BACK ON THE CAREER PATH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS FOR WOMEN WHO TAKE A CAREER BREAK AND THEIR RE-ENTRY EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to examine how six women made sense of their experience from leaving the workforce to trying to return after staying home for an extended period of time to raise their children. The research question was: *How do professional working mothers who choose to leave their career to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in?* The data analysis revealed five superordinate themes including: self-assurance, anxiety, surprise, growth and renewal.

The overall results of the study indicate that with a better understanding of the potential challenges to re-entry, professional working mothers could take a pre-emptive approach when leaving the workforce. Maintaining a relationship with their employer, keeping up professional networks and skills, and utilizing firms dedicated to helping mothers return to work, may allow women wanting to re-enter to avoid the challenges experienced by the research participants.

In addition, although some organizations are starting to capitalize on the amazing talent pool of women wanting to re-enter, so much more could be done including; more partnerships with firms focused on placing re-entry women, leveraging technology to create more flexible working conditions for mothers; and creating a network for talented females that have left the organization, but may someday want to return.

*Keywords*: re-entry, opting out, opting in, career break, professional female, stay-at-home mothers, liminality, identity, work and family, role salience, work–life balance, interpretative phenomenological analysis
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Chapter 1: Introduction

For many working mothers, the decision to leave the workforce to raise children may have long-term career impacts such as a loss of skills, or difficulty re-entering the workforce, that they may not have expected or considered (Ericksen, Jurgens, Garrett, & Swedburg, 2008; Greer, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Professional [defined as “Work requiring advanced knowledge…which means work which is predominantly intellectual in character, and which includes work requiring the consistent exercise of discretion and judgment” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008, p. 2)] women’s choice to leave the workforce to care for their children is often based on inadequate childcare options, limited opportunities for a more flexible work schedule, or their inability to take extended time off (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Others find it impossible to meet extreme societal standards to be the ideal worker and model mother, forcing their decision to leave the workforce, only later to discover the barriers to “opting” back in (or re-entering) (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016, p. 624). Scholars and practitioners have explored the reasons why working women opt out of the workforce (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Landivar, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Mastracci, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Wheatley, 2012; Williams et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), as well as their struggle to opt back in (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Greer, 2013; Helford, Stewart, Gruys, & Frank, 2012; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rahim, 2014; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), but few have studied the transitional or liminal phase from stay-at-home mother to working mother.

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of former professional females as they try to find a job after staying home for an extended period to raise children. This study used an interpretative phenomenological approach which allowed the researcher to explore in detail the experiences of the participants in relation to a particular topic or phenomena,
specifically the liminal period between staying home and workforce re-entry (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

This chapter presents an overview of the problem, the rationale and significance of the study, and the specific research question. This chapter also explains the theoretical framework that guided the study. The following chapters review the literature surrounding why professional women leave the workforce, what they may face when re-entering [the term re-entry refers to “women who re-enter the workforce after a few years of unpaid care-taking responsibilities” (Greer, 2013, p. 42)], and the concept of liminality. The methods that were used to investigate the research question, as well as the researcher’s positionality are also discussed.

Statement of the Problem

With childcare options that do not satisfy them, along with working conditions that do not lend themselves to raising children, an increasing number of professional women are choosing to leave the workforce and stay home (Landivar, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). During their time at home, women face an adjustment period in which they move from a work-related identity to one that focuses on family and being a mother (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). Once they decide to return to the workforce, another period of adjustment occurs where the identities of both mother and professional must be integrated (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). Additionally, once the decision to return to work has been made, former female professionals may enter into a period of liminality when searching for a job or a career change, which can push individuals through more identity change (Tansley & Tietze, 2013, p. 1802).

After interrupting their careers to have children, attempting to return to a similar job is not easy for many women (Ericksen et al., 2008; Greer, 2013; Helford et al., 2012; Lovejoy &
Stone, 2012; Orgad, 2016; Ravindran & Baral, 2014; Ronzio, 2012; Williams, 2010). The same occupation they once had may no longer be what they want to return to because long hours, travel and a full-time commitment is not manageable alongside the demanding needs of their family (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Landivar, 2014; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Additionally, outdated skills and an extended gap in employment may decrease their chances of finding a job at the same level as when they left (Greer, 2013; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Frustrated and disappointed, women may struggle to understand their identity during this time as they are unable to re-establish the work-related identity they once had (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012).

**Rationale and Significance of Research Problem**

Existing scholarship explores the reasons why working women opt out of the workforce (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Landivar, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Mastracci, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Wheatley, 2012; Williams et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), as well as their struggle to opt back in (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Greer, 2013; Helford et al., 2012; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rahim, 2014; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), but very little research has been published on the experiences of former female professionals once the decision is made to return to work. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014) maintain that moving away from an identity as a stay-at-home mother [defined as forgoing any income-earning activities, either outside of or in the home, and not dividing time or focus between paid work and child care (Dillaway & Pare, 2008, p. 442)], can either be an opportunity for growth and positive identity development or a time of loss and immobility. Understanding this liminal phase for female professionals transitioning back to the workforce has significance for researchers, practitioners, organizations and policymakers who struggle with a decreasing pool of
professional and experienced female talent (Cabrera, 2009; Ericksen et al., 2008; Fitzenberger, Steffes, & Strittmatter, 2016; Ravindran & Baral, 2014), coupled with the high cost of retention, training, and re-hiring (Fitzenberger, Steffes, & Strittmatter, 2016). In addition, female corporate professionals who may be considering leaving the workforce to raise children could benefit from a greater awareness of what they may encounter when deciding to re-enter (Ericksen et al., 2008; Greer, 2013; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Williams et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).

Working women in the United States who choose to have children usually need to take some period of time off from work either as family, sick or vacation leave or by exiting the workforce upon the birth of a child (“Economics of Paid,” 2014). During this time, a woman will have to decide if she will return to work or stay at home to take care of her child(ren) (Ericksen et. al., 2008). Career indecision can be a significant issue for many mothers debating a return to work, often causing anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion (Ericksen et al., 2008). During the 2000s, after significant growth of the female labor force in the 80s and 90s, professional working women turned their focus to work-family balance and began to “opt out” of the workforce (Landivar, 2014, p. 189). In 1999, 60% of women participated in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). By 2014, the number had dropped to 57% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). According to Lovejoy and Stone (2012), women in demanding professional careers often opt out when spouses or employers offer little support to manage work-family balance. Without this support, their ability and desire to re-enter the workforce after having a child may diminish (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Ericksen et al., 2008; Landivar, 2014), driving many women to decide to stay home with their children for several years. When making the decision to leave their careers, little forethought is given to how one might re-enter the workforce years later (Greer, 2013).
After being away from the workforce for an extended period, the transition from staying home with children to workforce re-entry can result in personal changes such as decreased self-esteem, lack of confidence, or depression, which may require some type of intervention (Ericksen et al., 2008; Greer, 2013). Suffering from low self-esteem, and losing much of their ambition since leaving the workforce to raise their children, women may question their employability (Greer, 2013; Michaels, 2009; Nilssan & Ekberg, 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). In addition, outdated job skills and the need for retraining makes finding employment even more difficult (Greer, 2013; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Panteli, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). According to Hewlett and Luce (2005), a survey by the Center for Work-Life Policy of 2,443 highly qualified women (defined as those with a graduate or professional degree, or high-honors undergraduate degree) found that 93% of women surveyed who left the workforce wanted to return, but only 74% were successful. Hewlett, Sherbin, and Forster (2010) repeated this research using a comparable sample and extending the questions, and found that the average time a woman spends out of the workforce is two to seven years. About 40% of those wanting to re-enter found full-time jobs, 23% found part-time jobs, 7% became self-employed and 30% had not returned (p. 30).

With the majority of professional women who have left the workforce not returning to their former occupations, or to any paid work at all, organizations that rely on knowledge are at a competitive disadvantage (Cabrera, 2009). “…As the need to compete for talent is escalating, organizations are failing in their efforts to retain highly educated women” (p. 187). Meglich, Mihelič, & Zupan (2016) assert that as businesses become more competitive, women make up a large percentage of the workforce and organizational talent pools. Additionally, more and more women are holding key positions and their exit from the workforce is having an impact on
organizational performance and competitiveness (p. 22). Greer (2013) states that professional positions open today are becoming harder to fill as baby boomers retire. Greer maintains that companies are not taking the time to fill these positions with highly educated females who may have temporarily left the workforce.

To date, the majority of research has focused on retaining female talent versus “re-engaging off-ramped women” (Greer, 2013, p. 42). Greer (2013) contends that women’s re-entry into the U.S. workforce is a topic that has received little attention. Lovejoy and Stone (2012) assert that there is limited research on professional females’ return to work after a career break, stating that the little research available indicates that upon re-entry, the majority of women pursue alternative careers. Lovejoy and Stone (2012, p. 631) posit that “little is known about why this occurs.” According to Ericksen, Jurgens, Garrett, and Swedburg (2008), in the 70s and 80s there was considerable interest in mothers who had a professional career due to the Feminist Movement, but more recently any research in this area has declined. Ericksen et al. argue that the transition from being an at-home mother to workforce re-entry is a significant life transition and can affect an individual’s identity and have possible negative consequences such as depression and a decrease in self-esteem. Unfortunately, little research seems to be available regarding the experiences women have during this time.

Research Question

The central research question for this study was: How do professional working mothers who choose to leave their career to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in?

Theoretical Framework
The purpose of this study was to examine an understudied aspect of professional females’ re-entry into the workforce after taking multiple years off to care for their children. Looking at this topic through the lens of liminality helped inform the research question of: How do professional working mothers who choose to leave their career to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in?

**Liminality.** French ethnologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work, *Les rites de passage* in 1909, first developed the concept of liminality in the early 20th century. Van Gennep (1960) argued that individual renewal is accomplished through rites of passage where an individual passes through identity states, occurring in three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. During separation, one becomes detached from their current social status (Beech, 2011). They then enter the liminal state as described by van Gennep as part of the process of social change where a person enters a new transitional position [“e.g. boy to man, girl to bride” (Beech, 2011, p. 287)] or in the case of this research, when a stay-at-home mother makes the decision to return to work. In the liminal state, an individual does not quite belong to their old world or to their new world and is fraught with ambiguity (van Gennep, 1960, p. 21; Beech, 2011). In the final stage, incorporation (an aggregation of all three stages), an individual has reached a new identity state (Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

Once van Gennep’s work was translated into English in 1960, Victor Turner expanded upon the theory in 1969. Turner (1969) described liminality as “Betwixt and Between” (p. 95). For Turner, the liminal state had specific characteristics. Primarily, the “liminar” is seen as outside society because they have no distinct identity as the original identity has disbanded and a new identity has yet to form (Ybema, Beech, & Ellis, 2011, p. 22). Turner also introduced the concept of *communitas* where being in the liminal state forces a sense of community and
togetherness, and differences are disregarded (Tansley & Tietze, 2013; Turner, 1969). While in a liminal state, individuals may look to peers also in a liminal phase for support (Beech, 2011). In the case of a female professional re-entering the workforce, the liminal state may be extended as she may struggle to try to return to her former occupation due to obstacles including outdated job skills, the amount of time away from the job, and being older (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).

A prolonged liminal state can be quite disruptive, causing frustration and depression (Beech, 2011). Unable to re-create the strong professional identity that provided a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in the past, professional females in the liminal phase may turn to reflection (Ericksen et al, 2008). According to Beech (2011, p. 289), reflection entails questioning one’s self, reacting to external “influences and perceptions” and ultimately changing. The question of “who am I?” emerges at this point as the individual is trying to change from the current version of themselves to a new, desired identity (Beech, 2011, p. 285).

For most employed adults, work and family are the primary sources of their identity (Miscenko & Day, 2015). A “sense of identity serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 194). Moving away from either of these stable sources of identity into the liminal state may drive an individual to question who he or she is (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). For females re-entering the workforce, hearing that their skills are out of date, or that they are too old, or that a former employer no longer has a position available, can cause self-doubt, insecurity, and a realization that things are different (Greer, 2013). Often, when identity is questioned in the liminal state, self-narratives are developed that draw on one’s desires or historical perspectives (Alvesson, 2010; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). Duberley and Carrigan (2013) contend that narratives allow an individual to make meaning of experiences and actions and provide a structure for making sense of past events and planning for future events. Beech
(2011, p. 291) asserts that creating a self-narrative allows for continuous sense-making. Kanji and Cahusac (2015) studied how mothers reconcile their identity after leaving the workforce using the theory of sense-making (or making meaning after an event occurs). Kanji and Cahusac posit that individuals turn to sense-making when one’s identity is being challenged. Conditions that are out of an individual’s control, such as the inability to return to a former occupation or job, can create insecurity around one’s identity (Alvesson, 2010).

Because self-worth is so closely tied to a positive identity, the liminal phase will continue until an individual is satisfied with his or her new or modified identity (Miscenko & Day, 2015). To successfully move to van Gennep’s (1960) incorporation phase, individuals need to feel both symbolically and physically that they have established a new identity in which they can satisfactorily answer the question of “who am I?” (Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

**Application of Theory**

Liminality has been applied to postcolonial theory, borders, and queer theory and has become more popular and visible in recent literature (Wilson & Tunca, 2015; Al-Samman & El-Ariss, 2013). Others have applied liminality to transgender persons (Caudwell, 2014; Diamond, Pardo & Butterworth, 2011), chronic illness (Trusson, Pilnick, & Roy, 2016), employment status (Borg & Söderlund, 2013; Johnsen & Sorensen, 2015), organizations (Beech, 2011; Johnsen & Sorensen, 2015), development of self (Simmons et al., 2013), prostitution (Sacramento, 2011), incarceration (Turney, 2015), and cancer (Adorno, 2015; Blows, Bird, Seymour, & Cox, 2012; Ho, Leung, Tse, Pang, Chochinov, Neimeyer, & Chan, 2013). Raineri (2015) states that today the concept can be found in studies on management, health, education, cyberspace, governance, sexuality, and tourism. The theory of liminality has not been applied to professional females re-entering the workforce as far as the researcher could determine.
Conclusion

The number of highly qualified, well-educated, professional women leaving the workforce and choosing to stay home to raise their children continues to increase, while the number who successfully re-enter continues to decline (Hewlett, Sherbin, and Forster, 2010; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Corporate policies, societal pressures, spousal support, childcare options, and identity are all major factors in a woman’s journey from being employed, to full-time motherhood, and back to being employed (Ericksen et al., 2008). A better understanding of the experiences of female professionals who leave the workforce for an extended period to have children, and decide to re-enter years later, could have a significant impact on practice, policies, and female health and well-being.

The literature review in Chapter Two explores the scholarship surrounding the experiences of female professionals choosing to leave the workforce and ultimately deciding to re-enter several years later.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The number of white, well-educated women forgoing earnings and choosing to stay home to raise their children continues to increase (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In 1999, 60% of women participated in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). By 2014, the number had dropped to 57% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). In general, mothers with children 6- to 17-years of age are more likely to participate in the labor force (75.8% in March 2014) than mothers with children under 6-years of age (64.3%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). For women with children under 3-years old, the rate declines even further (61.8%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

In 2012, approximately 370,000 married stay-at-home mothers with working husbands had at least a master’s degree and family income exceeding $75,000 (Cohn, Livingston, & Wang, 2014). Ten years after receiving an MBA, JD or MD degree, women are three times more likely to be out of the labor force than men primarily due to family responsibilities (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Kanji (2011) claims that the length of time a female is out of the workforce negatively affects possible lifetime earnings. Essentially, loss of experience equals a pay penalty (p. 510). In addition to a decrease in lifetime earning potential, self-image and career advancement can also be impacted (Felfe, 2012; Gallup, 2016; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Family and childcare responsibilities are major contributors to these trends (Cadsby, Servatka, & Song, 2012; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Landivar, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).

As seen by the statistics above, exiting the workforce to care for children creates a disadvantage for female professionals when they are ready to return. In addition, the decision to return after an extended leave from the workforce may be harder than anticipated (Ericksen et
al., 2008; Jones & Schneider, 2010; Ravindran & Baral, 2014). Loss of skills, age discrimination, or the inability to find a job at the same level or pay grade may never have been considered when initially choosing to leave the workforce and care for children (Ericksen et al., 2008; Gallup, 2016; Greer, 2013; Jones & Schneider, 2010; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Ravindran & Baral, 2014; Williams et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Once home, women often fail to maintain professional networks or keep job skills current, and very few create any type of plan for re-entry (Greer, 2013).

The literature defines the re-entry woman as “women who re-enter the workforce after a few years of unpaid care-taking responsibilities” (Greer, 2013, p. 42). For those women who attempt to re-enter, many change careers or look for flexible work arrangements in an effort to balance work and family or in response to the inability to find a similar job to what they once had (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Wheatley, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Lovejoy and Stone (2012, p. 634) state that despite realistic expectations, highly qualified women reported feeling frustrated and depressed because of their re-entry experiences. Workforce re-entry can result in personal changes such as decreased self-esteem, lack of confidence, or depression, which may require some type of intervention (Ericksen et al., 2008; Greer, 2013).

Existing research has explored why working women leave the workforce (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Landivar, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Mastracci, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Wheatley, 2012; Williams et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), as well as their struggles when opting back in (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Greer, 2013; Helford et al., 2012; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rahim, 2014; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). To date, little research has focused on what experiences former females professionals have as they transition from staying at home to workforce re-entry.
With an aging workforce and Baby Boomers retiring, employers are missing the opportunity to tap into this huge talent pool of highly educated, experienced employees (Greer, 2013; Jones & Schneider, 2010; Meglich et al., 2016; Ravindran & Baral, 2014). Female talent “brain drain” is a significant cost to employers as well as society (Stone & Hernandez, 2013, p. 239). Understanding the experiences and mindset of this potential labor source could lead to policy change and create new employment opportunities for former professional females who may otherwise fail to re-enter, change careers, or only come back part time. Thus, this study examined the experiences of professional females during the transitional period from staying at home to attempting workforce re-entry.

To better understand this phenomenon, this chapter begins with a review of the literature surrounding why professional women opt out of the workforce, including how other countries support maternity leave, the concept of the ideal worker and model mother, as well as gendered work environments. It then examines what happens once the decision to re-enter is made, including what drives the decision, challenges, work-life balance and what occurs during the transitional period from staying at home to workforce re-entry through the lens of liminality. The review concludes with considerations for re-entry.

**Why women opt out.** Americans work longer hours than employees in any other industrialized nations do (Rodgers, 2014). Compared to Europe and other countries, the United States lags behind in many areas pertaining to time off and paid leave. The United States is the only country in the world that does not guarantee any paid vacation time (Rodgers, 2014; Sullivan, 2014). The European Union requires employers to provide four weeks of paid vacation a year, with many companies offering as many as 25-30 days (Rozgus, 2015). Countries like Canada and Japan guarantee workers 10 days of paid vacation per year (Sullivan, 2014).
In the 1970s and 80s, an increasing number of women began to enter the workforce due to the Feminist Movement (Ericksen, et al., 2008; Orgad, 2016). With both father and mother working, families began looking for ways to balance work and family responsibilities. In response, the United States implemented the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, which protects a women’s job for 12 weeks while out on unpaid maternity leave if they work for a company with 50 or more employees (Lalive, Schlosser, Steinhauer, & Zweimoller, 2014). Unfortunately, only about 60% of women in the United States qualify for FMLA benefits (Schönberg & Ludsteck, 2014). Outside of limited job protection, and with no paid leave available for any part of the U.S. workforce, Akass (2012) argues that the United States has the worst maternity benefits of any Western country.

