

Struggling with Maternity Leave Policies and Practices: A Poststructuralist Feminist Analysis of Gendered Organizing

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Unlike previous research on maternity leave using Department of Labor statistics, survey data, or analyses of single cases or texts, this study explores 15 women's discursive constructions of their workplace experiences while pregnant, on maternity leave, and upon return to paid work. Through a poststructuralist feminist analysis, findings not only show how these women positioned themselves and others vis-à-vis gendered discourses and organizing, but also how this positioning process shaped possibilities for practice in particular ways. The ironies and contradictions exposed by participants' discourse reflect ongoing feminist debates about the productive management of dialectic tensions and suggest directions for change in micropractices and macroprocesses of gendered organizing.

Keywords: Maternity Leave; Pregnancy; Poststructuralist Feminism; Gendered Organizing

The U.S. labor force participation of mothers has increased dramatically in the past two decades. Among women with children under three years of age, the proportion who work for pay swelled from 34% to 61% between 1975 and 2000 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003a). The 2000 employment rate of mothers with children under one year is 51% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001) with most new mothers returning to

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the same employer within a year after giving birth especially if they are guaranteed jobs (Leibowitz, Klerman, & Waite, 1992; Lyness, Thompson, Francesco, & Judiesch, 1999). Despite the fact that the majority of new mothers engage in paid work, a recent trend of declining percentages (from 59% in 1998 to 55% in 2000) has prompted some companies to revise leave programs in hopes of retaining female employees (Chaker, 2003). Factors influencing when women begin leaves, return to market work, and switch employers are not well understood notwithstanding studies on new mothers' role overload, (dis)satisfaction, turnover, and work-family conflicts (e.g., Brown, Ferrara, & Schley, 2002; Fox, 2002; Hyde, Essex, & Clark, 2001; Leibowitz et al., 1992; Williams, 2000).

In this study, the discourse of 15 women who felt discouraged about their employment and advancement chances around the times of their maternity leaves are examined. Over three-quarters of these women either did not return to, or did not remain with, their employers after their leaves and almost half indicated job dissatisfaction after their leaves (whereas three-quarters reported being satisfied or highly satisfied beforehand). Because many did not remain with the same employer after their maternity leaves, these women may be similar to the labor force segment about which demographers and companies are most concerned, namely, those women who may not return to paid work or to their same employers and may not express satisfaction with leave policies and practices. In addition, those who reported discouragement might have been more aware of or had more extreme experiences than other women. Noting their reasons for discouragement could provide insight into the declining proportion of new mothers returning to work and ways in which leave programs and work cultures can be reformed.

Whereas most researchers of maternity leaves and new mothers' employment have examined U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and survey data (e.g., Hayghe & Bianchi, 1994; Klerman & Leibowitz, 1994; Leibowitz et al., 1992; Lyness et al., 1999) or have deconstructed one text or one executive woman's experiences (e.g., a company founder's maternity leave, a CEO's speech, or a hospital's leave policy; see Ashcraft, 1999; Martin, 1990; Peterson & Albrecht, 1999), this study examines how several women in different work and life situations talk about, enact, and respond to workplace pregnancy and maternity leave processes as well as how gendered organizing processes challenge women to intersubjectively (re)construct their identities and agency. As such, it informs researchers and policy makers about the ways ordinary women who are not companies' top officers actually position themselves and others vis-à-vis gendered discourses—and how this positioning process shapes possibilities for practice in particular ways. This analysis of workplace pregnancy and maternity leaves takes a poststructuralist feminist lens to show the constitutive power of discourse in evoking certain subjectivities, meanings, and likely material consequences of these struggles within specific socio-historical, economic, and cultural contexts (Weedon, 1997). A poststructuralist feminist lens illuminates power struggles that may prevent some women, family members, and supervisors or coworkers from constructing preferable identities and positive material conditions.

In this process of temporarily (un)fixing interests and power, workplace pregnancy and maternity leaves become contested sites in which discursive constructions wield power to establish reality frames, sequester other interpretations, shape women's relationships to their worlds in ways not always apparent to them, and locate possibilities for transformation (see Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby, 2004; Weedon, 1997). Through this analysis, "the everyday [is linked] to larger political and economic questions" (Mumby, 2004, p. 252) and possibilities for future research and practice can be offered.

Literature Review

In this section, an overview of maternity leave information from governmental and popular sources is presented so that the ways these texts (re)produce normal discourse, enlarge and constrict possibilities for actions, and address and silence administrative and individual concerns are illuminated. Poststructuralist analyses of maternity leave follow this synopsis not only to supply other possible interpretations of laws, organizational policies, and advice from popular sources but also to show how these analyses challenge notions that legal mandates and corporate policies alone can rectify gender imbalances. Consistent with the tenets of poststructuralism, they display how power operates behind-the-scenes in mundane interactions, how social reality is unstable and complex, how discourse orders the world (and manages people) in certain ways, and how organizational and institutional policies and structures are fundamentally gendered (Acker, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1996; Peterson & Albrecht, 1999; Weedon, 1987, 1999).

Legal and Organizational Policies and Implementation Issues

The two laws that operate as baselines for employees' rights in workplace maternity and family leave discussions are the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 (PDA) and the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA). The PDA amended section 701 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by adding a new subsection requiring basically that "women affected by pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions shall be treated the same for all employment-related purposes" [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2003]. The PDA translated into fairly standard six to eight week leaves for institutions and companies with 15 or more workers but the conditions of payment (or lack thereof) and of return to work in the same or comparable positions varied (Marzollo, 1989). Job security for pregnant women was limited to the same extent that companies guaranteed security to those returning from disability leaves (Weisberg & Buckler, 1994). The FMLA granted eligible employees up to 12 workweeks of unpaid leave during any year-long period for pregnancy and personal or family reasons (see U.S. Department of Labor, 2003b). The FMLA has exceptions for the highest-paid 10% of employees within 75 miles of the workplace (in which case, employers can reassign workers upon return from leaves because holding the same job might cause "substantial and grievous economic injury" to the business) and for use of vacation or disability

leave funds (Weisberg & Buckler, 1994, pp. 36–37). There also are differences in state coverage for pregnant women and those eligible for family leaves (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2003), but employers are required to comply with the federal or state law that offers more employee protection.

