Abstract

The Meaning of Work: Middle-Aged Women Reentering Paid Labor

By Katherine E. Sandker

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the meaning of work to middle-aged women reentering paid labor. I conducted in-depth structured interviews with five women aged 44-52 who discussed their thoughts and feelings about their transition into paid labor. The roles the women held and how the roles influenced the paths of their lives can best be understood through a combination of the following theoretical frameworks: the social construction of gender, role theory, feminist life span perspective, and the life course perspective. Three major themes emerged from the women’s narratives. These themes had to do with reasons for returning to work outside of the home; expectations of and for themselves, their families, and the job; and sources of job satisfaction. Particularly women with children gave unambiguous priority to their duties as homemakers and mothers. The women constructed their work trajectory to be parallel and secondary to their role as mother. The one woman who had no children still has primary responsibility for the household, but feels less constrained and was willing to reprioritize her obligations. These findings raise questions about the degree to which life course trajectories are a cohort effect.
THE MEANING OF WORK: MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN REENTERING THE WORKFORCE

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# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction
- Middle-aged women in paid labor: Statistics ........................................ 1
- Middle-aged women in paid labor: Literature ........................................ 3
- Theoretical Frameworks .......................................................................... 4
  - The social construction of gender ......................................................... 4
  - Role theory .......................................................................................... 5
  - Feminist life span perspective ............................................................. 6
  - Lifecourse perspective ......................................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Methodology ............................................................................ 8
- Research design ...................................................................................... 8
- Participants .............................................................................................. 9
- Data collection ........................................................................................ 10
- Analysis ................................................................................................... 10

Chapter 3: Findings ................................................................................... 12
- Participant portraits ................................................................................ 12
  - Feelings about the transition to work ................................................. 14
  - Female role models .......................................................................... 16
  - Transferable skills ............................................................................ 17
- Motivation ................................................................................................ 18
  - Getting out of the house .................................................................... 18
  - Interacting with people .................................................................... 19
  - Sense of self ..................................................................................... 20
  - Personal paycheck ............................................................................ 20
  - Financial need .................................................................................. 21
- Expectations ............................................................................................ 23
  - Prospective jobs ................................................................................. 23
  - Reentry timing ................................................................................... 24
  - Schedule ............................................................................................. 25
  - Routine ................................................................................................ 26
- Job satisfaction ........................................................................................ 27
  - Aspects of the job ............................................................................. 27
  - Specific activities .............................................................................. 28
  - Outcomes ............................................................................................ 28

Chapter 4: Conclusion ............................................................................... 30
- Implications ............................................................................................ 33

References .................................................................................................. 35

Appendices .................................................................................................. 38
- Appendix A: Interview schedule ............................................................. 38
- Appendix B: Recruitment advertisement ................................................. 39
Appendix C: Recruitment letter ................................................................................... 40
Appendix D: Consent form ............................................................................................... 41
Appendix E: Demographic sheet ...................................................................................... 42
Chapter I

Introduction

This study explores the meaning of work to five women aged 44-52 who are looking to or have recently reentered paid labor. The women participated in interviews in which they openly discussed and described their lives in and out of the workforce. As a cohort of women who observed their mothers as homemakers, they started their lives in a changing society that was becoming more accepting of women in paid labor. All of these women were out of the workforce for a number of years and described the transition they experienced or anticipate experiencing as they return to paid labor. They candidly discussed their motivations, expectations, and feelings in reference to returning to work, the job, their families, and themselves.

As women have become essential participants in paid labor outside of the home, society needs to become aware of what it means for women to be full-time wives, mothers, and employees. It is important to listen and understand the struggle that women experience while trying to balance their role as mother with their role in the workforce and how this affects their view of work. Additionally, there are unique struggles that women face in paid labor. All of these factors influence the meaning of work to middle-aged women, as this study illustrates through the experience of five women dealing with all of these issues.

Middle-aged women in paid labor: Statistics

Women’s labor force participation has steadily increased over the last 50 years. In the 1950s the United States started to see an influx of women into paid labor, resulting in about one in three women participating in the workforce. By 1998, nearly three in five women of working age were participating in the workforce (www.bls.gov). The laborforce participation of women increased from 33.4 percent in 1960 to 46.6 percent in 2000 (www.commissions.leg.state.mn.us). In 2000, the categories of women with the largest percentage participating in paid labor were aged 45-54 years, followed by women 35-44 years of age (Clark & Weisman, 2003).
Education and marital status also influence women’s participation in paid labor. In 2000, 74.2 percent of women with a college degree or more participated in the labor force. In comparison, 56 percent of women with high school diplomas and 32.4 percent of women with less than a high school diploma participated in the labor force (www.commissions.leg.state.mn.us). In 1992, 74 percent of divorced women, 65 percent of single, never-married women, and 62 percent of separated women were labor force participants, while only 59 percent of married women participated in the labor force (http://eserver.org/feminism/facts-on-working-women.txt).

If labor force participation of women varies by age, education, and marital status, so do the reasons women give for not entering the workforce. Research released in 1996 examined the relationship between women’s reasons for not working outside of the home and life-cycle events such as schooling, raising a family, and aging. The same research outlines how these reasons vary in importance among different age categories. Forty-three percent of study subjects aged 25-44 years list taking care of children or others as the number one reason for not working at a paid job, but most striking is that 72 percent of these were women (Weismantle, 1996).
In 1992, 54 million women were employed in the U.S. Of these 54 million women, 40 million worked full-time and 14 million worked part-time. Additionally, two-thirds of part-time workers in the U.S. were women (http://eserver.org/feminism/facts-on-working-women.txt). Typically, part-time jobs are unstable, pay low wages, and provide no benefits.

*Middle-aged women in paid labor: Literature*

The women who participated in this study are aged 44-52 years and therefore according to the Department of Labor are older workers (age 40+). “Older workers, whether men or women, face problems in the labor market such as job segregation, low pay, and falling rates of salary increases” (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). However, these barriers are exacerbated for women because of the embedded nature of gender norms and expectations that lead to sex discrimination and assumptions about women’s workforce attachment. Occupational segregation based on gender may result because of the greater flexibility in typically female jobs that are more easily paired with family roles (Shaw, 1989). Even as workforce participation has increased for women, they have maintained primary responsibility within the home (Alon, Donahoe, & Tienda, 2001). In addition to these obstacles, it is known that women’s earnings throughout the life course are less than those of their male counterparts. “According to human capital theory, the major determinants of wages are education, vocational training, and work experience…an interruption in work experience can be expected to have an adverse effect on reentry pay” (Shaw, 1989, p. 332). Much of the literature on women in paid labor focuses on problems in the workforce such as age and sex discrimination, disproportionate responsibility for family, gendered earnings differences, and employment instability. The obstacles that women face in the workforce stem from the social construct of gender and commitment to family roles (Shaw, 1989). The repercussions for women in paid labor only exemplify how individuals organize their lives based upon social institutions.

The scarcity of qualitative studies that would help to understand the transition to paid labor participation speaks to the need for studies such as this. While there is a plethora of literature on what happens to women in the workforce and the experiences of working mothers, there is very little insight into how the transition is made from unpaid work at home to paid work outside the home. All the studies cited above separate the two realms of women’s lives. Some research focuses on how women in the workforce balance their added roles at home, while other
research explores women’s experiences within the workforce. No one has asked what drives “homemakers” to return to work in midlife. How do they expect the transition to unfold? Why work at all? The answers to these questions give insight into the meaning of work to women, specifically in this case middle-aged women who have recently entered, or are looking to enter, paid labor.

Theoretical frameworks

Although initially my study was not driven by a particular theoretical framework, I was able to examine my data through a number of interrelated theoretical frameworks. These are the social construction of gender, role theory, feminist life span perspective, and life course perspective. The social construction of gender is central to understanding the behaviors of males and females in our society. From a young age we learn what our roles and responsibilities will be as members of society. For the purpose of this study role theory explains the expectations of women in our society guided by social constructs. As this study is particular to women, I also apply the feminist life span perspective to my data. With these concepts in mind, the life course perspective then allows me to understand the paths of these women’s lives as they have been guided by the roles and expectations of the female gender construct.

