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Patrice Buzzanell and Meina Liu

ABSTRACT

To examine maternity leave as a gendered conflict management process, we analyzed a sample of interviews (from a larger data set of 102 interviews) with 26 women who reported feeling discouraged ($n = 15$) or encouraged ($n = 11$) about their employment status and career opportunities at the times of their leaves. Whereas these two groups of women converged on perceptions of a) incompatible (individual and organizational) goals and b) increased stress, they diverged on perceptions of a) interdependence, and b) use of negotiation strategies. Although this study is exploratory, findings indicate the need for additional research on perspective taking and influence tactics as ways of handling potential gendered conflict interactions for female workers and their bosses.

KEYWORDS

bosses and supervisors ■ conflict ■ family leave ■ family policies
■ negotiation

Conflict is 'the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from one another in achieving those goals' (Putnam & Poole, 1987: 552). In the workplace, conflicts center on resource allocations and/or interpersonal misunderstandings with desirable outcomes often focusing on conflict management rather than on conflict elimination. Workplace conflicts can occur over any number of issues with a main conflict management process being negotiation (i.e. the means by which two parties agree to interact in a give-and-take fashion to achieve agreement; Lewicki et al., 2006).

One such workplace issue that is positioned as inherently conflictual in both academic and popular materials is maternity leave. Although studies on maternity leave practices discuss problems with workplace policies, research has neither fully conceptualized nor empirically investigated maternity leave as a conflict management process. By conceptualizing maternity leave in this fashion, researchers can develop greater understanding of the complex interactions and tensions among conflicts with micro-practices (e.g. specific influence and bargaining strategies, everyday workplace practices, features of leaves perceived by individuals as conflictual) to problems with macro-processes (e.g. company policies, gendered organizing processes, and laws). In this study, we utilize research on gendered conflict to describe women's perceptions of workplace interactions and outcomes regarding maternity leaves. By contrasting the perceptions of two groups of women, we describe similarities and differences in conflict features and suggest opportunities for research and practical applications.

Literature review

Maternity leave as gendered conflict

Maternity leave is defined as time away from wage work to recover from childbirth/adoption (Hyde et al., 1995). However, maternity leave is not simply absence from paid work for health reasons. Instead, it is a process whereby organizational systems make women's bodies generally suspicious and promote a separation of public and private domains that either exclude family and workplace issues from serious consideration or reframe them in ways that benefit organizational interests and processes. For childbearing women and their co-workers and bosses, questions arise about how, when, and with what career issues and consequences workplace pregnancy leave will unfold (e.g. Gueutal & Taylor, 1991; Mock & Bruno, 1994; Schwartz, 1989, 1992). In addition to these questions about individuals' lives, maternity leave creates conflict with legal and organizational policy implementation (Jenero & Dabertin, 1997; Kelly & Dobbin, 1999; Unowsky, 1998), especially policy designed to lessen work-family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Finally, maternity leave challenges the normal, rational career process through treating gender conflicts as a site of sexuality. Although biological sex, gender, and sexuality are fundamental aspects of organizing (Burrell & Hearn, 1989), pregnancy and maternity leave highlight taboo issues of sex and the body: 'Her visible pregnancy, capacity for sexual pleasure, and

involvement with intimate emotions and nurturance all become evident in an organizational context where such aspects of life are considered “inappropriate” (Martin, 1992: 182). Sexuality dissolves the veneer of rationality and gender neutrality in organizing.

Moreover, maternity leave also highlights asymmetrical power relations. As Martin (1992) points out, such power issues directly relate to conflict and negotiation. However, disempowered members, such as women, deal with ‘deeper, hidden sources of conflict’ that are covert, relegated to the private realm, and sequestered so that conflicts never become resolved (p. 167). Because maternity leave does not have obvious and direct organizational benefits, members may experience ambivalence about extended leaves and workload reductions for pregnant workers (Gueutal & Taylor, 1991; Martin, 1990, 1992).

In addition to sexuality and asymmetrical power relations, maternity leave upsets the ‘normal’ linear notions of work and career as well as human capital attainment (i.e. return on investments such as education or training) (Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Fondas, 1995; Lyness et al., 1999; Marshall, 1989). Even though employment and career discontinuities are fairly routine in the New Economy (Arthur et al., 1999), this point does not mean that parties perceive employment and career disruptions as any less conflictual. From women’s perspectives, work and career breaks can mean worries about job, wage, and advancement potential (Mock & Bruno, 1994; Shellenbarger, 2003; Taniguchi, 1999; Upton & Han, 2003). From the employers’ standpoints, work discontinuities may raise concerns about project completions, talent loss, and lower commitment (Schwartz, 1989, 1992). With over 80 to 85 percent of women in the workforce becoming pregnant during their employment (Lyness et al., 1999; Schwartz, 1992), the management of employee and company concerns becomes a central issue. Pregnancy-bias complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) are also rising (Shellenbarger, 1998) while the workforce participation rate of new mothers is decreasing (from 59 percent in 1998 to 49.5 percent in 2005, according to the US Department of Labor, 2004, 2006a).

Because of the covert and gendered nature of maternity leave, managing pregnancy leaves may be more complex than traditional role negotiations (Miller et al., 1996). According to Miller et al. (1996), almost all women who take maternity leaves experience some form of role negotiations (i.e. ‘formal and informal interactions’ that ‘represent attempts to modify the expectations of others to more closely conform to the focal person’s desires and needs’, p. 288). Although biases against leave takers (e.g. societal norms about appropriateness of mothers working outside the home) influence negotiation

behavior, Miller et al. (1996) do not describe the gendered nature of negotiations beyond 'roles,' or rights and obligations. Indeed, managing conflict about maternity leaves also introduces intangible issues, such as securing women's abilities to meet personal (family and self) needs, to be treated as competent and/or promotable, to deal with the stigmas that may come with the pregnant body, and to sort through shifting identities and physiological changes (e.g. Ashcraft, 1999; Jamieson, 1995; Upton & Han, 2003).

Thus, *maternity leave* can be defined as a conflict management process in which suppressed gender conflicts surface prior to and well after women's pregnancies and returns to paid work. To assist women and organizations in conflict management at these times, there is an abundance of websites, books, and articles. Websites for the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 (US Department of Labor, 2006b), the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 (EEOC, 2006), human resource personnel training (e.g. HR Certification, 2006; HRnext, 2006), and advice for childbearing women (CareerPlanning, 2006) outline rights, obligations, and points of contention among laws, organizational policies, and everyday practices. Books and articles urge women to negotiate leave details and urge organizations to be aware of demographic and legal trends (e.g. Chaker, 2003; Marzollo, 1989; McKay, 2006; Schwartz, 1992; Shellenbarger, 1997, 2004; Weisberg & Buckler, 1994). While much has been written about women's rights to and strategies for reaching agreement about roles, leave lengths, and benefits at these times, it remains unclear how women perceive and describe maternity leave management and whether many women see that they can and do enter negotiation processes at these times.