Unlike the United States, other countries provide more robust maternity benefits. In Germany, women are eligible for three years of partially paid leave, and job protection (Felfe, 2014; Schönberg & Ludsteck, 2014). In Sweden, on average, a mother returns to work after 15 months, compared to in the United States, where she is back within three months (Rahim, 2014). In Finland, mothers receive 106 paid days, while Canadian women can take up to 50 weeks of paid leave (Schönberg & Ludsteck, 2014). In Austria, as long as a mother stays at home to care for her child, she will receive a cash benefit of 35-40% of her net median income for a period of eight weeks before birth and 16 weeks after birth from the government (Lalive, et al., 2014). In addition, she will have job protection and can not be fired in the first six weeks after returning from leave (Lalive, et al., 2014). A two-parent family in Spain will receive over 300 weeks of protected job leave, although only 9% of this leave is paid (Vahratian & Johnson, 2009). Greece and Japan provide 45-50% paid leave for about 60 weeks of protected job leave (Vahratian & Johnson, 2009). Further, Europe has addressed disparities between full- and part-time
employees by providing protection for flexible and part-time arrangements (Landivar, 2014). England gives benefits, leave provisions, pensions, protected pay, and holidays to part-time workers (p. 211). Sweden allows parents with children under age 8 to work six hours a day at a pro-rated rate (p. 211). Belgium permits parents to work 80% of their regular hours for up to five years, and the Netherlands does not allow part-time workers to be treated any differently from full-time employees (p. 211).

**Ideal worker and model mother.** In addition to dealing with a limited maternity leave compared to women in other countries, U.S. female professionals must also deal with societal pressures and cultural bias (Cohn et al., 2014; Jones & Schneider, 2010; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). For women, motherhood is a pivotal life event causing many female employees to rearrange their careers to accommodate their families (Ely, Stone & Ammerman, 2014). Women are more likely to move for their husband’s jobs and will scale back work to adjust for the needs of their family (Jones & Schneider, 2010). Cohn, Livingston, and Wang (2014) cite a Pew Research survey that found 42% of working mothers have at some point reduced their work hours to care for a child or other family members, compared to only 28% of fathers. In addition, according to the Pew Research Survey, about one-quarter of working mothers (27%) have actually quit their job at some stage during their career to care for a child or other family member (p. 29). Ely et al. (2014) found similar results in their survey of 25,000 Harvard Business School graduates in which 28% of GenX and 44% of Baby Boom women had taken a six or more month career break to care for children, compared with only 2% of GenX and Baby Boom men (p. 105). The study also found that working mothers were more apt to limit travel, take a more flexible job, slow down their career advancement, make a job shift, leave a job, or decline a promotion to accommodate their families (p. 104). Shafer (2011) posits that women whose husbands work
more than 45 hours per week are more likely to leave the workforce than working women whose husbands work 35 to 45 hours per week since working mothers are inclined to spend more time taking care of children and doing housework. Rose, Brady, Yerkes, and Coles (2015) found in their study on how couples negotiate and rationalize gendered divisions in infant care that mothers are more willing to take on childcare responsibilities, letting fathers pick and choose the childcare tasks that they want to participate in. “Extensive research demonstrates that full-time working women still perform the majority of home life tasks” (Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012, p. 1452). Even if a male partner increases assistance in household work, women still assume primary responsibility for domestic tasks, putting a heavier burden on a women’s career compared to a man (Ericksen et al., 2008; Gallup, 2016). According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics in their American Time Use Survey, 85% of women and 67% of men spend time doing household work (Gallup, 2016). Steiner and Lachover (2016, p. 3) state that “neoliberal ideology” calls for mothers (not fathers) to put their children’s physical, psychological and emotional needs above all else. According to Landivar (2014), becoming a parent reduces working hours for women, increases working hours for men and creates a gap in the labor supply between men and women. Ely, Stone, and Ammerman (2014) found in their survey of Harvard Business School graduates that most of the men expected their careers to take precedence over their partners, while most of the women expected their careers to be just as important as their partner, but most wound up disappointed. In addition, 77% of respondents believe that “prioritizing family over work is the number one barrier to women’s career advancement” (p. 104). When faced with the prospect of staying at home to raise children or returning to work, women often feel compelled to leave the workforce (Aguero & Marks, 2008; Jones & Schneider, 2010).
Women continually face work-life conflict resulting from competition for time, resources, and emotional energy spent between work and non-work roles (Ladge, et al., 2012). Liss, Holly, and Rizzo (2013, p. 1112) claim that high standards for what it means to be a good mother can totally exhaust women and leave them depleted. Duberley and Carrigan (2012) acknowledge that women feel overwhelmed as they strive to balance working with the majority of household obligations. According to Gallup (2016), women are faced with a no-win situation as they are criticized for continuing to work after having children, or for staying home to care for children, or for not having children, or even for delaying motherhood to continue to work.

Because the standards for mothering are socially determined and have continued to change and become more intense over the past century, women feel pressured to stay home (Helford et al., 2012; Jones & Schneider, 2010; Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Ladge and Greenberg (2015) acknowledge that although women are advancing economically in the United States, the cultural norm that a mother’s primary role is at home continues to prevail. Steiner and Lachover (2016, p. 479) state that the image of the “Happy Housewife” that appeared on the covers of magazines in the 1950s and 60s has never really disappeared. Cohn et al. (2014), maintain that Americans think that having a mother at home is in the best interest of a child. Cohn et al. cite a Pew Research Center study where 60% of survey respondents said: “children are better off when a parent stays home to focus on the family, compared with 35% who said children are just as well off with working parents” (p. 10).

Cahusac and Kanji (2014) argue that motherhood equates to being more caring and less able to work, while fatherhood somehow denotes a better worker. Cadsby, Servatka, and Song (2012) attest that there are conflicting ideas in the workplace regarding the characteristics of a good employee versus a good mother. A good employee is dedicated and committed to their job;
while a mother is caring and committed first to her family, lessening her ability to be committed to her work (p. 285). Additionally, mothers face societal disapproval when taking on executive positions (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). Dillaway and Pare (2008) acknowledge that working women are often seen as being more concerned with their own success and having material goods, versus caring about the well-being of their children. Having to contend with judgments made by others, their own guilt for leaving their children and experts saying that maternal employment is linked to childhood obesity and attention-deficit disorders, working mothers struggle to live up to the expectations of being the primary caregiver, while working full time (Akass, 2012; Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Liss et al. (2013) report that women feel guilty due to their inability to live up to their own, as well as societal expectations of mothering. Steiner and Lachover (2016, p. 479) believe that the media continues to promote the “supermom” or “career mother” who juggles being a good mother and productive employee effortlessly. Dillaway and Pare (2008) contend that the media portrays the supermom as easily shifting from full-time career woman to intensive mother with no disadvantages to their work or for their children. Milkie, Pepin, and Denny (2016, p. 52) maintain that mothers carry a heavy burden when trying to live up to the “good mother” standard. Media representations encourage these stereotypes by portraying the homemaker mother as altruistic but superficial, and the working mother as confident and self-sufficient, but at the cost of her family (Milkie, Pepin, & Denny, 2016). Jones and Schneider (2010) believe that women often feel guilty for working rather than staying home with their children and that societal beliefs regarding motherhood only add to this stress. Liss et al. (2013) contend that women who believe in the ideal mother image portrayed by the media feel guilt and shame and may ultimately experience depression.
Additionally, a shift away from traditional ways of mothering toward creating a more structured, purposeful environment for children has significantly increased pressures on working mothers, furthering the decision to stay home (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012). This phenomenon, known as “intensive mothering”, defined as incredibly inflated standards of mothering, is affecting a woman’s decision to stay home (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 91). The ideology of intensive mothering is built around the ideal family—white, middle-class, heterosexual couple with children (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). It encourages mothers to stay at home, spend tremendous amounts of time focused on their children, become an expert in child development and push their children to achieve excellence in everything they do (Steiner & Lachover, 2016). In return, mothers should expect an emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive role, but with the payback of being able to raise their own children (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Feelings of guilt and failure are often prevalent for mothers who feel that they can not live up to the intensive mothering standards (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Liss, Holly, & Rizzo, 2013; Medina & Magnuson, 2009).

**Gendered roles.** Cahusac and Kanji (2014, p. 58) assert that “gendered cultures” within organizations also contribute to mothers exiting from their workplaces. Reasons for leaving include women stuck in cultures of “hegemonic masculinity” where there are “prescribed” roles for men and women, as well as working norms associated with these prescribed roles like the idea that a mother should be home to take care of her children, or that a woman who works is judged as being a non-active parent (p. 58). Murgia and Poggio (2013) point to Law 53 that was enacted in Italy in 2000 that extended the right to take parental leave for childcare to men. Ten years later, very few men had taken advantage of this benefit provided by the government. Murgia and Poggio attribute the resistance to the “organizational structures, cultures, and
practices” centered around hegemonic masculinity where males are the breadwinners, head households, work full time and have power and status (p. 417). Cahusac and Kanji (2014) declare that in these gendered organizational cultures, due to childcare responsibilities, women become excluded from after-work activities like golf or socializing where male camaraderie develops, making it even more difficult for working mothers. Cahusac and Kanji state that women face the “maternal wall” (p. 57), paying penalties just because they are mothers, leading many professional females to ask if it is even worth it, or would full-time motherhood be a better option? Ely et al. (2014) assert that most highly educated professional women do not leave their jobs after becoming mothers because they want to become stay-at-home mothers, but because it was a last resort due to being stigmatized for using work-life balance programs, going part time, being overlooked for promotions, or even being demoted.

**Decision made – staying home.** Unable to manage work and home, many women make the decision to stay home with their children. The decision to leave work can be difficult for working female professionals (Ericksen & et al., 2008). In most cases, the decision to leave the workforce comes after a woman anguishes over having the stigma of a stay-at-home mother, or possibly being too old to return to their former occupation (Stone & Lovejoy, 2012). Called the “Opt Out Revolution”, (coined from Lisa Belkin’s famous *New York Times* article in 1995) many college-educated, married, professional women are choosing to leave their careers to become full-time mothers (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012, p. 633). Lovejoy and Stone (2012) reference Hewlett et al.’s (2009) survey of highly qualified women (defined as those with an advanced degree or undergraduate degree with honors), age 25-55 where at least half have reported leaving the workforce at some point, usually for at least a year. These women are usually socioeconomically privileged, married to husbands who are also professionals and earn enough
to enable their spouse to quit their own well-paying careers. More than half of these more affluent women are aged 35-44, with about 19% under age 35 (as of 2011-2012 data), and 50% of them having a child age 5 or younger at home (p. 6). Milkie et al. (2016) contend that the media glorifies these elite women and suggests that it is a trend based on choice. Akass (2012, p. 139) states that as the option to have a career post-childbirth becomes improbable (due to unmanageable work-life balance), and quitting equates to defeat, women “desperate to feel empowered in the face of institutionalized discrimination, spout the rhetoric of choice.” Steiner and Lachover (2016) assert that many women quit because of an inflexible workplace and having a baby provides an easy excuse to leave. Stephens and Levine (2011) argue that making the choice to opt out allows a working mother to feel that she has made an individual choice when the reality is that workplace barriers have left her no options. Stephens and Levine state, “By concealing the barriers that women still face in the workplace, this choice framework may hinder women’s long-term advancement in society” (p. 1231). Jones and Schneider (2010, p. 1) maintain that only a small number of women actually opt out and that other challenges such as an inflexible workplace, caring for a child, demands of a partner’s job, masculine work environments, and discrimination, force women to exit from their careers. Orgad (2016) asserts that current portrayals of women choosing to leave the workforce hide the fact that they are highly influenced by their husband’s career, the anxieties related to childcare, and the stress associated with domestic duties.

Upon leaving the workforce, a woman needs to let go of her work-related identity and create a new sense of self (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Kanji and Cahusac (2015) contend that women struggle to redefine themselves as their work identity lessens over time. Orgad (2016) argues that women who leave the workforce to have children reported feeling
disregarded, losing confidence and no longer having a voice or opinion. Ronzio (2012, p. 78) posits that women opting out of the workplace may experience “powerlessness, disrespect, and economic vulnerability.” Lovejoy and Stone (2012) caution that women who exit the labor force and become economically dependent on their partner may face potential consequences in the event of a disruption to their partner’s earnings, or even divorce. Ironically, choosing to leave the workforce to care for children so that their husbands can continue to work, in turn, hurts a women’s long-term career, and ultimately contributes to higher pay and better jobs for men (Orgad, 2016).

**Opting back in – workforce re-entry.** When considering returning to work, reasons such as financial security, self-image, ambition, or environmental factors (like societal pressure to fill the hours while children are in school) contribute heavily to the decision (Ericksen et al., 2008; Orgad, 2016; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Zimmerman and Clark (2016) believe that a key reason women re-enter the workforce is to have a secondary income to support their families, as well as having a source of income for themselves that is not dependent on their spouse. Additionally, women opt back in for non-monetary benefits such as the intellectual stimulation and the increase in self-confidence that they get from work (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Others re-enter to due to a great job opportunity and to advance their careers (p. 623).

**Challenges to re-entry.** After staying at home for an extended timeframe, opting back into the workforce can be more difficult than many females anticipate (Ericksen et al., 2008; Greer, 2013; Helford et al., 2012; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Orgad, 2016; Ravindran & Baral, 2014; Ronzio, 2012). Ravindran and Baral (2014, p. 32) acknowledge that women who have taken time off find it difficult to regain career momentum. Nilsson and Ekberg (2013, p. 450) posit that the prospect of gaining new employment is limited for individuals attempting to return
to the labor market after a long-term leave or unemployment. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) argue that even though women are only out of the workforce for two to three years on average, most still face significant challenges when trying to re-enter. Orgad (2016, p. 483) states that after several years out of work, returning to the labor market and “re-inventing” oneself is very difficult. Lack of current skills, age, or amount of time out of work, may hinder the re-entry process (Greer, 2013; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Ronzio, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).

According to Greer (2013), time out of work equals a decline in job skills. Ronzio (2012, p. 81) states that younger job applicants are 40% more likely to receive a job interview compared with older candidates. Greer (2013) maintains that age discrimination may occur as employers look to hire younger, less expensive candidates. Zimmerman and Clark assert that during the hiring process, employers are more apt to hire non-mothers, start mothers at lower salaries, and see mothers as less promotable. Hoobler, Lemmon, and Wayne (2014) believe that hiring managers hold negative perceptions of women re-entering the workforce, assuming that because they have children they will not be committed or motivated. In addition, mothers returning to the workforce may feel penalized for taking a time out, often experiencing a cut in salary and/or status and limitations on advancement opportunities (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rahim, 2014; Ronzio, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). According to Rahim (2014), women who take time off from the labor market can expect a lower accumulation of experience that equates to an overall lower salary. Lovejoy and Stone (2012) contend that women can expect their earnings to fall by 30% if they leave the labor force for more than two years. Jones and Schneider (2010) found that higher earning females who take three or more years off, lose more than $1 million (or 37%) of income over the course of their career. Miller (2011, p. 1073) claims that “a year of delayed motherhood is found to increase career earnings by 9%, work experience by 6%, and
average wage rates by 3%.” Miller (2011, p. 1074) argues that the impact of motherhood on wage levels and wage growth is not as much of a male-female gender gap, but more of a “family (or mommy) gap” since the biggest differences occur between mothers and childless women. Akass (2012) states that there is a 10-15% gap in pay between mothers and women without children. Kanji (2011) maintains that women who continue to work full time after childbirth and women without children are paid higher salaries. Panteli (2012, p. 392) claims that women with an interrupted employment pattern have “less human capital” (training and education) which ultimately affects their career development. Zimmerman and Clark (p. 621) posit that women who have opted out due to children have “fewer advancement opportunities, smaller social networks, and great skill deterioration”, contributing to a decrease in organizational power.

According to Zimmerman and Clark (2016), one of the biggest factors affecting women initially when opting back in is a lack of confidence stemming from their own concerns over employability, age, skills, and absence of a peer network. Greer (2013) argues that professional women often become negative or depressed when trying to re-enter as employers do not have a high level of interest in women who have left their careers for an extended period. When looking to re-enter, carry the stigma of not being the “ideal worker” and in many organizations are viewed as less valuable, lower in status and less competent (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016, p. 624). In many cases, mothers wanting to return to work find that former salaries and status may no longer be available to them, leading to frustration or depression (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Zimmerman and Clark (2016) maintain that in addition to a lack of confidence, women become stressed, are ridden with guilt, and experience role conflict during the re-entry process.

**Searching for authenticity.** When contemplating returning to the workforce, many women decide to pursue a new career in more female-dominated professions such as teaching,
nursing, or social work (Lovejoy & Stone, 2013). Zimmerman and Clark (2016, p. 622) contend that early in their careers women look to be challenged, while mid-career they seek work-life balance, and after a work interruption like having children, continue to look for balance but also try to find authenticity and ways to fulfill “communal goals” in their work. According to Zimmerman and Clark, many women move into social service jobs because they believe they can find both authenticity and balance in these fields. These careers may have lower pay or offer lower status than their former occupations, but provide more flexibility, are less time consuming and leave more time for family (Greer, 2013; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Lovejoy & Stone, 2013; Ronzio, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Zimmerman and Clark claim that it is rare for women to return to the same job and same employer upon re-entry and that it is much more common for women to change fields. Frequently, this decision is based on a negative experience with their former job, a lack of confidence in the skills they once had (often heightened from rapid advances in technology), insecurity about their age, or having to adapt to their new constraints at home (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Lovejoy and Stone (2012) suggest that based on their experience home with their children, many former female professionals who were in male-dominated or mixed gender occupations, shift their career focus to more caring, community-oriented professions where they can give back. After staying at home with their children, many women find that their values, interests, and priorities have changed and seek to find occupations that align better to their new life as a mother (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Ronzio, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Time at home has allowed them to explore new values, identities and possible career paths (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).
Work-life balance. Conflicted with the decision to return to work, many mothers try to combine work and motherhood, looking for careers that could support a part-time status or one that centers on their shifting priorities (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Fitzenberger, Steffes, and Strittmatter (2016) acknowledge that female employees with long work interruptions, often try to change from full- time to part-time work. Lovejoy and Stone (2012) maintain that ideally women look for a job that allows equal time to be a mother and a professional. According to Felfe (2012), a non-standard work schedule is important to a female’s decision to return to work and factors into how long they stay out of work. Ladge et al. (2012) found in their study of pregnant professionals that women who saw more family-friendly resources in their workplace like flexible scheduling, often felt that they would have an easier time balancing their maternal and professional selves. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) assert that many women are willing to forego higher salaries for non-monetary benefits like flexibility or more meaningful work.