What all these frameworks have in common is an emphasis on gender inequality in the distribution of resources and labor, as well as differential access to power, influence, and levels of autonomy. Basically these frameworks are stratification theories that explain how our society produces and reproduces social inequality. Each one of these theories explains a part of the experience of the women in this study. Taken together, these frameworks are a powerful set of tools to help us understand the women’s life course trajectories.

The social construction of gender. The social construction of gender in our society begins with the assignment to a sex category at birth. “A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers” (Lorber, 1994, p. 20). Children are taught gendered behaviors through interactions with and between parents. “Imitation of same-sex models, particularly parents, is recognized as central to the socialization process” (Kelly, 1997, p. 23). In social interactions, each gender sees and learns how to act and respond in appropriate ways, and “thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order” (Lorber,
These behaviors are reinforced throughout the life course by assignment to different roles and responsibilities. Therefore once gender is assigned the social order creates and binds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations. Gender is experienced by individuals, but also functions as a social institution by which we organize our lives. Societies rank gender so that one gender has more prestige and power and ranks above the other gender (Lorber, 1994).

Our society ranks men above women and places each in a socially constructed status. The social status of being a woman assigns one to the role of girlfriend, wife, and/or mother and each is expected to behave in ways that reflect this status. Men are assumed to need more leisure time and greater freedom from domestic chores and caretaking functions, while women are assumed to accept family and caretaking responsibilities as fundamental to their womanhood (Kelly, 1997). Women in this study clearly accepted gender-specific roles without question. Since role theory is implicit in the social construction of gender, the application of role theory is clearly relevant to this study.

Role theory. Traditional gender roles refer to expected attitudes and behaviors which a society associates with each sex (Hatch, 2000). “Such roles identify and describe a person as a social being and are the basis for self-concept” (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2002, p. 257). Furthermore, the shared norms and values that are associated with these roles are considered the foundation of societal order. As such, it has been proposed that tasks within the family are allocated on the basis of gender, so that socioemotional functions of the family unit are assumed by women and economic functions and societal involvement are assumed by men. Specifically, Talcott Parsons proposed in 1955 that employed married women have “a job” rather than “a career” and men’s participation in housework and child care is secondary to their breadwinning role (Hatch, 2000). While it may be contended that this view is culturally and historically specific and therefore does not apply to modern women, I maintain that traditional gender roles are what the women of this study viewed as applicable to them. Furthermore, this model is specific to white middle-class families (Hatch, 2000), like the families in which the women of this study grew up, where women have traditionally been relegated to the role of caring for others (Browne, 1998). Assuming that women accept this role and conduct their lives accordingly, they are at a disadvantage throughout the life course with regard to career choices, power, and autonomy.
Feminist theorists critically examine the power and opportunity structures of our society that uphold this disadvantage.

**Feminist life span perspective.** The feminist life span perspective focuses specifically on the “needs of aging women, their unique challenges and triumphs, society’s role in providing them with advantages and disadvantages across their lifetime, thoughts toward social justice for aging women, and ideas for a new epistemology on women and aging” (Browne, 1998, p. 154). Recognizing that ageism brings a layer of oppression for women makes it all the more essential for this perspective to “draw more attention to women’s view of aging in their own words, one that documents and celebrates their strengths and resistance to oppression” (Browne, 1998, p. 155). Patriarchal ideologies lead to a lifetime of inequalities between men and women. By examining female roles within the home and in paid labor, it is clear that gender as a socially constructed status rarely benefits women. From this we can begin to understand that “certain traits attributed to women (i.e., passive, nurturing) are nothing more than qualities socially ascribed to women by the social structure, and not ‘essential’ characteristics” (Browne, 1998, p. 156). The compounded problems and issues that women face in their lifetime as a result of sexism are exacerbated by ageism in our society. Therefore the feminist perspective focuses on the social structures that promote inequality, not individually, but to the female gender as a whole (Browne, 1998). The women of this study did not express that they felt pressured by social constructs or that they felt disadvantaged by the trajectory they followed. On the other hand, gender norms and expectations are very powerful. The women of this study follow socially prescribed norms, roles, and expectations to guide the trajectories of their lives. The fact that they do not feel pressured by gender roles attests to the power of gender norms. The women of this study totally bought into traditional gender roles and norms and do not question them.

**Lifecourse perspective.** As society has changed and the gender roles of men and women have evolved correspondingly, the women of my study have based their point of view on what they have experienced in their lives and how they have interpreted each experience. The life course perspective allowed me to focus on each woman’s journey and the trajectories that they chose to understand their current situation. It is here that the social construction of gender, role theory, and feminist life span perspective help me to understand why women may have
embarked on a particular trajectory and how these trajectories are shaped by social constructs. A trajectory is a long-term pathway one follows as one moves through the life course (Hatch, 2000). Individual life courses include multiple, interdependent trajectories, such as work, family, and education (Settersten & Hendricks, 1999). Trajectories are defined by successive life events, such as marriage, birth of a child, retirement, or significant changes in one’s financial situation (Hatch, 2000). Life events are typically abrupt changes that are accompanied by gaining or losing a role (Settersten & Hendricks, 1999). A life event that causes a gradual shift in a person’s social identity is called a transition (Hatch, 2000). As the feminist perspective suggests, life events influenced by power relations (i.e. race, class, gender, sexual preference, age) affect the patterns of activities taken on throughout the life course (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Therefore, I use the life course perspective to focus on the ways in which these women’s multiple attributes, the social roles they occupy, their unique life events, and their adaptive resources interrelate within particular sociohistorical contexts to affect their transition or anticipated transition into the paid workforce (Stoller & Gibson, 1994). While the life course can be viewed individually as a life event history of a single individual, it can also be viewed collectively as properties of a culture (Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

The women who participated in this study discussed their lives without using these theoretical terms, but nevertheless allowed me to apply the life course perspective to understand the meaning they placed on critical aspects of their lives, specifically in this case, paid work. I present the women individually, describing each woman’s life event history, and then collectively examine the shared properties that shape their transition into paid labor. The women in this study discussed the overlapping trajectories of marriage, childbearing, and workforce participation as they experienced them. They also discussed their feelings and expectations for the transition from home to paid work. I outline in the remainder of this inquiry the profound impact that this transition has upon the life trajectory and how in combination with gender roles the meaning of work to these women is significantly influenced.
Chapter II

Methodology

In this chapter I describe and give rationale for the method I used to conduct this study. Since I was interested in the subjective experience and meaning of paid work for middle-aged women I decided a qualitative approach was indicated. Qualitative methods are most appropriate in exploring the meaning that people attach to a concept or what sense they make of particular questions about an idea. This method is intended to depict life as participants experience it, rather than in predetermined categories with numerical interpretations (Schutt, 2001). In this study qualitative methods allowed me to consider the individual perspectives of the women, reveal the complexities of relationships and understandings, disclose what actually happens in the lives of these women, and present individual profiles of experience (Gubrium, 1993). Using a qualitative approach required me to keep the central focus on the participants’ voices and their particular points of view (Gubrium, 1992).

