." These biases led returners to further distance themselves from their motherhood identities. The impact that these biases from relational partners had on women's identity and eventual distancing from their mother identity is exemplified in Anne and Diane's stories:

> I think that's why women's self-esteem just disappears because you're in a room full of people and whether it's a Christmas party or a family social event and someone asks what you are doing, and you

TABLE 3 Identity distancing during re-entry transitions.

Open codes, supporting quotes	Second-order codes	Theoretical dimensions
Psychological mechanisms		
In my last job, I managed a large team, I just couldn't do that now. (Laura)	Diminished self-efficacy	*Devaluing full-time motherhood identity*
And I'm quite capable of still being challenged. … I still have a brain. We all have, it's sometimes a bit hidden, because it's mush at this stage, like mine is. I haven't used it in a while, but it's there somewhere. I'm hoping it's going to rekindle. Yeah, I think we just have to believe in ourselves. (Lynda)	Self-stigmatization	
I felt uneasy any time someone asked me about my background, I tried to skip over being at home and talk about my previous work history. (Laura)	Masking motherhood identity	*Distancing from motherhood identity*
I think it comes from rejecting your own past or rejecting your own vision of what you thought… to turn it upside down to move forward. Because then that makes it, I don't know, if I'm making sense there… I don't think it does come from you. But you have to lose it, you have to part ways with your past or where you are currently, yeah, or your expectations or your aspirations of your career. You have to narrow it down. You have to peel it back. (Cora)	Rejecting motherhood identity	
Relational mechanisms		
People are biased against people who are out of work. I think they are happier to employ people who are in work or who have recently left work, I think when you've been out of work for a period of time, people see that as a bad thing (Janice)	Others' bias against career breaks	*Experiencing full-time motherhood bias*
Nobody was paying any attention to the experience and stuff… And they're just, of course, you get a lot of experience at home. Yeah, it's different. But you know, yeah, life experience. When it's just not, I don't think it's valued (Sarah)	Others devaluing motherhood	

> say well, I'm doing a bit of voluntary work, looking after the house and minding my own children or whatever it is and that's the end of the conversation. [Anne]

> An awful lot of women lack confidence because they've been out for so long. And they're so undervalued on the whole. I know your husband says it's great you're at home, and the kids say, Mom, you're the best mom ever. But there's no actual value put on that… it's very hard to say, I actually am capable of doing a lot more than this [Diane]

Overall, in the experience of re-entry, distancing from one's mother identity seemed to be necessary before mothers could reactivate their work identity. For instance, both Anne (see Table 2) and Diane speak in more positive terms about themselves as they reflect on distancing from their mothering identity and returning to work, with Diane talking about her love for work and the identity it provides:

> I also love being back out in the workforce and having a life separate to home. I really value that. I love it. Just a separate kind of life from home. You know, I love when I'm in with my colleagues, and they're a great bunch. So I just love it.

These participants' reflections illustrate that, through the transition, women begin to consider and test out aspects of a new work identity and how they might enact it, which we discuss next in terms of identity reactivation.

4.3 | Work identity (re)activation

In addition to the identity distancing involved in navigating re-entry, psychological and relational mechanisms were also influential in driving work identity reactivation. Collectively, the processes of distancing and reactivation could result in a significantly more positive valence attached to the women's identity post re-entry. We distinguish multiple processes underpinning identity reactivation. As we illustrate below, psychological mechanisms included validation of work identity as a possible self; reducing work identity reactivation risk; and ascribing positive valence to expanded identity, while relational mechanisms included developmental support and reinforcement of work identity (see Table 4). These mechanisms pushed women toward a revised and expanded identity as a working mother.

Looking first at the psychological mechanisms that underpinned the process of work identity reactivation, our returners reported engaging in activities and patterns of thinking that helped them to reduce the perceived risk they associated with reactivating their work identities. These strategies included elements of playing with or testing out their new or potential work identity by framing the re-entry process as an experiment or using upskilling opportunities to make a low risk first step. Although this represents a step beyond distancing, these strategies were not yet embracing a newly activated work identity but rather represented the uncertainty and lack of sure-footedness that women experienced about reactivation and how it had changed who they were. Distancing from the identity they have embodied as full-time mothers often left them apprehensive and lacking confidence, resulting in caution around re-entry aspirations and work identity reactivation. Kara framed the return as experimental as a means of reducing risk associated with reactivating her work identity: "*I hadn't worked in so long and because my self-esteem was already low enough and I thought I am just going to do something that I can just smash it and build up my confidence again*." Many returners also shared how they began to ascribe a more positive valence to their newly expanded identities and that supported work identity reactivation, as depicted in Table 2. As Nina notes, "*It's very empowering…I feel like a different person, I feel 10 years younger*."