Because of exceptions, litigation threats, and the changing nature of human resource policies, numerous websites offer guidance for HR professionals in handling workplace pregnancy and maternity leaves (e.g., HR Certification, 2003; HRnext, 2003). According to a FMLA update provided by the Council on Education in Management (2003) and using DOL statistics from the Wage and Hour Division, federal district courts have held managers and supervisors “personally liable” in over 16,000 FMLA complaints (with \$19,000,000 in damages). Websites providing information to women summarize variations in treatment and respond to issues such as “Could pregnancy affect your job?” (CareerPlanning, 2003).

The PDA and FMLA presumably safeguard against penalties for maternity and ensure job security (under specified conditions). However, researchers and *Wall Street Journal* columnists point out inadequacies in government laws and organizational policies regarding leaves (e.g., Chaker, 2003; Greenberger, 2003; Shellenbarger, 2003). Researchers have advocated more effective management of benefits programs (Glass, 1996), and public policy changes such as granting paid maternity leaves at the discretion of the woman (Queneau & Marmo, 2001). But Klerman and Leibowitz (1999; see also Brown et al., 2002; Lyness et al., 1999) found that maternity-leave legislation is unlikely to have a major impact on new mothers’ job continuity because other factors, such as the work-family culture and supervisory relationships, play key roles in women’s satisfaction and policy use. Poststructuralist feminist analyses of mothers’ discourse and practices within specific leave programs can supplement prior research by bridging macro organizing discourses that frame, shape, and can be changed by micropractices.

Poststructuralist Feminist Insights into Workplace Pregnancy and Maternity Leave

Poststructuralist feminism enables researchers to destabilize and critique institutional texts and organization theory as well as the discourse and practices of individual women. Although there are several strands of poststructuralist feminism, all draw upon the instability of language, the ways language constitutes realities and subjectivities, the hidden costs of asymmetrical power relations (including politics in knowledge production), and the human body as a “locus that legitimates and normalizes certain discourses and practices as ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’” (Calás & Smircich, 1996, pp. 236–237; see also Butler, 1995a; Flax, 1987; Trethewey, 2000; Weedon, 1987, 1997, 1999). What institutional and individuals’ texts say and do (and do not consider saying or doing) depicts discursive attempts to fix meaning or realities. Poststructuralist feminist analyses show the nuanced ways in which discourses and individual identities can and do shift in varied and often conflicting ways with implications for human agency. Specifically, critiques display: how different subject positions are called into being within situations, how agency is constrained or

enhanced, and how opportunities for awareness and action emerge in situ (Butler, 1995a; Calás & Smircich, 1996; Flax, 1987, 1990; Gherardi, 1994; J. Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1987, 1999).

Based on a review of literature, there are only three poststructuralist feminist critiques of maternity leave: Martin's (1990) deconstruction of a CEO's story describing a project manager's plans for caesarian birth as evidence of his company's gender emphasis and family friendly practices; Peterson and Albrecht's (1999) textual analysis of a hospital policy that supports the continued sexual division of labor; and Ashcraft's (1999) reconceptualization of leave as a temporary executive succession process and site for intricate gendered identity constructions.

Using a Derridian analytic lens, Martin (1990) displays the prioritization of masculinity, work, rationality, and corporate interests over feminine, private, emotionality and sexuality, and relational ethics. Through language reversals (female–male, private–public, absence–presence, baby's birth–project launch) and examination of silences, Martin depicts deeply embedded gender conflicts that manifest themselves both in the CEO's positive spin on the executive's caesarian birth arrangement and in the real material consequences of the woman's complicity with corporate discourses. Martin reconstructs the story to show its transformative potential both for individual women and corporate policies as well as for organizational theorizing.

Peterson and Albrecht (1999) revisit maternity as a gendered site to expose “the hidden, ideological assumptions buried beneath seemingly benign language” of a hospital's leave policy (p. 170). Using Burkean textual indexing, they delve into factual associations (i.e., presence and absence of words and their arrangements in texts) and interpretations. The *maternity leave = benefit* equation presents leaves as bonuses and voluntary choices rather than guaranteed rights. *Pregnancy = disability* metaphors and absences of people, such as the baby and father, reveal women's experiences as sickness, abnormal, sexuality and reproduction, disability, and private (rather than their organizationally privileged opposites). Peterson and Albrecht's deconstruction implies direction for policy revision that can disrupt the sexual division of labor.

Like the previous two poststructuralist feminist analyses of a CEO's story and of a hospital's leave policy, Ashcraft (1999) also critiques a specific text (in this case, executive succession literature) to locate the gendered basis of maternity leaves. However, she augments her theoretical critique by developing a case study of a top officer's pregnancy and maternity leave. In this second move, Ashcraft includes voices other than those of herself as the author. In other words, she develops a sense of human agency that Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) point out is often missing in feminist deconstructions. For example, in Martin's (1990) study, the voices are that of the CEO and of Martin herself rather than the pregnant executive or audience members at the CEO's address—leading to a “text stripped of its narrative and social context” and of women's agency (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 103). Likewise, Peterson and Albrecht's (1999) critique comments on the hospital as a specific context but relies on the authors' interpretations rather than those of female employees, HR managers, and others. Ashcraft focuses on discourses about policies and precedents, the ways leaves

are situated within changing relationships, and the causes for and consequences of maternity leaves.

Through her critical participatory ethnography, Ashcraft (1999) illuminates how a company founder's pregnancy and leave create a variety of shifting tensions, ongoing sensemaking interactions over time, and complex identity struggles for the founder, her employees, and other stakeholders. Ashcraft reveals "intricate plays of control and resistance" embedded in feminine leadership and executive succession while also questioning what "organizing . . . crafted around women's meanings and experiences [would] look like" (p. 276). Her richly detailed case analysis suggests possibilities for alternative organizing and theory.

Summary and Research Question

Three studies display how poststructuralist feminist analyses foreground issues and processes in workplace pregnancy and maternity leave that are different from more traditional approaches of labor force analyses and surveys of corporate or governmental policy use. They help bridge the gap between what is present and absent in maternity leave policies and practices on macro–micro levels. However, none critiques the discourse and practices of multiple women who are employed in various occupations to show how ordinary women deal with gendered constructions and contradictions in interactions, policies, procedures, and organizing processes around the times of their pregnancies, leaves, and returns to paid work. In this study, maternity leave is positioned as a contested field where meaning is (re)produced, negotiated, and resisted in context. The research question is: How do women who report discouragement about employment and career opportunities around the times of their maternity leaves express the tensions and ongoing power struggles inherent in gendered organizations?