Investigating 'gender' and 'conflict'

To date, maternity leave has not been empirically investigated as a conflict management process. While organizational studies provide insights into maternity leave as a gendered conflict, they tend to focus on the macro-level *gendered* organizing processes rather than micro-level *conflict management* practices. With few exceptions, research on gender and organizational conflict has examined how men and women handle conflict and negotiate differently. Although empirical research reveals no consistent sex differences in conflict resolution and negotiation (Nicotera & Dorsey, 2006), research confirms the stereotypes that depict women as weak, passive, and interdependent. For instance, research indicates that women typically achieve less profit in negotiations than do men (Halpern & Parks, 1996; Neu et al., 1988; Stevens et al., 1993), are less confrontational and more avoidant (Portello &

Long, 1994), are less concerned with tangible results and more concerned with intangible issues, such as community (Halpern & Parks, 1996; Heen, 1996), focus less on thinking but more on feeling (Sorenson et al., 1995), and are, in general, less effective (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). The more troubling finding is that even when goal-setting training is provided, men still negotiate significantly better outcomes than do women because women have lower expectations for themselves than do men (Stevens et al., 1993).

Although these studies have described general patterns regarding sex differences in conflict management and negotiation, they do not explain *why* such differences exist. Gender (i.e. biological sex) and conflict are both treated as linearly correlated, observable variables rather than dynamic, socially constructed processes. Gender roles and identities that give rise to conflicts are largely excluded from conflict analyses and prevention. Often a 'gendered' lens ignores individual conflict management practices while a 'conflict management/negotiation' lens tends to bracket out gendered organizing processes.

Therefore, we argue that maternity leave as a gendered conflict can be fruitfully examined by integrating 'gendered' and 'conflict management' lenses. Such a hybrid framework is particularly useful when we use an interpretive approach to understand how childbearing mothers perceived and managed their maternity leave experiences. Martin's (1990) deconstruction of an organization's story treated maternity leave as the exposure of a taboo conflict embedded in asymmetrical gender relations. Although the analysis reveals the covert nature of gendered conflict, her study focuses primarily on the author's interpretation of the organizational story, rather than the interpretations of multiple organizational participants. As such, how women perceive and describe their maternity leave experience and why they engage in some, but not other, types of conflict management behavior are not known.

In this study, we contrast the reports of two groups of workers about their pregnancies and maternity leaves by examining how they perceive their interactions with supervisors and co-workers and why they say they engaged in some actions rather than other possible behaviors. We examined interviews of women who reported, on a brief survey, that they felt encouraged ($n = 11$) or discouraged ($n = 15$) about their employment and career opportunities at the times they were pregnant, on leave, and returned to paid work. We believe that by examining how these two groups of women converged and diverged in how they perceived, made sense of, and negotiated their maternity leave experiences, we could gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of maternity leave as gendered organizational conflict (through the commonalities) as well as the different types of conflict management

behaviors that could potentially result in positive and negative professional and personal consequences.

Academic and popular reports about maternity leaves in the USA provide evidence for greater latitude in negotiating. Some companies extend leaves because they fear the loss of female talent if women decide to stay at home for several years or more rather than returning to paid work (Chaker, 2003; Singhania, 2006). Yet, organizations and some female employees are shortening maternity leaves (see Gerstel & McGonagle, 1999; Lyness et al., 1999) even while studies find that women who remain home longer with their newborns are less likely to suffer postpartum depression and other health problems (Clark et al., 1997; Hyde et al., 1995; McGovern et al., 1997; Shellenbarger, 2004). Finally, women in different occupations and relationships with their bosses perceive greater and lesser abilities to negotiate the conditions and timing of their leaves. In short, there may be some commonalities and differences in the ways different female groups perceive and enact conflict during their maternity leaves.

Conflict management and negotiation strategies

Scholarly research on how individuals manage conflict and negotiate is abundant. Blake and Mouton's (1964) dual-concern model has been the most influential theoretical framework for conflict resolution research. According to Blake and Mouton (1964), conflict in organizations is managed in different ways based on whether a manager has high or low concern for production and high or low concern for people. These two dimensions were later extended by Thomas (1976) and Pruitt and Rubin (1986) to include high or low concern for one's own outcomes and high or low concern for the outcomes of others. Crossing these dimensions results in five commonly recognized conflict management strategies: integrating, dominating, avoiding, obliging, and compromising (for a detailed review, see Cai & Fink, 2002).

The conflict literature suggests that the *integrating* style (also labeled 'collaborating') is most likely to yield win-win solutions because it is characterized by a willingness to exchange information openly, to address differences constructively, and to make every effort to pursue a mutually acceptable solution (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Rahim, 1992). This strategy is also known as *integrative bargaining* in negotiation literature. Here the two parties focus on each other's interests (i.e. underlying needs, concerns, desires, or fears) rather than positions (i.e. what the parties want or demand), engage in information exchange, and actively search for solutions that meet the needs and objectives of both sides (Lewicki et al., 2006). In addition,

research on organizational influence strategies suggests that subordinates are more successful at managing bosses when they obtain information about their superiors' professional and personal goals, strengths and weaknesses, preferred working style, and attitudes toward conflict (Gabarro & Kotter, 1993).

On the other hand, research suggests that the *dominating* conflict management strategy (also labeled 'competing,' 'contending,' or 'confrontational') is more likely to yield solutions in which one party wins and the other loses. These outcomes are likely because dominating strategies are characterized by the use of forceful tactics such as threats and put-downs, an unwillingness to share information, and a focus on defeating the opponent (Cai & Fink, 2002). In negotiation literature, this strategy is known as *distributive bargaining*. Here the two parties are competitive, positional, and focus on approaching one's target point (i.e. the optimal ideal, or what a negotiator can maximally get) or the other party's resistance point (i.e. the bottom line, or what a negotiator can minimally accept) (Lewicki et al., 2006). According to the managerial influence literature, distributive influence tactics such as use of persistent requests, repetition, threats, manipulation, and arguments without support, have been deemed ineffective (Keys & Case, 1990). Substantial research indicates that these contentious tactics often result in premature stalemates or breakdowns, negative emotions, hostile relationships between the parties, and fewer joint gains (Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Friedman et al., 2004; Pillutla & Murnighan, 1996; Pruitt & Lewis, 1975).

In addition, according to the dual-concern model, the *avoiding* (also labeled 'inaction' or 'withdrawing') and *obliging* (also labeled 'yielding' or 'accommodating') strategies result from having little concern about either one's own or the other's interests. The model suggests that these strategies are relatively undesirable and ineffective because they are likely to yield lose-lose or lose-win solutions that do not meet one's own needs or objectives (Follett & House, 1969; Kim & Leung, 2000; Thomas, 1976). The *compromising* strategy reflects a moderate concern for both one's own and the other's interests and a moderate effort to pursue a mutually acceptable outcome. It is characterized by dividing resources in some equitable fashion without pursuing alternative solutions that are truly satisfactory to meet both parties' interests (Cai & Fink, 2002).