Research design. I employed a qualitative research design to explore the meaning of work to middle-aged women who are looking to or have recently reentered paid labor. To engage the women I used an interview schedule (Appendix A) with questions about topics ranging from past work experience to advice for women in the same position as themselves. The initial question allowed study participants the opportunity to give me as much information as was comfortable for them. I first asked the women to tell me the story about how they first started to think about going to work. The initial question led the women to describe many of their expectations about returning to work. I then used probe questions to reveal more in-depth thoughts and feelings. I probed as to why it was so important for them to get a job and what they get or anticipate getting from work outside of the home that they did not get in the home. The responses resulted in motivations for reentering the workforce. I inquired about “homemaker” skills that transferred or would transfer to the workforce. To illustrate this, the women described the importance of their role within the home. I asked about female role models and uncovered a significant background, which revealed the importance of traditional gender roles. I also asked the women to discuss their feelings about the transitions, their typical day, and any advice they would give to women in their same situation. From the ample responses I
received I was able to identify emerging themes that influence the meaning of work for these middle-aged women.

Participants. Participants in this study included five women 44-52 years of age. While recruitment through a newsletter/newspaper advertisement (Appendix B) was attempted, all participants were recruited through opportunistic sampling. Opportunistic sampling, or convenience sampling, allowed me to make use of acquaintances in the population of study. I then employed snowball sampling by asking initial interviewees if they knew others like themselves to whom they could refer me (Weiss, 1994). All five participants identified themselves as middle-aged (40+) women who had been homemakers for at least five consecutive years with no work outside of the home, who at the time of the interview were either looking for work or had recently (within the last three years) entered the workforce.

Upon approval of the project by the Miami University Committee for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, I contacted the Butler County Job Center, Preble County Workforce Center, and five area Senior Centers by telephone. Then recruitment letters (Appendix C) and ads (Appendix B) were distributed to four senior centers and to the Butler and Preble County Workforce Centers. These recruitment efforts did not yield any participants who met the participation requirements.

Opportunistic sampling led to five women who met the participation requirements and agreed to participate in the study. These five women varied by marital status, number of children, educational attainment, current employment, and annual household incomes. Four of the women live in Ohio and one woman lives in North Carolina. Four of the women are married and one is divorced. One woman had no children, two have three children, and two have five children. Three of the women list high school as their highest level of education and two women are registered nurses. Two women are currently thinking about going back to work, one has gone back within the last month, one has worked for two and a half years, and one has recently quit after working three years and is now looking for a new job. Annual household incomes ranged from $20,000 plus spousal support for one woman, to $72-75,000 for two women, and $250,000 for two women. To assure success in recruiting I offered participants $15 for their time and effort. Given their levels of household income, it was not surprising that only one participant (June) accepted compensation.
Data collection. All participants were aware of the purpose of the study and each signed a consent form (Appendix D) and completed a demographic sheet (Appendix E) prior to their interview. All participants agreed to have their interview audio-recorded, and I transcribed all of the interviews within 24 hours of their completion. Audio-recording allowed me to retain all contents and details of each interview, consequently allowing for a more accurate and thorough analysis (Weiss, 1994). I asked participants to discuss their thoughts and feelings about reentering the workforce in an attempt to explain behaviors in relation to paid work outside of the home without imposing categorizations that would have limited the field of inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 1994). I guided the in-depth, unstructured interviews with an interview guide (Appendix A) designed to allow participants to share as much information as was comfortable for them. I completed four interviews in the participant’s homes and one interview over the telephone. Each interview lasted between 35-90 minutes and all participants seemed generally at ease throughout the course of the interview.

Analysis. In the first phase of text analysis, I conducted line-by-line analysis of each transcribed interview to identify preliminary themes and units of meaning. During the second open coding I examined all units of meaning and attempted to group similar units into categories. I then transported the interviews into atlas.ti, a computer program that assists qualitative data analysis. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, computers have been adapted only to the mechanical and not the interpretive phases of data analysis; “interpretation is still in the hands of the analyst” (p. 352). After transporting all interviews into atlas.ti, I coded the interviews within the program using the categories I had generated in open coding. At this point I created excerpt files containing all quotations for a given code. I then coded each excerpt file in the same manner as the initial interviews. This procedure, identified as the constant comparative method of analyzing qualitative data, “combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.134). “As each new unit of meaning is selected for analysis it is compared to all other units of meaning and subsequently grouped (categorized and coded) with similar units of meaning. If there are no similar units of meaning, a new category is formed. In this process there is room for continuous refinement; initial categories are changed, merged, or omitted; new categories are generated; and new relationships can be discovered (Goertz & LeCompte, 1981)”
(Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.134). Using this procedure, I identified first themes and then sub-themes; together they tell the emerging story of my study participants’ trajectories into the workforce in midlife.
Chapter III

Findings

In this chapter I will present the themes that emerged through the interviews with the five study participants. Specifically I will present the actual words of the participants as they discussed their lifecourse trajectories and their transitions into paid labor. Before presenting my findings, I offer brief portraits of my participants to provide a context for their utterances that I will quote throughout the presentation of the findings.

Participant portraits

Dolores: Dolores, 52, has been married for 26 years. She and her husband have three daughters. She is a registered nurse, but has been out of paid labor for 23 of the last 24 years. She returned to work as a visiting nurse for one year while her kids were in school but expressed difficulty in scheduling work around the activities of her daughters. Now that her youngest daughter is going to graduate from high school, Dolores is thinking about going back to work. Both her husband and her daughters are supportive of this decision. Work will not, however, be a financial necessity for Dolores and therefore she is not aggressively pursuing work. She is also concerned that getting a job that will meet her needs at this point in her life will be problematic. Dolores would like to have holidays off to spend with her children and be able to travel freely with her husband. Dolores is looking for a job that is fun and requires little responsibility. She would like to interact with lots of people, but not bring her job home with her at the end of the day.

June: June, 45, has been married for 23 years. She has no children. She worked at an insurance agency after high school, but was laid off after a few years. She then began to baby-sit in her home and continued to do this for 19 years. She did not feel that her position as a babysitter was greatly respected. June expressed that she finally got tired of being at home and longed to interact with adults. At this point she was presented with an opportunity to go back to work in a doctor’s office. Her husband was supportive of her decision to return to work. She talked candidly about her perseverance and describes her return to work as the hardest thing she has ever done. She has been back to work for two and a half years and really enjoys her work. However, June also reported being more tired now and not being as attentive to the housework.
Kathleen: Kathleen, 46, has been divorced for four years. She and her ex-husband were married for 24 years and have five daughters. Kathleen worked several jobs until her first daughter was born. She was then out of paid labor for 18 years. As her daughters got older, she decided to go back to work. She and her then-husband decided that she would go to work for him, which enabled her to have a very flexible schedule. After her divorce she began babysitting in her home. After one year she decided to quit babysitting, move from her family’s home into an apartment, and look for a job. Her daughters were extremely supportive. She then got a job as a bartender and eventually became the assistant manager. She speaks very highly of this job and truly enjoyed the work she did there. After three years at this establishment she quit because of difficulties with the manager. She also had hurt her back on the job and said she would now like to wait until her back is better before looking for a new job. She expressed that she cannot wait to get back to work because it makes her feel good about herself to help others.

Meredith: Meredith, 44, has been married for 24 years. She and her husband have four daughters and a son. Meredith worked as a clerk in a carryout and then as a secretary until her first daughter was born. She babysat in her home when her two older daughters were young and went back to work as a bookkeeper when they started school. During this time her husband was in medical school and completing his residency. After her husband completed medical school they moved to a new town where he started his medical practice. Meredith had two more daughters and when they began school she went to work in her husband’s medical practice. She worked one day a week which she did not even consider work, but expressed that it was enough to interfere with her weekly schedule. She worked for her husband for ten years until her son was born, and she has since not returned to work. She says that now that her son is getting to the age when he can go to daycare she would like to return to work. It has been her dream to open a café, and she and her sister are working on plans to make this happen. Meredith says that her family is supportive of her returning to work. She looks forward to interacting with people and getting out of the house. The café will also allow her to work hours that are more conducive to having school age children with after school activities. She also hopes that returning to work will help her family become more responsible for household and other chores.
Faith: Faith, 51, has been married for 24 years. She and her husband have three daughters. Faith has her bachelor’s degree in nursing and is a registered nurse. She has worked as an obstetrics/gynecological nurse for 20 years. Faith described how she was able to remain in the workforce after the birth of each of her daughters by reducing the hours she worked each week. Then five years ago her family moved out of state for her husband’s job. She stayed out of work to help her daughters acclimate to the new area. Faith has recently returned to paid labor in an obstetrics/gynecological nurse position. She went back to work because of financial need of the family. With two daughters in college and accumulating expenses it became necessary for her to return to work. Faith expresses a lot of resentment toward her husband and feels that he is at fault for their current financial situation, which has forced her to go back to work. Since one daughter still lives at home, Faith would like to try to manipulate her schedule so that she can be at home with her daughter as much as possible. This means that Faith is going to try to work nights and hope that her husband will take more responsibility for their daughter. She speaks candidly about her extreme apprehensiveness about returning to paid labor and her anger with her husband for the financial situation that the family is currently experiencing. Faith feels guilty and angry about her work outside of the home, but is hopeful that everything will work out.