Method

Participants

From audiotaped and transcribed interviews with 102 women about their maternity leave experiences, this study focused on those who reported that they felt discouraged about their employment and advancement chances in their companies. Fifteen women or 15% of the entire data set checked off *discouraged* or *very discouraged* on a brief written survey that was completed at the time of their interviews. These women were selected because human resource materials have tended to discuss problems with workplace pregnancy and maternity leaves in general but have not examined how women actually construct these life events and with what consequences. Reporting discouraging employment or career outcomes was not typical since the majority (50%) of participants reported *neither encouragement nor discouragement* or said that the question was *not applicable* to them (with the remainder indicating encouragement). Those who reported discouragement might have been more aware of or had

more extreme experiences. They also seemed inclined to leave their pre-pregnancy employment sites.

These 15 women came from a great 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 and 44 years of age when they took their maternity leaves. Most had some college education and, with two exceptions of black women, were white. Most had one maternity leave (with a range of one to three leaves).

Procedures

Data gathering

The first author constructed an interview protocol and survey based on published research and her own and others' experiences with maternity leave policies. There were four parts to the protocol: respondents' understandings of maternity leave policies; their descriptions of their pregnancies or adoptions and maternity leave experiences; their (and others') ways of talking about maternity leaves; and their returns to paid work. At the time of the interviews, participants also completed a brief survey that requested demographic data as well as information pertaining to their maternity leaves (e.g., timing of the leave, job satisfaction prior to and after the leave). They also signed consent forms consistent with IRB approval.

Student volunteers obtained course or practicum credit for participating in a research project. Interviewers collected the surveys (which participants signed with their first names along the seal of the envelope) and transcribed the data using Fairhurst's (1993) system. After all the data were gathered, both authors identified the 15 interviews being used for this study, verified transcripts against audiotapes, noted corrections, and began analyzing data. The 15 interviews used for this study ranged in length from 10 to 60 minutes and resulted in 203 pages of double-spaced text. Interviews averaged 25 minutes, with the 10-minute interview being unusually sparse in interviewer probing behaviors. All names and locations were changed to preserve confidentiality.

Data analytic techniques

As both authors were verifying transcripts against audiotapes, they also began memoing, comparing and interrogating categories using generative questions, and developing themes using grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001). Over the course of numerous meetings and email exchanges, the researchers located, refined, and repeatedly returned to the data for support of thematic processes that spoke to participants' discursive struggles as embedded in their words, reported actions (and what they failed to report or did not consider doing), and responses to others' attempts to fix meanings of their situations and their identities. As such, data were interrogated for what was present and absent, fixed on one side of gendered tensions (e.g., male, work, and public instead of female, family, and private),

and contradictory or ironic in participants' discourse, as is consistent with previously reviewed poststructuralist feminist deconstructions of maternity leave by Martin (1990), Peterson and Albrecht (1999), and Ashcraft (1999).

Results and Interpretations

This analysis indicates that workplace pregnancy and maternity leave discourses are replete with gendered conflicts, ironies, shifting identity constructions, and discourses of simultaneous resistance and complicity as some women navigate among dominant conceptualizations of their nature and social roles as well as their own and their babies' experiences during transitions from good workers through pregnancy, leaves, and return to work. Research participants struggled with their own and others' efforts to fix meaning and identities through processes of: (a) reining in the feminine: emotions and expectations; (b) (de)constructing identities and identity work; and (c) resisting and complying with maternity leave policies and practices. These themes followed a progression: from initial reactions, emotions, and expectations about pregnancy and maternity leave; through participants' struggles to construct productive identities for themselves while pregnant at work; to their sensemaking and agency over time after they returned to paid work at the same or different employment sites.

Reining in the Feminine: Emotions and Expectations

During their pregnancies, not only were many participants' feelings reined in through discourses that privileged masculine and corporate ways of thinking, but they struggled with their hopes for caring and their feelings of ambivalence when others accommodated their physical conditions. Maternity leave created a context for oppositional discourses that reinforced a gendered divisiveness about the nature and enactment of leaves.

Conflicting discourses about workplace pregnancy feelings and desires

When participants were asked to describe their emotions about becoming mothers, all expressed positive feelings, such as being "excited," "happy," and full of "amazement" that they could partake in a miracle. Katrina, a black data entry operator, commented that when she first found out about her pregnancy, "it was like a miracle." April, a white librarian assistant, recalled her joy and excitement—explaining that she was 36 years old at the time of her first pregnancy and had been married for 11 years so no one ever thought that she was going to have children. For these women and other participants, family and coworkers usually shared in their happiness.

In contrast to their own and coworkers' joy, these women constructed their bosses' reactions as chagrin and almost personal affronts at their conditions and impending needs for leaves. Katrina said that her boss expressed "disappointment sort of that they're losing an employee." When she returned to work, her boss was "happy . . . how's the baby but you're back to work . . . I'm happy that it's over.

You had the baby. Now let's go back to work." April recalled that when she approached her boss, the female director of a library, the woman was "kind of against it" because the boss assumed that pregnant women were abusing the system ("trying to get something out of the company and they may not come back"). April noted that her boss foregrounded her own inconvenience ("you were making it hard on her because she had to somehow get your work done") and reacted negatively despite the fact that April had only a six-week unpaid leave. April and some other participants constructed excuses for their bosses. April rationalized her boss's treatment by commenting that the woman "was not married, had no children, [and] was an older woman." But even when their female bosses had children, participants felt caught between expectations and practice. Brice, a white seamstress in an embroidery embossing company, said that all her boss "cared about was her job and that's why I quit because they weren't adjusting, changing my schedule all the time and I relied on her . . . and she never stood up for me."

Ironically, when bosses did exhibit concern about their workers' health, some women expressed ambivalence. This ambivalence centered around simultaneous feelings of happiness at being cared for or treated as an individual, nagging feelings about paternalistic attitudes (in which bosses implied that they knew what was best for employees and their unborn babies), and feelings of discomfort at seemingly inappropriate behavior for the rational, instrumentally-focused workplace (see Mumby & Putnam, 1992). For instance, Katrina was ill during her pregnancy so her boss was lenient about lateness and moved her from her CRT because of fear that the rays emanating from the computer screen might harm the baby. Although Katrina appreciated the caring attitude she also felt that accommodations were improper, preferential treatment: "I felt that it was unappropriate somewhat because I felt that they were playing kind of favoritism towards me." Brice expressed irritation:

This one boss he was a male chauvinistic sort of and he would be like, "Oh, I can't give you that job, you can't lift that much," or "Okay, come in and I'll give you help when you get to this section," and "Only do up to this part," like people would start to do that to you, like "Can you, are you feeling okay," "You can't lift that."