While much conflict and negotiation research has examined how individuals differ in the ways they manage conflict and negotiate, what accounts for the differences has received far less attention. Conflict is defined as 'an intense disagreement between two interdependent parties over incompatible goals and the interferences each perceives from the other in her or his effort

to achieve those goals' (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 194). From this definition, conflict scholars identify four defining features of conflict: incompatibility (i.e. 'perceived mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed goals, values, or beliefs', Putnam, 2006: 5), expressed struggle (i.e. 'intense interpersonal and/or intrapersonal dissonance, tension and antagonism,' Ting-Toomey, 1985: 72), interdependence (i.e. 'the extent to which conflict parties must cooperate . . . while they simultaneously compete with one another,' Putnam, 1989: 176), and some form of interaction (i.e. strategies and tactics used, Putnam, 2006). Little research has examined whether individuals differ in perceptions of these conflict features and how these perceptions actually influence the ways in which they manage conflict. From a gendered lens, conflict and negotiation are gendered activities in that exchange occurs within and aids pre-defined gender relations (Putnam & Kolb, 2000). Given the emphasis on the framing of issues and the exercise of power in traditional negotiation research (Gray, 1994), and the way that women lack voice at the bargaining table (Kolb & Coolidge, 1991), an understanding of conflict and negotiation cannot be complete without giving due consideration to women's perceptions and experiences in the organizations. Thus, we ask:

- 1) How do women who felt discouraged or encouraged about their employment and their careers around the times of their maternity leaves converge and diverge in making sense of, accounting for, and resolving conflicts?
- 2) How do women who felt discouraged or encouraged about their maternity leave experiences perceive the defining features of conflict and employ different types of conflict management and negotiation strategies?

Method

Participants

This study focused on 26 women who reported that they felt discouraged ($n = 15$) or encouraged ($n = 11$) about their employment and career opportunities at the time of their pregnancies and returns to paid work. These 26 women were selected from a dataset of 102 interviews about maternity leave with women of different occupations, relational situations, and socio-economic backgrounds. Fifteen women or 15 percent of the entire data set checked off 'discouraged' or 'very discouraged' on a brief written survey that

was completed at the time of their audio-taped interviews. These 15 women came from a variety of occupations, ranging from blue-collar workers, such as bartenders, to pink-collar workers, such as secretaries, and white-collar workers, such as consultants. These women were between 21–44 years of age when they took their maternity leaves. All said that they were middle class and all had some college education (with seven out of 15, or 47 percent, having associates through graduate degrees). Most were married ($n = 13$, or 87 percent) and white ($n = 13$, or 87 percent) (two research participants listed their race as African American).

Eleven women or 11 percent of the entire data set checked off 'very encouraged' about their employment and career opportunities at the times of their maternity leaves. Like the discouraged group, these 11 women also came from a variety of occupations: teacher, manager at a printing company, university office worker, assistant manager of a food service, phone clerk at a financial company, researcher at a university, circulation director at a newspaper, medical secretary at an insurance company, restaurant waitress, and account executives at television stations. These women were between 20–43 years of age when they took their leaves. Twenty-five of the women claimed to be middle class. The one exception labeled herself as lower class. All but one of the participants had some college education (with seven out of 11, or 64 percent, having at least baccalaureate degrees). Most were married ($n = 8$, or 73 percent) and white ($n = 8$, or 73 percent) (three participants listed their race as African, Hispanic, and Asian American). Most of the women had taken one to three maternity leaves. Given that the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of women who had radically different perceptions about employment and career opportunities after their maternity leaves, the 'middle group' (i.e. the rest of female participants who reported that they were neither discouraged nor strongly encouraged) was excluded from our analysis.

Procedures

Data gathering

The first author constructed an interview protocol and survey to obtain information about participants' perceptions of their pregnancies and maternity leaves. There were four parts to the protocol: respondents' understandings of maternity leave and leave policies; descriptions of pregnancies and leave experiences; ways of talking about pregnancies and maternity leaves (including messages exchanged during pregnancy announcements, discussions with

bosses and co-workers about the leave, and office visits with the infant); and the return to paid work (including feelings and perceptions about the treatment that the women received before and after the leave). At the time of the interviews, participants also completed a brief survey that requested demographic data, such as educational levels, occupations, and race and ethnicities, as well as information about their feelings of encouragement, discouragement and career at these times.

After all the data were gathered, both authors identified the 26 interviews to use in this study, verified the transcriptions against audiotapes, and began analyzing data. The transcription method used enabled us to record lengthy pauses, talk-overs, and other depictions of the linguistic choices, expressions of feelings, and hesitations that participants voiced in their interviews (see Fairhurst, 1993). The 26 interviews ranged in length from 10 to 60 minutes (with the average of 25 minutes). Transcriptions of the interviews resulted in 391 pages of double-spaced text (203 for the women who felt discouraged and 188 for those who felt encouraged). All names and locations were changed to preserve confidentiality.

Data analysis

As both authors were verifying transcriptions against audio-tapes, we also began the process of developing themes using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001). We used the constant comparison technique to generate, reduce, verify, and confirm the themes that each researcher developed. Specifically, we drafted analytic memos that depicted recurring semantic patterns of the perceived feelings, actions, and choices of women within the two groups. We also noted when participants talked extensively about issues, interests, positions, and changing relationships. We took notes on these kinds of extensions within each group (discouraged versus encouraged) and then across the interviews.

We then examined all of the participants' interviews together and constructed a table that categorized recurring themes from each group. These themes suggested that the commonalities and differences between the discouraged and encouraged women related to the defining features of conflict (i.e. perceptions of incompatible interests, interdependent relationships, emotional struggles) and the ways that conflicts were managed (i.e. processes and outcomes of conflict management). For example, we noted that both groups of women commented extensively on the level of stress they experienced while trying to balance incompatible goals in the leave process (i.e. goals such as taking time off, meeting organizational demands, negotiating accommodations to their expanding bodies, trying to be seen as

capable, reliable and promotable). As we reduced the numbers of thematic categories, we repeatedly returned to our data for confirmation of these categories within each group and across all interviews. We interrogated each category by using generative questions (e.g. why might the woman have said, or not said, something to her boss about her needs?) and examined how an observation from one category informs insights about the other categories.

Results and interpretations

Our study examined how contrastive groups of women (i.e. those who felt discouraged or encouraged about employment and careers around the times of their maternity leaves) converged and diverged in the ways they made sense of, accounted for, and tried to resolve conflicts. As noted earlier, literature on gendered conflicts at the times of leaves indicated that organization members, including pregnant executives, experienced career uncertainties, shifting identity constructions, and changing workplace relationships (e.g. Ashcraft, 1999; Martin, 1990; Mock & Bruno, 1994).

Consistent with this literature, we found that both groups of women perceived workplace pregnancy and maternity leaves as stressful and conflictual. We used defining features of conflict (Putnam, 2006) to identify ways in which the two groups of women converged or diverged in their perceptions of these stressful experiences. In our study, participants converged on perceptions of a) incompatible goals and b) increased stress (as a form of expressed struggle), yet diverged on perceptions of a) interdependence between their companies and their own goals and b) use of negotiation strategies. These differences may contribute, in part, to the distinctions between women who felt encouraged and those who felt discouraged after maternity leaves.

Convergence 1: Incompatible goals

One of the most central of the defining features of conflict is incompatible goals. Conflict often arises when one party sees her goals as mutually exclusive with the other party's objectives. In our study, regardless of whether participants were discouraged or encouraged about their employment and career opportunities after maternity leaves, they perceived their abilities to fulfill both their organizational and personal goals to be at odds with each other. Women who felt discouraged perceived these incompatibilities as irreconcilable or inadequately resolved, whereas women who felt encouraged recognized and attempted to reconcile these incompatibilities.