Feelings about the transition to work. The women candidly discussed their feelings about the transition from home to work. From expressions of their feelings I came to infer the driving forces behind the approach each woman has taken in returning or looking to return to paid labor. Their feelings ranged from indifference to anger.

Dolores has a “take it or leave it” attitude about returning to paid labor. She feels no pressure to return to work and is less than proactive in looking for employment. She is in no hurry to return to work and will take her time finding a job that will meet her needs. If she does not find a job that will meet her needs, she will not return to work.

June described the shock she felt when she returned to the workforce and realized all of the things that she needed to learn. She credits her perseverance to succeed and feelings of self-worth derived from her job with helping her make the transition into the workforce.

Kathleen passionately described how working outside of the home and helping others makes her feel so good about herself. Now that she is temporarily out of work she is even more cognizant of the affirmation she feels in working outside of the home.
Meredith described her feelings of isolation and solitude in the home in contrast to the interpersonal interactions she anticipates in work outside the home. She spoke of the satisfaction she will receive from having a job in which she can serve people and be able to interact with them.

Faith characterized her return to work by talking about the anger she feels toward her husband, the fear she had about starting a new job, and the subsequent struggle and conflict between her and her husband. After describing the struggle and insisting that she had incurred sacrifices in the move for her husband’s job, she was nevertheless hopeful that everything else would turn out okay.

Four of the women did discuss regrets about returning or planning to return to the workforce. Dolores admitted that she regrets not having gone back to work sooner. June regrets not having taken some time off between babysitting and going back out into the workforce. Kathleen regrets the falling-out with her previous boss because she misses working there. Faith regrets having allowed her family to get into the financial situation they are currently experiencing. She allowed her husband to have control and responsibility for family finances and consequently he made her choose between returning to work and cashing out her retirement fund. Even after agreeing to cash out her retirement she eventually had to return to work because of her husband’s continued poor financial decisions. Faith wishes that she had furthered her education by pursuing a master’s degree. She also regrets having put her oldest daughter in daycare when she was young, and feels so bad about it that Faith felt the need to apologize to her daughter.

Clearly these women have evaluated their lives in process known as life review. Life review is a naturally occurring process in which the person “takes an inventory of past feelings and behaviors and reexamines old conflicts” (Markson, 2003, p. 173). This process is commonly done when a person is making an important decision or has come to a major juncture in life. In order to evaluate past decisions the person will conduct a life review to aid them in making the best decision in the current situation. The women of my study spoke of the considerations that they have made regarding their roles in the home as well as their participation in paid labor. Additionally, they spoke of their regrets. The evaluation of their lives to this point has helped them use past experience to make the best decision at this juncture in their lives.
Life review helped my participants understand and evaluate their irreversible decisions that changed the course of their lives. The most applicable example is Faith cashing in her retirement on the advice of her husband. She was under the impression that if she cashed in her retirement she would be able to stay out of paid labor and continue to fulfill her role within the home. She was unaware that her husband’s decision with regard to the family finances had made it inevitable that she would have to return to work. In reviewing her life, as she began the process of reentering the workforce, she wished that she had made different decisions that would have lead to better choices for her and her family. The decision to return to paid labor will be more on her terms then were the financial decisions. Understanding the process of life review and recognizing that each of my participants had been through this process allowed me to more closely examine the steps that the women have taken in reentering paid labor.

The participant profiles outlined above in combination with the feelings expressed by the women exemplify how life events propel trajectories to interconnect. Specifically, the life event of having children interrupted many of the women’s work trajectories, just as children growing older seem to have the opposite effect on the work trajectory. This leads to the question of why women’s life course trajectories were more significantly impacted than men’s by life events that changed dynamics within the home.

Female role models. To explore the influence of gender roles the participants have had in their lives, I asked the women about their mothers and whether or not they had participated in paid labor during the study participants’ childhoods. Traditional gender roles were upheld in the homes of origin of the participants whose mothers were their primary female role models. All of the participants’ mothers had been stay-at-home moms; most never entered the workforce after their children were born and raised. As society changed during the participant’s lives and gender roles evolved to become somewhat more blurred, the women of my study had based their view on gender-specific behaviors that they witnessed firsthand in their homes of origin (Freeman, 1997). While they are all either back in paid labor or thinking about going back, originally they all followed in the footsteps of their mothers and upheld the traditional roles of their gender. All participants talked about why they wanted to go back to work, but four had not been in paid labor because of responsibilities to their families. All five women stated, either explicitly or implicitly, that they had always dreamed of staying at home and being a mom.
While two of the women did pursue post-secondary education, only one used this as an avenue to a “career.” Furthermore, the career she “chose” was in nursing, a profession that is most often occupied by women. So while the women of this study were on the cusp of changing societal acceptance of women in the paid workforce and the blurring of role expectations, their female role models typified upholding the traditional gender roles. The women followed the lead of their female role models and placed their family as their highest priority and their role as mother and/or homemaker as their primary responsibility. Now the women will add the paid labor trajectory and work in such a manner as to maintain their role within the home.

Transferable Skills. I asked each of the women if they thought they had any “homemaker skills” they could transfer to the workplace. Their responses varied considerably as illustrated by their statements. This is how Dolores talked about transferable skills:

I don’t know if I would say that staying at home has prepared me for working outside of the home.

Dolores’s lack of recognition of transferable skills speaks powerfully about her view of her role within the home. The other four women expressed that being at home has prepared them with skills that will apply in paid labor, but many of the transferable skills they listed are gender-specific.

Faith clearly relates obstetrics/gynecological nursing with motherhood when she says:

The only thing I would think is, I, you’ve been through childbirth, you’ve been through raising kids, you know the fears the patients are going through, you know, I’ve breastfed, um, that kind of thing.

Similarly, Kathleen credits being a mom and a woman with easy acquisition of skills:

Well, just being a woman, being a mom. I think you just have, I don’t know what you would call it, you just kind of have a common sense for a lot of things that I did…I would say it helped me a lot, just being at home and being a mom for that many years…helped me, picked things up easier.

June considers her babysitting experience as having equipped her with transferable skills that helped her get along well with clients:
I get along great with kids here. Um, patience…because you have to have a lot of patience…and I think that, um, appreciate other people, no matter what kind of job that they have that they are important.

Meredith’s idea of a transferable skill is related to providing for clients in paid labor what she provides for her family at home:

I’m hoping to provide things that people need and want to use because basically we’re looking for gifts for the home that people, women enjoy and don’t feel guilty about buying and using. Um, also the food line, I love to cook for people; I’ve always enjoyed it; I love waiting on people.

It is clear that as the women move into the workforce they do so by adhering to social constructs. Most of the women of my study recognized very gender-specific transferable skills. If the social institution of gender and its consequences in the workplace are so embedded in societal view, what then motivates women to participate in paid labor?