Although Brice found it "annoying" when her boss would assign her something "special" to do, she also expressed pleasure: "I mean it is nice sometimes, you know, when you are not feeling well and they are comforting. It feels good but at the same time they can be a little overbearing." These interactions prompted ambivalence because the women seemed aware of paternalistic caring as well as female stereotypes that informed others' discourse and practices (see Wood, 2005). They valued their identity changes and emotions associated with pregnancy and motherhood in their private lives, but resisted corporate constructions of them as weak and incompetent in the public realm.

Oppositional discourses of maternity leave policies

Whereas pregnancies drew out conflicting and ambivalent discourses about appropriate feelings and desires, maternity leave discourses established: oppositional

framings of women's maternity leave definitions (as relational and health time for themselves and their babies) and organizational emphases (on following policies unless it benefited the company not to do so); and benefit-burden dialectics.

Most participants stressed that maternity leave is "time off work to have a baby," "time to take care of your new baby and time to recover," and "time spent getting to know the baby, nurturing it for two to three months and getting it started in its life." Underlying their definitions are assumptions that caring for newborns and for new mothers are worthy time expenditures. These women assumed that maternity leave policies were intended to help them fulfill their own and their babies' needs and that they would be treated with respect and consideration. Tara, a white photo lab technician who also sold cribs at the retail store for which she worked, commented that she thought that companies "would be really supportive; that they would try to understand and help you the way that they could." She considered maternity leave to be a "benefit that the company provided." However, actual maternity leave practices were quite different from Tara's interpretations of company policy. Instead of caring and guaranteed rights, Tara and others dealt with reminders that they were not individuals but workers under company control.

Janice, a white sales representative and customer service specialist, returned "exactly six weeks after the baby was born. Um, I did have more sick leave built up than that, but that was all I was allowed to use." Jena, a white sales rep in the broadcast industry, reported, "Um, my boss just said if I could handle it, um 12 weeks at home and still do some work from home, that she didn't see any problem with me taking 12 weeks." Although Jena took her leave two years after the FMLA was enacted, her company probably was not required to follow guidelines because of size. Jena performed routine duties while on leave but earned only 50% of her regular salary: "I worked out of my home quite a bit, I came down for a lot of meetings." She justified coworkers' phone calls by saying that "they didn't know the history of an account" and "they didn't want to do something that could cost me the business while I was out on maternity leave." She indicated that she was "a little frustrated" at the constant calls. Neither she nor her "supportive" boss recognized how much each of them prioritized discourses of work and economics or that they never tried to locate creative ways to ensure both the leave and the account flow.

In addition to oppositional (maternal and corporate or economic-centered) discourses and practices of maternity leave, there also were benefit-burden dialectics playing out in participants' and their organizations' discourses. In most cases, maternity leaves were set up by the personnel or HR department in a standardized fashion. Just about all participants had maternity leaves that lasted a set amount of time. The length depended on sick or disability leave procedures, union contracts, vacation use policies, and other agreements but was standardized by amount of time after delivery (usually six to eight weeks), type of delivery (vaginal or C-section), doctors' letters, or combined hierarchical level and organizational tenure. According to Portia, a black consultant, "You could work until the doctor said you shouldn't and you could return to work when your child is six weeks old, six weeks after delivery." Brice was "level one" in her company and took off eight (unpaid) weeks.

In general the women read their handbook policies, talked to HR personnel (or other experts), phoned the benefits number for details, or talked to managers. The experiences of Lori, a white inventory analyst in a merchandising company, were typical in that she informed HR and obtained “a packet” about leave policies.

While the standardization of rules, paperwork, set durations, and expert sources made maternity leave practices appear to be routine employee benefits as well as fair policies (i.e., there were consistent procedural applications, outcome allocations, and interactional treatments; see Bies & Moag, 1986), combinations of work prioritization and standardized policy discourses discursively closed off chances that the women would consider negotiating for extensions or requesting extra information about policies. They would have needed “legitimate” reasons to challenge these discourses even though full recovery from childbirth can be nonroutine and lengthy (Hyde, Essex, Clark, Klein, & Byrd, 1996) and even though almost all participants said that they longed to have more time with their infants. Presumption was accorded to the ways things were done, equal policy enactment, and work prioritization.

Despite standardization implying the normalcy of maternity leave in benefits packages, companies enacted maternity leaves as burdens and nonroutine events. When Tara asked personnel managers to explain the leave policy: “They told me that I had to call the number in Arkansas and pretty much find out for myself. They never really had time to sit down and talk to you.” Tara spent a great deal of time, money (\$200 + phone bill in one month), and energy to get answers that, presumably, any benefits specialist should have been able to provide. Likewise, when Janice said that she had a very hard time with personnel losing the files containing her leave application, it was her problem (and, by implication, her fault): “Management gave me a hard time.” Dee, a white assistant manager in a gas company, commented that the process was very time consuming “because there were a bunch of papers we had to fill out.” By placing the burden for obtaining information (“I had to literally *chase them down*”—Tara), understanding the text, rectifying errors, and completing paperwork on the women, policy discourses silenced them. When April requested and was denied a leave extension because of a tailbone injury sustained during delivery, she did not appeal her case. She and her coworkers learned not to request or expect any accommodations: “Everyone after that took maternity leave learned that she [boss] was not going to become flexible”—an example of discursive closure that sealed off opportunities for potential conflicts or changes in social relations or work (Deetz, 1992).

(De)constructing Identities and Identity Work

Participants were both drawn to and repelled the crafting of their identities (Kondo, 1990) as pregnant workers and working mothers. Their former promotable worker identities receded into the background as they became pregnant and working mother.

While all participants said that they looked forward to having children, they also remarked about the noticeable transition that occurs in identity negotiations. Brice said, “When you are pregnant, it is a transition from you being important starts to change.” Josie, a white speech pathologist in a hospital, said “They [pause] saw me as

a different person, I think.” With motherhood, Katrina remarked, “You don’t feel like the same . . . you’re used to working everyday . . . You’re cleaning, cooking and stuff and *that’s not you*” (emphasis added).