Alongside these psychological mechanisms, we saw that relational mechanisms were particularly critical to work identity reactivation. Relational partners played an important role in validating women's possible work selves by affirming their decisions to return to work, endorsing their capabilities and role modeling their own consideration of possible selves. Affirmation of their re-entry decisions was particularly important during the pre-return phase. Many mothers "tested the waters" by exploring how others in their personal networks would react to their decision to return-to-work. As Karen notes: "*I tested myself by checking the look on their faces when I said I was returning to work so there is a lot of testing the waters*.", Cliona did something similar with her friends: "*I've built up a great network of mums and they were all delighted I was looking to go back and thought I'd be great as an Special Needs Assistant. That was important that the friends are all behind you instead of going 'are you bloody mad', they actually thought it was a fabulous idea*" [Cliona] and this was enough to counteract her subjective sense of being "*worthless*." Spouses were also important as workers who were able to reassure women returners that they would be desirable employees and to endorse their capabilities: "*My husband said to me, 'you're a female who ticks so many boxes for companies …you should apply for every job. They'd be delighted to have you'*" [Yvette].

Endorsement of capability often came from interactions with non-work relational partners who validated their work identity and often counteracted negative interactions with others. For instance, as Liz began to consider a significant downgrade in the work roles she was pursuing because she perceived she was being evaluated negatively because she was a full-time mother, it took a proactive intervention from her sister to challenge self-doubts about her skills:

TABLE 4 Reactivation of work identity during Re-entry.

Open codes, supporting quotes	Second-order codes	Theoretical dimensions
Psychological mechanisms		
I thought OK, I've got things into perspective. I said if I'm not the right person and if they ask me to finish at the end of the month, Ok it's not great but it's not the end of the world. At least I can say. I've done my best (Kate)	Framing re-entry as experimentation	*Reducing work identity reactivation risk*
I chose to do this diploma over the Masters because you were guaranteed the work placement… So I thought, well, someone is going to have to employ me. And once I'm through the door, I'm confident…it gets the door open for me (Yvette)	Building confidence through upskilling	
I'm much more focused than I used to be… So, I think you come out of this not prepared to put up with everything anymore. You are more likely to suit yourself and work things around your life rather than just giving everything and being a slave to your job. (Denise)	Re-prioritization during Re-entry	
It really gives you a sense of identity of yourself. You're not just the mom anymore, you're not just the wife anymore. You're your own person. You're somebody. (Nina)	Work as identity	*Ascribing Positive valence to expanded identity*
My life does not revolve around the school and the house anymore, there's more to me, I like that (Laura)	New aspects to self	
Relational mechanisms		
My husband was very supportive. I think he knew I wanted to have further intellectual challenge and maybe move in another direction…And my mother was alive at the time. She was also… (Joan)	Social support	*Developmental Support*
This probably has had an enormous impact on me starting off my business, I didn't have to worry about sourcing a venue, and so on, I just have to decide, this is it, I'm taking this leap of faith, I had 100% support from my husband, you know, he was pushing for it as well… And that was enormous, no rent, no overheads to begin with, I was on my own. And so I opened it. And I had a great deal of support from the local enterprise centers, they were amazing. And they gave me a lot of advice on the financial setups and tax and so on (emer)	Practical support	
Then [husband] got an email… He just said would you be interested in going back to work part time and he said to me I've just got a mail here, there's an opportunity in the contact team, the customer service area (Sophie)	Network introductions	
About the way the job came about, it was from a friend, so maybe not a network but it was one of my contacts. It was through a conversation with a mum friend that led to the job. (Anne)		
I worked with a lot of different teachers, different mentors in the school and stuff…Then it's a super school. I work in an amazing school where they really they really value newly qualified teachers, and they really bring them along. (Diane)	Career mentoring	