Wanting flexibility in work hours, or meaningful part-time work to accommodate the demands of child rearing, the need for work-life balance is growing (Eversole, Venneberg, & Crowder, 2012; Gilley, Waddell, Hall, Jackson, & Gilley, 2015). According to Gallup (2016), women want more flexibility at work and seek jobs that enable work-life balance. When a professional female returns to work after a leave, she may try to reduce her hours or seek more flexibility, only to find that the corporate world is not well designed to support family obligations (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Ashkanasy, Wilderom, and Peterson (2011) and Gilley, Waddell, Hall, Jackson, and Gilley (2015) note that the boundary between work and family has shifted significantly in recent decades due to more women in the workforce, technology advances, dual-career families, eldercare and childcare responsibilities, economic changes, more stressful home situations and increasing competition, creating a dramatic conflict between work and family life.
Gilley et al. (2015, p. 17) assert, “all generations of employees desire work-life balance.”

Eversole, Venneberg, and Crowder (2012) state that both older and younger employees make the decision to stay in or return to work often based on an organization’s flexible and part-time work policies. According to Wheatley (2012), work-life balance is the ability to successfully manage work and household responsibilities. Work is defined as paid or unpaid employment done on behalf of an employer, while life is non-work activities such as time spent with family or for leisure (p. 816). To ease the transition back to work and to encourage a better work-life balance, many companies do offer part-time opportunities, flex-time, job sharing, compressed hours, leave options, and telecommuting technologies (Aguero & Marks, 2008; Gilley et al., 2015; Helford et al., 2012; Wheatley, 2012).

The intent of work-life balance options offered by employers is to create a “win-win” situation for both the employee and the employer (Wheatley, 2012, p. 816). Gilley et al. (2015) argue that individuals experience a higher quality of life, increase their involvement in work, and are more satisfied if they spend more time in their life roles versus their work roles. In addition, employers see improved recruitment and retention rates, have lower absenteeism, improved customer service, better productivity, and higher employee engagement (Gilley et al., 2015; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Wheatley, 2012). Employees’ benefit from increased flexibility, reduced stress, less work-family conflicts, and higher job satisfaction (Eversole et al., 2012; Gilley et al., 2015; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Wheatley, 2012). Eversole et al. (2012) claim that the successful adoption of work-life programs can have a major impact on recruiting and retaining talent. Cahusac and Kanji (2014) maintain that if professional females perceive the organizational culture as supportive of work-life balance, they are more committed to the organization and will plan to return to work more quickly, change jobs less frequently and are
less likely to exit the labor market. Without work-life balance options, employees are more prone to work-life conflict, leading to increased turnover, stress and poor job performance (Gilley et al., 2015).

Although the intent of organizations may be good, many women feel they will be stigmatized as uncommitted if they ask for alternative work arrangements, encounter “flexibility bias”, or suffer negative career consequences (Stone & Hernandez, 2013, p. 236). Others simply feel pushed out because they cannot balance the demands of the workforce with the demands of child rearing (Jones & Schneider, 2010; Michaels, 2009). Steiner and Lachover (2016) argue that working mothers are expected to meet the dual norm of being an ideal worker and an ideal parent at the same time. The “ideal” worker, is defined as one that can work long hours, is totally dedicated to their job, and is committed to the organization (Stone and Hernandez, 2013, p. 236). In many organizations, simply putting in long hours demonstrates this commitment (Stone & Hernandez, 2013). According to Aguero and Marks (2008) and Stone and Hernandez (2013), the American workplace depends on a model of employee commitment that does not support today’s family. In many organizations, the male breadwinner, female stay-at-home mother stereotype continues to preside (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Stone and Hernandez, 2013).

Due to caregiving responsibilities, women are often less able than men to meet the criteria of the ideal worker (Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Workplace inflexibility, specifically hours and schedule, is a major cause of why so many women fail to return to the workforce (p. 239).

**Organizational culture.** Wheatley (2012) argues that organizational culture plays a significant role in furthering women’s fears of being stigmatized. According to Wheatley (2012), organizational culture, workgroup practices, and managerial influence can form barriers to the effectiveness of programs and policies that promote work-life balance. Eversole et al.
(2015) agree, claiming that workplace culture can impede the implementation of work-life balance programs. Mastracci (2013) states, “informal corporate culture is often more critical in shaping employee behavior than formal processes” (p. 9). According to Schein (2010, p. 21), culture is created when employees who work together share a long history, learning experiences and similar assumptions. Managers often support a culture where the more hours you put in equals more commitment (or higher productivity), coupled with the belief that you must be present in the workplace (Akass, 2012; Eversole et al., 2012; Wheatley, 2012). In senior roles with high incomes, it is assumed that employees will work long hours (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Landivar, 2014). Although they may be exempt from any additional compensation for these extra hours, these individuals may choose to work more hours to demonstrate their commitment to the organization in hopes of a promotion (Landivar, 2014). Particular organizational functions such as Sales or Marketing require attendance at social events in the evenings, in addition to an eight-hour work day creating even more demands on time (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). Landivar (2014) argues that in particular occupations like medicine, law or management, it is assumed that long hours will be worked and those who do not meet this criterion will be penalized.

Blair-Loy, Wharton, and Goodstein (2011) note that larger organizations with 500 or more employees are more apt to institute work-life policies than smaller firms. Mastracci (2013) maintains that organizations, where management places a high value on employee welfare and perceive a benefit from work-life balance policies, are the most likely to adopt family-friendly practices. Mastracci claims “wariness” on the part of supervisors and a distrustful organizational culture inhibit family-friendly workplace policies (p. 7). Gilley et al. (2015) posit that managers can greatly influence work-life balance programs through coaching, growth and promoting development opportunities, as well as creating a culture that supports both work and home life.
Gilley et al. argue that a manager’s actions and behaviors must reflect their support for work-life balance programs for an employee to feel like they can trust their supervisor and fully engage in work-life balance initiatives. Eversole et al. (2012) believe that employees can better achieve work-life balance if their manager shows support, is caring and understanding, and communicates adequately, acting more as a resource to help employees get their work done. Manager’s reasons for resisting flexible arrangements and other work-life balance programs include fear of losing control and power, as well as only supporting the traditional full-time model (Eversole et al., 2012).

Females who participate in work-life balance options offered from their employers tend to continue to engage in organizational norms such as not taking breaks and often carrying a full-time workload even though they are being paid for part-time work (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). A majority of working mother’s change their work style and become more intense with less time wasted going to lunch or socializing (p. 66). Additionally, women assume that compromises such as reduced opportunities for advancement and foregoing the associated financial benefits, or being downgraded, are part of participating in work-life balance programs (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Jones & Schneider, 2010; Wheatley, 2012). Mastracci (2013) contends that the benefits of family-friendly policies come with strings attached such as delayed career growth or the perception that the participant is not committed to their job. Many women feel marginalized for choosing to take a flexible work arrangement that over time can lead to unsatisfactory experiences at work, vulnerability to layoffs, and sacrifices at home; ultimately diminishing the intended benefits of the work-life balance option offered by the employer (Landivar, 2014; Wheatley, 2012). Kanji (2011) argues that many women change to jobs that they are overqualified for in exchange for part-time hours. Jones and Schneider (2010, p. 7) contend that
although women may take a lower-level or part-time job to accommodate their work-life balance, “it does not mean they like it.” Cahusac and Kanji (2014) posit that initially women are grateful for the ability to continue to work, but over time may feel that they are being taken advantage of.

Employers often struggle with the successful implementation and delivery of programs to support work-life balance (Wheatley, 2012). For example, flextime allows mothers the ability to drop their children off at school or daycare, but at the same time, many women find that by the time they arrive at work limited parking is available, which can cause undue stress (Wheatley, 2012). Cahusac and Kanji (2014) argue that without addressing the cultural assumptions and bias within organizations that do not support work-life balance, employers offering these programs will not be successful. Eversole et al. (2015) acknowledge that many organizations put formal work-life programs in place, but do not support the associated policies in the workplace. Apy and Ryckman (2014, p. 13) contend, “people are the most crucial resource, providing a corporation with experience, expertise, and talent.” To retain female talent and overcome these espoused beliefs and underlying assumptions that create barriers to work-life balance programs, organizations need to identify and respond to these beliefs and assumptions. Ashkanasy et. al. (2011) argue that simply putting policies in place is not enough. For family-friendly policies to actually work organizations must adopt values and assumptions that encourage employees to take advantage of these programs and not feel like their job is at risk if they do so (p. 284). Landivar (2014, p. 194) argues, “the lack of flexibility among employers, the long-hour demands of the job, the lack of cooperation from partners, the absence of work-family policies, the stigma for using available workplace benefits, and among some, the unaffordability of reducing hours” can all lead to the inability to successfully balance work and life for women with children.
Liminality

Unable to return to a former occupation, or to find a suitable job with a supportive culture can create emotional challenges for women looking to re-enter the workforce as job loss (which may not have been fully realized while out of work caring for children) is closely tied to one’s identity (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Ronzio, 2012). An identity is a positive meaning attached to self-worth which allows an individual to explain who he or she is to themselves as well as to others, ultimately reducing uncertainty (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Minscenko & Day, 2015). According to Ladge and Greenberg (2015), both identity and self-efficacy are changing as former professional women begin integrating the competing demands of work and motherhood when making the decision to re-enter. Because professionals spend so much time at work, much of their identity is centered on job satisfaction and accomplishments in the workplace (Minscenko & Day, 2015). Brown and Coupland (2015) posit that when it comes to identity, people are constantly searching for reassurance, but because identity is always evolving, self-doubt and emotional insecurity can arise, especially from other’s judgment. Self-doubt and vulnerability may emerge for women during the transitional period while searching for a job or new occupation or working to develop new job skills (Ronzio, 2012). Panteli (2012) maintains that a career break causes a knowledge gap and reduces a female’s confidence level. Ronzio (2012) argues that the magnitude of change during a job transition, coupled with unsuccessful attempts to find employment, may cause mental health issues including depression, anxiety and adjustment disorders (p. 78).

During their time at home, women are likely to hold on to their professional identities for as long as they can (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). After unsuccessfully finding a job, or being able to
return to their previous occupation, Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014, p. 67) believe that the realization of a work-related loss can trigger a disruption to one’s existing identity, leading one to enter a liminal or transitional state. Tansley and Tietze (2013) define liminality as a state of transition where an individual has separated from their former self but is not yet clear on what their future self may look like. Andrews and Roberts (2015, p. 8862) describe liminality as “passing through a transitional phase.” During the liminal period, an individual detaches himself or herself from their old sense of self and transitions to a new sense of self (Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly 2014). Ladge, Clair, and Greenberg (2012, p. 1450) state that during liminal periods, a person is conceived as "in between" two identities and that a life-changing event can be the stimulus for an identity transition. Beech (2011, p. 285) agrees, noting that in some research liminality is seen as having “before and after identities” that are usually initiated by some type of triggering event. Identity transformation occurs when an individual recognizes that things have changed (p. 285). Liminality may cause self-questioning and an individual may be shocked to realize that they are not the same as they used to be (p. 285). Kanji and Cahusac (2015) contend that a challenge to identity, coupled with change and ambiguity, can act as an impetus for sense-making.

According to Ladge and Greenberg (2015), when a woman experiences significant life changes, their sense of self may be questioned. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014) claim that processing the emotions associated with moving from a work-related identity to a new sense of self can lead to finding greater meaning in one’s life, a missed opportunity for growth, or turning inward and removing one’s self from the social world. Moving away from their former work-related identity, stay-at-home mothers can either seize the opportunity for growth and positive identity development or remain in a liminal phase, leading to depression and immobility (Conroy
& O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Beech (2011) states that negative psychological outcomes may occur due to the ambiguity individuals may feel during this liminal phase. Ambiguity and insecurity increase when identity is unstable (Alvesson, 2010). Ahlqvist, London, and Rosenthal (2013) claim that conflicting identities can cause self-doubt and increase the risk for physical disorders and depression. According to Beech (2011), liminality can be very disruptive to one’s sense of self. Ybema, Beech, and Ellis (2011) acknowledge that there is much research on identity processes, but little has been studied around the struggles when in-between or liminal. During this time, a loss of identity may occur, causing an individual to be disoriented or feel lost and want to end the transition (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). It may trigger emotional responses including sadness and embarrassment, or anger and guilt (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Additionally, incessant thinking about the loss may occur (p. 75). Andrews and Roberts (2015) add that the liminal phase can be connected with danger as one may lose a sense of self and identity. Additionally, one may uncover an undesirable identity (p. 133). Andrews and Roberts declare emotional upheaval and anxiety are to be expected as one passes through the liminal phases.

The liminal state can be broken down into three phases; separation (moving away from a former sense of self); transition (trying to resolve uncertainty around identity); and reincorporation (finding a new sense of self) (Beech, 2011; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Minscenko & Day, 2015; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). During the separation phase, as explained above, a triggering event may occur, disrupting one’s identity (Beech, 2011; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014, p. 70) maintain that “identity equilibrium” occurs as an individual begins to see a gap between their current identity and the identity they desire. The transition phase incorporates trying to make sense of one’s identity by testing or

Beech (2011) contends that liminality is essentially a time of reflection where self-questioning and self-change occurs, coupled with contemplating the views of others. Not only do individuals reflect on their former self, but they also create an image of their future self (Ybem et al., 2011). To resolve ambiguity around identity, one may develop narratives in an effort to create a sense of self (Alvesson, 2010; Beech 2008; Beech, 2011; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). These narratives or stories may entail where the old self has gone, along with what the new self is (Beech, 2008; Beech, 2011; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). Narratives allow an individual to balance the “identity equilibrium” experienced when there is a gap between current and desired identity (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014, p. 71). Beech (2011) argues that during the transition phase, identity work begins to occur as an individual attempts to validate a desired identity or their narrative with others. Identity work is defined as “…forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising” identity (Alvesson, 2010; Beech, 2008; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Minscenko & Day, 2015, p. 10; McInnes & Corlett, 2012; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Ybema et al. (2011) contend that liminality drives identity work as one tries to understand one’s self. Alvesson (2010) claims that identity work intensifies because of a change, transition, event, crisis or surprise and as it intensifies an individual continues to progress through the liminal phase. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010, p. 12) describe identity work as “acting and looking the part” in an effort to have the identity validated by others. When the social validation does not occur, individuals will suffer a threat to their identity and remain in the liminal state (p. 12). Brown and Coupland (2015, p. 1318) believe that people react to any threats or insecurity related to their identity through identity work, in particular, the
development of identity narratives that respond to the threat. Knights and Clarke (2014, p. 336) state that insecurities “render identity fragile and precarious.” Insecurity is tied to identity because it relies heavily on the judgments of others, which individuals can not control (Alvesson, 2010; Knights & Clarke, 2014).

Finally, the incorporation phase allows one to realize a new sense of self and to create a new identity (Beech, 2011). The liminal period has ended when one’s narrative has been validated socially and their “identity equilibrium” has been stabilized (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014, p. 80). Individuals unable to successfully validate narratives, or who continually think about their loss, may stay in a liminal phase for extended periods, leading to increased emotional setbacks including longer-term issues like depression (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014, p. 80). Ybema et al. (2011, p. 28) acknowledge “being a perpetual liminar constitutes both a problem and an opportunity.” Individuals who may experience long liminal periods, but are open to testing and exploring various narratives and seek feedback, undergo identity work (p. 82). Beech (2008) maintains that identity work requires understanding the meanings that come out of the new identity trials. Miscenko and Day (2015) argue that the creation of identity narratives is critical to identity work. It requires inner reflection and external interactions with society and helps an individual create a logical reason for their identity (p. 11). Having a positive attitude and allowing different versions of one’s self to be tried, the liminal period may end with the individual uncovering an identity that aligns with their new sense of self (p. 82). Brown and Coupland (2015) acknowledge that identity work can be positive because it drives goal-oriented action.

…it is the experience and processing of emotions during this liminal interval that determines whether identity loss will lead to greater authenticity and meaning, to missed growth opportunities, or, in the worst cases, to turning inward and losing connection with the social world (Miscenko and Day, 2015, p. 83).
McInnes and Corlett (2012) believe that identity work is ongoing and must be managed on a daily basis in our interactions with others. Brown and Coupland describe identity work as “messy, fluid, socially negotiated, to some extent individual, specific and nuanced” (p. 1329). Individuals who progress rapidly to incorporation may not experience the dramatic emotions or belabored meaning-making associated with longer liminal periods, decreasing their likelihood of identity work occurring (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014).

Upon making the decision to return to the workforce, mothers need to change to support a new professional identity (Ericksen et al., 2008). Her self-image (mental image a woman has of herself including physical features and self-identified characteristics including fat, skinny, intelligent) needs to reflect the professional status she desires (p. 159). Ladge and Greenberg (2015, p. 978) state that when returning to work after having children can be an especially vulnerable time for women as their sense of self may be changing… “mothering poses a threat to the woman’s established identity, creating a greater need to reconstruct her sense of self in light of these life changes.” Haynes (2008, p. 638) suggests that individuals are transformed by events (like motherhood) whether they like it or not, “not just economically or socially, but ontologically and phenomenologically.” To successfully manage their dual identities of mother and professional, women must integrate their professional and personal identities rather than letting them be in opposition to each other (p. 639). Ladge et. al. (2012, p. 1449) posit that little attention has been paid to cross-domain identity transitions, defined as “identity transitions that occur when an individual's established work identity must be adapted to be integrated with a change in a non-work identity.” For instance, a stay-at-home mother’s desire to return to work might provoke a work identity transition as she starts to see herself differently—as a professional again. The transition back to work also means that she must address the implications of
becoming a working professional on her current identity as a mother. How she sees herself as a female professional may influence how she sees herself as a mother (Ladge et al., 2012). Ladge et al. argue that as women transition back to work and are trying to define their role as a professional, tensions between professional and mother identities emerge. Many struggle with feelings of inadequacy and wonder whether they can be a good mother and a good employee at the same time (p. 2012). “To establish a strong sense of self, a woman must find a way to link the dual identities that comprise a working mother” (p. 2012). Ladge and Greenberg (2015) state that motherhood represents a transitional life event causing women to question how they will integrate their new identity as a mother with their previously established identities.

**Re-entry considerations**

When leaving the workforce, women are encouraged to develop a long-range plan for re-entry (Greer, 2013; Ronzio, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Zimmerman and Clark (2016, p. 626) argue that “from the day that women opt-out of the workplace, they should be planning for their reentry with a specific focus on maintaining and continuing to develop their skills.” The plan should also include how to maintain professional networks, keep job skills current, and considerations around re-entry options (Greer, 2013). According to Panteli (2012), women who demonstrate a commitment to new skills and qualifications while out of work are viewed more favorably by employers. In addition, realistic expectations regarding the amount of time it may take to receive a job offer, additional training, or skill development that might be needed, or the possibility of multiple rejections should be set (p. 77). Zimmerman and Clark encourage women to maintain their industry knowledge by staying active in professional organizations, volunteering, attending conferences or furthering their education (p. 626). Nilsson and Ekberg (2013) argue that individuals need to take responsibility for their own employability after being
out of the workforce for an extended period. Organizations are focused on cost-cutting, efficiency, and profitability and are now moving at a faster pace with shorter lead times, using knowledgeable and technology-savvy contract employees to support growth (p. 450). Employees wanting to return to work need to show life-long learning, flexibility, interpersonal skills, adaptability and continuous development of competencies (p. 450).