As the women were taking part in identity work and changes in everyday routines, they also noted that they were being re-evaluated by others. As Tara puts it, “They don’t look at you at the same way, 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.” Participants described subtle shifts in the ways others treated them (not always badly and not always unwelcome) and their attempts to position themselves during pregnancy and after maternity leaves as the same persons as before they became pregnant. The “same” person meant the same *worker* since they acknowledged their bodily, emotional, and cognitive changes. They tried to discursively manage their identities by arguing that they were the same people, by resisting labels, and by reasserting accomplishments to ward off the negative aspects of pregnant and working mother categorization.

Their dilemmas in constructing productive identities for themselves were evident in their discussion of others’ treatment of them. Half of the participants indicated that pregnancy and maternity leave were used frequently by their bosses as reasons to blame them, demote them, or deny raises or promotions that were promised previously—all of which negatively impacted these women’s incomes, work life quality, or career development. Some women are conscious of the paternal meaning constructions underlying these practices. For instance, Janice said that after a woman has a baby, people assume that the woman does not want to be promoted: “They don’t really give you much of a chance to rise above that, even if you would choose to, you’re pretty much kind of labeled as a working mother, that you don’t have any aspirations.” Janice, a sales representative who had been working for her company for 14 years, failed to get a promotion even though she had made it clear that she intended to return after her leave: “I don’t know if that [getting pregnant] had something to do with it or not. . . . Um, I can’t prove or disprove that. I always felt that it had something to do with it.” Some women like Janice still reflected upon and wondered about the differences they perceived—searching for logical and concrete proof for unfair treatment and gender bias (“I can’t prove or disprove that”).

What Janice and other women were caught between was the difference between their lives and ideal worker images with masculine performance evaluation systems. A “good” or ideal worker is *not* someone who chooses pregnancy, who exhibits feminine and sexual qualities, who prioritizes personal needs such as childbearing over corporate needs, and who cannot be in the office 24/7/365 (see Deetz, 1992, 1995; Perlow, 1998). In addition, ideal workers must always look and act fit, youthful, and professional (Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 2000, 2001). These cultural images of good workers and the organizational structures and practices associated with them are suffused with masculinity (Acker, 1990, 1992; Gherardi, 1996). Nowhere can the discrepancy between the ideal and the female worker be more evident than when some employees are pregnant.

The pregnant body is one of excess, hormonal and emotional changes, and sexuality. Most participants talked about morning sickness, discomfort because of weight gain and swelling, and tiredness. Katrina recalled that she “was just so big and . . . uncomfortable.” Sara, a waitress and bartender in restaurants: “Sometimes you don’t feel well, you get sick at the beginning and you’re tired all the time, your feet hurt, you’re uncomfortable.” Portia said she was “very fragile physically I um had a sickle cell trait, low blood count, I was just constantly being weak and tired all the time.” Tara recalled, “I had toxemia, high blood pressure, um, and I had severe swelling to where I couldn’t even wear shoes half the time . . . I couldn’t bend over. It was hard for me to get up and down real quick.” Despite having had a miscarriage, suffering from asthma, being high risk, and holding doctor’s notes requesting accommodations, Tara reports that her bosses did nothing to assist her. In one exception when she fell, Tara figured that the “jerk” helped her because he thought acting otherwise could “endanger him.”

The lack of responsiveness by management was not simply a reaction to inconvenience, it also was a means of controlling or disciplining women like Tara. Tara had already stepped down from a management position because of chemicals in her photo lab. She previously had been sent off-site to management training seminars—an indication of her worth to the company and her promotability. But pregnancy changed how she and others constructed and restricted her gendered identities to one—the pregnant worker. And as a pregnant worker, not only was Tara “yelled at” for “leaving” her post to go to the bathroom “without notifying anybody,” but with a “huge” body that “gained 85 pounds” during pregnancy, she had to help a customer carry a crib by herself when she was six and a half months pregnant. She was not even able to get a glass of water or keep one near her. She was disciplined by others and by herself (see Trethewey, 2000).

Despite her best efforts and dreams of a slim postpartum body, she could not mold her body into the professional (masculine) form. So she described how she tried not to request accommodations and tried to comply with all managerial directives. So caught was she in her attempts to construct good worker images and discourses that Tara even stayed on her job when she fell and started spotting. Her boss at that time refused her request to go home and she did not go.

Tara was not alone in her struggles. While Lucy had to work with some “pretty bad thing[s]” in the labs, her company refused to follow her doctor’s advice of arranging flexible work hours. Janice, who worked until her due date and returned to work in six weeks without requesting additional time despite her physical needs, ended up having physical problems and bleeding abnormally.

Resisting and Complying with Maternity Leave Policies and Practices

Butler (1995b) points out that agency is “a repeated process, an iterable procedure. . . . That the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance” (p. 135). As such, it is through discourse and related practices that possibilities for agency and

for “reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled” are enacted (Butler, 1995b, p. 136; see also Weedon, 1987, 1999). The discursive field of workplace pregnancy and maternity leave consists of competing ways of organizing and giving meaning to women’s lived experiences that offer individuals a range of modes of subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). However, the dominant discourse in this field, managerialism, operates as “a set of discursive moves that interpellates a particular type of subject and produces a particular world” by which organizations do “little to foster autonomy and choice making” (Deetz, 1992, pp. 222, 233). Managerialist ideologies interpellate or call, in an Althusserian sense, workers to be subjects who often take corporate control for granted, generally acknowledge control and predictability as necessary conditions, and fail to fully recognize power inequities (see Deetz, 1992; Hall, 1985; Weedon, 1987). Against these discourses, however, participants strove to negotiate productive identities and situations.

Their struggles were evident in their words and deeds. In most cases, participants did not attempt to obtain additional maternity leave time. In very matter-of-fact tones and language, they explained that their actions were consistent with policy. Yet describing their action simply as complicity with policy would conceal the complex hegemonic processes that embody attempts to fix meaning (see Mumby, 1997, 2004) and their simultaneous enactments of resistance.

Participants actively constructed what motherhood, selfhood, worker, consumer, and these identity intersections meant. Tara returned to paid work not only because she enjoyed her job and coworkers but also “because there was [sic] things I wanted, you know, nice things I wanted the baby to have and I knew I couldn’t have unless I got back to work and had the money.” Katrina noted the importance of motherhood (“That’s the peak of your life”) but returned to work for “independence” and income. Dee said, “Actually [laugh] it sounds stupid. I didn’t like to go back to work.” Dee’s comment “sounds stupid” from corporate imperatives in which employees privilege corporate interests and rationality (see Deetz, 1992; W. Scott & Hart, 1989). Ironically, it also “sounds stupid” insofar as it depicts the shame some women experience about their preferences for private mothering over public career fulfillment (e.g., Williams, 2000).