As an example of women who felt discouraged, Lucy, a lab technician for a chemical company, said that she went to the doctor because she was sick during her first trimester: 'he gave me a note stating that I needed to be off my feet as much as possible, and could not work more than 8 hours.' Lucy remarked: 'they require you to work 12 hours. We get two 15-minute breaks and a half-hour lunch and that would be the only time that I could have been off my feet.' After morning sickness subsided, she felt 'great' and would like to have returned to the lab but could not be on her feet for a long period of time. When 'the company refused' to meet these needs, she began her maternity leave.

Lucy described her company as 'very "by the book"' and 'strict' – she knew what to expect and nothing deviated from what was in the employee handbook. She says, 'I would have liked to have gone back . . . But they weren't willing to be flexible.' She had talked to other lab techs before announcing her pregnancy to her male supervisors so she knew what to expect. Although she enjoyed her colleagues ('we're good friends'), she felt that she 'really didn't have a choice' and had to quit work, especially when her supervisors 'weren't even going to consider me' for a position that would meet her health and scheduling needs (e.g. she said that her supervisors 'felt that "we can't fit your hours and that is your problem"').

Lucy perceived her goals as reasonable accommodations for a pregnant employee, whereas she perceived the company's modus operandi as maintaining routine processes, even when conditions were detrimental to workers (e.g. Lucy said the chemicals with which she worked 'could have harmed the baby . . . they [company] were very lax'). Lucy described her efforts to reach a settlement with her boss. She said: 'I would keep explaining to him, "well, if you're willing to cut my hours back, I would come back" and they refused.' Lucy could not seem to comprehend why it was so difficult for her boss to understand and comply with her request. She felt as if the irreconcilability of the company and her personal goals eventually led to an impasse. Since Lucy's supervisors refused to offer what she would minimally accept, she quit her job.

Jena, a sales representative in the broadcasting industry, also felt discouraged. Based on her co-workers' experiences, she anticipated difficulty in extending her leave and sustaining her accounts:

I would talk to other people that had been forced basically to quit their jobs because they only had six weeks off maternity leave . . . And some of them were in sales positions where their list was changed or the accounts that they were calling on had been changed somewhat, um, so it really wasn't even worth them coming back.

To be able to take 12 weeks off rather than the regular six, Jena accepted her supervisor's proposal that she work from home during the leave. Even though the compromise partially satisfied both party's needs (i.e. Jena was able to take a longer leave and her company was able to sustain workflow), Jena perceived that incompatible perceptions of 'the meaning of a maternity leave' eventually hurt her work relationship with her boss. As she noted:

I'd say that the work relationship . . . might have been a little harder because I was called frequently at home, you know, three times each day when I was on maternity leave. And I think, she [my boss] and I both had a problem with that because she didn't realize she was calling me as much, and it just wasn't enough time for me to do what I needed with three other kids. And I don't think she really truly understood the meaning of a maternity leave . . . so . . . I did notice a change [in the work relationship with my boss].

Jena noted that she went into the office 'for a lot of meetings' so that, 'even though it was a maternity leave, I was not really gone.' In spite of feeling 'a little frustrated' with 'all the calls at home,' she understood the reasons for the calls (i.e. her boss and co-workers 'didn't want to do something that could cost me the business while I was out on maternity leave'). As she legitimized her boss and co-workers' positions (to maintain regular workflow) and thus dis-legitimized her own needs (to take time off work), she did not complain. Her boss could not know what Jena's situation was like at home or what Jena truly needed. Once the compromise was established, neither Jena nor her boss reopened the discussion to search for other creative solutions (see Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Women who reported feeling very encouraged about employment and careers also indicated goal incompatibility. For Millie, an account executive who had been working at a television station for several years, pregnancy posed subtle tensions. Recalling her pregnancy announcement to co-workers as they were drinking New Year's champagne, she remarked, 'I said, "well, I have an announcement to make. You guys can toast me because I cannot drink. I am going to have a baby."' My boss had this look of sheer horror on his face.' She elaborated,

My boss was horrified because he hadn't been through it before . . . I think my boss was maybe very curious and concerned if I was going to come back and things like that. But after I reassured him I was coming back, it was fine, normal.

Millie's anticipation of and sensitivity to her boss's interests enabled her to resolve concerns that could have escalated into a conflict. She 'was the first woman basically under this new management to take maternity leave.' Her boss 'made up' a policy for her in which she could take 60 days off and 'work on 100 per cent commission, which is a kind of nice position to be in, because I got along very well with my boss and he trusted me.'

Nevertheless, like Jena, Millie was fully aware that meeting the company's goals meant having to sacrifice her personal interests. Even though she completed her sales quota three months in advance and before she took her leave, her personal goal of relaxing during her pregnancy was thwarted:

I wasn't sure how much I'd be called. You're trying to do three months' worth of work in one month's time, or two months' time, in addition to the month you are working at, to sell ahead to be able to relax for your maternity leave.

Yet unlike Jena who tolerated the phone calls and attended the meetings, Millie communicated her position to her supervisors in a straightforward fashion:

you really have to assert yourself and say 'Look – I know you are paying me, but I am on maternity leave. And I've already done the sales that you are paying me for, so leave me alone.' You just have to assert yourself. If they are mad or ticked off, oh well. You just have to do what's right for yourself and for the baby.

Pam, a teacher and coach at a university, knew that her maternity leave would interrupt work processes, so she proactively worked around classes and coaching timetables. When she told her boss, the athletic director, about her pregnancy, he 'wasn't thrilled' because it was a 'difficult situation': 'My boss was upset because he did not want to do the coaching, and he wasn't sure that [the department] was going to hire someone to come in. But once that was taken care of, he was more at ease.' Angelina, a manager at a printing company, said that her boss was excited for her but also 'overwhelmed at first, like what are [we] going to do now . . . My boss, you know, she's single and she didn't really understand at first but she's like, oh well, it's part of life.' Angelina acknowledged her boss's feelings as a legitimate response, given her boss's personal life and work concerns. Angelina talked to her boss throughout her pregnancy and maternity leave ('we get along fairly well'). She felt that her maternity leave experience was very accommodating ('she just told me that if I needed more time off, she was more than willing to give me the time off').

In sum, both groups of childbearing women converged in perceiving their personal goals as incompatible with their companies' objectives and particularly their bosses' needs during times of pregnancy and maternity leave. Women who felt discouraged described negative outcomes of not being able to change their bosses' positions. They perceived company demands as rigid and unmalleable and felt that they had to either quit their jobs or sacrifice their personal well-being. Women who felt encouraged perceived incompatible goals as reconcilable and described positive consequences of finding mutually acceptable solutions. From a negotiation perspective, discouraged women seemed to focus on positions and engage in distributive bargaining, whereas encouraged women centered on interests and engaged in integrative bargaining.