Greer (2013) contends that confidence and self-esteem are the biggest developmental needs for women who want to re-enter the workforce. Low confidence and self-esteem may hinder employability as much as a lack of skills (p. 48). Nilsson and Ekberg (2013, p. 456) found in their study on employability after a long-term leave that individuals who were confident in their personal characteristics and resources, had greater self-esteem and career confidence and had more success when re-entering… “the most important predictor of returning to the labour market was self-rated individual work ability.” By attending re-entry training programs that address these areas, as well as skill development, re-entry women have experienced increased confidence, better job search, and career planning capabilities, and have been able to create a support network (p. 48). Zimmerman and Clark (2016) also suggest that women be willing to change behaviors and mindsets and be flexible to potential new opportunities in the workplace.

Ronzio (2012) maintains that seeing a career counselor before re-entry can help with career transitions. Discussing corporate culture and policies, expectations of partners, and male versus female roles, in advance of going back to work, may help facilitate the re-entry process (p. 79). Gaining new skills or education, confronting self-esteem issues, and possibly being ready to accept a reduction in former salary are also areas that can be addressed in advance (p. 82). Counselors can also help deal with potential identity issues by understanding how a client may have dealt with transitional periods in the past (p. 77). Ericksen et al. (2008) encourage
holistic counseling (mind, body, spirit) since returning to work can have a significant impact on self-image and confidence. Additionally, Ericksen et al. endorse finding peer support when re-entering the workforce as many women experience similar challenges and feelings during the transition from home to work. Because current family and home demands generally do not change when a mother re-enters the workforce, support from family and friends is necessary (p. 159). Greer (2013) states that women returners can be highly influenced by personal, financial and family constraints, which may affect their motivation to re-enter. To maintain motivation, Ronzio suggests changing one’s mindset from being anxious or apprehensive, to viewing re-entry as a growth opportunity, can help decrease uncertainty. Ericksen et al. agree and promote taking the time to reflect on oneself in relation to career, family, and others in terms of growth.

Another source of re-entry support can be found by looking for employers such as consulting firms, who have specific programs targeted at re-entrants (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Taking assertiveness training prior to re-entry can also help female professionals (Ericksen et al., 2008). Ericksen et al. (2008) promote using career assessment tools, finding a mentor, and focusing on self-care to facilitate the re-entry process. Finding a company that is a good fit for women re-entering is critical. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) encourage women opting back in who are looking for balance and authenticity to find an organization whose culture and management support a family-friendly environment and policies. Ladge and Greenberg (2015, p. 993) found in their study on re-socialization of mothers who left the workforce to have children that organizational culture and support significantly influences the “degree of identity and efficacy uncertainty women experience” when returning. Fitzenberger et al. (2016, p. 805) posit, “firm culture is more important than the existence of formal family friendly policies” for most women returning to work.
Summary and conclusion

In summary, from the literature, it is clear that organizational culture, work-life balance, societal pressures, spousal and family support, coupled with childcare options, all influence a professional female’s decision at each stage of her journey from deciding to leave their careers, to caring for children full time, to workforce re-entry. Each stage also has implications on a woman’s identity as she shifts from a work-related identity to an identity associated with being a full-time mother, to one that the literature has yet to define, before coming full circle back to a professional identity. Duberley and Carrigan (2012, p. 642) state, “Many women face competing and often contradictory societal expectations about career success and motherhood as they construct their identities.” Multiple factors can influence identity and may introduce a transitional or liminal period as a woman tries to transition back into the workplace after leaving for an extended period to care for her children. Experiencing an identity transition can cause confusion and stress for a female contemplating a return to work (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Ladge et al. (2012) found in their study of pregnant professionals, those who could visualize their future selves managing family and work seemed more prepared to start to actualize changes well before transitioning back to work. Those who could visualize were more likely either to be caught in a state of inaction, delaying any identity change, or reject the idea that any change would occur at all (Ladge et al., 2012).

This literature review has uncovered the need to further explore the experiences of former female professionals who are seeking workforce re-entry. Existing research has examined why working women leave the workforce (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Landivar, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Mastracci, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Wheatley, 2012; Williams et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016), as well as the re-entry process, (Cahusac &
Kanji, 2014; Greer, 2013; Helford et al., 2012; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rahim, 2014; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Within this research, emotional and psychological implications have been identified for former female professionals who want to return to work, but little in-depth study has occurred to better understand this phenomenon. Additional research on the experiences former female professionals have as they transition from staying at home to workforce re-entry would add to the limited research currently available. Thus, the intent of this research was to garner a better understanding of the experiences of stay-at-home mothers who previously held professional positions as they pursue workforce re-entry. Each strand of literature reviewed points to challenges and struggles that women may encounter in the workplace once they become a mother. Providing further study that can benefit women and help to create more equal, diversified, and family-friendly workplaces is clearly needed. Specifically, understanding the transition from staying at home to re-entering the workforce could help put the emotional and psychological implications that have been identified in current research into context and allow women to be better emotionally and physically prepared during this transitional period. At the same time, employers could also benefit from additional research on the experiences of women seeking to re-enter the workforce, as they struggle with an aging workforce and the need to fill jobs. Understanding what women encounter emotionally could assist organizations and human resource professionals in creating programs and policies that address the needs of women who have left the workforce and are trying to re-enter.

Policymakers could utilize this research as they develop future family-friendly policies, and family members and friends of women seeking re-entry could provide increased and more relevant support during the re-entry process.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This study explored workforce re-entry for stay-at-home mothers. The intent of this chapter was to explain the research methodology and design proposed for the study, as well as the research tradition employed. Additionally, a synopsis of the researcher’s positionality and an overview of participants and recruitment is discussed along with data collection, storage, and analysis procedures. The chapter closes with a summary of how the researcher plans to ensure trustworthiness and validity for the study.

Methodology

The goal of this study was to answer the following question: How do professional working mothers who choose to leave their career to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in? To best explore this topic, a constructivist paradigm was applied to guide the research. Ponterotto (2005) states that constructivism calls for an understanding of the lived experiences from those experiencing the phenomena. Constructivism encourages individuals to tell their own stories about a particular phenomenon and for the researcher to look for patterns of meaning while suspending judgment (Ponterotto, 2005). For this particular study, the researcher tried to understand how participants make meaning out of the phenomena of the transitional state from stay-at-home mother, back to working professional. To that end, using a constructivist framework enabled participants to share their varying perspectives. In addition to a constructivist paradigm, the theory of liminality acted as the theoretical framework or lens for this study. Liminality is defined as a state of transition where an individual has separated from their former self but is not yet clear on what their future self may look like (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Anfara and Mertz (2014) maintain that
theoretical frameworks help to explain the data discovered during the research project. Merriam (1998) argues that researchers would be lost without a theoretical framework to guide them.

**Positionality.** According to Banks (2006, p. 64), “culture, context and the positionality of researchers influence their assumptions, questions, findings and interpretation.” Understanding, acknowledging, and being constantly aware of my own positionality was critical as a phenomenological study aims to show how individuals make meaning of a particular experience and describes the commonalities of the experience among those studied (Meisenbach, 2010). As a white, married, highly educated, professional, working mother of three daughters, with a spouse whose income could allow me to leave my career, interjecting my own experiences may have biased my results, and ultimately diminished the validity of this research.

As a working mother, I have personally struggled with balancing the demands of a career and family obligations. On several occasions throughout the past 15 years, I have contemplated leaving the workforce to stay home full time to care for my children. The guilt of leaving them in day care, traveling for work, missing key developmental milestones, and not being able to attend school functions, causes me to question if working full time is worth the many things I have had to miss or give up. I believe that any working mother who has the economic means to leave the workforce may face this same dilemma. Many upper-middle-class, college-educated, female professionals make the choice to leave the workforce, especially when their first child is born. I have seen several of my professional friends (who could afford daycare) say goodbye to careers as lawyers, teachers, accountants, pharmacists and other occupations to care for their children full time. As the years have gone by, each has been very happy with their decision to leave their careers, but they are currently facing a new decision—what do I do now that the children are in school and no longer need me home full time? What I am seeing causes me great
concern—well educated, once professional, career-oriented women, left with minimal options to re-enter the workforce. For most, their old jobs are gone and looking for a new job in their old occupation has been unsuccessful as too many years have passed and their skills and qualifications are outdated. No longer needing to be home as a full-time mother, not being recognized for their former professional status by employers, a question of who they are, and what their identity is, has become front and center for these former female professionals.

I know that I have the predisposition to be biased. I have several beliefs, biases, and opinions about female professionals who leave the workforce to raise children and the implications on their identities when trying to return to the same job or occupation. To begin, I have seen several of my friends struggle to find a purpose once their children become school age. The children do not need the support they once did and are often not at home as much as they used to be. I believe that when this starts to happen, many former female professionals begin to think about going back to work. As they try to pursue that option and find that the job they desire may no longer be available, they begin to question what their purpose is in life and who they are now that they do not need to mother full time. Unable to re-create their former work-related identity, I have seen females become depressed, gain weight and isolate themselves from friends and family. I believe they lose confidence and feel somewhat lost. I also believe that leaving the workforce and no longer staying connected or keeping a foot in the door may be a mistake. I have even been made aware that use of the term stay-at-home mother seems to imply that I believe that women who leave their careers no longer work, when in fact staying at home requires them to work every day to care for their families and households.

As Machi and McEvoy (2012) point out, the personal bias I am certain to have could be both a strength and weakness. I am passionate about the subject matter, which drives my desire
to learn more and explore the subject at a deeper level. On the other hand, I may jump to premature conclusions that may have encumbered my research efforts (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). For example, my perception of the world and the particular place I hold (Parsons, 2008) may have created prejudices around my research. As Machi and McEvoy note, “a researcher hobbled by unchecked bias can only produce biased findings” (p. 19).

As I stated earlier, having seen colleagues and friends experience this identity loss when trying to re-enter the workforce, I feel as though I have already concluded that there is an impact on female identity and that many women are unsuccessful when trying to re-enter the workforce at the same level as when they left. Additionally, I am a mother of three children and have personally faced the decision to stay home. Because I did not leave my career, I may feel that not leaving a career to care for children is a better decision. According to Banks (2006), “culture, context and the positionality of researchers influence their assumptions, questions, findings and interpretation.” Acknowledging my bias was a first step toward being a better researcher. To overcome my personal bias, opinions, and feelings, it was critical for me to control my biases to preserve my neutral position as I moved forward in my research. Briscoe (2005) cautions that researchers who try to characterize what others have experienced should understand that their representations would always include their own positionality. By knowing myself and the biases I may have, I also reviewed my research for these specific biases. As Briscoe states, “Dimensions of positionality include one’s demographic positioning within society, one’s ideological positioning, and how one discursively positions the other and oneself” (p. 31-32). Knowing myself on all of these dimensions helped me be more honest about my opinions and biases. As Machi and McEvoy (2012) suggest, identifying and handling this bias head on was the first step I needed to take.
One other area of potential bias for me was my current occupation as a consultant. It was critical that as I interviewed my participants that I did not try to problem solve or become involved in their current situation. I had to separate my role as a researcher versus my occupation as a consultant.

In an effort to answer the research question noted above, an empirical qualitative research approach was used. Ponterotto (2005) contends that qualitative research looks at how individuals describe a phenomenon, event or experience in their own words. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) state that qualitative research focuses on meaning, how individuals make sense of their world, how people experience events, and what meanings they make (p. 361). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013, p. 11) argue that because qualitative research focuses on people’s lived experiences, it allows meanings to be attached to events, processes, and structures in people’s lives, and what this might mean in the greater schema of the world. Therefore, conducting a qualitative study aligned best with the purpose of this research, which was to understand the experiences of stay-at-home mothers and their attempt(s) to re-enter the workforce. A quantitative method would have required control, and/or the analysis of the relationships between the variables, which would have been difficult with this particular topic as the variables are unknown (Ponterotto, 2005). In addition, based on the literature reviewed, it seemed that this research had yet to be explored. According to Miles et al. (2013), qualitative research has been promoted as an excellent tool for learning about a new topic.

**Research Tradition**

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).** An IPA approach was used, allowing the researcher to study the experiences of the participants. “Using rigorous, critical, and systematic methods, phenomologic studies create a plethora of rich data that facilitate a better
understanding of the participants’ lived experience” (Sharif Nia, Ebadi, Lehto, & Peyrovi, 2015, p. 282). Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011, p. 231) argue that answers to research questions may have “multiple constructed social realities” and can best be answered by understanding people’s experiences, therefore an IPA study with semi-structured interviews best fit this research. Larkin, Walts, and Clifton (2006) maintain that the goal of IPA is to go further than just a description of the experience, but also to understand and interpret what it means for the participant in light of the context in which they describe the experience.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology, the study or science of phenomena, is not only a research method used in social and behavioral sciences but also a philosophy that challenged the origin and nature of truth (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Meisenbach (2010) argues that the goal of phenomenology is not to explain or control, but to bring an understanding of the experience. A phenomenological study aims to show how individuals make meaning of a particular experience and describe the commonalities of the experience among those studied (Meisenbach, 2010). Phenomenology encourages an individual to reflect on an experience and to interpret it verbally, allowing the researcher to get insight on the phenomenon experienced (Bevan, 2014).

The increased interest or focus on phenomenology can be traced back to the start of the 20th century in Germany with the work of academic philosophers Franz Brentano (1838-1917), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a positivist, along with his assistant Eugene Fink, followed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), an interpretivist, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) a post-positivist (Larkin, Walts, & Clifton, 2006). Later authors include Gadamer, Arendt, Levinas, Sartre, Derrida, Van Maanen, Moustakas, and Crotty. Husserl, while studying the structure of experience, and wanting to differentiate between what was real and non-real, looked to phenomenology as a way to get answers (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl advocated descriptive
phenomenology and promoted the idea of phenomenological reduction or Epoche, arguing that the use of Epoche, or bracketing, allowed an unbiased study, free from judgment or prejudice (Moustakas, 1994). In opposition to Husserl, Heidegger disagreed with Husserl’s use of reduction and instead looked to hermeneutics as his preferred research method, maintaining the ontological view that a lived experience should be an interpretive process (Larkin et al., 2006). Heidegger strongly rejected the division between subject and object, using the term *dasein*, or being there, and claimed that any findings were due to the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Larkin et al., 2006).

**IPA.** In line with Heidegger’s beliefs, the researcher designed an interpretative phenomenological study. According to Larkin et al. (2006, p. 104), the objective of the IPA researcher is, in conjunction with the participant, to understand and describe the participant’s world using interpretative analysis which looks at the participant’s description in the scope of the wider, social and cultural context. Larkin et al. (2006, p. 110) state “in choosing IPA for a research project, we commit ourselves to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the means by which our participant’s make sense of their experiences.” Another major underpinning of IPA is the focus on hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Specifically, IPA relies on the double hermeneutic (or dual interpretation process) where initially participants make meaning of their world and then the researcher works to translate that meaning or make sense of how the participant is making meaning by asking more questions to get a more comprehensive interpretation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) maintain that the double hermeneutic can be seen as the “researcher trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (p. 3). Ultimately, the intent for the researcher was to garner further insight into the phenomena of the
liminal period for re-entry women by listening to the descriptions of the participants who had engaged with the phenomena and worked to make sense of their accounts. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012, p. 362) contend that IPA attempts to “understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of a subject (although recognizing that this is never completely possible) and through interpretive activity make meaning by translating it.”

**Research method**

**Participants.** Qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding the human experience. Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, and Zichi-Cohen (2016, p. 1189) suggest “purposively selecting participants with the cognitive capacity and ability to be self-reflective and express oneself verbally in interviews” as the goal of the phenomenologist is to understand lived experiences. According to Larkin et al. (2006), IPA requires detailed analysis of verbatim descriptions from a small number of participants. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012, p. 364) claim that there is “no rule” as to the number of participants, but an IPA study does benefit from a smaller, homogenous, purposively selected sample as IPA seeks to gather a more in-depth analysis of a phenomenon. Sanders (1982) states the ideal number will vary according to the research topic. In alignment with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, Pietkiewicz and Smith recommend a smaller number of participants so that the data is not overwhelming but similarities and differences can still be identified. Smith et al. (2009) argue that three to 16 participants is a good guideline for IPA and suggest that undergraduate projects stick to the lower end of that guideline, while larger projects may move more to the higher end. For this study, participants included six professional, married women with children. The researcher strove to recruit a diverse sample but was limited by a sample that was somewhat homogeneous demographically, culturally and socioeconomically. Specifically, the women had the following criteria:
1. Upper middle class, college-educated, married (to men), mothers, who work(ed) in professional managerial or executive positions, and can afford daycare for their child(ren)

2. Seeking a job after having been out of the workforce for approximately five or more years

3. Worked full-time for at least five years with an annual income of over $85,000 before leaving the workforce

4. Between the ages of 30 and 50

5. Have at least one child under the age of 18

6. Geographically located in the United States

**Recruitment and access.** Once approved for this research proposal from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board, the researcher began recruitment. When recruiting participants, purposeful sampling [as suggested above by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012)] was used, as it helped the researcher to identify and select women who had experienced leaving the workforce to stay at home with children and attempted to return to work. The participants were selected because they were willing and able to partake in a phenomenological conversational-style interview about their lived experiences (Willis et al., 2016). A snowball selection strategy (Meisenbach, 2010) was used and included developing a list of potential participants and recruiting through personal contacts, alumnae Facebook networks, and the researcher’s LinkedIn network (see Appendices A, B, C). Rubin and Rubin (2012) state that by using shared social networks researchers can access knowledgeable participants. Individuals responding were encouraged to forward contact information regarding participation in the interviews to others as a way to find additional participants. To recruit participants, the researcher took the following steps:
1. An initial recruitment email (see Appendix A) was sent to the researcher’s personal contacts. The email described the study, indicating that participation was voluntary, and that involvement would remain confidential, and requested that anyone interested in participating or getting more information contact the researcher directly. The letter also asked contacts to forward the email to anyone else they knew who may have fit the criteria and were interested.

2. A Facebook and LinkedIn posting (see Appendix B) that provided a short overview of the research study (again indicating that it was voluntary, and that involvement would remain confidential) along with a request for participation or more information and the researcher’s contact information was shared on the researcher’s LinkedIn account. The post also asked contacts to share the post with anyone else they knew who fit the criteria and was interested.

3. The researcher then evaluated if additional recruitment needed to occur pending the initial response rate. The researcher then shared a request for participants (see Appendix C) on her personal Facebook page, as well as with her University of Hartford and University of Connecticut alumnae Facebook networks.

4. A personalized response (see Appendix D) incorporating additional details of the study was then sent within 24 hours to anyone who had expressed interest in participating in the study and who fit the selection criteria. The response included a consent form (see appendix E) as well as a request for possible times that the participant was available for their first interview.
5. A personalized response (see Appendix F) thanking anyone who has expressed interest in participating in the study but did not fit the selection criteria was sent within 24 hours of receipt of the initial email.

The researcher did not provide any type of incentive for participation in the study.