In their active (re)constructions, participants operated within discourses filled with sensemaking and shifting identities. In the passage below, Tara expresses her continuing attempts to make sense of pregnancy, corporate policies, and her particular leave experience:

I was glad that they were offering one, but I was kinda misled on how it, you know, how it was gonna be, so I was really disappointed when I was built up—they built a maternity leave up to something that it wasn’t.

While Tara may now think she was naïve in expecting her leave to be “glamorous and glorious,” she realizes that her own unique needs held no weight against corporate interests. When she acknowledges that she was “misled,” she is moving toward resistance and understanding of her social position in society. Tara is unwilling to take

the blame for misinterpretations. “Misled” implies purposeful and deceitful action on the part of the other.

As mentioned earlier, some women returned to their employers after their maternity leaves but often left some time later. Janice explained the strategy of promising to return:

Insurance would cover the benefits for the six weeks afterwards was kind of the understood way of doing things and then when your six weeks would come up, they'd call in and say, “Well, I'm not coming back.” And that was kind of the general rule at that time.

Ironically, in resisting the social order by promising to return but not doing so, participants (re)constructed unreliable working mother discourses—images that they were trying so hard to change in their own lives. The “general rule” formed a means of resistance passed down from one pregnant woman to another. But they also constructed a legacy of broken contracts (from the company's viewpoint) that provided justifications for lack of trust and promotions.

For those who did not return simply to receive benefits, decisions to move on later involved much thought, feelings of hopelessness, and considerations of multiple identities and priorities. Lucy spoke about a series of “ifs” or possible actions her company could have taken to satisfy her but she saw “no hope anywhere in the company, it just wouldn't have been worth going back.” While one could view quitting as acts of defeat, they also could be read as resistance against flawed working conditions and logics. Joan, a white nursing assistant in a hospital, said that her decision to leave took her a year. After returning to paid work from her maternity leave, she found out that a promised management position was given to someone else:

I even thought about consulting a lawyer because I thought it was discrimination against [pause] the fact that I was a mother now, and um I thought about going to a lawyer but I, I just left, after I worked there for another year, and it got so bad, I ended up leaving.

Joan's discourse reveals that her professional, mother, individual, and female identities have shifted over time. Underlying her words are her recognition that she holds a legitimate claim for advancement (using criteria of performance, seniority, and desire for advancement) and that, as an individual, she not only has rights to litigate perceived corporate wrongdoings but also rights to leave untenable situations. Then she talks as a “mother now.” Here, she indicates that efforts to claim her professional and worker rights are temporarily less important than her maternal identity. Joan's discourse indicates that she performed actions when she was ready and willing to do so. Her priorities shifted again when “it got so bad”—making her desires for better working conditions override other considerations (for meaning making involved in “moving on,” see Marshall, 1995)—but her sensemaking still is ongoing as reflected in her nonfluent speech.

In Jena's case, she chose to stay with her employer despite not receiving her promotion: And as far as the way the management staff used me, I think it bothered

me the first time, it doesn't really bother me now because I don't have aspirations right now to move up within the company, so . . . I think I've gotten used to it.

While her phrase "I've gotten used to it" connotes resignation to political interests that are not her own, Jena indicates that she now better understands how the company works and fully recognizes that the "staff used" her. Another participant, Janice, still clings to idea that corporations are just even though her bosses would not allow extra maternity leave time when she was experiencing postpartum physical difficulties. Tara learned how to subvert the system:

If they give you a phone number to call, call it at least two or three times. Write down everything they tell you. . . . Document everything because you're never gonna get a true story from them. . . . Question it, re-question it, document it, you know, just make sure that you understand everything completely. . . . You know, the most important thing is make sure that you understand your rights . . . make sure that you let the place that you work know and you understand everything that you're supposed to get so they can't more or less intimidate you and make you lose face, you know.

Tara resorts to the masculine and individualistic notion of rights and active resistance against the passivity associated with feminine stereotypes and good (complicit) worker images. She advises other women to use the very bureaucratic procedures that attempted to de-individualize her and negate her negotiating abilities. She advocates documentation ("write down everything"), overt information seeking ("re-question it"), profound skepticism ("you're never gonna get a true story from them"), an in-your-face attitude ("so they can't more or less intimidate you"), and an aggressive bargaining position ("make sure that you let the place that you work know that you understand everything that you're supposed to get").

Summary

While the three themes roughly followed a chronological ordering from pregnancy through return to paid work, they also displayed the unfolding of participants' awareness about gendered organizing and ways that they simultaneously reproduce and resist the social order. The first theme established both baselines of and contradictions within expectations, emotions associated with, and definitions of pregnancy and maternity leaves. Second, participants' struggles to construct productive identities and counter ideal worker images were described. Finally, participants' discourses displayed their ongoing sensemaking and the shifting nature of their identities and agency since their returns to paid work.

Discussion

Poststructuralist feminism casts doubt on maternity leave as a neutral organizing process as presented in laws, policies, and some advice from popular information sources. Instead, it helps researchers and practitioners "understand those social and cultural practices which constitute, reproduce and contest gender power relations"

(Weedon, 1997, p. vi). The gender tensions and contradictions exposed by participants' discourse about workplace pregnancy, maternity leave, and returns to paid work reflect ongoing feminist debates about the productive management of complicity–resistance, reason–emotion, public–private, masculinities–femininities, sameness–difference, and exclusion–participation, among others (see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Buzzanell, 2000). These tensions structure women's and men's identities and provide insight into gendered organizing processes, including maternity leave.

Specifically, both complicity with and resistance to dominant interpretations of maternity leave become evident as the women negotiated their identities more or less productively and determined what courses of action they should and could take. Within this negotiation process, participants' accounts often portrayed the workplace as masculine with boss/subordinate conflicts, standardization of policies to benefit organizational efficiencies, and subordination of feminine interests and bodily needs over public sphere concerns. Moreover, participants' leave experiences and identity constructions could not be comprehended without understanding their transitions into working motherhood and without contextualizing these transitions within the details of their tasks at work, interactions with coworkers and family, medical histories, and so on. It is at the intersections of multiple contradictions, ironies, and tensions in situ that opportunities for these women's agency and for policy reform can be shaped.