From a gendered lens, almost all the women perceived their supervisors' reactions, emotions, and actions as legitimate. In other words, they prioritized work and organizational interests above their own personal concerns in ways that conformed to their supervisors' expectations and goals. They recognized that their personal goals (i.e. to take leave, get paid, and maintain positive relationships with their supervisors) could not be achieved unless the organizational goals (i.e. to maintain regular workflows, reduce costs) were fulfilled. Many women, particularly encouraged women, expressed attitudes toward work that were consistent with organizational goals. For instance, Rose, a phone clerk in a financial company, 'missed being on the floor' and the 'hustle and bustle.' Pam 'enjoyed going back to work' for the 'challenge' and to do things ('I would go out of my mind sitting in the house 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I am a doer and I'm a pusher'). Sophie, an assistant food service manager, remarked that she was 'really bored' during her leave. Grace, an office worker, was 'anxious' to return – she liked the 'public contact with the outside world.' These women may have emulated the ideal worker enough that they still felt valued and respected irrespective of their pregnancies (see Acker, 1990; Trethewey, 2000; Upton & Han, 2003). Once they reassured their bosses, expressed their wants, and showed that they were willing to assist their companies in meeting deadlines or maintaining accounts, their bosses seemed to relax. Although their goals seemed incompatible initially, the encouraged women negotiated some flexibility and sustained good relationships with their bosses.

Convergence 2: Increased stress

Increased level of stress is another important feature of conflict, one that was also aligned with maternity leave experiences. Stress often is marked by heightened feelings of anxiety, tension, depression, or pressure, as well as subsequent physical symptoms including chest pain, peptic ulcers, back pain,

stomach problems, headaches, high blood pressure, and fatigue (Ray, 1987). In our study, women who felt discouraged saw their maternity leaves as stressful because they saw the company ignoring their requested needs and physical accommodations whereas those who felt encouraged treated stress as linked to role requirements and information seeking about policies. Both sets of women associated stress with health problems.

Specifically, women who felt discouraged associated their stress with lack of accommodations for their physical conditions. Tara, a photo lab technician who also sold cribs at the same retail store, recalled that her supervisor made her do things 'that no pregnant person should be doing' including carrying a crib when 6.5 months pregnant: 'no management would come help me. You know, and I had paged and called for management plenty of times and even a customer complained to management that I had to carry it by myself.' She attributed her physical condition to job stressors: 'I wanted to relax a little bit, because I was under a lot of stress at my job and that, I think, that created a lot of the problems with my blood pressure' (for links between workload and stress symptoms, see Miller et al., 1990).

In addition to high blood pressure, Tara also gained over 80 pounds with her pregnancy, had toxemia, and swelled so badly that 'I couldn't even wear shoes half the time.' At different points, she requested permission to go home ('I had fallen and I started spotting and I asked if I could go home and they would not let me go home') and was reprimanded for leaving her post to attend to bodily needs ('I got written up for it [going to the bathroom] – for leaving without notifying anybody', even though she had notified a co-worker who was nearby). Besides physical complications, Tara associated psychological stress with difficulties in obtaining information: 'I could not find anybody in the offices to tell, explain anything to me.' She called the out-of-state headquarters so many times that she had over a \$200 phone bill in one month. Tara perceived that her company would not negotiate anything or make any compromises, a condition that probably led to her dissatisfaction.

Some participants who felt discouraged about employment and careers in general also felt obligated to work from home during maternity leave. Jena said that she was 'stressed out' by the constant work during her leave. She made sense of her situation by labeling her case as 'being used' or exploited: 'as far as the way the management staff used me . . . It doesn't really bother me now because I don't have aspirations right now to move up within the company.' Her comment referenced a complex sensemaking process in which she indicated her perceived exploitation and her choice to adopt an accommodating conflict style. This style may have perpetuated a situation that she viewed as stressful.

As a representative of the women who felt encouraged, Millie attributed much of her physical ill-being during pregnancies (i.e. a hernia during her first and 'back to back' bronchitis, pneumonia, and pleurisy during her second) to her intense workload and, consequently, stress: 'It was tough. My high stress job, I think, it takes a toll on your immune system.' Given that Millie managed to complete her sales quota three months ahead of time, do a lot of work at home during her leave, and return to work part-time a couple of weeks after delivering her baby, her attribution of the causes for her physical ill-being seems warranted. In addition, she had difficulty obtaining information about leave policies because 'nobody wanted to talk about it': 'they were all afraid if they put something down in writing and if they were easier on me, then it would follow through to every female in this company.' Millie felt that her company's silence about benefits was strategic because her superiors did not want to set any precedents. But she also thought that her supervisors were silent because they were afraid to voice their fears about work discontinuities. When asked whether her boss ever talked with her about ill health during her pregnancy, she replied, 'no, because . . . I was coming in for a day and then [would] be gone for two days, because I would come back before the doctor would allow me to come back.' She continued, 'I know they were afraid to talk about what if I had to go home or I was put on bed rest or something like that. It was never really discussed.' Millie found that her bosses avoided discussion about her health and work schedule even though it was 'nerve racking'. Millie believes that she and her unborn child paid the price for this stress: 'it's too much stress for a pregnant woman. Which is probably why I went [delivered] five weeks early with my first one. But, so, you know, it was nerve-racking getting ready to leave.'

Both Lanie and Julie perceived pregnancy and maternity leave as stressful in other ways. Like Millie, Lanie, an account executive in a television station, was 'very sick during the beginning of her pregnancy.' Because disclosure of her sickness might work against her, she did not tell anyone that she was ill and she continued to work: 'I was told that if I took time off before I actually had the baby that that would go against my maternity leave. And that, to me, was totally unacceptable . . . [so] I came in here sick.' Keenly aware of the potential tensions that might be caused by pregnancy and maternity leave, Julie, a circulation director for a newspaper, did not even announce the news of her pregnancy at first: 'it's a small company with an older generation of upper management, so I really was afraid at first to reveal my pregnancy' so she was 'just letting people think I gained weight' until she was in her last trimester.

In short, many of the women who felt encouraged also experienced stress because of their fears that sickness and pregnancy might affect their careers or maternity leave. Some women also had their workloads increased when they returned to paid work. Grace, for example, recalled, 'she [her supervisor] just expected my workload to increase because we were responsible for different phone accounts . . . So then after I came back, they just increased my workload.' Lanie said that after her first week of leave, she worked 'every single day' with constant phone calls at home: 'I had to tell them to back off a little bit . . . And some days I just thought I was going to have an anxiety attack, because it was bad.'

At the end of her leave, Lanie felt 'really guilty' because 'it's not like I work only 40 hours. I work like 50+ hours,' in addition to taking work home. But this overtime did *not* mean that other co-workers were sympathetic toward women's pregnancies, leaves, and returns to work:

there's a co-worker here who was pregnant recently and, I mean, a little bit of morning sickness and she'd take three days off. And I'm like, 'oh, come on, get your butt back to work. We've all done it. You suck it up. Bring a tooth brush, go to the bathroom, throw-up, brush your teeth, and go back to your desk.' I mean that's life. And so I try not to be insensitive to her but, you know, it's really difficult.