**Data collection.** When conducting an IPA study, data is most often collected through semi-structured oral interviews that are recorded and transcribed, but can also be mined from participant observations, or a document and artifact study (often is used in conjunction with interviews (Sanders, 1982). For this study, semi-structured, open-ended, recorded, phone interviews were conducted. Bevan (2014) states that using semi-structured interviews is consistent with IPA, while Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) acknowledge that semi-structured, one-on-one interviews allow for a real-time conversation and the flexibility to add or change questions. During the individual audiotaped interviews, the researcher focused on gathering detailed descriptions of the women’s lived experience and conversing with the participants to ensure the meaning of what they were saying was clear.

For this study, a three-part interview process was used. Seidman (2013) recommends a three-part interview process with an introductory interview to get to know the participant and establish a relationship, a second interview to further explore experiences, and a third interview to understand how the participant has made meaning out of the experience. The three-part interview discouraged inaccurate data analysis based on one interaction with the participant whose recollection of the experience may have been impacted by their current mood or emotional state (Seidman, 2013). Seidman contends that an interview must start by providing a point of context in which the phenomenon occurred or is occurring. Bevan (2014) claims that contextual questions allow an individual to reflect on the experience and provide a narrative of
what they experienced. Bevan also states that the researcher should keep the focus of the interview on the phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) state that IPA requires that the researcher reflectively engages with the participant’s account of the experience.

It is important to note that the researcher kept a journal throughout the entire study to capture notes, observations, thoughts, feelings, assumptions, bias, ideas, issues, additional questions, possible themes, and patterns – or anything that helped facilitate data analysis. In addition, based on Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) recommendations, the researcher also used an interview guide (see Appendix G) to steer participants to a full account of the experience being studied. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) also suggest using an interview guide with prompts and advocate interviews last at least one hour. Questions were focused on the background of the participant, what led them to leave their careers, what their time at home was like, and their experiences when deciding to return to work. Using the interview guide (see Appendix G), the researcher conducted a pilot test once she attained permission from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board. The purpose of the pilot test was to evaluate the interview guide. Modifications to the interview guide were made following the pilot test as needed prior to screening interviews. The data gathered in the pilot test was not included in the general study.

As a first step, the researcher set up phone screening interviews with each participant. Following the phone screening, the researcher set up phone interviews with participants that fit the required selection criteria. Participants chose the time and location. To begin the interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose, potential benefits and/or risks, voluntary nature, how results will be used, and confidentiality of the study. The researcher also explained that the interview was part of a series of two to three interviews, and that each interview would be recorded, and that the participant could stop the interview at any time if they were not comfortable. The
researcher also explained that if all key topics were covered within the first two interviews, a third interview would not be necessary. The researcher then asked for consent (see Appendix E) to conduct and record the interview. During the interview, the researcher took notes and referred to the interview guide (see Appendix G). According to Seidman (2013), taking notes can help facilitate active listening on behalf of the researcher. The initial screening focused on introductions, intent of the research, and established rapport with the interviewee, as well as explored the participant’s experiences and setting up the second and third interviews (if required). Moustakas (1994) suggests that the interviewer is responsible making participants feel comfortable and creating an environment that encourages responses that are honest and detailed. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012, p. 365) propose having a “warm-up” discussion to help the participant feel less tense. The goal of the second interview was to understand how the participants made meaning, while the third interview was only used if further clarification from the participant was required (Seidman, 2013).

Upon completion of each interview, the researcher reviewed all notes and sent the recordings (using only pseudonyms) to a professional transcription service. The researcher did not have the service transcribe filler words like um or hmmm, or when inaudible text was present even though Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest including pauses, mannerisms, and grammatical errors if a precise transcript is required. Once the transcripts were received and analyzed, recordings were destroyed, and the researcher followed the data storage protocols summarized below.

**Data storage.** Miles et al. (2014) recommend creating a working file for each participant with all related data. The researcher created an electronic file for each interviewee, using a pseudonym in all correspondence. All data for the study including; field notes, memos, audio
recordings, journal, transcripts, and data analysis materials were in electronic files on the researcher’s password-protected computer, as well as backed up on an external hard drive that was kept in a locked cabinet. All MAXQDA software files were password protected and backed up to the external hard drive in preparation for data analysis. Only the researcher had access to the electronic data or the cabinet. All files were destroyed upon completion of the researcher’s study.

**Data analysis.** To analyze the data, the researcher used the data analysis approach for interpretative phenomenological studies outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The goal of the analysis was to get a comprehensive description of the experience of the phenomenon. The analysis included: (1) Reading and rereading the transcripts and making notes; 2) Reviewing the notes to look for emergent themes; and 3) Looking for relationships and clustering themes. Smith et al. maintain that IPA is an iterative process between the ongoing analysis and the transcript. Specifically, the researcher utilized the following detailed steps for data analysis:

**Phase I.** The first phase of data analysis for this IPA study entailed repeated listening and reading of the transcripts as new insights evolved from each reading (Abalos et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2009). During this phase, the researcher made annotated memos about her observations and reflections, as well as reviewed and re-read each transcript and recording in order to gain a clear picture of the overall interview (Abalos et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) suggest noting distinctive phrases and emotional responses. In addition, after the transcription was completed, the researcher emailed the transcription to each participant for approval. Once approval was attained, the researcher began the coding process.

**Phase II.** In phase II, the researcher worked to transform her notes into emerging themes. Smith et al. (2009) recommend that the researcher works with her notes at this point
rather than the transcript. The goal for the researcher is to refer to her notes and create short phrases at a higher level that encompass a psychological concept, but also reflects the participant’s description (Smith et al, 2009). During this process, the double hermeneutic comes into play as the researcher has already annotated the transcript in its entirety and now is interpreting each part (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This process was continued through the entire transcript.

**Phase III.** Once data is collected, transcribed and organized in a phenomenological study, it is ready for thematic analysis (Saldana, 2016). Theming, according to Saldana (2016), is an “outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (p. 198). Saldana argues that the goal is to streamline the themes into an overall discovery that can be presented in the findings. In this phase, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that the researcher looks for connections between emerging themes, then grouping similar themes together into a cluster, and then assigning a descriptive label. Smith et al. note that themes will reflect both the participant’s words and thoughts as well as the researcher’s interpretation so that both description and interpretation come together (p. 92). During this phase, the researcher used MAXQDA software to cluster the themes (and possible sub-themes) and assigned labels. The software also enabled links to the transcript so that the researcher could go back to the transcript at any time to check against what the participant originally said. Abalos, Rivera, Locsin, and Schoenhofer (2016) argue that it is critical for the researcher to consider the context in which the phenomenon is described, therefore reviewing the preceding and following statements of the original transcript can help. The researcher created a chart of significant statements and the meanings formulated to help with the data analysis. Smith et al. acknowledge that certain themes may be dropped at this point if they no longer fit. Smith et al. suggest, “…emergent themes should feel like they
have captured and reflect an understanding” (p. 92). Validating findings at this point is recommended (Abalos et. al., 2016; Shosha, 2012).

**Phase IV.** In this phase of data analysis, the researcher wrote narrative descriptions for each participant’s account, focusing on the themes identified and using extracts from the interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) encourage researchers to finish each narrative before moving to the next narrative in an effort not to bias the other narratives. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) maintain that using extracts from the interviews allows the voice of the participants to be heard and demonstrates the relevance of the interpretations. From the individual narratives, the researcher began to look for similarities and differences across all of the narratives.

**Phase V.** In the final stage of analysis, the researcher outlined the meanings of the participants’ experience, using the overall themes found in the earlier analysis, being careful to clarify what the participant said versus the researcher’s interpretation, and using verbatim extracts from the transcripts for support (Smith et al., 2009).

**Trustworthiness.** In line with IPA, steps were taken to ensure the validity of the study. Shosha (2012) argues that qualitative research has to establish trustworthiness in providing “rigor and strength to the study validity and reliability in all stages including data collection, data analysis and descriptions” (p. 41). To ensure trustworthiness, the research followed Smith et al.’s (2009, pp. 180-) high-level principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research including: 1) *sensitivity to context* especially during the interview process; 2) *commitment and rigor* to the interview process and thoroughness of the study; 3) *transparency and coherence* through the write up of the stages of the research and the ability to put one’s self in the “shoes of the reader”; and 4) *impact and importance* …does the research suggest something useful,
interesting or important? More specifically, the researcher conducted member checking (asking one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account) throughout the entire process from data collection to analysis to interpretations (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). Moustakas (1994, pp. 33-34) claims that “in heuristic investigations, verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other material, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy.” Smith et al. also suggest an “independent audit” as a way of ensuring validity in a study. According to Smith et al., the goal of an “independent audit” is to create a paper trail that would allow anyone to look at initial notes, the proposal, the interview schedule, audio tapes, transcripts, tables of themes, reports and the final summary and see that each aligns to the research argument (p. 182).

**Protection of human subjects.** The researcher was aware that she was responsible for the protection of participants in human subjects research. As part of her ethical responsibilities, she was responsible for protecting the participants from undue risk, either directly or indirectly, while conducting research at Northeastern University. It was made clear to participants, orally and in writing, that they had the right and opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time. This consent form is included as Appendix E. The researcher was committed to following all research procedures in accordance with ethical principles of research at Northeastern.

In accordance with Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board policy on the protection of human subjects, no activity involving human subjects can be undertaken until reviewed and approved by the IRB. Therefore, the researcher submitted a proposal to the Office of Human Subject Research Protection for IRB review and approval and did not begin any recruitment or interaction with participants until approval was granted. As part of the process, the
researcher completed Northeastern University’s training on the protection of human subjects and the ethical principles of research for all human subject research.
Chapter 4: Findings

This study explored workforce re-entry for professional women who left their careers to care for their children. The purpose was to answer the following question: How do professional working mothers who choose to stay home to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in?

This study sought to understand how participants make meaning out of the phenomena of the transitional state from stay-at-home mother, back to working professional using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). “Using rigorous, critical, and systematic methods, phenomenologic studies create a plethora of rich data that facilitate a better understanding of the participants’ lived experience” (Sharif Nia, Ebadi, Lehto, & Peyrovi, 2015, p. 282). Six women were identified to participate in the study. Each was interviewed over the phone for approximately one hour, answering a series of semi-structured questions. Although liminality, defined as a state of transition where an individual has separated from their former self but is not yet clear on what their future self may look like (Tansley & Tietze, 2013), was used as the theoretical framework for this study, asking semi-structured questions allowed the participants to talk about their individual experiences. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) acknowledge that semi-structured, one-on-one interviews allow for a real-time conversation.

This chapter provides an overview of each participant and her experiences, as well as the superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged.

Participant overviews

The six participants interviewed for this study all met the study criteria. Additionally, they shared several commonalities in that they were all married to successful professional men, allowing them to stay home from a financial perspective; each was very career driven; and all of them worked in male-dominated industries prior to leaving. Interestingly, all of the participants
could have afforded daycare prior to staying home, but still chose to leave the workforce.

Geographically the six participants were from four states and all reported having a career and then choosing to stay home for a period of time to raise their children. Each participant either returned to work or were currently trying to re-enter the workforce. Table 1 lists each participant, geographic location, previous career, number of children, and whether or not they are currently employed. Overall, the participant sample was somewhat homogeneous and may have lacked the diversity that the researcher had originally intended, potentially limiting the study.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Former Career</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Ages of Children</th>
<th>Currently Working</th>
<th>Went back to work after first child</th>
<th>Years out of Work</th>
<th>Intended go back full time</th>
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<td>Banking</td>
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<td>14 &amp; 11</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>13 yrs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Banking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26, 25, 18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>+15 yrs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JC</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Advertising &amp; Sales</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8 &amp; 6</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>8 yrs</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mel B.</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10 &amp; 13</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>5 yrs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>17 &amp; 14</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>12 yrs</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19 &amp; 17</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12 yrs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kaylee

Kaylee is a married mother of two children from North Carolina. Her husband currently works in financial services and she holds an economics and accounting degree. She worked in banking until leaving her demanding career when her second child was born due to a heavy travel schedule and a lot of stress. She did not return to full-time work for 13 years, just four days prior to her interview.
Kaylee held some part-time jobs over the 13 years that she was home but did not consider full-time work until her oldest child was in high school. Prior to finding her current job, Kaylee was nervous and admitted that she probably “started maybe a step back,” but is hoping to maintain balance with work and family.

JC

JC is a married mother of two from Indiana who had a career in advertising and sales for 10 years. She has a degree in marketing and decided to leave the workforce when her second child was born “because it was too much.” JC’s husband currently works as a financial planner.

After staying out of the workforce for approximately eight years, JC recently decided to return to work since both of her children are in school. She has yet to find a position and remarked that finding a job has “been a little slower than I thought it would be.” Additionally, JC was the only research participant that was looking for a part-time role at this time, as all of the other participants either went back to a full-time role or were looking for such.

Mel B.

Mel is a middle-aged, married mother of three children residing in Indiana. She holds a M.B.A. in marketing and had a 20-year career in sales and software before leaving the workforce for five years to take care of her children.

Mel is now looking to re-enter the workforce to assist her family financially and with insurance benefits because her husband has become an independent contractor. She has not had any success finding a job as of her interview date.

Franny

Franny is a married mother of four children living in Massachusetts. She graduated with an economics and political science degree and also had a banking career for several years where
she progressed up the corporate ladder, ultimately having management responsibilities. She decided to leave her job in her 30s after her twin girls were born. Her husband is currently an attorney.

Franny recently returned to a full-time position after being home for more than 15 years, much longer than the other participants and should be noted as an outlier to the research. She stated that her new job is “the right thing right now” as it allows her to work from home and have flexible working hours. She also acknowledged that finding a job was much harder than she had planned on.

**IP**

IP is a married mother of two from Connecticut that had a career in management consulting before leaving the workforce after the birth of her second child. She holds an undergraduate degree and her husband was a dentist for several years, but recently left his practice.

IP is currently working in consulting again after stepping away from full-time work for 12 years. IP says that she is trying to find “balance” as she transitions back to full-time work but acknowledges that she feels challenged with things at work that she “didn’t struggle with before” after being out for so long.

**Kat**

Kat is a mother of two teenagers from Connecticut that left a nine-year career in insurance after her second child was born. She holds a B.A. in communications and is married to an insurance executive.
Kat rejoined the workforce full-time after staying home for 12 years to raise her children but admitted to feeling very anxious about going back. Additionally, Kat stated that she needed to find flexible work that would not “affect” her husband’s career.

Although the six study participants came from various demographic areas and industries, they all shared a strong work ethic and passion for their profession. The participants all mentioned moving up the career ladder and being recognized for their value and contributions prior to leaving the workforce. Several went into detail on the accolades and the positive performance reviews they had received. Each also expressed in some fashion that they missed their previous jobs and the other professionals they worked with. The rest of this chapter will delve into each of the superordinate and subordinate themes as experienced by the individual study participants.

Analysis of the data

After analyzing the data, five superordinate themes including; self-assurance, anxiety, surprise, growth and renewal were found among the study participants, with 15 subordinate themes emerging. Table 2 details the superordinate themes with the corresponding subordinate themes.

Table 2
Superordinate theme 1: Self-assurance. The first superordinate theme presented consistently across all study participants was the self-assurance they had related to their early career experience. Most talked about their early career with a sense of pride and enjoyment, while at the same time suggesting that they were each very career driven and for the most part had extremely demanding jobs.

**Pride.** Pride in their work and occupation was prevalent among all participants. For example, when describing her job, Kaylee states, “It was my whole being. I loved it.” While Mel B. was proud to note that she “managed a territory of independent retail outlets,” and “went to grad school while working in Germany.”

IP expressed pride in herself by describing how she got into the consulting field right out of college, even though she didn’t have experience. “There were some people like me who were quick studies, had perfect communication skills and so actually, that’s how I got into the field.” IP also noted that after she gave her notice, “they kept asking her to stay.” Kat also mentioned her easy transition into her career, stating, “I got the job right out of college because I had a co-op at (the company) during college and then they hired me full time immediately when I got out.”

When describing her earlier career, Franny thought it was important to discuss the many transitions her company went through and the fact that she “had survived tough times” and many organizational changes in her company. Franny also was proud of the money she made using the

<table>
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<th>4. Growth</th>
<th>4.1 Self-Awareness</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
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<td></td>
<td>5.3. Contribution</td>
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</table>
term “lucrative” more than once and stating, “I was rewarded more than you could have imagined.”

**Enjoyment.** Four of the participants recalled positive emotions about their early work experience, using words like *enjoyment, wonderful, great, learning, passion, and positive.* Kaylee described her career at the time by saying, “I learned so much about financial services. I just thought it was a great time in my life.” Mel B. also expressed her enjoyment with her previous job, “I did that (managed retail outlets) for about four years and it was a really interesting experience and I learned so much as I tried to figure out how to run a small business.” Kat makes reference to her colleagues as being a family, “I had been there for nine years and made lots of relationships. It was like a family to me.”

Asking about her early work experience seemed to evoke very warm memories for Franny, “It was always positive. It was always a great, wonderful experience. I enjoyed it immensely. All of it was so positive. I always had such a great, great career and feeling about the work that I was doing.”

**Career driven.** The majority of participants seemed very career driven and had a tendency to want to climb the corporate ladder as demonstrated by references of needing to be available, others not understanding the hours required, and having to drop everything for a call in the evening and the need to work on weekends. Additionally, having these career-driven traits seemed to have led many of the participants to struggle with work life balance which became another subordinate theme in this analysis. Kaylee specifically describes herself as career driven:

So, for many, many years I was just this kind of person who went to every company-sponsored event. I was the first one there and the last one to leave. Whether it was a walk
in the community, or happy hour, or whatever it was, I was always there. I was telling somebody when I first moved back to Charlotte, I mean I would get my car towed on the weekends because I was parked there, and I would be at work. I would be there 12, 13 hours on Saturdays.

JC seemed to impose pressure on herself regarding perhaps some unstated expectations of her role:

I was working full time, but the kind of position I was in I felt like you kind of had to be available 24/7. You had to be available to take calls in the evening or on the weekend if needed. If a meeting or an investor meeting came up, you just kind of had to drop everything.

IP also appeared to put pressure on herself regarding her career and the need to meet unstated expectations, “I do a terrible job of drawing boundaries. I get myself into a little trouble in the sense that I overcommit and have to work more hours outside of the work week to get it all done.”

Superordinate theme 2: Anxiety. The second superordinate theme to emerge overwhelmingly among all participants was anxiety related to the difficult decision to leave the workforce after much contemplation and internal debate. The anxiety that drove the decision to leave ultimately became a life-changing event for all of the participants as demonstrated by the subordinate themes that surfaced including; stress and balance, family and financial stability.

Stress and balance. All of the participants expressed feeling stressed and struggled with work-life balance, which led them to the decision to leave the workforce. Kaylee describes how tired she was during the year leading up to her departure from work:
I was really getting kind of burned out at that point. I was so tired, really tired, and I generally was exhausted because I was carrying all the benefits for the family. I had to be the stable one because he (her husband) was working in a small business. He didn’t have benefits. He didn’t have paid time off. He didn’t have insurance. He didn’t have a 401K. He didn’t have all that and it was all up to me. We had strong conversations about it. I was tired. I really honestly wanted to be laid off, and I wanted it so badly. I was like, “please just let me go. Lay me off.”