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Open codes, supporting quotes	Second-order codes	Theoretical dimensions
I was like can we not wait a bit and my husband said no I think you should start looking now (aideen)	Affirmation of re-entry decision	*Validation of work identity as a possible self*
My father….He could say, you're good with people. He was able to analyze my personality. You have to have an affirmation from somebody to give you the, the I don't have it in myself to affirm it myself (Cora)	Endorsement of capability	
I was very lucky that I had people who had actively been looking for work and they had already been through that and they had they put me through my paces (Karen)	Vicarious Experience	
He was fascinated by me, he said "look absolutely, there's opportunities all the time, nothing at that particular time" but he would keep me in mind. After a while, he called me and said there may be a couple of opportunities coming up… In the back of my mind, I presumed it was [basic admin role] they were interviewing me about… they weren't interested in me for the admin role, they wanted me for the sales role which was what I wanted as well. So I went for the second interview and the rest is history (Madeline)	Employer belief in returner	*Reinforcement of work identity*
The other thing is that I work with great girls in that job, like, we actually became friends and really enjoyed their company. And that kind of gives you a boost. Because then all of a sudden, you start to feel like you have the life of your own and your own conversations… but the fact that going out to work, you get those kind of working as part of a team but, the craic, you know, it's the interaction (Eilish)	Friendship and belonging at work	

> Thankfully my sister said, 'are you nuts, what planet are you on, will you grow up?… I can't stress this highly enough the marketplace is just crying out for people precisely like you and they can't get it, they can't get that maturity, even if you don't have the exact skill set, you bring so many other things to the equation…you can go into digital marketing with your eyes closed… data management and analytics is the way to go, you're more than capable…

Women could partly overcome diminished self-efficacy where they had peers who had returned to work after breaks, underlining the importance of vicarious experience. As Laura notes, "*I found the interaction with other mums helped me regain some of my confidence, there was a lot of talk about going back. You know, we were all in the same boat. I think it gave me the confidence to network again.*" Many of the mothers in our sample benefited from developmental support provided by work and non-work relational partners including the provision of social support, more practical, instrumental support and network introductions. For Kate, her non-work relational network helped her to reactivate her work identity by opening up a professional network. She describes how Bill, a retired friend with whom she once worked but who was now a mentor proactively provide career advice and network introductions to help her to get back into the job market:

> I had to understand what was going on in that market so I met up with Bill. He's retired and he has almost become my mentor. He is a friend… We met up and he just said well listen you need to have a plan for yourself you need to do a marketing plan and look at your strengths and weaknesses. You

> need to understand what's going on out in the marketplace at the sharp end. He is very well-connected, he's a great guy. He said 'right, I want to introduce you to four people and when I get back to the office I will send you their details. It's up to you, you follow up, just keep me posted.'

And through these introductions to a new professional network, Kate got her job and she recognizes that the opportunity came through people she knew. Similarly, Aideen describes how others gave her developmental support: "*I had a friend who worked in HR she helped me to rework my CV and my husband brought home CVs home from work that I could follow*."

In other instances, professional relationships supported women in their return. For instance, Denise described how a returner coach helped her figure out her priorities and begin to reactivate her work identity through developmental support and highlighting opportunities:

> I got in touch with [coach] and said 'could you help me, I want to get back to work and where do I start'… she said three things that really got me thinking. One was, your previous experience is very relevant… She said Women Returners are running a program and you can apply for a job there and the third thing was, what do you want? She said it a few times. And I thought and thought. And I said forget about those notions related to history/academia. Just go back to work and get paid for it. So, that's what I did."

The second category of relational mechanism that our participants reported finding beneficial for work identity reactivation related to others' efforts to reinforce their emerging work identity. This materialized primarily through employer signals of belief in the returner and experiences of friendship and belonging once they were back at work. As Gillian notes, her manager's belief in her boosted her confidence for seeking greater responsibility and challenge:

> there was a [promotion] competition recently… my [manager] was saying, hope you're going for that, take a couple of hours, whatever you need, sit down and fill out the forms…. Work can wait, get those forms done. Take whatever time you need.