Butler (1995b) questions the concrete conditions under which agency becomes possible; in other words, under what conditions do repetitious or transformative performative acts become supported? The three thematic processes found in this study provide indications for how and where women reproduce and resist dominant readings of their experiences. In reining in the feminine, not only did participants struggle with conflicting and ambivalent discourses about their pregnancies, particularly with regard to being treated differently or similarly to other employees, but they also had to deal with oppositional discourses of maternity leave (that rendered their definitions of and expectations about maternity leave illegitimate) and benefit-burden dialectics. Against the ideological force of work prioritization, corporate needs, illegitimacy of feminine feelings, and justice constructed through equal policy enactment, participants had difficulty constructing alternative discourses and identities *at that time*. Yet their discourse attested to the provisional and iterative processes of identity, gender, and organizing negotiations that afforded and closed openings for change during some women's transitions into working motherhood.

In (de)constructing identities and identity work, participants both were drawn into and avoided others' crafting of their identities as pregnant workers and working mothers (i.e., unpromotable workers acting against the companies' best interests and requesting time off work). Their dilemmas in developing productive identities for themselves surfaced in their discussions of others' treatment of them and their inability to discipline their bodies to conform to professional ideals. Some women argued that they were the same (workers) *and* different (pregnant) but masculine performance evaluation systems and ideal worker standards shifted attention to only one pole of the seemingly dichotomous ideas (i.e., difference). Difference discourses

embedded within traditional organizing processes often undermined the women's attempts for fair treatment to the extent that many did not even consider other possible actions until they left their companies or had time to reflect back on their experiences.

Finally, the thematic process of resisting and complying with maternity leave policies and practices suggested that complicit and microemancipatory discourses and actions did take place. Participants expressed ongoing sensemaking about and political struggles in creating their identities and priorities in life, their ways of handling situations, and their agency. Transitions into working motherhood seemed to be contexts in which self-reflection and intersubjectivity promoted awareness and (constrained) action against gendered social orders. These thematic processes indicate that simply providing leaves is insufficient for making these benefits automatic rights. The gendered social order undermines women's identity work to construct themselves as normal workers who just happen to be pregnant and, later, mothers.

In sum, thematic processes indicate the presence of multiple, competing, and shifting discourses that simultaneously resist and reinscribe dominant meanings of organizing and gender. Through awareness of what is missing and present in discourses and practices, particularly that which is ironic and contradictory, researchers and practitioners can advocate change in theory and practice.

Limitations

While this sample was limited numerically (but not occupationally), of greater importance is that data consisted of retrospective accounts supplied during interviews with only the women taking maternity leaves (and not other family, friends, coworkers, bosses, or HR specialists). Although their stories displayed their sensemaking over time, they did not reveal the moment-by-moment struggles and emotional responses that other methods, such as participant observation during leaves and transitions into working motherhood, could have produced.

Moreover, these women constituted only 15% of the total data set. While their numbers suggest that they represent extreme experiences, they may have been more aware of or have had more concrete or identifiable problems (e.g., postpartum difficulties, denial of already promised promotions) that enabled them to name their experiences as discouraging.¹ Thus, their numbers may belie that fact that many women experience gendered organizing processes during their transitions into working motherhood. The very fact that researchers and practitioners still have discussions about what to do with leave requests and policies indicates that maternity is not normalized in organizational life.

Moreover, these women's accounts retell a familiar story in published materials (e.g., Mock & Bruno, 1994; Schwartz, 1989, 1992) and may provide insight into why there is declining workforce participation of new mothers (Chaker, 2003), less job satisfaction after returns to paid work than before pregnancies (Brown et al., 2002), continuing work-family conflicts (Williams, 2000), and inadequate theorizing about,

policies normalizing, and practices assisting women undergoing maternity leave (Ashcraft, 1999; Martin, 1990; Peterson & Albrecht, 1999).

Theoretical Implications

Weedon (1999) looks toward discursive possibilities for identity construction and agency as opening opportunities for change and implications that are “always partial, historically specific” ways of dealing with conflicting interests and “structural relations of inequality” (p. 178). Using poststructuralist feminist emphases on language, subjectivity, identity, and power, nuanced understandings can be derived about some ways oppressive and empowering conditions can operate in the context of maternity leaves. In this study, empirical evidence lent support to Martin’s (1990) and Peterson and Albrecht’s (1999) deconstructions of maternity leaves as deeply embedded gender conflicts and as abnormalities situated in an array of automatic benefits and policies. These textual deconstructions play out in some women’s everyday lives and in the ways the assumptions underlying maternity leave act to suppress alternative ways of thinking about and constructing women’s identities, individual leaves, organizational policies, and governmental laws. In addition, this analysis shows how the U.S. stance on maternity leave as a political issue being defined (or fixed) by governmental policy makers relying on Department of Labor statistics and on business lobbies can neglect the most important stakeholders in this process, namely childbearing women and their infants, as well as family members, friends, and organizational members who may not be able to contemplate alternative scenarios for action while in their current situations. Finally, this analysis points to the ways in which organizations are fundamentally gendered with masculinities guiding formation of policies, practices, and individual behaviors.

To open these discussions, empirical analyses that continue to display ways in which discourses and practices are simultaneously reproductive and transformative, disempowering and empowering, within specific contexts would be beneficial (e.g., Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). There already are analyses that deconstruct the force of ideal worker norms, the masculine nature of work, and the appeal of domesticity for American women (e.g., Perlow, 1997, 1998; Williams, 2000). For maternity leave situations, in particular, the sexual nature, diverse experiences of women, and inadequacies of policy reforms cannot be denied (see Ashcraft, 1999; Martin, 1990; Peterson & Albrecht, 1999). However, prior deconstructions of one top officer’s experiences, a CEO’s speech, and a leave policy are insufficient for understanding and advocating on behalf of multiple, non-executive women.

Research and publication of local moments of resistance and of the real material consequences of transitions into working motherhood need to be continued (i.e., material consequences in this study were loss of income when the only course of resistance is quitting work, expenses encountered in information seeking, and physical problems when there is little or no accommodation to pregnancy and postpartum difficulties). These studies could provide a more complex and nuanced picture of the shifting nature of discourse and possibilities for transformation. This picture needs to include diverse women, different occupational settings, and contrastive organizing

systems, such as female-owned and -operated businesses, virtual companies, top family-friendly firms, not-for-profit agencies, conventional institutions, and companies with low and high proportions of telecommuting and other flexible arrangements.