(Julie)

In sum, participants in both groups found pregnancy and maternity leaves to be a time associated with tremendous stress that resulted in substantial physiological and psychological problems. Childbearing women commonly described their stress as a result of failing to receive necessary accommodations from their companies (primarily the discouraged women), failing to obtain necessary information about maternity leave, meeting organizational demands (un)willingly, and emulating the ideal 'good worker'. Despite different personal situations, many women accepted the stress as an inevitable part of their workplace pregnancy and maternity leave experiences. Some women (like Tara) *confronted* the process by asking permission to go home, to leave her post to attend to bodily needs, and to make numerous phone calls to gain necessary information. Other women (like Jena) chose to *avoid* her supervisors by relinquishing 'aspirations to move up in the company'. Still other women (like Millie and Lanie) chose to grin and bear it (*accommodate*) to avoid losing career advancement opportunities. And some women (like Julie), after their own personal sufferings, perpetuated the system by expecting or requiring other childbearing women to 'suck it up.'

Divergence I: Perceptions of interdependence

Even though all participants perceived goal incompatibilities and increased stress, the women who felt discouraged as opposed to those who felt encouraged perceived their interdependent relationships with other parties differently. Consistent with research on perceptions about interdependence between negotiators (Lewicki et al., 2006; Walton & McKersie, 1965), our analysis revealed that the two groups differed in their views of interdependence; that is, discouraged women felt that their bosses were working against rather than for them. Encouraged women, in contrast, felt like valuable contributors that could not be easily replaced. These divergent perceptions may have influenced the different group members' feelings of power or abilities to negotiate. Among the women who felt discouraged, more than half of them eventually left their companies; but all the women who were encouraged after their maternity leaves returned to paid work with the same employers.

Women who felt discouraged perceived pregnancy and maternity leaves as turning points in their relationships with their bosses. Tara remarked that her boss would say 'you're just going to have to quit, you know, this place comes first.' Tara, who had previously gone to management training programs at her company's expense, perceived her boss as 'just kind of a jerk the whole way through – all along, way before I got pregnant.' She commented that the only time he was 'kinda lenient, [was] you know, when I fell [down] that time.' She attributed his leniency to his self-interest because his lack of helpfulness 'could endanger him.'

Lucy originally thought that she was a valuable contributor and she attributed the problems with her boss to a 'conflict of wills': 'I was probably considered the best lab tech. I mean, I had no problems with anyone. [But] he told me [that] I didn't work well with others and that kind of floored me.' Lucy was too 'floored' to ask for details. But there might not have been anything explicit to coincide with her boss's evaluation. As Manzoni and Barsoux (1998) point out, difficulties with supervisors can begin for petty or irrational reasons that would be difficult to describe. These difficulties escalate if left unchecked and workers often become demoralized or quit.

Many participants who felt discouraged perceived that they were no longer reliable, competent, and trustworthy workers since they became pregnant and took a maternity leave. Joan, a hospital nursing assistant, said that 'before, everything was fine,' but when she needed extra leave time because she had a Caesarian section delivery, she was questioned:

they kept calling me and saying 'why do you need the extra two weeks.' I had to take two weeks of my vacation because otherwise it was without pay and, um, so he [boss] was mad about that. And then when

I came back, um, I was up for, ah, like a manager position, and they told me I wasn't going to be able to get it because they couldn't rely on me as much because, with a new born baby, I would probably miss a lot more work than the other girl because if she [my baby] was sick or something happened I'd have to stay home with her. So I didn't get the position.

Like Joan, Jena perceived that once a woman has a baby, 'the way they view you is that you don't want to move up within the company . . . you're pretty much kind of labeled as a working mother, that you don't have any aspirations.' Tara noted that supervisors 'don't keep you in mind for, like, advancement.' She continued, 'it's kinda like you're almost starting over, or like you have a disease, like they don't want to give you credit for stuff that you do.'

Women who felt discouraged perceived adversarial relationships with their bosses and developed resistance strategies against these bosses and their companies. At the end of her interview, Tara emphasized that women should make sure that 'they understand everything that they're supposed to get. [Companies then] can't more or less intimidate you and make you lose face.' Like a vicious cycle, the perceived adversarial relationship may be an explanatory factor for negative outcomes. When Janice, a customer service representative, had a problem with a co-worker who always went to the boss and complained about her, Janice said, her boss would blame the incident on Janice's pregnancy 'that I was emotional or something like that.' After returning from her leave, Janice found out that her promised promotion had been given to this co-worker: 'I unfortunately did not get the position. I always felt that it [the pregnancy] had something to do with [this oversight]. Ah, but I can't prove that.'

In contrast, participants who were encouraged perceived strong interdependence between their companies/supervisors and themselves. They neither lost previously promised promotions nor experienced attributions of competency, as some of the discouraged women had faced. Julie noted that it would be difficult to redistribute her work if she is not there because 'the smaller the company, the more the burden [it] is to be without a person.' In her case, she managed a couple of people so 'for one of us to be gone, it's a big burden in the department.' Tan, a university researcher, shared similar perceptions of interdependence, work unit characteristics, and her value to the department. When asked to explain why she used less of her leave time than she was allowed, she said: 'ya know, this office is very unique to the department. We really cannot close it obviously too long.' Although she took only a one-month leave, she returned to 'tons of work.' She tried to ease into

the backlog: 'I just want to take it little by little so that, you know, I would not get strung up when I come back after two or three months.'

Pam, too, was concerned about her teaching and obligations to co-workers ('they have to cover my classes'), particularly her sports coaching: 'And I couldn't leave anybody holding the bag. I also coached, and it was important they would get a good coach to replace me.' Although Pam was eligible for up to a year of maternity leave, she took a semester and a portion of the summer near the time of her child's birth. She remarked that, especially with her second child, 'I would've liked to have stayed out longer, but I was coaching and I felt a responsibility to get back and finish coaching.' Even though she was eligible for the 12-month leave with her third child, Pam made excuses for the amount of time she took on this leave ('my body . . . just didn't bounce back the same way it did when I was younger').

In sum, perceptions about interdependent relationships between child-bearing women and their companies/supervisors constitute an important source of women's perceptions of discouragement and encouragement about employment and career opportunities in their companies. Consistent with Miller et al.'s (1996) role negotiation framework, these women differed in the perceived criticality of their company positions and the perceived interpersonal relationships with their bosses. What mattered, however, was how these perceptions could have changed (or remained unchanged). The discouraged women attributed their bosses' behaviors to personal (like Tara and Lucy) and social biases (like Joan, Jena, and Janice). Just as they viewed incompatible goals as irreconcilable, they assumed they had no agency to change their bosses' perceptions. In contrast, the encouraged women took tremendous responsibility in constructing their interdependent relationships. They identified with organizational goals and proactively enacted 'valuable' work that would constitute them as 'irreplaceable' workers.

Divergence 2: Use of negotiation strategies

Perceptions of interdependence had significant effects on the use of negotiation strategies (Lewicki et al., 2006). In general, women who felt discouraged perceived a limited repertoire of negotiation strategies, typically distributive, avoidant, or 'win-lose' negotiation. In contrast, participants who felt encouraged employed a wider range of strategies that centered on compromise, confrontation, and obtaining mutual interests (Fisher et al., 1991; Pruitt, 1981; Sillars, 1980; Sillars et al., 1982).