Similarly, Sophie contrasts two very different experiences she had during the lengthy interview process and stresses the importance of the encouragement and belief expressed by her second interviewer:

> I had to go through two interviews and the first one was an hour long and I did just OK. But then at the second interview one of the senior managers came in and she got me because she would be about my age and she understood what I was talking about. Yes, she got me. She knew what I was and she knew what was different. I felt so much more empathy and she was very encouraging about, you know, what I had to offer of course.

While employer belief signaled to women returners that someone more senior was supportive of their return, peers and the wider organizational community were also important to building women's confidence and positive work identity after they returned to work. Women returners talked about how new colleagues created a sense of belonging once they returned to work: "*the staff made me feel at home immediately, I actually felt as if I've been part of the school all along and that's a tribute to them and also myself I guess*" [Cliona]. These proactive relational interventions triggered a stronger re-activation of a work identity, building on the distancing work women had done by not only pulling women away from their motherhood status but also pushing them toward a work identity to which they attached a more positive valence.

5 | DISCUSSION

In this research, we consider how women returners experience their sense of self during the return-to-work process following a significant career hiatus of between three and 20 years and, in doing so, we seek to contribute to research on working mothers' career transitions. In focusing on women returners following a significant career interruption, we develop understanding of how women's subjective experiences of these transitions shape their return-to-work and their evolving sense of self. We have illustrated how women confront their own sense of self, as they distance themselves from the full-time mother identity which makes space for the reactivation of their work identities. The reactivation of a work identity typically is associated with a more positive subjectivity, where women returners' narratives around their sense of sense are significantly more positive following work re-entry, regardless of the comparative status of their job role pre and post career break. As part of this theorizing, we also surface how psychological and relational mechanisms affect women returners' evolving sense of self and support the distancing and reactivation identity processes. Relational interactions—ranging along a spectrum of negative, to passively supportive, to positively proactive—were highly influential in either reinforcing or counteracting negative subjectivities associated with full-time motherhood. Where these relational interventions were positive and proactive, they prompted women to prepare themselves for the return-to-work more actively and typically resulted in a stronger reactivation of their work identities.

5.1 | Contributions to theory

Our research contributes to theory on identity transitions and offers novel theoretical insights in explaining the experiences of women returners. First, we extend theory on identity transitions and contribute to understanding of processes of identity construction (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). We depict an evolving identity process where mothers construct and reconstruct identities to which they attach some sort of valence as positive or negative (Lewin, 1946), that is, the extent to which they see that identity as valued or not by others and, consequently, how they value this identity themselves. Thus, we offer a novel and more complex understanding of (maternal) subjectivities that comprise both identity enactment and the positive or negative value attached to that identity. More specifically, our research illustrates how lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) can become enacted again by depicting the distancing and reactivation processes involved in navigating the transition. As mothers reactivate their work identities, which have been lingering for a significant temporal period, we illustrate that the continuity of their identities as mothers and as working mothers is characterized by disruption and recalibration. Thus, our analysis of our participants' narratives offers some nuance to the concept of continuity inherent to lingering identities (Wittman, 2019) in the context of return-to-work transitions. We surface the tensions that confront women as they find their current, salient identity as full-time mothers at odds with what is valued in society. In reactivating their lingering identity, women experience a more discontinuous form of identity continuity than previous theory might suggest as they find they have to mask or even reject one identity to allow the lingering identity to re-emerge.

Our findings also echo Ashforth and Schinoff's (2016) arguments that link past and present to aspired future identities and highlight the role of social validation in developing an understanding of self-in-context and a more positive subjectivity. In this way, our research extends the theory on the role of audience participation in identity (re)construction (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) by underlining the importance of relational mechanisms in the distancing and reactivation processes involved in re-enacting a lingering identity. We demonstrate the role of these relational processes in two specific identity reconstruction processes, distancing and reactivation, and highlight their particular importance during the pre-re-entry period. Moreover, relational mechanisms are core to the identity valence shift in our theorizing, as women come to view themselves more positively as a result of their distancing and reactivation identity work. This argument advances the work transitions literature which has tended

to overemphasize individual agency at the expense of exploring the role of relational and structural mechanisms on these transitions and on women's careers (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). As called for by Sullivan and Al Ariss (2021), we offer a deeper understanding of the quality and depth of engagement of various members of a person's social network in shaping and supporting identity processes during career transitions. The relational mechanisms we highlight are crucial to understanding how we can better support employees following career interruptions (Bian & Wang, 2019) and, in particular, in illustrating how mothers develop, and are supported by others to activate, a positive understanding of themselves in relation to work.