Motivation

In this section I present the women’s reasons for entering paid labor or contemplating to do so. For women who have been out of the workforce for an extended period of time, what influenced their transition? The women shared the reasons they had for reentering paid labor, including getting out of house, interacting with people, sense of self, receiving a personal paycheck, and financial need. While one or two of these motivations were predominant in all of the women’s stories, they were not mutually exclusive. Many of the women had overlapping reasons for wanting to return to the workforce including wanting to have a job they enjoyed, being able to provide for their children, and having personal success.

Getting out of the house. Getting out of the house was an important motivation. The women spoke emphatically of wanting and needing to get out of the house, as illustrated by these statements. Although they all wanted to get out of the house their specific reasons varied. This is how June talked about it:

I got sick of being at home and I just wanted to get out of my house and get a job. And it was hard my husband would come home after working all day and he was ready not to do
anything and I ready to go somewhere, where as I had been stuck in the house…I love being outside the home.

Clearly being out of the house and participating in paid labor put June in the personally undesirable situation of being out of sync with her husband’s schedule. This is quite different from Kathleen who felt trapped by the environment of her house:

So I would say it had to be just getting out into the world and meeting people…I just felt kind of trapped at home… I just wanted to do something different; I just wanted to be out in the world instead of at home all of the time.

Meredith stressed that getting out of the house would mean that she would spend less time doing repetitive housework:

I enjoy working. I would like to be working and doing something I liked to do instead of the same menial tasks daily, in and out.

It is apparent that while getting out of the house was an important theme, it meant something different for each woman. From being in sync with one’s husband’s schedule to disliking housework, all of the women are aware of why they want to get out of their house.

*Interacting with people.* Different pulls and pushes were at work for women to seek interaction outside the home. Interacting with people outside of the home was one very important reason related to motivation to return to work. Four of the women emphasized their desire to have social interactions with lots of people. Dolores thinks “…it would be fun working one-on-one with a, seeing different people.” June stressed that she enjoyed her years of babysitting, “but after awhile you just want to talk to an adult.” Similarly, Kathleen said “…just getting out in the world and meeting people, and just being with adults.”

The women craved adult interaction and wanted to get out of their homes in search of fulfilling this desire. On the other hand Meredith expressed feeling too lonely at home and needed to interact with people. She said “…it is a more of a satisfaction that, um, the interaction with other people, I’ve always enjoyed it. I miss that sometimes; it’s very solitary being at home.” Clearly interaction with adults was a strong motivator to reenter paid labor for all my informants.
**Sense of self.** Feelings of increased self-esteem and self-worth emerged as powerful motivators for women to seek work outside the home. Most people voluntarily go along with their society’s instructions for those of their gender status because the norms and expectations shape their sense of worth and identity (Lorber, 1994). The women of this study expressed their self worth in terms of working outside of the home, while still fulfilling their role within the home. They use a variety of words to express the effect of work on their sense of self:

I think feeling better about myself. Um, I think that’s mainly what I get out of this, um, feeling a little bit more important. (June)

But I do wanna go back to work, I mean, I feel so good about myself when I’m at work, you know. I feel very worthwhile. I feel confident. (Kathleen)

June’s feelings of importance in her job and Kathleen’s feelings of confidence associate work with positive outcomes. The positive outcomes are conveyed in the way June and Kathleen view themselves and consequently how others view them. On the other hand, for Kathleen work is also about recognition of roles:

Making myself feel good about doing something other than just being a mom.

Work produces an outcome that will be noticed by oneself and indirectly by others. As Kathleen makes clear, even while she acknowledges the benefit to herself from paid labor she is still helping others:

I just think I needed to do this for myself, you know. I’m helping others while I working, but yet it was really a lot of help for me…it was very, very mentally good for me.

Increased feelings of self-worth are the start of individual empowerment for these women. The snowball effect of women’s feelings about work lend to feelings of independence, autonomy, and empowerment.

**Personal paycheck.** Receiving personal paychecks from work completed outside of the home also led to feelings of satisfaction. Four of the women discussed how it felt to receive a personal paycheck and why this was so important to them. The tangible recognition of work is a powerful motivator. In the case of these women a reward for work done well ignites feelings of independence from a life where often their hard work is under recognized. Meredith simply stated, “The satisfaction of earning a paycheck is always nice.” Kathleen also recognized
receiving a personal paycheck. She noted that “getting paid, it’s very rewarding you know. It was very rewarding getting paid for doing a good job.”

The tangible rewards in paid labor also lead to a sense of power and autonomy. Traditionally males are the family “breadwinners” and this has driven the oppression and domination of women. For the women of my study earning a paycheck was empowering and led to feelings of independence. This power stems from knowing you contribute to society, you are compensated for doing so, and consequently you could provide for yourself. June’s statement about receiving a personal paycheck reveals the power of money:

I really don’t need a lot, but I like having my own money. And my check is my money… I could not stand not to have my own money.

This statement emphasizes the power of money that is striped when you rely solely on someone to provide financial stability.

Financial need. Despite the satisfaction of earning a paycheck, only one woman stressed the need for increased household income as a motivator to return to work. Four women discussed finances. Three women expressed their motivation was not fueled by immediate need for income. The socioeconomic status of the women’s households leave no surprise that three of the women said returning to paid labor was not about money:

I wasn’t working out of financial need…it’s not a financial necessity at this time.

(Dolores)

On the other hand, again independence and power emerge to motivate participation in paid labor:

It probably was more financial security, knowing that, I wanted to be able to take care of myself… it’s not like I have to do this, it’s something I’ve just always wanted to do. Well I mean in a way financially, I don’t have to do it. Mentally, I feel I have to do it.

(Meredith)

For Kathleen, who will not receive spousal support forever, earning money and being financially stable is in preparation for the day when it will be a necessity and her responsibility:

I get spouse support, so I thought, you know, I don’t have to take this. You know, it’s gonna be tight, I’ll get another job.”

While these women expressed feelings of financial stability, Faith articulated financial need as the primary motivation for returning to work:
It was all financial, you know, my two kids are now in college…you know, I’m still not working and we have just, you know, four cars, one income, and now my next child has gone to school…work is becoming necessary…I don’t want to leave all of this debt to my kids.

Faith tells the story of many middle-class families; the stress of maintaining middle-class status is often a financial hardship. The motivation to measure up to neighbors, friends, and family can put strain on the pocketbook and the urge to stay ahead can be persuasive.

Clearly, getting out of the house, interacting with people, sense of self, personal paycheck, and financial need were strong motivators to return to paid labor. The women are willing and ready to combine participation in paid labor with existing full-time domestic tasks and create a “second shift” for themselves. “Regardless of the strains produced by the second shift…a busy life that includes diverse roles, the opportunity to interact with other adults on a daily basis, a paycheck of one’s own, and other intrinsic rewards from work roles, apparently more than compensates psychologically for whatever strains may result from a very long work day and week” (Chafetz, 1997, p. 117). The women stress that they need fulfillment as it is derived from one or any combination of these motivators. Life events such as children entering school, children leaving the home, and changing financial situations all drive women to seek different kinds of fulfillment in a different role. This new role, however, must still allow them to continue to meet their obligations to the family and their position in the female role.

Only one of the women stated that finances are the main reason for returning to paid labor. “For many couples, financing their children’s college education or preparing for financial security in old age may depend on wives’ employment” (Shaw, 1989, p. 333). While this may be true, the women’s own words demonstrate the psychological need to reenter the workforce. Because of the blurring of gender roles, it has become more acceptable and possibly even expected for women to participate in the labor force for whatever reason. However, the narratives of the women in this study clearly illustrate that the women still uphold the traditional belief that women have primary responsibility in the home. Working women, then, have to balance their roles in the parallel trajectories of work and family making sure that the new trajectory does not diverge too much from the footsteps molded by their role models. Expectations of a job and participation in paid labor are central to being able to achieve this balance.
Expectations

Expectations about work are influenced by the traditional gender roles the women upheld in their lives and the subsequent familial responsibilities they feel. In discussions of the transition to work, the women clearly outlined what they expected or are expecting from themselves as well as from the job. It became clear that most of the women primarily envisioned their reentry in terms of how it would fit into their lives as a parallel trajectory that did not compete with their primary roles as mother and homemaker. This was not true for June, who, not having any children, was willing to let her housework slack. In this section I first present what the women expect from their job outside of the home and then the stipulations that drive these expectations.