JC talks about how she was feeling after returning to work after her daughter was born by stating, “I did go back after my first child for about six months and then I quit because it was too much.” Mel B., who was trying to balance family and hostile work environment, contends, “I was a little bruised and needed to take some time and figure things out and center the family.” IP, who was worried that her job was in jeopardy while pregnant with her second child, describes her decision to stay home:

I wasn’t balancing it. I did a very bad job of that. And so, because it was coming to an end, I decided I’d take a little time, but I wasn’t making a decision that I was going to stay home for one or eight years at the time.

Stress became a factor in Kat’s decision to leave the workforce as she had to constantly handle all aspects of the children’s care since her husband did not want his career impacted. “My mom said she would help but couldn’t help every day, so it was just stressful trying to figure it all out.”

**Family.** Family was a strong subordinate theme across all participants as to why they decided to leave their jobs. Kaylee recalls:
We were trying to have a second child. My daughter was in full-time day care obviously. We were having a little bit of trouble. I was traveling a lot, and a lot of stress. I pulled back everything. I just think I needed some time off. Everything was out of balance. I felt like a horrible parent and everything else. I told my husband, “I’m going to let you continue to climb the corporate ladder. I can’t climb it right now.”

JC described her feelings before making the decision to stay home:

So, I felt like I was working too much and I felt like I was missing out. My daughter was just kind of growing up too fast and I felt like I was missing most of it. I think, especially when your kids are young, looking into alternative care options for them. I didn’t love the options. I just needed to be with them.

Mel B. also decided to leave the workforce due to family:

We adopted (child) from China and we also took on a German exchange student, so I went from two kids to four kids. We agreed as a family…well my husband and I, for me to re-center myself on the family with his support.

Franny focused on wanting control of raising her kids which led to her decision to stay home:

Well, I was paying good money to have someone else raise my children. I knew it was stressful because I lived with them. I loved them, so I could take that stress, but I kind of didn’t trust that someone else could give them the life that I wanted and the upbringing that I wanted them to have. I wanted to control that more, and I felt like it wasn’t worth it to put it in someone else’s hands.
Kat’s decision to stay home occurred when she lost her caregiver to illness, “I didn’t feel comfortable putting them in day care. I decided with my husband to stay home and give up my career to take care of the kids.”

**Financially able:** Five of the participants specifically mentioned being able to afford to stay home, thanks to a working spouse. Kaylee remembers the moment she was able to leave the workforce, “So now he (her husband) had a job and benefits and paid vacation and everything. So that’s when I made the switch.” JC states:

> It’s just kind of been ok financially for me to continue to stay home. I’m fortunate enough to be in a situation that I didn’t have to work. I always had the option to stay home if I wanted to.

Franny makes reference again to her need for control, “It wasn’t money, it was control.” When making the decision to stay home, IP suggests that it was an easy decision financially, “I didn’t really have to struggle over the decision because I could look for another job after the baby was born. I was lucky enough where we were in a situation where I didn’t have to work. Kat contends, “we could have afforded daycare, but I just couldn’t do it.”

**Superordinate theme 3: Surprise.** The third superordinate theme to appear was the surprise experienced by the participants when transitioning back to work in which the participants referred to the *timing* of their return, *misperceptions* they had, *pressure* some felt to return to the workforce, as well as the effect it had on their *self-confidence*.

**Timing:** Four of the participants mentioned the timing of their return for the most part being much later they had originally planned. When asked if she hadn’t left the workforce, where would she imagine herself now, JC responded, “I didn’t really anticipate to be away from work this long. It’s easy to put off.” Mel B. who was still looking for a job at the time of her
interview, and was hoping to have found one long before, stated, “Well it’s time consuming. Looking for a job really is a full-time job.” Franny also expressed being home much longer than anticipated:

Oh my god, I thought I would have been back to work much sooner. I never thought I would take that much time. I misjudged. I think the fact that my older kids needed me, needed the support. I thought that once the girls started going to school, and the boys were already in high school, that everything would be like, “Okay, now I can go,” but everyone needed more help later. You always think you are going to return, but it just never seems the right time.

IP explained that she had not given herself a timeframe for being out of work, but overall it was probably longer than she expected:

I think it was like every year I would think about it. It wasn’t the right time. I didn’t know what was right or what I needed, or what would be right for my family. Every year things would happen that made me feel like I have to be present right now, although sometimes I said to myself, “was that really what was going on, or was it that I was just at a point I felt paralyzed at the time, or that it was just that they needed me, or that I wasn’t ready.” If you told me I was going to be home for eight years I would never have believed it.

Misperceptions. All of the participants experienced misperceptions about the process of transitioning back to work. Most thought it would be easier or faster than it turned out to be. Kaylee expected that her transition would be easy, “I thought I could easily go back because I had a great resume. I had done things and knew so many people.” JC describes the transition as “slower than I thought” and “difficult to go back into the field that I was in.” Additionally, she
notes that initially she was excited, “but then that turned into kind of disappointment.” Mel B. also has been disappointed in her search for employment, “I do great with the phone interviews, but then when they see me, they just…I can tell they’re looking at me like I’m this old lady.” Franny too experienced a longer and harder transition than she had originally expected:

So, as the years went by, it became really hard to see myself finding the people that knew me, that knew the way I worked, that could vouch for me, that would make coming back easy. That slowly disappeared. I started seeing that it was going to be harder than I thought.

IP, who started looking for a job in January and didn’t end up landing a role until the following September, regretted not doing more to expedite the process, “I started poking around a little bit and only that really, other than working on my resume, but I could’ve been meeting with people and really more actively networking.” Kat was lucky enough to land a consulting role fairly quickly but was faced with the misconception that it would be easy to go back to work. Instead, she learned that she would have to work without disrupting her husband’s schedule in any way:

Well, my husband made it clear that I couldn’t really impact his career. Like he couldn’t be there if I needed to go to a meeting. So, it was really stressful to figure out. I had all those logistical things and figuring it out. It was very stressful. Whenever I could, I worked at nighttime when the house was sleeping.

Pressure. Three out of six participants specifically mentioned feeling pressured to return to work either for financial or employee benefit reasons or because their kids were in school full time and they no longer felt able to justify their time at home. Kaylee affirms that she decided to start to look for a job after her and her husband discussed finances:
We started talking about our finances. My daughter’s probably going to drive soon and then we’re going to be looking at colleges, and our son needed braces. As we looked at everything, I was like, “It would be a huge if I went back to work full time. I haven’t had a 401(K) since I don’t know, six years?”

Mel B. also decided to go back to contribute financially and with providing employee benefits stating, “one of the drivers is really health insurance.” “Predictability of income is also since it is always feast or famine. We want to have stabilization.”

JC experienced pressure from friends and family:

Well honestly, I feel like there’s also kind of just a pressure to go back to work. Like people look at you like, “your kids are in school now, so what are you doing. Like, why wouldn’t she be working?” So initially I think I felt that pressure and it’s like this is what I’m supposed to do. I got my kids to this point. They are in school now so I should go out and work. But there’s been no pressure from my husband.

**Self-Confidence.** All of the participants experienced some difficult emotions during the transition back to work related to their confidence. Kaylee questioned herself and her experience while looking for a job:

I was so afraid I wouldn’t be able to get a job again because there’s something weird with me. My mother told me, “you’re crazy, crazy and dumb to give up your job.” “This is the worst decision you’re making.” I thought, “you’re right” for a long time. For a couple of years there was that nagging feeling like “gosh I am probably never going to work a job again.” I don’t have a B.A. or higher education and all that stuff started creeping in.
JC also thought the process of returning to work was “daunting” and stated, “I don’t feel as confident in myself as I did before having been out of it for almost eight years.” Mel B. mentioned that the impact of the job search on her self-confidence has affected others in her family:

My husband, he worries because I get so close and then, I’ll get a ding to my self-esteem. You know guys, he tries to help the best he can, but he does worry. He’s trying to pick up more work around the house so that I have free time which is nice. The kids, they don’t notice.

Franny initially experienced apprehension and anxiety but references an agency she turned to for help with her job search:

I think what they gave me was a little more confidence and understanding. I knew once I got to speak to someone, I knew that it would be easy. Once I could speak to a hiring manager, I knew I’d be able to get a job. And once I started work, I knew I would show my value and it would all work out and that’s exactly what happened.

IP also questioned her abilities as she transitioned back to work, “I had moments where I felt incompetent.” Additionally, Kat described having self-doubt and being anxious:

I was thinking, oh, my gosh, am I going to be good enough? You know, have my skills changed? Have I kept up? What’s in the market? There was so much ambiguity. I had a lot of anxiety about it. I was suffering from post-partum depression and that depression lingered into my life. So, I was fighting those symptoms while trying to make a change in my life. And it was almost like I was fighting myself. Like I wanted to go forward, but I was taking two steps back all the time, because of me, my self-doubt. So, I was really anxious.
**Superordinate theme 4: Growth.** The fourth superordinate theme to surface for all participants was growth through the development of greater self-awareness and coming to terms with the limitations surrounding their return to work.

**Self-awareness:** All of the participants revealed a sense of self-awareness during the process of re-entry. Sentiments like self-reflection, self-esteem, emotions, and relevance were prevalent during many of the interviews and reflected the growth that many of the women seemed to have gone through. Kaylee discusses her realization that she can’t have it all:

I’ve done a lot of self-reflection. I feel that where I’ve really grown is trying to realize that you can’t have it all. You can do it all, people do it all the time, but they may not be the room mom, or going on field trips, especially if they are the person that travels 100 percent for their job. When I’m in that kind of state (trying to do it all), I’m a horrible person. I’m horrible to my husband. I’m horrible to my kids. I’m horrible to me.

Additionally, Kaylee had high expectations when she started her job search after staying home, but quickly found that employers didn’t understand or value her previous experience. After one interview she recalls her astonishment, “I went, ‘wow,’ you have no idea about me after our conversation and you didn’t even look at the bullet points (on her resume), that was really eye-opening. After that I had to really look at my resume. I’m like, “gosh, that is what people see.”

JC reflected heavily on her lack of current knowledge about her previous field:

The industry I was in was pretty related to the newest technology, the newest ways to advertise. And I used to be in online advertising and now there’s just all sorts of things that I don’t even know about anymore. So, I feel like I really need to re-educate myself before I can speak intelligently in an interview.
Kat also recognized that her skills may not be up to date:

I felt like I was losing all intelligence, so I had to do something. I totally learned how to utilize a new skill, new software. It was fantastic to be able to do that. And then I taught myself how to build websites. I taught myself graphic design, just to stay relevant in the market. I kept trying to improve myself because I realized my skills had been so dormant. They were so old.

Mel B. suggested that she has become more aware of her emotions and feelings during the re-entry process and has experienced a trend with job interviews of having the relevant skills and experience but being turned down or being told that she is “over-qualified”, especially when employers see her in person. Additionally, she had the realization that she misses working with people:

I miss having an ongoing team and working on projects over time and the continuity between teams and projects. I’m lonely. So, I would say the bigger driver (for trying to re-enter) really would be my craving to get back into a corporate team environment.

Franny has become more aware of the stigma put on her when trying to re-enter due to the fact that she had been out of the workforce for so long, “…because it is hard to sell someone who’s been out of the workforce for any extended period of time.”

IP recalls looking for a new role as “a little scary” and admits that she struggled at some tasks when she initially re-entered the workforce, “There was still stuff where I wasn’t back where I needed to be because those are not things I struggled with before. But I wasn’t nailing it the way she (her supervisor) wanted.”

**Limitations.** Five out of six participants acknowledged that due to their personal situation, they had limitations on the careers they could pursue. In some cases, the participants
still had childcare responsibilities since their spouse worked, or desired flexibility with their job so that they could spend time with their children or attend school events. Kaylee concedes:

I think I’ve grown a lot, but I also realized that job is just a job. I’m not going to say it’s been perfect, but for right now, and the flexibility I have, it’s going to be a good fit for me. I started maybe a step back, but I’m hoping to kind of build a foundation and get excited again about the work and get certified. So, it’s been a very curvy road and financially I’m probably a little behind where I’m supposed to be but I’m okay with all that. I really am. I think I told you money is one of those driving factors in my life. That to me has even gone away. I took a step down. So, all of my self-reflection has lectured me that I don’t really want to be a person in charge. I still want to be here for my kids, and I love being home when they get home from school. I’m helping out as coordinator versus being a project manager. That was a big ego decision for me.

JC is also feeling limited by her options as she is trying to return to the workforce:

I’m trying to figure out how I feel, like it’s difficult to go back into the field that I was in at a part-time level. The reason I left it was because of the time it took away from my family. So, I’m hesitant to go back to that type of role because I feel like it would consume my time and I wouldn’t be able to keep things the way they are with my family. And there’s just kind of not much available part-time in the business I was in so that’s why I’ve just kind of been looking for anything almost to get my feet wet again.

Franny, who was able to find a job working from home giving her flexibility and better work life balance since she doesn’t have a commute, describes her new job as, “I just feel like it’s the right thing right now.” IP states that she “made the intentional decision” to go part-time
and “took control” of her career, allowing more balance and flexibility. Kat took a role in consulting once her kids got into school full time that allowed her flexibility with her schedule:

I had some flexibility, so I was being subcontracted at the time. The kids were in school full-time. They had grown older, I just needed to be home for after school, and I couldn’t affect his (her husband) career. His career need to stay separate.

**Superordinate theme 5: Renewal.** The final superordinate theme to materialize was the renewal participants felt during the re-entry process. Transitioning, or trying to transition back to the workforce had a significant impact on the *identity* of each woman. Additionally, the women experienced very strong *emotions*. Many also mentioned the *contributions*, financial or other, they were now, or potentially could make to the family in the future.

**Identity.** The notion of identity presented itself at different times during each participant’s journey from staying home to returning (or trying to return) to work. Kaylee discusses how moving after leaving her job and having her first child impacted her identity:

Both my husband and I both moved here from other cities. We don’t have any family either. Didn’t really have that family network so it was very challenging. That was the hardest. Then I lost my identity because I did not really know what to do with a two-year old all day either. I thought of how I wanted to be working. It was a challenge, just a challenging time. It got a little bit easier as things went. But it was, as I said, that very first time, it was definitely challenging for me, for my identity. I’m just the type of person, I love my kids and I love being a mom, but I also just felt like I just wanted to work. I wanted to have something of my own.
JC also talked about her identity, “So I feel like now I have the time and I am kind of anxious to get that part of my life back and not to just identify as a mom.” Mel B. saw landing a job as allowing her to be “independent.” IP also talked about her new job in a similar fashion, “It gave me a level of independence.” Additionally, IP compares herself to when she wasn’t working:

All that time I didn’t work, they (her daughters) didn’t see their mother working. They didn’t see their mom as a professional or me having a career. I think that they needed to see that too, and I think that there’s a trade off or something that comes with it, and I think they both will be working mothers, if they’re mothers. So, I think it’s important the get the experience to see that.

Franny also mentions the impact of going back to work on how her children perceive her: First of all, when I worked with boys around, they saw me as a professional. So, to this day, they see me as a professional who became a mom. My girls only know me as a mom. So, what’s been powerful is having them see me in a professional capacity and understanding that that’s another part of me that they never knew, and women do this. It’s like “wow.” They are so proud. I’m sure they were always proud of me as a mom, but they see me in a different light. I’m glad they do, because I think they need to be feeling empowered.

Kat describes the impact on her identity when she returned to work:

Okay, my confidence soared. I wasn’t just identifying myself as a mom or a wife. Now I started identifying myself as an instructional designer. I started working with upper level executives, coaching them on how to interact and lead. I was just impressed with myself,
so I think I carried myself different. I was more social. I never put myself out there as much as I did with all the confidence that I gained.

**Emotions.** Once the participants made the decision to return to work, or had secured a new job, they experienced a range of positive emotions including feeling *excited, valued, competent, motivated and acknowledged.* Kaylee notes, “I have excitement again and I’m hoping that I’ll move up.” Kat shared Kaylee’s enthusiasm by saying, “I was so excited (about going back to work).” JC describes her feelings as she gets closer to finding a job, “Well it’s more as I think about it more. As I look into things, I’m getting that old feeling back as far as I want that sense of accomplishment. I’m getting more motivated to do something.” After returning to work, Franny experienced a number of positive emotions:

> Oh my God, I feel like I’m on top of the world. I walk with a swagger, if a woman could do that. I just feel like I have something to talk about that’s interesting and current. I feel my husband is much happier. So, I feel like I’m part of the world again.

Regarding her new job, Franny enthusiastically states:

> I was asked to join a tech startup in Silicon Valley as the Chief of Staff, and I love it. I work virtually. I’m on Zoom a lot and conferencing every single minute of the day and building something from nothing. It’s just probably one of the best experiences of my life, which given my career is amazing.

IP describes feelings she was having while staying at home versus what she was feeling when she returned to work:

> I think there might’ve been points in time (while at home) where I felt like I wasn’t appreciated. I definitely felt that at times, and I think it’s just because the level of appreciation at work is so different. I was good at what I did and so there was an
appreciation by people for what I did. I felt very competent in something. I felt like I
was good at something. I did not get that feeling from being at home. She gets what I do
(referring to her supervisor now). She gets the value in that.

Kat explains how returning to work has changed her, “I feel worthwhile. I feel like I
have something to offer, whereas I didn’t feel that before. I feel like I’m making a difference.”

**Contribution.** All six participants alluded to the ability to make contributions to their
family by returning to work. With Kaylee’s recent return to work, she says, “I wanted to
contribute. I wanted to have that value earned. Money obviously is also a part of it too. Things
get more expensive and living in Charlotte is expensive.” JC, who hopes to find a part-time job
soon, contends, “I’m anxious to get that satisfaction from working and contributing financially to
the family, but still being around.” Mel B. says that finding a job would provide “predictability
of income and insurance” for her family.

When describing her new position, Franny states:

Even if this opportunity was part-time, I would still have taken it and I would still have
loved it. It was just getting to something that made me feel valued and allowed me to
provide value. I see myself going from start-up to start-up, making a lot of money.

IP mentions how going back to work “made it easier for her family” since her husband
was out of work, while Kat said that going back to work “made our lives easier. There was more
money.” Additionally, Kat describes how going back to work made her a better mother, “the
consulting position allowed me that flexibility. I was a happier mom, being able to really enjoy
the time with them (her family), because I wasn’t feeling so resentful that I had to give up my
life.”

**Conclusion**
Five superordinate themes prevailed from this study of the experiences of stay-at-home mothers re-entering (or trying to re-enter) the workforce. The themes encompassed the period from their early career experiences to staying home, to re-entering the workforce. Themes included the self-assurance they had from their early career experiences, the anxiety that they felt when they decided to leave the workforce, the surprise they faced when transitioning back to work, how they grew through these phases of their lives, and the sense of renewal they underwent as they re-entered.