Participants who felt discouraged selected among a restricted repertoire of possible negotiation strategies. As noted earlier, many of them felt that their companies no longer valued them as much as they did before the

pregnancy. They believed that bosses and co-workers saw them as 'unreliable,' (Joan), 'less qualified,' 'emotional' (Janice), unpromotable (Tara and Lucy), and having no 'aspirations' (Jena). Their pregnancies strained superior-subordinate relationships and limited their contact with their bosses. Despite efforts to assert their own needs, women who were discouraged seemed to have limited agency in managing the conflict with their bosses who held all the power (e.g. leaves were granted 'at the discretion of your boss,' according to Donna, a secretary). Lucy reiterated throughout her interview that she had 'no choice' because her company was not 'willing to be flexible.' Since the women treated the situation as a distributive bargaining process, someone had to 'lose.' April, an assistant librarian at a metalworking association, said, 'I wanted longer but they wouldn't give it to me . . . I requested a longer leave but I was then told [that] I couldn't [have it].'

Discouraged participants' perceptions of maternity leave as 'win-lose' seemed associated with competitive attitudes and distributive negotiation strategies. As mentioned earlier, they were focused more on positions rather than interests. Instead of having an open conversation with her supervisors about her needs and concerns, Lucy resorted to third-party intervention, using her doctor to end the 'harassment' of frequent calls from her boss. Lucy kept repeating the same position ('I would keep explaining to them, "well, if you're willing to cut my hours back, I would come back."'). By her own admission, Lucy neither introduced new positions nor interests. She kept repeating her demands while her boss kept calling back and asking the same question. This pattern follows vicious cycles or rigid conflict sequences that are difficult to change (Brett et al., 1998; Putnam & Jones, 1982). In addition, the influence tactics that Lucy reported – particularly her use of persistence and repetition – are considered to be defiant and ineffective (Keys & Case, 1990; Kipnis et al., 1980).

When her doctor entered the situation, the conflict changed. Not only would her doctor have professional expertise and the ability to evaluate medical situations, but the doctor also changed the script. He simply addressed what Lucy's boss really wanted to know, namely that she was not returning to wage work until after her child was born. Prior to the doctor's report, she had left the option open depending on her needs. The doctor cut to the chase and avoided negotiation. His statement was accepted as fact.

Lucy concluded this episode by saying, 'it was fine', but she clearly did not perceive it as 'fine.' When 'there was a job opening coming up' that was 'an opportunity to have a regular eight-hour day,' Lucy found out that 'they weren't even going to consider me for the position' despite her qualifications 'as the only one working at that time who had a degree.' Thus the conflict escalated into an impasse in which neither party won. Lucy adopted an

avoidant conflict style by not going back to work when her company refused her request for an accommodation.

Since the women in this study perceived their bosses as the decision-makers about the leave process, participants attributed the lack of accommodations to their supervisors' qualities, a mark of competitive negotiating (Deutsch, 1973; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). April, whose request for a longer maternity leave was denied, commented that her boss 'had a definite problem' with employees who might quit because of maternity leaves and possible relocations after marriage. Darla, a cook at a sorority house, noted that she never talked to her boss about daily tasks: 'he would tell me what my work order was that day and that was it. And he expected me to do it no matter what.' With limited communication, Darla probably did not expect to negotiate about her job.

In contrast, participants who reported feelings of encouragement perceived a high level of superior-subordinate interdependence and consequently treated maternity leave as a 'give and take' process. As Julie said, 'give and take. I think it's the most important thing.' Feeling stressed out by receiving too many phone calls from the office during maternity leave, Millie said she called her boss and said, 'I've helped you by answering questions and taking calls. Please leave me alone for these last four weeks. If you have an emergency, call me; otherwise figure it out on your own.' With recognition of their efforts and contributions to the organization, these women were more assertive and confrontational about their needs than the women who were discouraged.

Consistent with collaborative negotiation strategies, Millie responded – not by blaming her boss – but by focusing on her interests, needs, and their mutual work processes (Fisher et al., 1991). In keeping with effective integrative bargainers who are flexible on positions but firm on interests (Pruitt, 1981), Millie explained her needs and indicated her willingness to work in emergency situations. Similarly, Julie recalled: 'I told them what I wanted and I think I was reasonable because I understand how business works.'

These two examples illustrate four important features of the negotiation processes used by women who felt encouraged. First, as both Julie and Millie were managers, they had experience in taking multiple perspectives and understanding managerial concerns (Neale & Bazerman, 1983). They identified with the companies' goals and were willing to meet organizational expectations in exchange for fulfilling their personal goals. Second, they focused on the underlying needs and interests rather than on rigid positions about maternity leave and they were skilled in using integrative negotiation strategies to maximize mutual interests (Fisher et al., 1991). Third, they

exerted agency in the negotiation process and recognized the importance of being assertive but not competitive. Finally, they perceived positive relationships with their bosses who were, perhaps, the most important parties in work–family negotiations (Gottlieb et al., 1998; Kirby, 2000).

When asked about who set up her maternity leave, Lanie stressed, ‘I pretty much told them here are the dates.’ As a managerial woman, Lanie did not see any status differences when she negotiated with her supervisors. She described another scenario in which she adopted a confrontational conflict management style while she was on maternity leave:

one day my boss called me, and I was going crazy and I said, ‘God, I don’t even have time to take a shower!’ And he says, ‘Well, what do you do all day? Just put the baby down and go take a shower,’ I was dumbfounded by that and my response to him was, ‘you [should be] glad that you are a half-hour away from me because I would get into my car, drive over there, and slap you with that comment’ . . . I am very verbal and if I have a problem with something I have no problem communicating it. So, I think that helps our relationship.

Not only did participants who felt encouraged directly confront their bosses and exert agency in the negotiation process, but they also devised creative solutions that met both parties’ original interests. For example, Julie brought her baby to the office without even asking for permission (‘the funny thing is I never asked anyone if I could bring him’). She just assumed that she should handle the situation (‘I just figured if I couldn’t bring him they would tell me’): ‘so I brought him in and set-up camp with his playpen . . . and sat down to work.’ When her boss, the company owner, stopped by to talk with her while she was nursing her baby, he reacted as though this situation was an everyday event: ‘I thought he might be shy or embarrassed . . . And he’s like . . . “well, come talk to me when you’re done!” And that was it.’ In this scenario, Julie found a solution to personal needs and company interests by exploring, rather than assuming, the extent to which her supervisor was willing to accommodate.

In summary, childbearing women who perceived discouragement or encouragement about employment and career opportunities after maternity leaves used different conflict management strategies with their bosses. Although Miller and colleagues (1996) believe that virtually all women taking maternity leaves experience some form of role negotiation, such an assertion is not supported in this study. In particular, women who felt discouraged tended to either totally avoid the conflict (i.e. not enter the negotiation process) or confront the bosses competitively with repetitive

positions. In contrast, women who were encouraged treated maternity leave as a 'give and take' process and used diverse, creative negotiation strategies to influence their bosses and achieve their personal goals.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions and practical implications

Examining women's reports about their maternity leaves revealed that pregnancy, maternity leaves, and returning to wage work were filled with gendered conflicts in which female employees felt more or less able to negotiate. Prior theory and research on maternity leave as role negotiations failed to account for a full spectrum of micro-practices that might be associated with women's perceived agency in this process. In this study, we employed a conflict management lens to examine the experiences of women who felt encouraged or discouraged about their employment and career opportunities when they transitioned into working motherhood (see Putnam, 2006).