5.2 | Practical implications

While research to date has typically focused on individual motives for returning, the organizational barriers women experience, and the type of work women return to (e.g., Sian, 2021; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), our research provides theoretical insights regarding the work identity reactivation processes mothers engage in as they transition back to work after a significant career break. This shift in focus can support practice to move beyond a focus on reasons for opting out and re-entry outcomes (e.g., Herman, 2015) to look deeper at the processes that support positive transitions back to work.

Many of our narratives point to significant deficits in supporting mothers to return to the workplace and suggest that organizational efforts to attract returners should aim to counteract the common barriers to work identity reactivation for working mothers and recognize the critical role of personal and professional networks. For instance, challenging and changing recruitment approaches that seem to actively discriminate against mothers who have had career breaks in both internal recruitment practices and in partnering with inclusive external recruitment agencies. Given many of our participants experienced challenges in reactivating their work identities, recruitment approaches that actively target women returning from career breaks and seek to highlight the valuable experience and skills they bring (e.g., Rothbard et al., 2021) are likely to be influential.

Perhaps most importantly for practice, our work highlights that much of the reactivation of work identity for these women happened before they re-entered the workforce or had any formal interactions with potential employers. First, many of the women in our study reported falling between two stools, where recruitment agencies were biased against them while governmental agencies simply did not have practices in place to advise them on how to get back to work. As a result, our work highlights a wider responsibility of societal and governmental agencies to consider support for women following career breaks if they wish to attract this cohort back into the talent pool. Some of our participants also noted the value of return-to-work courses and being delivered privately and that these helped them to determine what their priorities were or whether they needed to upskill first. Thus, career coaching or mentorship programs that attend to these issues, but which also focus on surfacing the psychological mechanisms influencing work identity reactivation, are likely to be valuable. Frameworks that support women in accessing support from their personal and professional networks are likely to have a significant impact on enabling the work identity reactivation process.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

Our research has some limitations and new avenues for exploration emerged following our analysis. First, although it was not our initial intention to collect data on the valence of mother or worker identities, this emerged as an issue that our participants often reflected on and indeed the quote “not just a mom” inspired the title of our paper. The narratives of our participants may ultimately suggest that being “just” a mother violates contemporary, neoliberal norms, which demand that women should continually be “working on themselves in order to enhance their value”

(Rottenburg, 2019; p. 1074). It became clear in our interviews that some participants experience tensions in social norms that dictate what constitutes a "good mother" and "ideal worker" and future research is needed to consider how these tensions might be experienced across different industrial and national contexts. Furthermore, as our purposive, convenience sampling approach may have limited our ability to engage a socio-economic or racially diverse population. Future research would benefit from considering how these demographic differences might also shift women returners shifting identity as it pertains to motherhood and work. We also would suggest that future research engages a more mixed-methods approach (Molina-Azorin et al., 2017; Yin, 2015) particularly to examine how factors such as leave length, age of children and other individual and family variables might affect returners' distancing from motherhood and reactivation of work identity during the re-entry process.

We were unable in this study to quantify the level of agency the women returners felt in returning to work. On the surface, it would appear that many of them wished to return-to-work and the experience was ultimately fulfilling and positive. However, some of the narratives in our research would tentatively contest this, where mothers felt they had to return-to-work in order to have some value in society or perhaps because their partners suggested it. This is something that struck us during the analysis stage and future research could better interrogate how autonomous decisions to re-enter the workforce are in relation to personal desire and societal norms and values. This aligns with Sullivan and Al Ariss' (2021) observation that there is a glaring assumption in the literature that career transitions are voluntary and there is a need to understand more deeply transitions that are characterized by less agency.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare in relation to this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports this study can not be publicly shared due to privacy and ethical restrictions and confidentiality that was provided to the participants.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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