Finally, because gender constitutes organizing processes and outcomes, one could argue that maternity leave cannot change unless organizational structures are transformed through feminist values of caring, nurturing, connection, and advocacy on behalf of women (e.g., bounded emotionality, in Mumby & Putnam, 1992). These structures and corresponding values operate in tension with mainstream forms such that daily micropractices and macro discourses are in constant conversation with each other (Ashcraft, 2001; Buzzanell et al., 1997; Gottfried & Weiss, 1994). Additional research on alternative organizing processes would enable researchers to situate maternity leave more creatively within and offer realistic models of diverse organizational structures premised upon dialectic tensions rather than certainty.

Practical Applications

Given how participants positioned themselves and others vis-à-vis gendered discourses, several possibilities for practice emerge. First, data portray workplace pregnancy and transitions into working motherhood as times in which multiple and shifting identity constructions, physical and emotional needs (and accompanying material conditions), and subject consciousness of constrained agency emerge. Findings suggest that human resources procedures and local practices should stipulate periodic (re)evaluation with individual women and groups of pregnant women and working mothers to assess specific changes in their work-life experiences and to promote information sharing (especially intersubjective construction of stories articulating needs, interests, and ways to proceed). One recommendation would be establishing a women's advocate in the human resources department who would accompany some pregnant women—particularly those who feel discouraged about their employment or career opportunities and those who feel as though they lack legitimate forms of power—in their negotiations with bosses. These advocates let women know that they are not alone or different in their needs for accommodations. Their very presence would signal that laws and corporate policies are open to interpretation and negotiation rather than fixed documents.

Second, results indicate that some contemporary maternity leave practices demand unnecessary paperwork and promote lack of clarity about policies. While policies may be strategically ambiguous to benefit corporate interests (see Eisenberg, 1984), imprecision in policy goals and implementations fosters great concern among some childbearing women and opens organizations to litigation and EEOC complaints. Research shows that women employed in perceived supportive work-family cultures work late into their pregnancies and return to paid work more quickly to the same employer (e.g., Lyness et al., 1999). It would seem to be in the company's best interest to make maternity leaves automatic rights that have streamlined and unambiguous processes as a baseline from which case-by-case negotiations, as suggested in the first practical recommendation, could take place. These first two proposals address

the needs and interests of both concrete and universal others in feminist ethical approaches (see Haas & Deetz, 2000) while paving the way for the third implication.

Third, childbearing women should be treated as knowledgeable about their own needs. Participants indicated that their own requests as well as doctors' notes and obvious postpartum physical difficulties failed to produce any leeway in scheduling or work demand alterations. Participants' discourses and practices also indicated that they wanted to do good work. They not only complied with requests to stay at their desks and engage in physical duties but also expressed ambivalence at special treatment. Recognizing that these women are not trying to cheat companies out of work effort, that they can still be good workers while pregnant, and that there may be alternative ways of doing tasks would go a long way in enhancing these women's abilities to construct productive identities.

To signal women's rightful place in organizations, managers should reward promotable and competent women while they are pregnant, on maternity leave, or during their returns to paid work (and to do the same for men who have taken paternity or other family leaves). Other processes and practices need to be mandated to assist women (and men) in work-family negotiations: office closing times, family leaves, positive performance appraisals for work efficiencies rather than work time, flexible hours for community and family service including coaching children's sports teams and participating in parenting classes or support groups through various extended family and stepfamily phases; networking and social gatherings during regular work hours; discussions of leave policies with all potential employees, annual discussions delineating the kinds of rewards employees would like to have when raises or promotions are neither viable nor the most desirable benefits to specific employees, and so on. Martin (1990) also notes that a whole range of organizational policies would need to be changed if female organizing models were used. These policies might include on-site obstetric and pediatric care, adjustable work hours, and flexible daily breaks. Thus, it is not enough to advocate for both flexibility and clarity in maternity leave, the nature of gendered organizing must be challenged and reworked in specific concrete ways.

Change in policies and everyday interactions can be facilitated by creating awareness that these interventions—individually and in combination—are routine practices in some organizations (e.g., Deloitte & Touche, LLP, and International Business Machines Corp., in Chaker, 2003; S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., and Wachovia Corp., in "100 Best Companies for Working Mothers List for 2003"). Investments that construct worker-friendly organizations not only assist members in their own balancing of work-life tensions but also assist companies in recruitment and retention of valued employees (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Awareness can be created through employee newsletter features, case studies in organizational communication classes, career training and development seminars, and so on. Furthermore, benefits orientations and training sessions that focus on workplace pregnancies (and adoptions), maternity leaves, and returns to paid work along with other automatic benefits could enable the women, their bosses, and coworkers to establish reasonable work conditions for women at different points in their pregnancies.

While it is easy to list recommendations for what researchers and practitioners should do, it is not as easy to engage in praxis. But feminist politics requires that awareness and generation of possible solutions for particular times, places, and people be revisited periodically and developed into concrete actions in specific contexts (see Buzzanell, Sterk, & Turner, 2004). To this end of feminist political engagement, both authors are presenting recommendations to the Council on the Status of Women (CSW) at Purdue University and the first author is chairing the Work–Life committee of the CSW. The CSW and similar groups on other campuses are not aligned with the institutional hierarchy but operate through educational sessions, development of coalitions about specific issues, and strategic alignment with values purported by, but not necessarily actualized in, vision statements and strategic planning documents.

This study demonstrates that maternity leave often is located within discourses about difference and may not be perceived or practiced as an automatic right. As such, workplace maternity still operates as a contested site not only because it brings to the foreground tensions between masculinities–femininities, public–private, reason–emotion, and other dialectic concerns but also because it holds a tenuous place in organizing processes (Ashcraft, 1999; Peterson, & Albrecht, 1999). Given the large portion of the U.S. labor force that has infants and young children, such inattention to the mundane experiences of some working mothers by policy makers and by organizational communication researchers only makes sense through a traditional gendered lens. While women who are discouraged by employment or career opportunities at the times of their maternity leaves seem to be a relatively small percentage (15% of the larger data set), their accounts provide insight into reasons for the declining percentage of new mothers who work outside the home (Chaker, 2003; Williams, 2000) and for the “institutional forces at work in the production of gender difference and identity” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 18).

Notes

- [1] We would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that findings might have emerged from a random sample of women in the paid labor force who had become pregnant and taken leaves.

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