The first superordinate theme of Self-assurance included the participants memories and emotions related to their work experiences prior to staying home with their children which was presented through the subordinate themes of pride, enjoyment and career driven. The second superordinate theme of Anxiety reflected the drivers that led the participants to leave the workforce including; stress and balance, family, and financially able. The third superordinate theme to emerge, Surprise, was at the point that many of the participants started to try to make sense of their experiences. The superordinate theme of surprise consisted of four subordinate themes: timing, misperceptions, pressure and self-confidence. Each of these themes embodied unexpected experiences the majority of the participants encountered as they began their journey from staying home to re-entering (or trying to re-enter) the workforce. The fourth superordinate theme of Growth, which discusses the participants’ personal development through self-awareness and the acceptance of the limiting factors surrounding their transition as they attempted to return to work. Specifically, self-awareness and limitations were the two subordinate themes uncovered. The final superordinate theme, Renewal, exposed the liminal states that the participants experienced as they discussed the impact on their identity, positive
feelings, and satisfaction of being able to contribute to their family through the subordinate themes of identity, emotions and contribution.

In summary, the superordinate themes and supporting subordinate themes, follow the stages of the participants’ journey from working to staying home to returning (or trying to return) to the workforce. The descriptions provided by each participant revealed many similarities in the experience each has had. The following chapter will provide more perspective around these themes based on the literature and through the theoretical framework of liminality. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research will also be discussed.
Chapter 5: Implications for Research, Theory and Practice

This study investigated workforce re-entry for women who chose to leave their careers after having children in an effort to answer the following research question: How do professional working mothers who choose to leave their career to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in? This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand how six female participants made meaning out of their experiences from leaving the workforce, becoming a stay-at-home mother and transitioning back to work.

After analyzing the results from the study, five superordinate themes including; self-assurance, anxiety, surprise, growth and renewal were found among the study participants, with 15 subordinate themes emerging. This chapter reviews the implications of those findings for research, theory and practice, followed by a discussion on the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Implications for Research

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of former professional females as they try to find a job after staying home for an extended period to raise children. Largely this research study confirmed the scholarship around this topic. The following section looks at four of the superordinate themes and the alignment or possible contradictions with the extant literature.

Anxiety. When looking at the superordinate theme of Anxiety, this study found that several of the participants struggled with stress and balancing the demands of work (a subordinate theme of Anxiety) while they were still employed. Gilley, Waddell, Hall, Jackson and Gilley (2015) note that the boundary between work and family has shifted significantly in recent decades due to more women in the workforce, technology advances, dual-career families, eldercare and childcare responsibilities, economic changes, more stressful home situations and
increasing competition, creating a dramatic conflict between work and family life. JC specifically recalled needing to be “available to take calls in the evening or on the weekend if needed.” IP mentioned several times that she wasn’t balancing things well, and Kaylee discussed working 12 or 13 hours on Saturdays. Orgad (2016) asserts that current portrayals of women choosing to leave the workforce hide the fact that they are highly influenced by their husband’s careers, the anxieties related to childcare, and the stress associated with domestic duties. This can be seen by the participant’s recollections of when they decided to leave the workforce. Kaylee states that she was “really getting burned out…” and was exhausted to the point of wanting to get laid off. JC talks about quitting six months after returning to work because it was too much, and Mel B. mentions that she needed to take time off to “center the family.” Additionally, the study supports the literature in reference to “husband’s careers” as all of the participants had working spouses so financially (another subordinate theme) they were able to leave the workforce. IP suggests that she didn’t have to work since her family was financially sound, and Kat contends that paying for daycare wasn’t the issue, she just didn’t like the idea of leaving her children in a daycare facility.

The subordinate theme of family that was an outcome of the study was fully supported by the research. Ely, Stone & Ammerman (2014) claim that motherhood is a pivotal life event causing many female employees to rearrange their careers to accommodate their families. Stress and family drove Kaylee to leave the workforce because she felt that she no longer could handle trying to achieve more at work and still manage the needs of her family. Franny didn’t trust that someone else could raise her children as well as she could and therefore decided to leave work, while JC felt like she was missing out on her daughter growing up. According to a Pew Research survey, one-quarter of working mothers (27%) have actually quit their job at some
stage during their career to care for a child or other family member (Cohen, Livingston, and Wang, 2014). This corresponds with all of the participants responses that suggested family was a primary reason for leaving work.

Ely, Stone and Ammerman (2014) found in their survey of Harvard Business School graduates that 77% of respondents believed that “prioritizing family over work is the number one barrier to women’s career advancement.” The study did not seem to support this research as none of the participants made mention of their careers not advancing due to having children, although all of them definitely found that once they stopped working, their careers stalled.

Another strand of research that the study did not support was the concept of the “supermom.” Steiner and Lachover (2016) contend that the media promotes the concept of the “supermom” who is able to juggle being a good mother and productive employee effortlessly. Milkie, Pepin, and Denny (2016) note that the media portrays working mothers as “confident” and “self-sufficient” but at the cost of their families. None of the participants mentioned experiencing a need to be the “supermom” or feeling the need to excel in their role as a mother, although all of them became highly stressed trying to balance both roles.

**Surprise.** The superordinate theme of Surprise which included subordinate themes surrounding the *timing* of the participants return, *misperceptions* they had, *pressure* they felt and the impact on their *self-confidence* supported the research in several ways. Orgad (2016) claims that attempting to return to a similar job is not easy for many women, while Zimmerman and Clark (2016, p. 624) contend that women later discover many barriers when “opting” back in. Additionally, although women are only out of the workforce for two to three years on average, most still face significant challenges when trying to re-enter (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). The study findings related to the subordinate themes of *timing* and *misperceptions* aligned with the
research as most of the participants were surprised at how much longer they were home than expected and how difficult it was to find a job. Mel B. stated that “looking for a job is really a full-time job” and Kaylee had expected the transition back to work would be easy thanks to her “great resume” but found it was much harder than anticipated. JC claimed it took longer than she had thought and was more difficult. Franny no longer had her network of colleagues to call on since it had been so long since she had worked, and IP regretted not doing more sooner, not realizing how long the process of re-entering would take.

Regarding the subordinate theme of self-confidence, the research and study findings were very similar. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) note that women may suffer low self-esteem and begin to question their employability, with one of the biggest factors affecting women when opting back in being lack of confidence stemming from their own concerns over employability, age, skills and absence of a peer network. Stone and Lovejoy (2019) attest that women become frustrated and depressed due to negative re-entry experiences. Orgad (2016) argues that women who leave the workforce report feeling disregarded, losing confidence and no longer having a voice or opinion. From the study interviews, the challenging process of trying to find a job led to Kaylee questioning her employability, and JC not feeling as confident having been out of work for more than eight years. Mel B. talked about her “ding” to her self-esteem and IP admitted to feeling “incompetent.” Kat described her experience as “I was taking two steps back all the time, because of me, my self doubt.”

The study did not support research when it came to the type of job women look for when trying to re-enter. Zimmerman and Clark (2016, p. 622) state that after a work interruption like having children, women try to find authenticity and ways to fulfill “communal goals” in their work. Zimmerman and Clark attest that when re-entering many women move into social service
jobs to find authenticity and balance. Stone and Lovejoy (2019) contend that when women return to the workforce, many women pursue new careers in female-dominated professions such as teaching. The study participants did describe looking for work that better fit their work-life balance needs (which will be discussed in the Growth section) but did not specify wanting authenticity or any type of social service job. Additionally, the research focused on societal pressures regarding female obligations to be the primary caregiver and to be the “supermom.” Ladge and Greenberg (2015) suggest that female professionals often deal with societal pressures and cultural bias. According to Gallup (2016), women still assume primary responsibility for domestic tasks and Milkie, Pepin, and Denny (2016, p. 52) maintain that mothers carry a heavy burden when trying to live up to the “good mother” standard. The only pressure that the study participants reported encountering was from a financial need or self-imposed because their kids were in school full time, which aligned with Zimmerman and Clark (2016) and Orgad (2016) who state that women return to work for financial reasons and environmental factors (like societal pressure to fill the hours while kids are in school). Kaylee and Mel B. both felt pressure to contribute more to their families financially, while JC’s friends and family caused her to feel pressured to return to work by questioning her about what she was going to do with all her time now that her kids were in school.

**Growth.** The fourth superordinate theme to emerge from the study was *Growth,* supported by subordinate themes of *self-awareness* and *limitations.*

The extant literature mentions that an extended gap in employment, outdated skills, as well as the need for retraining, may decrease a women’s chance of finding a job at the same level as when they left (Stone & Lovejoy, 2019; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Zimmerman and Clark (2016) posit that women who have opted out due to children have “fewer advancement
opportunities, smaller social networks, and great skill deterioration.” The study confirmed this research through the subordinate theme of *self-awareness* as all of the participants realized that that lack of current skills, no professional peer networks and an extended time away from the workforce all made it difficult to re-enter. Kaylee experienced employers ignoring her previous experience and JC admitted that “there’s just all sorts of things that I don’t even know about anymore (regarding her former advertising career).” Kat knew her skills were “dormant” and began to teach herself new skills in preparation for her return to work. Franny had employers’ comment on the amount of time she had been away from the labor force and IP struggled with tasks that at one time had come easily to her.

Regarding the limitations women encounter when trying to re-enter, Stone and Lovejoy (2019) and Orgad (2016) contend that it is not easy for many women to return to a similar job. The same job they once had may no longer be what they want to return to because of long hours and difficulty managing travel alongside the demanding needs of their family (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). According to Stone and Lovejoy and Zimmerman and Clark (2016), many women look for flexible work arrangements in an effort to balance work and family, or because they are unable to find a similar job to what they once had. Orgad argues that choosing to stay home to care for children hurts a women’s long-term career and limits her earning potential. Zimmerman and Clark and Stone and Lovejoy agree, stating that women feel penalized for taking a time out and often experience a cut in salary and or status, and limitations on advancement opportunities. Additionally, many women forego higher salaries for non-monetary benefits like flexibility (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Fitzenberger, Steffes, and Strittmatter (2016) acknowledge that female employees with long work interruptions often change from full-time to part-time work. Stone and Lovejoy maintain that women look for a job that allows equal time to be a mother and
a professional. The study aligned to the research in this area for example; Kaylee cited finding a job with flexibility that was a “good fit” for her now and admitted to financially being a little behind but being ok with that. JC quickly realized that she wouldn’t be able to go back to her former occupation part time due to the nature of the work and was willing to take “anything” to get her feet wet again. Franny found a job working remote so that she could be home with her kids more and not have a commute. IP made the intentional decision to go back part time and Kat took a consulting role with flexibility so that she could be home after school.

Renewal. The final superordinate theme of Renewal with subordinate themes of identity, emotions and contributions was reflected in the literature in the following ways. Kanji and Cahusac (2015) note that women face an adjustment period in which they move from a work-related identity to one that focuses on family and being a mother. Ladge and Greenberg (2015) maintain that once women decide to return to work, another period of adjustment occurs where the identities of both mother and professional must be integrated. Kanji and Cahusac argue that women struggle to redefine themselves as their work identity lessons over time. The study supported this research as seen by Kaylee who describes losing her identity when she was at home. JC talked about wanting to get “that part of my life back and not to just identify as a mom.” IP and Franny discussed the aspect of their children seeing them as professionals. IP stated, “They didn’t see their mom as a professional or me having a career.” Franny declared, “My girls only know me as a mom. So, what’s been powerful is having them see me in a professional capacity.” Kat notes, “I wasn’t just identifying myself as a mom or a wife” and was now able to identify herself as an “instructional designer.”

In relation to the subordinate themes of emotion and contribution, Zimmerman and Clark (2016) believe that a key reason women re-enter the workforce is to have a secondary income to
support their families, as well as having a source of income for themselves that is not dependent on their spouse. Additionally, women opt back in for non-monetary reasons like intellectual stimulation and the increase in self-confidence (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Results from the study again align to this literature. For example, Kaylee and JC both wanted to contribute financially to their families, while Mel B. wanted the “predictability” of income and insurance for her family. IP adds that working “made their lives easier” as there was more money and Franny liked feeling valued and the ability to provide value. All of the participants seemed to experience positive emotions, leading to more self-confidence. Franny claimed she walked with a “swagger” and IP felt appreciated.

**Implications for Theory**

The purpose of this study was to examine an understudied aspect of professional females’ re-entry into the workforce after taking multiple years off to care for their children. The researcher chose to look at this topic through the theoretical framework of liminality.

In his seminal work, *Les rites de passage* in 1909, Arnold van Gennep developed the concept of liminality. Van Gennep (1960) argued that individual renewal is accomplished through rites of passage where an individual passes through identity states that occur in three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. During separation, one becomes detached from their current social status (Beech, 2011). They then enter the liminal state as described by van Gennep as part of the process of social change where a person enters a new transitional position [“e.g. boy to man, girl to bride” (Beech, 2011, p. 287)] or in the case of this research, when a stay-at-home mother makes the decision to return to work. In the liminal state, an individual does not quite belong to their old world or to their new world and is fraught with ambiguity (van Gennep, 1960, p. 21; Beech, 2011). In the final stage, incorporation (an aggregation of all three
stages), an individual has reached a new identity state (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Although the researcher’s focus was on the liminal stage, inadvertently the five superordinate themes and supporting subordinate themes seemed to illustrate the three identity states as described by van Gennep (see Table 3).

Table 3

Alignment of the stages of *rites of passage* with superordinate & subordinate themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of Rites of Passage</th>
<th>Superordinate</th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>1. Self-Assurance</td>
<td>1.1 Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 Career Driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liminality</td>
<td>2. Anxiety</td>
<td>2.1 Stress &amp; Balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2. Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.3. Financially Able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Surprise</td>
<td>3.1 Timing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Misperceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.3 Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4 Self-Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Growth</td>
<td>4.1 Self-Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.2. Limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporation</td>
<td>5. Renewal</td>
<td>5.1 Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.3. Contribution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further, the liminal state can be broken down into three phases; separation (moving away from a former sense of self; transition (trying to resolve uncertainty around identity); and reincorporation (finding a new sense of self) (Beech, 2011; Minscenko & Day, 2015). The superordinate and subordinate themes found from the study also seemed to support the theory in this regard as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Alignment of the Liminal stages with superordinate & subordinate themes
In addition to the alignment of the participant’s experiences to the stages of liminality, the study’s findings reinforced the theory in several areas. Miscenko and Day (2015) contend that for most employed adults, work and family are the primary sources of identity. In relation to the Separation stage, the study participants supported this construct with memories of their former occupations and who they were at the time and how hard they worked, demonstrating that their work identity had been very important to them. When describing themselves during the Separation period of liminality, the participants developed narratives of who they were in direct alignment with Kanji and Cahusac (2015) and Beech (2008) who believe that when identity is questioned in the liminal state, self-narratives are developed that draw on one’s desires or historical perspectives. Kaylee spent much of her interview talking about her former career using phrases like, “It was my whole being, I loved it.” Kat compared her former company to a “family” and Franny talked about her former career as a “great, great career.” Reflecting on their former careers seemed to be the first step in making sense out of where they currently were. Beech (2011, p. 291) asserts that creating a self-narrative allows for continuous sense-making.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liminal Stages</th>
<th>Superordinate</th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>2. Anxiety</td>
<td>2.1 Stress &amp; Balance</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Family</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 Financially Able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>3. Surprise</td>
<td>3.1 Timing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Misperceptions</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.2. Limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reincorporation</td>
<td>5. Renewal</td>
<td>5.1 Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.3. Contribution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ambiguity can act as in impetus for sense making. According to Miscenko and Day, as individuals try to make sense of their identity, they may experiment with various versions of oneself socially. During the study, several of the participants talked about trying numerous part-time or stay-at-home jobs as they tried to transition back into the workforce, supporting this concept. Kaylee in particular mentions working as a virtual trainer, consultant and professional organizer. Kat tried marketing and communications, as well as part-time training roles, and IP immersed herself in the local school and PTO program, while Franny worked for a friend who had a real estate office.

As the participants moved to the Transition stage, many experienced a long waiting period to find a job, or hadn’t found one, and seemed frustrated and somewhat depressed. Mel B. described the “ding” to her self-esteem and how worried her husband was about her. According to Beech (2011), a prolonged liminal state can be quite disruptive, causing frustration and depression. Beech also notes that while in the liminal state, individuals may turn to reflection, questioning themselves about who they are. According to Ladge and Greenberg (2015) when a women experiences significant life changes their sense of self may be questioned. All of the participants mentioned some type of self-reflection including questions about their abilities, skills, and/or what they wanted from a job. Kaylee couldn’t believe what “people see,” and Kat realized her skill set was outdated. Mel B. became more aware of her emotions and feelings due to being told she was “over-qualified” and potentially looked older than she is. Beech notes that this is the stage when an individual is trying to change from the current version of themselves to the new, desired identity state (p. 285).

Beech (2011) maintains that liminality is seen as having “before and after identities” that are usually initiated by some type of triggering event. Identity transformation occurs when an
individual recognizes that things have changed (p. 285). This coincides with the superordinate theme of *Growth* and subordinate theme of *self-awareness* where the participants had realizations that going back to work was going to be difficult and much different than it had been earlier in their careers – definitely a turning point for many of them. Beech argues that identity work begins when an individual attempts to validate a desired identity or the narratives they have developed with others. Identity work is defined as “…forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising identity” (Alvesson, 2010; Beech, 2008; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Miscenko & Day, 2015, p. 10).

As the participants moved into the *Reincorporation* stage of liminality, the construct of identity work was apparent in the descriptions of their experiences in support of the theory. For example, each participant made reference to how their identity had changed. Several participants noted that they were now viewed (or wanted to be viewed) as a “professional” and not just as a mother or wife. Additionally, many of the women experienced very positive emotions during this time, validating theory. Miscenko and Day (2015) attest that having a positive attitude and allowing different versions of one’s self to be tried, may lead individuals to uncover a new identity that aligns to their new sense of self as the liminal stage ends. Brown and Coupland (2015) acknowledge that identity work can be positive because it drives goal-oriented action.

Regarding expansion of the theory, with the advances in technology and the ability to work virtually for many types of jobs, will women continue to face these issues they openly discussed during their interviews? By being able to work full-time at home, will work-life balance be as difficult? They would no longer have long commutes and wouldn’t have to spend as much time at work because any social activities that take up time after hours would no longer be part of the job. In the study, Franny indicated that being able to work at home and not having
the commute has allowed her to better balance work and family. Additionally, it would be interesting to better understand the link between identity work and goal-oriented action as referenced above. What exactly occurs for this to happen? Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014, p. 80) discuss “identity equilibrium” that occurs once one’s narratives have been validated socially. Does goal-oriented action lead to identity equilibrium? Also, Miscenoko and Day (2015) argue that the liminal phase will continue until an individual is satisfied with his or her new or modified identity. The researcher found that none of the participants seemed fully satisfied with their new identity but had made some type of transition to the Incorporation phase. Words like not perfect, step back, right thing right now were used frequently and inferred that they might be looking for something better but were not able to find it. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014, p. 80) determined that individuals who do not validate their narratives, or who continually think about their loss, may be in a liminal phase for extended periods, leading to increased emotional setbacks including depression. The participants did not seem to experience such extreme emotions so perhaps theory should be expanded to include some type of stage between transition and reincorporation where individuals begin reincorporation but have not fully reincorporated.