Prospective jobs. The women discussed their expectations about work in such a way that they revealed what the act of going to a job outside of the home does mean or will mean to them. Dolores describes a job that will be fun, where she can have one-on-one interactions with a variety of people. She says:

I would like to do something that, a type of job that I’m not going to bring home with me, it’s gonna be just interacting with people on a fun type situation, like Bath and Body Works, or Victoria Secret, where you meet and you greet and you chit chat, and you don’t take that work home with you and you don’t have responsibilities and commitments after hours.

June expresses uncertainty about her future, but makes no question of her preference to work outside of the home. When asked how long she will continue working and how the transition into retirements will unfold she responded, “I would like to be able to get to 60 and say I quit, you know, but I don’t know. I think it all depends on what life brings you…If I could I would probably, if I could, I’d work full-time” until retirement.

Kathleen is looking forward to returning to work and spelled out a strategy for obtaining a new job after her back is healed:

And, but I really wanna get a job. As soon as I get my back straightened out, you know, I know what it is now…So I wanna get, you know, get it settled down, get it fixed up before I really dig in hard. But I do wanna go back to work.
Meredith revels in the prospect of owning her own café where she can pursue her career according to her ideal plan:

I think we’re planning the hours of the café so it fits our lifestyle…there’s other places that run like that and I think if we focus in on one main meal, the lunch one, that’s kind of what we’re going for.

Faith expects that she will eventually enjoy her work and the interactions that she will have with others, but currently she is concerned with the trade-off she is making for financial stability:

It’s kind of hard to balance…I don’t want to work days…if I work nights, this sounds very boring, but what I’ll do is, I’ll probably work and then sleep during the day and get up when [daughter] gets home.

Two of the women with children at home have very specific conditions for returning to paid labor. While they do not specifically state it, all of the women in this study with children embraced the social constructs of caring mother and continued their role of mother as their primary responsibility. They are not concerned with their decisions’ effect on their workforce marketability or that they are perpetuating patriarchal ideologies. The women of this study who have children articulate that their children come first, and they are willing to suffer any hardships that follow from this priority. With this in mind, reentering paid labor comes after weighing several measures, specifically reentry timing, schedule, and routine.

*Reentry timing.* For four women in this study who had children, their children’s ages were influential in the timing of returning to paid labor. This is how they talked about good timing or the time being right for returning to work:

My kids are grown, there wasn’t the responsibility, they didn’t have the, you know, they weren’t babies so, you know, they were in school. (Dolores)

I think the timing is right. I think [son] is getting to the age, I think it is really important to be home with the kids when they are really little…It’s been waiting for him to get to the right age. (Meredith)

Financial necessity influenced timing for Faith in that she and her husband now have two daughters in college, and trying to provide for them has become an expensive task:
I’m still not working and we have just, you know, four cars, one income, and now my next child has gone to school [college].

Reentry timing is the key for the women to make a smooth transition into paid labor. Once this time has been identified the women have construct a work schedule that also fits their lifestyle.

Schedule. It is evident that the participants have given top priority to their families before considering anything that might resemble a career outside of the home. The four women with children spoke of ideal and desired schedules that respected the hours during which their children would be at home, have activities, and possibly be in need of care or assistance. Dolores said:

I told this agency that I wanted strictly part-time, one, two, three days a week…it turned out that some weeks I worked five days…and it turned into working some nights…I was missing track meets and trying to arrange schedules…it was not convenient to work at that time.

Kathleen too is quite clear about her priorities:

I wanted it to be where, you know, the hours so that I could be home when the youngest ones got home from school especially and that’s why I worked at [husband’s] office. Because I could pretty much leave if somebody got hurt, you know, and that type of thing. It was easy for me to work there. Um, and that was the main goal anyways, that I could be home with my kids when they got home from school. That was my plan.

Meredith also has a specific schedule in mind:

I think we’re planning the hours of the café so it fits our lifestyle. And that will be an advantage.

Now they have carefully chosen jobs that allow them both flexibility and predictability. Faith noted that during the day shift “you have to be there at a quarter ‘til seven and then [daughter] gets on the bus at 7 and [husband] has to be at work at seven, so it just doesn’t work out.” Even June who has no children considers evening work as undesirable. “It was Monday and Friday evenings and, you know, I quit babysitting and I would go right there and, um, it just for to the point that I was tired of working Monday and Friday evenings and not being able to do things.” Workforce schedule is clearly important to all of the women as they are essentially working two jobs that need to be coordinated. As Meredith pointed out, “The scheduling of things can be very difficult. And let’s face it; it’s hard because you basically end up doing two
jobs.” The expectation of the schedule of paid labor fitting in with existing roles within the home also contributes to rearranging the routine within the home to co-exist with participants in paid labor.

**Routine.** The women arrange their work schedule as best they can to fit their domestic obligations. As “normal” family behavior expectations mandate, women have primary responsibility for domestic labor, which results in family obligations of employed women as a “second job” (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). All the women in this study had primary and often sole responsibility for household chores; they routinize their domestic tasks; and they pay primary attention to the needs of their children. Even June, who has no children, said her household routine drastically changed when she reentered the workforce, to the point that she now neglects some of the housework. “That is one thing that doesn’t get done as much, is the work at home. I have neglected my house work.” Dolores anticipates that this same thing will happen in her household, “I pretty much do have a specific routine…if I go back to work, I won’t have that daily cleaning routine…I probably won’t change what I do in the course of a day, but I think it will be rearranging when I do it”. Meredith and Faith, however are hoping that their families will pitch in and help more around the house once they work. Faith said that her reentry into paid labor will “help her [daughter] grow up.” She said that to date her daughter “hasn’t really had too much responsibility…Probably I’ll expect more from [daughter].” Meredith anticipates that she “will still be the main person doing the household chores.” But she did add that “everybody will have to take on their own responsibility”, and that is her goal. Meredith says, “That’s what I am hoping for, that everybody can be responsible for themselves, if they get something out, they can put it away, you know.”

This demonstrates that particularly for women with children, the trajectories of unpaid work at home and paid work outside of the home exist parallel to each other, with unambiguous priority placed on their duties as homemakers and mothers. The factors of reentry timing, schedule, and routine combine to suggest that the women hold their role of mother to the highest standards. “Decades of research have shown that women take on the vast majority of housework, in part because no one else will do it and in part because everyone, including women, expects them to do so, as if to prove that they’re real women” (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, p. 99). They attend to family first and as best possible, whenever possible. Recognizing reentry
timing, schedule, and routine as significant expectations in the women returning to paid labor further leads to an understanding their meaning of work. If all of these stipulations apply in examining jobs for reentering the workforce, then it is clear that the meaning of work to these women is anchored in their role within the home.

Job Satisfaction

The women’s adhering to the traditional gender roles of women lead me to consider what aspects of work they might find most enjoyable and how this did or did not relate to the strong attachment to their roles within the home. Here it is important to differentiate between aspects of the job, specific activities, and outcomes of the job when evaluating why a particular job would elicit satisfaction.

Aspects of the job. Aspects of the job that produce satisfaction were related to many of the topics I discussed in sections above. The women talked about the work hours, interaction with others, helping others, autonomy, prestige, and amenities (i.e. perks) as topics that influence job satisfaction. Here I heard comments about how expectations of work, within the perceptions of obligations in the home, influence job satisfaction. For the most part the women talked about how working outside of the home and aspects of the job are or will be gratifying for them. Faith was comforted by the fact that the hospital where she is employed is “working mother” friendly. In addition there are amenities that come with the job that she feels will improve her lifestyle:

[Hospital], it is one of the top best companies for working mothers in the nation…they offer childcare onsite…they have a gym.