Specifically, our findings indicated that regardless of occupations, position statuses, and relational contexts, both groups of women perceived maternity leave as characterized by incompatible goals between organizational and personal needs. Consistent with Martin's (1990) analysis, maternity leave exposed a taboo conflict that resulted from activation of women's multiple and seemingly incompatible identities as 'mother' and 'worker.' In addition, as this study showed, stress, along with its many physical and emotional consequences, was an integral part of women's lives, as they transitioned into working motherhood.

Moreover, our study revealed that women who were discouraged or encouraged about employment at the times of their pregnancies and maternity leaves diverged or displayed noticeable differences in perceptions of their interdependent relationships with supervisors/companies. Women who felt discouraged associated maternity leave with increasingly problematic superior-subordinate relationships, restricted repertoires of bargaining strategies, unproductive influence tactics, gender stereotypes, and vicious cycles. These respondents saw these seemingly incompatible goals as irreconcilable since they could neither negotiate their roles nor their working conditions. In contrast, women who felt encouraged believed they were valued and had agency in work situations, including leave negotiations. They recognized organizational constraints, such as a manager's need to preserve workflow and they helped out when necessary, even while on maternity leave. Even though they experienced some of the same types of conflicts as the

women who felt discouraged (i.e. stress and incompatible goals), they realized that these situations did not necessarily lead to negative outcomes.

For women who felt encouraged, maternity leave was a time when they sustained positive relationships with their superiors, expanded a range of possible behaviors, focused on interests and mutual concerns, and indicated through their work involvement that they were still the same competent workers despite pregnant bodies and working mother status. Hence, the suppressed gender conflicts, depicted in the research on executive women, did not thwart these women's perceptions of employment and careers. All of the women who felt encouraged remained with their employers, whereas more than half of those who felt discouraged left their companies after their leaves.

These findings of commonalities and differences have important theoretical implications. First, traditional research on gender and organizational conflict treats gender as a variable (i.e. biological sex) linked to conflict management behaviors and outcomes. Although these studies describe general conflict management patterns that can predict and improve cross-gender communication, they perpetuate social stereotypes about women as weak, ineffective, compromising, and avoidant. Since gender identities are excluded from these analyses, past research provides limited understanding of gendered conflict. By situating conflict within gendered organizing processes, this study provides insights into socio-cultural contexts in which gendered conflicts are embedded (macro-processes) and shape the reasons why some women manage conflict the way they do (i.e. how macro-processes inform micro-practices).

Second, gendered organizational studies typically focus on the covert nature of gendered conflicts and the ways that asymmetrical gendered relations shape and (re)produce possibilities and practices (e.g. Martin, 1990). Conflict is often examined as a macro-level social process rather than a micro-level interpersonal practice. Although these studies make women aware of the taken-for-granted tensions and ironies in organizational practices, they do not provide specific recommendations regarding conflict management strategies. By conceptualizing maternity leave as a negotiation process, this study not only reveals the inevitability of conflict as a gendered process, but also provides insight into productive and unproductive ways of negotiating important professional and personal issues.

Third, our analysis reveals that the ways women manage conflict before and during their maternity leaves may influence their employment and careers. Women's ways of handling conflict seem related to their bosses' assessments of their competencies and their potentials for promotion. These ways of handling conflict shape the use of influence and negotiation tactics,

understandings about interdependencies, and management of goal incompatibilities and stress. Thus, approaches to handling conflict may influence superiors' and co-workers' judgments about the extent to which women sustain their ideal worker images when transitioning into working motherhood. We argue that maternity leave requires additional theorizing and research as a conflict management process as well as continued work on policy and career development.

Fourth, research of this nature might shed light on why some women still have difficulties managing maternity leave and why truly innovative and productive work–family policies remain difficult to implement (Kirby et al., 2003). These findings may explain why only 15 percent of our sample felt discouraged about their employment and careers when the literature suggests that a much higher percentage perceives negative outcomes at the times of their leaves.

Finally, the findings of this study indicate the need for additional research on perspective-taking, influence tactics, and gendered conflict between female workers and their superiors. Practical applications should focus on training for both parties and not simply the woman.¹ Of particular importance is training for bosses. Even when flexible work–family policies are in place, these policies operate at the discretion of bosses (Gottlieb et al., 1998; Kirby, 2000). Negotiation training for anyone in supervisory roles is necessary. This training should include ways to recognize and remedy the set-up-to-fail syndrome and hidden gender conflicts (e.g. Martin, 1992; Manzoni & Barsoux, 1998) as well as on FMLA and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act guidelines. There should also be periodic assessments of structural supports for maternity leave and other work–family policies (for structural supports, see Martin, 1990; Schwartz, 1992).

The sample in this study included only 26 women who were primarily white and lived in the Midwestern region of the USA. Women employed in other areas, from different backgrounds, and from countries with more (or less) progressive policies may have quite dissimilar maternity leave experiences. Moreover, the women's accounts were retrospective. Although they reflected over time, they offered only an individual, partial look at maternity leave practices (Lindlof, 1995). They lacked the moment-by-moment struggles and emotional responses that other methods, such as participant observation during workplace pregnancies and maternity leaves, could have produced. They also relied on participants' perceptions rather than on co-workers' opinions and evaluations. The study did not include interviews with bosses or human resources personnel who might have information about performance appraisals, conflict management behaviors, or work relationships linked to feelings of discouragement or encouragement.

Finally, this study did not examine the organizational policies or benefits packages of the participants. Because we were interested in the ways these 26 women made sense of their workplace practices, we relied on their perceptions. In conflict situations, people act on their interpretations of data whether these data are factual or not (Neale & Bazerman, 1991).

In short, our respondents indicate that maternity leave is a conflict management process that unfolds differently for women who perceive discouragement and encouragement about their employment and careers. For greater understandings of maternity leaves, work–life balance, and implementation of work–family policies, scholars need to examine additional accounts of workplace experiences, including the treatment of women during pregnancies and maternity leaves.

Note

- 1 One reviewer noted that our analyses suggest that the women themselves must change to create situations that they perceive as better for themselves. We would advocate that all parties (bosses, co-workers, and women) engage in discussions and training about negotiation strategies to assist in maternity leave and other processes.

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Patrice Buzzanell (BS, MA, PhD) is Professor of Communication at Purdue University. Her research interests center on identity and emotion work in career and leadership contexts, particularly gendered processes regarding advancement, work-life issues, and organizational participation. She has published in such journals as *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Theory*, *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs* and *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. She edited *Rethinking organizational and managerial communication from feminist perspectives* and co-edited *Gender in applied communication contexts*. She mainly teaches graduate seminars on communication theory, leadership, and career discourses but also has taught such courses in CIMBA (Italy) and executive education programs for engineering managers (Krannert). She advises and researches engineering design teams in EPICS (Engineering Projects in Community Service).

[E-mail: buzzanel@purdue.edu]

Meina Liu (BA, MA, PhD) is Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research interests center on the role of emotion in conflict and negotiation, gendered organizational processes, career discourse, and intercultural communication. She has published in journals such as *Journal of Business Communication*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Communication Research*, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* and *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*.

[E-mail: liu@umd.edu]