The study contradicted theory when it came to the concept of communitas where being in the liminal state forces a sense of community and togetherness, and differences are disregarded (Tansley & Tietze, 2013; Turner, 1969). The participants in the study did not mention looking for other women experiencing the same transition. Each seemed to maneuver through the transition from working to staying home and then trying to re-enter on their own, only looking to their spouses for support. Franny did mention seeking out an agency for help with her job search, but from her description, the relationship seemed short lived and the agency did not find her a job.
The study also did not align to Andrews and Roberts (2015) who concluded that the liminal phase can be connected with danger as one may lose a sense of self and identity. None of the study participants seemed to have had any type of real fear, outside of some anxiety and apprehension when trying to find a new job. This aspect of the study did support Andrews and Roberts who found that anxiety is to be expected as one passes through the liminal phase.

**Implications for Practice**

**Recommendations for professional females with children:** After exploring the experiences of women who have left the workforce to stay home to care for their children and are trying to re-enter (or have re-entered) the workforce, it can be seen that changes in practice could have a significant impact on this population as well as organizations hoping to retain or hire more women.

**Recommendation #1:** First and foremost, more visibility needs to be brought to working women around the re-entry process and the challenges that go along with it. Most of the study participants had never given any thought to what might happen after they left the workforce and all of them were very surprised at how difficult and how much longer it took to re-enter than they had expected. Becoming educated, being aware of, and understanding the potential challenges to re-entry are critical for women making the decision to stay home. In addition, women should put measures in place (see Recommendation #2) to ease the transition back to work when they are ready.

**Recommendation #2:** Women should develop a long-term plan when deciding to leave the workforce that would allow them to retain their skills and to maintain their professional networks and relationship with their current company. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) encourage women to begin planning for re-entry from the moment they decide to leave the workforce.
None of the participants in the study had given much thought to re-entry. Each was focused on their current work dilemmas and difficulties with work-life balance and never considered how long they might be out or what the re-entry process might look like. Additionally, women should keep all certifications and licenses up to date during their time out so that they are not faced with re-certification requirements or starting over when they return to work. Zimmerman and Clark urge women to maintain their industry knowledge by staying active in professional organizations, volunteering, attending conferences or furthering their education (p. 626). Unfortunately, of the study participants, only Kat worked to maintain her skills and that was after realizing how outdated her skills had become.

**Recommendation #3:** Women who leave the workforce and are looking to re-enter should utilize an organization like IRelaunch, the Mom Project, ReacHIRE or the Mom Corps to help find and prepare for professional work; get specialized training and coaching; or to build a new network. According to Stone and Lovejoy (2019), many of these organizations promote and connect women to internship (or “returnships”) opportunities as a way to return to work. Companies like MetLife, Crédit Suisse, Morgan Stanley, JP Morgan Chase, Johnson & Johnson, and General Motors offer such programs (p. 475). Of the study participants, only Franny had searched had worked with a firm like this, while most of the other participants did not even seem aware that they were out there and that they could look to these companies for support.

**Recommendation #4:** When planning to take a career break, or after leaving the workforce, professional women may want to seek out other female professionals who have taken a career break for support while out of work and during transition back to work. This would allow them to network, share ideas and possibly find employment opportunities. Additionally,
women who have re-entered successfully should share their learnings with women who are attempting to re-enter.

**Recommendations for Organizations**

**Recommendation #5:** According to Huang, Starikova, Zanoschi, Krirkovich and Yee (2019), the number of men in manager level jobs significantly outnumbers the number of women. In essence, the number of women decreases as the job level gets more senior, ultimately leading to not enough women to promote (Huang & et al., 2019). To counteract this problem, organizations should look for ways to maintain connections to high-potential females that leave to care for children by offering them project work, remote opportunities or part-time positions as they become available. Creating some type of women’s network for those who have left the organization but want to maintain a relationship with the employer would allow the organization to have a pool of potential future job candidates. This network could offer training, coaching and skills development periodically to help the women that have left maintain job-relevant skills for an easier return. As seen by the study, the majority of participants loved their former employers and aspects of the jobs they held, but at the same time, each was looking to return to a job that allowed work-life balance and flexibility.

**Recommendation #6:** Organizations should re-evaluate current jobs to test the feasibility of the job being done remotely. If more full-time, remote positions were available in companies, more women may opt to re-enter sooner, or never leave the workforce as it may be easier to balance work and family by working from home. Advertising these positions as remote and possible flexible working hours may attract more qualified, experienced, female candidates. As the study revealed, the participants were all looking for positions that allowed for more work-
life balance and flexibility. This simple and cost-effective change to a job location could open up a huge female talent pool not currently tapped.

**Recommendation #7:** More women hoping to opt back should utilize the services of firms devoted to placing those re-entering which would allow more employers to look to organizations like ReacHIRE, the Mom Corps, the Mom Project, and IRelaunch for female talent. Many of these organizations are helping women regain their skills, providing professional coaching, and investing in upskilling, which is a win-win for re-entry woman and the organization that hires her. Companies can save time and money filling positions by leveraging these organizations to provide talented, experienced, female candidates. Additionally, organizations could become a sponsoring company that puts specific programs into their workplaces, or “returnships”, similar to the ones mentioned earlier like JP Morgan Chase, Johnson & Johnson, etc. (Stone & Lovejoy, 2019, p. 475).

**Recommendation #8:** Organizations and HR practitioners could also benefit from the development of a career path model that accounts for a career break for an extended leave for mothers or fathers. Having a methodical approach to handle such situations, organizations and individuals could more proactively plan for their workforce exit and eventual re-entry.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

When evaluating the limitations of the study, it can be seen that although the researcher made strong efforts to recruit 10 participants, as well as to find a diverse group of women, only six were found that met the outlined criteria and were willing to be interviewed. Smith et al. (2009) argues that three to 16 participants is a good guideline for IPA and suggests that undergraduate projects stick to the lower end of that guideline, while larger projects move to the
higher end. Unfortunately, even with snowball sampling, the researcher was limited to six viable candidates and a somewhat homogenous sample.

Another limitation was the researcher’s own positionality and bias. Being a working mother that never left the workforce, the researcher tried to keep any personal bias from the study, but it may have unintendedly affected the findings without the researcher even being aware. According to Banks (2006, p. 64), “culture, context and the positionality of the researchers influence their assumptions, questions, findings and interpretation.” The researcher made every effort to follow Machi and McEvoy’s (2012) advice to identify and handle known bias by keeping a journal and noting any time personal bias or positionality identified during interviews and analysis. It was pointed out to the researcher that referring to a participant as a stay-at-home mother may have implied that the researcher assumed that because the participants opted to stay home, they did not work when in fact they worked every day taking care of their families and households.

The study may have also been limited geographically, demographically and socioeconomically. All of the participants came from suburban areas versus having any that were city or rural. Each came from similar environments and upper-income, traditional households. Having a homogenous sample, with very limited diversity may have limited the outcomes of the study. Additionally, the study may have been limited by the fact that all of the data gathered from the participants interviews was self-reported with no real way for the researcher to check facts or validate what was said. Because the researcher relied on some self-reported information from years ago in the participant’s lives, participants may have forgotten facts or embellished on statements due to the amount of time that has passed since the event.
**Future Research.** The study findings and limitations have uncovered several areas in which women and organizations could benefit from additional research. Three categories for potential research surfaced after evaluating study limitations and outcomes including: identity, policy, and societal influences. Regarding identity, several of the participants were proud to be able to identify as a professional again after re-entering the workforce, and not just a mother or wife. Part of this need to have an extended identity seemed to stem from a decreasing dependency on them from their children. Future research may want to investigate the identity impacts on females who have children who become empty nesters – both stay-at-home and working females. From a policy standpoint, the study pointed out that the United States may have the worst maternity benefits of any Western country (Akass, 2012). Future research may want to explore how positive changes in policy might impact the number of women that leave the workforce to stay home with children. What types of policy changes would it take to make it easier for women to take time off to raise their children as well as to return to work after having children? Finally, from a societal perspective, research could explore what the impact of the construct of intensive mothering is having on women’s decision to leave the workforce as well as the amount of time they are at home as this phenomena seems to grow stronger each year (Budds, Hogg, Banister, & Dixon, 2017).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to examine how six women made sense of their experience from leaving the workforce to trying to return after staying home for an extended period of time to raise their children. The research question was: *How do professional working mothers who choose to leave their career to raise children make sense of their experience from opting out to opting back in?* The results of the study
indicate that with a better understanding of the potential challenges to re-entry, professional working mothers could take a pre-emptive approach when leaving the workforce. Maintaining a relationship with their employer, keeping up professional networks and skills, and utilizing firms dedicated to helping mothers return to work, may allow women wanting to re-enter to avoid the challenges experienced by the research participants.

In addition, although some organizations are starting to capitalize on the amazing talent pool of women wanting to re-enter, so much more could be done including; more partnerships with firms focused on placing re-entry women, leveraging technology to create more flexible working conditions for mothers; and creating a network for talented females that have left the organization, but may someday want to return.
References


*Personnel Review, 41*(6), 813-831.


Appendix A: Initial Recruitment Email to Contacts:

Subject Line: Participants needed for a research study involving female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home with children

My name is Amy Valente and I am a doctoral student studying education at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of female professionals that took extended time off from the workforce to raise children and are attempting to re-enter the labor market.

I am specifically seeking females that are:

- College-educated
- Married (to men)
- Mothers
- Have worked in professional managerial or executive positions
- Can afford daycare for your child(ren)
- Seeking a job after having been out of the workforce for five or more years
- Worked full-time for at least five years with an annual income of over $85,000 before leaving the workforce
- Between the ages of 30 and 50
- Have at least one child under the age of 18
- Geographically located in the United States

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two to three interviews, either face-to-face, FaceTime, or telephone at your choice of location and a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed upon completion. Once the interviews are transcribed, research participants will be asked to review the transcripts (which should take approximately 20-30 minutes) to ensure accuracy. Participation is entirely voluntary.

To protect your privacy, your participation in the study will be completely confidential.

Please contact Amy Valente by phone or email for more information if you would like to volunteer to participate. Or, if you know of someone that might be interested in participating and fits the criteria above, please feel free to forward this email to them.

Phone: 860.978.1934 or Email: Valente.a@husky.neu.edu

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Amy Valente

Amy Valente
Doctor of Education Student, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University
Appendix B: Initial Recruitment Post to Personal Networks:

Subject Line: Participants needed for a research study involving female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home with children

My name is Amy Valente and I am a doctoral student studying education at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of female professionals that took extended time off from the workforce to raise children and are attempting to re-enter the labor market.

I am specifically seeking females that are:

- College-educated
- Married (to men)
- Mothers
- Have worked in professional managerial or executive positions
- Can afford daycare for your child(ren)
- Seeking a job after having been out of the workforce for five or more years
- Worked full-time for at least five years with an annual income of over $85,000 before leaving the workforce
- Between the ages of 30 and 50
- Have at least one child under the age of 18
- Geographically located in the United States

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two to three interviews, either face-to-face, FaceTime, or telephone at your choice of location and a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed upon completion. Once the interviews are transcribed, research participants will be asked to review the transcripts (which should take approximately 20-30 minutes) to ensure accuracy. Participation is entirely voluntary.

To protect your privacy, your participation in the study will be completely confidential.

Please contact Amy Valente by phone or email for more information if you would like to volunteer to participate. Or, if you know of someone that might be interested in participating and fits the criteria above, please feel free to share this post with them.

Phone: 860.978.1934 or Email: Valente.a@husky.neu.edu

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Amy Valente

Amy Valente
Doctor of Education Student, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University
Appendix C: Recruitment Post to Personal Social Media Network:

Subject Line: Participants needed for a research study involving female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home with children

Northeastern University doctoral candidate looking for participants for a research study involving female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home with children

I am a doctoral student studying education at Northeastern University in Boston, MA and I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of female professionals that took extended time off from the workforce to raise children and are attempting (or attempted) to re-enter the labor market. I'm looking for women willing to talk about their experiences in trying to return to the workforce after staying home. Please email me at: valente.a@husky.neu.edu, if you would like to volunteer to participate. Or, if you know of someone that might be interested in participating and fits the criteria above, please feel free to forward my email to them. Participation is entirely voluntary.

Amy Valente

Amy Valente
Doctor of Education Student, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University
Appendix D: Response to Qualified Participants

Subject Line: Participants needed for a research study involving female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home with children

My name is Amy Valente and I am a doctoral student studying education at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of female professionals that took extended time off from the workforce to raise children and are attempting to re-enter the labor market.

I am specifically seeking females that are:

- College-educated
- Married (to men)
- Mothers
- Have worked in professional managerial or executive positions
- Can afford daycare for your child(ren)
- Seeking a job after having been out of the workforce for five or more years
- Worked full-time for at least five years with an annual income of over $85,000 before leaving the workforce
- Between the ages of 30 and 50
- Have at least one child under the age of 18
- Geographically located in the United States

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two to three interviews, either face-to-face, FaceTime, or telephone at your choice of location and a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed upon completion. Once the interviews are transcribed, research participants will be asked to review the transcripts (which should take approximately 20-30 minutes) to ensure accuracy. Participation is entirely voluntary.

To protect your privacy, your participation in the study will be completely confidential.

I have attached a consent form. Please review, sign, scan (or take a photo) and email the form back to me at Valente.a@husky.neu.edu. In your email, please provide your phone number so that I can call you to set up our first interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.

Thank you again for your participation.

Amy Valente
Doctor of Education Student, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators:
Dr. Tova Sanders (Principal Investigator), Amy Valente (Student Researcher)

Title of Project:
Workforce Re-entry for Stay-at-Home Mothers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you prefer not to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a (former) female professional that took extended time off from the workforce to raise your child or children and is looking to re-enter the labor market.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of (former) female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home for an extended period to raise children.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in two to three interviews, either face-to-face, FaceTime, or telephone. Interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed upon completion. Once the interviews are transcribed, research participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure their accuracy.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a location you choose and at a time that is convenient for you.

- Initially a phone or FaceTime screening interview will be held, followed by an interview that will take about one hour. The screening will focus on introductions, your
background, the intent of the study and obtaining your consent to participant (see Appendix E). In the next interview, we will discuss your experience attempting re-entry.

- The next interview (if required) will take about 60 minutes. During this interview, the researcher may ask for clarification regarding your previous discussion and additional information on your experiences attempting re-entry.
- In addition, I will be asking you to review the interview transcripts. This should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. You will receive an email with a secure attachment containing the transcript. You can reply with feedback via email or by telephone.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort that a participant should expect to experience as a result of the study. Any information collected from our interviews will remain confidential and a pseudonym will be used on all references to you. All data collected will be stored in a secure location and will be destroyed upon completion of the study. This study is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit from taking part in the study. However, your involvement with this study may ultimately help influence organizations to develop programs for females re-entering the workforce. It may also help inform other women looking to re-enter the workforce.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you. To protect your identity, pseudonyms will be used for names of all research participants. All data collected and created electronically will be stored on a password-protected computer. Any documentation pertaining to research participants will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office. Any emails from the researcher will be sent using a secure Wi-Fi connection. Upon completion of the study, all records will be shredded and destroyed.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin this study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, any relationship you might have with Northeastern University or any organization will not be affected.
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact the researcher, Amy Valente, at 860.978.1934 or by email at Valente.a@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Tova Sanders, the Principal Investigator (faculty advisor) for the study, at t.sanders@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115 (617) 373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

There will be no payments for your participation in the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

No costs will be incurred as a result of your participation in the study.

Is there anything else that I need to know?

Research participants must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study.

I agree to take part in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the Participant above and obtained consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix F: Response to Initial Recruitment Request (those that do not meet criteria):

Subject Line: Northeastern University Study on Workforce Re-entry

Thank you for your email. Due to an excellent response to my request, it does not appear that I will need additional participants at this time. If anything changes, I will contact you to see if you are still interested in participating.

Thank you again for your interest.

Amy Valente

Amy Valente
Doctor of Education Student, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University
Appendix G: Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Interview:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date Transcribed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee Name (Pseudonym):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview #: 0 1 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Screening Interview:

Welcome:

Thank you for agreeing to participate. My name is Amy Valente and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of former female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home for an extended period to raise children.

Overview:

This is a screening interview to get more information about you. This interview will last approximately 15 to 20 minutes and will focus on getting to know you a bit better, answering any questions you might have about the study, getting your consent (see Appendix E) to conduct these interviews, and your background. The next interview will last about 60 minutes and I will be asking you more specific questions about your experiences. Finally, if more information is required, I will set up a third interview and we will discuss your thoughts on your experiences that we talked about in our second interview.

Please remember that anything you say will be kept confidential and I will use a pseudonym in any documentation in which I make reference to you. This study is voluntary, so you can decide at any time to stop the interview. In addition, I would like to audio tape all of our interviews. You will have a chance to read each transcript from the interviews and provide any feedback. Do I have your permission to record our interviews?

Audio recording will begin now.

I would like to ask you a few questions about your background.

- Have you attempted to return to work?
- Where do you live?
- What is your race?
• How old are you?
• How many children do you have?
• What are the ages of your children? Are they male or female?
• Does your husband work?
• What line of work is he in?
• What is your educational background?
• What is your professional work history?
• Why did you decide to leave the workforce?
• How old where you when you left employment to take care of your child(ren)?
• How long did you work before deciding to leave your career?
• How long have you been out of work?
• Could you have afforded day care for your children while working?
• In your last job, did you make over $85,000?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Can we set up dates/times/locations for your next interview?
Welcome:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my interviews. My name is Amy Valente and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of former female professionals who are attempting to re-enter the workforce after staying home for an extended period to raise children.

Interview Overview:

This is the second interview in a series of approximately three interviews. This interview will last approximately one hour and will focus on your experiences leaving your job, staying at home to raise your children and attempting to return to work. If more information is required, I will set up a final interview and we will discuss your thoughts on your experiences that we talked about in our second interview.

Please remember that anything you say will be kept confidential and I will use a pseudonym in any documentation in which I make reference to you. This study is voluntary, so you can decide at any time to stop the interview. In addition, I would like to audio tape all of our interviews. You will have a chance to read each transcript from the interviews and provide any feedback. Do I have your permission to record our interviews?

Audio recording will begin now.

- Tell me about your decision to leave your career.
- Tell me about your decision to return to work.
- How would you describe your “transition” from staying at home with your children to deciding to return to work?
- How would you describe your growth and development as you go through this “transition”?
• Tell me a bit more about what has happened since you made the decision to return to work.
• Can you tell me more about the process of returning to work?
• Do you think this process has changed you or those around you in any way?
• When you left the workforce, where would you have imagined yourself now?
• How do you see yourself two to three years from now?
• Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Can we set up dates/times/locations for your next interview?
Welcome:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in my interviews. I enjoyed our last discussion and am looking forward to hearing more about your experiences. As a reminder, this interview will last about 60 minutes and I will be asking you specific questions about your experiences leaving your job, staying at home to raise your children and attempting to return to work.

I would also like to remind you that anything you say will be kept confidential and I will use a pseudonym in any documentation in which I refer to you. This study is voluntary, so you can decide at any time to stop the interview. I will also continue to audio tape all of our interviews. You will have a chance to read each transcript from the interviews and provide any feedback. Do I have your permission to record our interview?

Audio recording will begin now.

- This interview will only take place if additional information is needed

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this final interview. I will be sending you all transcripts from our interviews for your review. Could you please confirm your secure email address?