Furthermore, aspects of the job are not necessarily related or dependent upon the employer, but actually on the very nature of the job itself. June expressed how validated she feels having a job outside of the home:

When I babysat I felt like it was my job because I wasn’t doing it, I don’t have any children, I wasn’t doing it to stay home with the children. But nobody else felt like this was a job. [Now] I feel like I have a job that other people recognize as a job!

The aspects of a job that make it desirable are often subjectively determined by each woman’s individual needs, but in combination with specific job activities make a particular job the right “fit.”
Specific activities. A few of the women listed specific activities that they particularly enjoy in work situations. As Faith stated, the latest technology is an important aspect of her job that determine a number of her activities. “I think that they have the cutting edge of medicine and they’re up-to-date on a lot of their equipment and care.” She also appreciates “being able to teach, do a lot more teaching with the patients.” June also noted that their were specific activities that favored in her job, but she remarked that her “favorite thing about his job is doing so many different things…I love doing different things.” Thus there are a variety of specific reasons for which the women chose their particular job. However, their choices were severely limited by their primary attention to their gender roles.

Outcomes. In combination, aspects of the job and specific activities contribute to satisfaction and lead to significant outcomes for the women. I think the outcomes of job satisfaction are most important in fueling the meaning of work for the women. It is here that all of the other aspects that contribute to the meaning of work come together. At this point the women experience the product of all the considerations they have made to make the experience most successful. The outcomes of job satisfaction are subjective, as two women poignantly captured the outcome of their paid labor participation with these statements:

My family says that I talk about it all the time, you know. So that is probably a good thing, you know. I do talk about work a lot, the job, and people I see, and just the experience of it, I do talk about that a lot so I think that is good. (June)

For June talking about her job a lot means that she must have achieved something in choosing this particular job. For Kathleen the greatest outcome was her realization of what participating in paid labor has done for her. She is proud of her achievement as an organizer of social events:

I it was just nice doing for myself, getting myself out in the workplace, um, you know, holding a party on my own and having it be a big success.

The outcomes of job satisfaction as discussed by the women revealed the ultimate tradeoffs they were making. As Meredith said, “I look at it as an advantage, I only look at it as a positive thing that I’ve been able to do this [stay home].” But as the women make the transition back into the workforce, they want the experience to be as smooth and successful as possible for all involved. When thinking about going back to work all of the women had expectations of the job. They did and are trying to find the best fit of a job for them based on their expectations.
Again I stress the importance of children in this equation as they have the most influence on how women with children structure the trajectories of their lives. However, it is with regard to job satisfaction that the women can either reap the rewards of a careful decision about a job, or be left feeling unfulfilled because of an ill fit.
Chapter IV

Conclusion

The five women who granted me an interview for this project contributed to the slim qualitative knowledge base about the meaning of work for middle-aged women who were homemakers during their young adult years and who enter paid labor in midlife. While researchers have examined what occurs in the home and the workplace when women reenter paid labor, none have specifically asked women why they considered returning to work, how they felt about it, and what it meant for the women to return to work. The findings of this study shed light on the aspects women did or will take into consideration when contemplating reentering paid labor. The interviews revealed several important insights about the role of women in the home and its subsequent effect on their transition into paid labor. These findings can now serve as a base from which to explore this topic further.

As women continue to balance paid and domestic labor, it becomes increasingly important for employers to recognize the needs of women. It is still commonplace for women to have primary responsibility for household duties and therefore they are essentially working two jobs. Furthermore, for women with children the primary responsibility for the home can be even more rigid and strenuous. Employers need to be aware of the expectation women have of working outside of the home and how these expectations contribute to satisfaction on the job. With all of the themes that emerged while talking to my study participants, it is clear that there are definite conclusions to be drawn and areas that need more in-depth research.

Each of the women who participated in this study has characteristics that influence why she decided to reenter the workforce. It is clear that all of these women have stipulations about what they expect from work, the proper time for reentry, and what they need to do to balance all the roles in their lives. June is an exception in this study because she has no children and her return to work was supported by her husband. She and her husband understand that she is working for self-fulfillment. The other four women uphold the traditional female gender role in their household dynamic. Their work is a secondary trajectory that is parallel and so planned as not to interfere with their role as mother and homemaker.

The women of my study express their views as choices they have made, but understanding the implication of the social construction of gender, norms and expectations of female roles, and how power and opportunity structures influence women allow me to recognize
the limited nature of their “choices.” The paths these women have followed are a direct result of the cycle of oppression of women. The women’s “choices” perpetuate what the feminist life span perspective outlines as the unique challenges and triumphs of women as a result of advantages and disadvantages across their lifetime. Capitalism relies on a ready pool of low wage workers, which are often women. Women seek these positions in paid labor not because they have made a conscious choice, but because this is the structural placement of women in our society. It is the patriarchal ideologies that these women adhere to that uphold inequalities between men and women both in the home and in the labor market.

As we have come to understand gender socialization, it is clear why the women of this study organized their lives in such a way as to provide first for their families. “People go along with the imposition of gender norms because the weight of morality as well as immediate social pressures enforces them” (Lorber, 1994, p. 22). Gilligan (2001) described women’s construction of moral behavior to focus on care and responsibility in relationships so that the “expression of care is seen as the fulfillment of moral responsibility” (p. 73). Gilligan outlines the phases of morality to include three perspectives from which women view themselves. The initial focus is on caring for self in order to survive. The second phase emphasizes the connection of self and others to form a concept of responsibility where “good is equated with caring for others” (p. 74). Once others are “legitimized as recipients of the woman’s care” she is free to move on (p. 74). At this point the third perspective takes hold and allows the woman to dissipate the tension between selfishness and responsibility and recognize the importance of interconnection between the self and others (Gilligan, 2001). The women in this study typify the expression of stage three of moral responsibility. The quotations above unveil how gender socialization, the moral responsibility of care, and their subsequent roles have influenced the women of this study and contributed to decision-making about the trajectories of each of their lives.

The meaning of work was influenced by motivations, expectations, and different sources of job satisfaction. The overarching theme connecting all of these aspects is each woman’s regard for her role in the home. Reference to the lifecourse perspective as a theoretical framework allowed me to bridge the ideas of traditional gender roles, social institutions that shape individual lives, and these women’s evolution through the lifecourse. All of the women who participated in this study are white, heterosexual, and middle to upper-middle class women of one particular historical cohort.
Examining the women’s life course progressions allowed me to extract ideas and evaluate them individually and for the group. Above I outlined the female role models for these women and then went on to discuss their role in the family, as well as their view of the transition back to work. The women of this cohort were raised during a historical period when it became more acceptable for women to pursue education, work, and the traditional family in any combination. The opportunity structures of the women’s young lives may have influenced what path they chose, but certainly their female role models had a significant impact on the women.

An analogy that can help us understand how social institutions interact with ideologies generated throughout the lifecourse is imagining the footsteps in which these women follow. As a product of their upbringing the women followed in their mother’s footsteps. As social norms and expectation of women began to evolve and allowed them, at least theoretically, to pursue higher education and career trajectories, one foot so to speak began to diverge from the mother’s footsteps. Having their feet pulled into two divergent trajectories caused great strain and even greater effort. The women managed by not allowing the diverging path to move too far away from the path modeled by their mothers. This analogy represents women’s lives as they try to maintain roles within separate trajectories. This causes the women to have to carefully balance each of their roles.

Women with children were particularly centered in their homes, especially when their children were young or school age. However, June did not have any children. She babysat for pay in her home during the same timeframe that the other women were home caring for their families and households. Her reasons for wanting to go back to work had to do with the nature of babysitting. June felt at the mercy of the parents whose children she was watching and often did not feel appreciated. In her mind she was caring for “the most important thing in these people’s lives”, yet she felt that they looked down upon her. This is reminiscent of Hochschild’s (1989) report on how families divided their work between outside of the home, inside of the home, and childcare. Most strikingly, Hochschild briefly describes what happened when she contacted babysitters to participate in her study. She writes, “When we called them, a number of baby-sitters replied as one woman did, ‘You’re interviewing us? Good. We’re human too.’ Or another, ‘I’m glad you consider what we do work. A lot of people don’t’” (Hochschild & Machung, 1989, p. 5). June clearly communicated the same sentiment. In contrast to June, the women in the study who have children never used language to indicate that they viewed what
they were and are doing in the home as work. June placed more emphasis than did the others on the satisfaction of entering paid labor in a job outside of the home. All of the women, even those still looking for work, summarized what did or would satisfy them in a job outside of the home.

Family was a major theme throughout each interview, especially for the women with children. Researchers agree that the timing of life events is important to consider, but there is controversy concerning how and why timing is important (Hatch, 2000). I believe that interview data collected for this study speak to the importance of timing for women with children. They reveal how and why timing is important in relation to the care and development of family. There may eventually come a point when a woman can reconcile the strain of maintaining her role within the home while taking on the added responsibility of a job outside the home in order to fulfill herself through “the opportunity to interact with other adults on a daily basis, a paycheck of one’s own, and other intrinsic rewards from work roles” (Chafetz, 1997, p. 117). Further research should explore whether or not women of other cohorts, socioeconomic classes, and racial/ethnic groups in our society are as concerned with family as their primary responsibility as are at least four of the women in this study.

Implications

This study was completed on a small scale with five participants, all white, heterosexual, middle to upper-middle class females from basically the same birth cohort. Clearly a larger study is needed to fully explore the effect of marital status, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, cohort membership, and particularly childrearing on women’s perception of the meaning of work. A more in-depth exploration of the social and historical contexts of this and other cohorts may offer further insights into the meaning of work to women and how that may be different for differing cohorts, reflecting major changes in gender roles. Particularly as we see women’s paid labor differ between cohorts, it would be interesting to cross-sectionally examine the influence of female role models (i.e. mothers or mother figures) versus peers on the work trajectories of women. Furthermore, a better understanding of why women work, what expectations they have, and what aspects of the job elicit the most job satisfaction would round out the sketchy picture I was able to draw about the meaning paid work for midlife women. The findings yielded in such studies would expand the knowledge base about women’s work and contribute to a better understanding of the evolution of gender roles.
As I went through the process of analyzing and writing up the findings of this study I realized there are many questions that I would still like to ask the women. For instance: How many women in your life do you consider close friends? Who are they? Do they participate in paid labor? How often do you get together with them? When you were growing up, what women did you consider your role models? What part of their lives was attractive to you? Why? How did you make the decision to stay out of paid labor? What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of staying at home? Why? If you have daughters, how do you think their experience will be or is different from yours? Would you encourage them to have a career or focus on family? How do different age groups of women differ in paid labor participation in midlife? Why do you think that is? These are just a few of the questions that I would like to ask now. The answers to these questions would lead me to better understand the experience of women and how life events and trajectories influence paid labor participation. Specifically the meaning of work is entrenched in subjective experiences that can only be explored after getting information from those who have lived or are living this reality.
References


Appendix A: Interview schedule

Meaning of Work Qualitative Interview Schedule

1. **Tell me the story about how you first started to think about going to work.**

   Answers to this question are likely to offer the opportunity for probes into any or all of the following areas:

   2. How long were you/have you been looking for work?
   3. Who turned you down? Why?
   4. Who did you turn down? Why?
   5. How many jobs did you have until you decided to stay with this one?

   6. Why was it so important to get this job?
   7. What is it that you get out of this job that you didn’t get at home?

   8. Were there skills you had to acquire for this job? (Training programs?)
   9. Were there any skills that you used in the home that were applicable at your job?

   10. How does your family feel (encourage, discourage, etc.) about you looking for/having this job?
   11. What is/was the work history of other females in your family?

   12. How do you feel now that you have this job?

   13. Describe for me your work day yesterday.
   14. Was this a typical day? If not, describe for me what a typical day looks like.

   15. What advice would you give other women like you trying to find work?

   16. Are there any important issues relevant to our discussion that I have not asked you about?
Appendix B: Recruitment ad

A Graduate student at Miami University seeks middle-aged women, who have recently entered the workforce or are planning to do so, for participation in a study. In an interview lasting no more than 90 minutes participants will be asked to discuss their job and job search experience. Participants will receive $15 compensation. If you are interested please contact Kate Sandker at (513) 664-5227 or ksandker@yahoo.com.
Appendix C: Recruitment letter

Dear Prospective Study Participant,

For my Master’s Thesis in Gerontological Studies I am exploring the meaning of work for middle-aged women entering the workforce after having raised a family. This is an important topic because the labor market will increasingly depend on women like you, as large numbers of Baby Boomers are retiring.

I am interested in why and how middle-aged women make the transition from home to work. Specifically, I am interested in how and why women start thinking about going to work, what and how long it took them to find a job, whether and how they were prepared for the demands of the workplace, and what their job means to them. I am asking you to participate in this study.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you either in your home or any other location of your choice. Using a tape-recorder, I will ask you about the history and experience of your job search and subsequent employment. If you are still looking for work, I will ask you about where you are in this process and how you got there. I am interested in hearing about your expectations for the job and experiences before, during, and after the search as it applies to you.

The interview will last between one and one and one-half hours. I hope that you will share your experience of this important step in your life. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any question/s or stop participation in this project at any time. On the other hand, you may find it enjoyable to share your experiences. From this project I will gain important insights into the complexities of this process. While these insights may not benefit you directly or immediately, they will be useful to professionals who need to know what they should tell women to facilitate this transition from home to work.

All your responses will be kept strictly confidential. If I quote your words I will do so without ever mentioning your name. I will keep the tapes in a locked file cabinet in my home until they are transcribed. Only my professors will have access to the transcriptions, but they will not know the identity of the person who granted the interview.

Whatever your decision, please return the self-addressed and stamped postcard, indicating your decision. If you have questions about this study, please call me at (513) 664-5227 or Dr. Lisa Groger, my faculty advisor, at (513) 529-1598.

Sincerely,

Kate Sandker
Enclosure
Appendix D: Consent form

Consent to Participate

I understand that I am participating in a project about the meaning of work to older women entering the workforce. Kate Sandker from Miami University has explained the study to me. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded either in my residence or in another location of my choice, and that any information I provide will be strictly confidential. Kate may quote my words without identifying me. In any written materials that Kate produces she will insure that all personal identifiers will be changed so that there is no way I can be identified. Furthermore, the audio-recording will be destroyed. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary, and that I may stop the interview or my participation altogether at any time. If I would like any further clarification about the study, I can call Kate Sandker at (513) 664-5227 or her faculty advisor Dr. Lisa Groger at (513) 529-1598. I understand that I may call the Office for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching at Miami University at (513) 529-3734 or humansubjects@muohio.edu if I have any questions about the rights of participants in research.

_________________________________                               _____________________________
Signature                                                                                  Date
Appendix E: Demographic sheet

Demographic Sheet

Age: ______

Marital Status: ___ Never Married  ___ Married  ___ Divorced  ___ Widowed

Number of Children ____  Ages ________________________________

With Whom Do You Live: ______________________________________

Partner’s Occupation __________________________________________

Education: ______________________________________________________

Previous Employment: ____________________________________________

Type: ___________________________  Dates: ______________________

Number of Years Out of the Workforce: ______________________________

Current Employment: _____________________________________________

Type: ___________________________  Dates: ______________________

Looking for Work Since: _________________________________________

Annual Household Income: ________________________________________