

Career Counselling Considerations for Mothers Returning to Work

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Abstract

Women transitioning back to work from motherhood face complex challenges, including changes in their self-concept, priorities, self-confidence, and career-related beliefs. To effectively support mothers contemplating workforce reentry, career counsellors must understand the unique interplay between their clients' home, community, and previous work lives and its impact on their career development. This article integrates relevant concepts from the career development theories of Super, Krumboltz, and Brown, Hackett, and Lent with current literature to inform career counselling interventions aimed at optimizing the reentry experiences of mothers returning to work.

Keywords: career development, mothers returning to work, working mothers, career theories, counselling interventions

Women contemplating reentry into the paid workforce following a period of staying home with children face a difficult decision-making process (Ericksen et al., 2008). Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) described a transition as a state "that alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 14).

Indeed, research with this population indicates that the transition to motherhood and back to career represents a challenge, in particular, to women's self-concept, priorities, self-confidence and career-related self-efficacy beliefs (Ericksen et al., 2008; Killy & Borgen, 2000; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rubin & Wooten, 2007). Career counsellors are in a strategic position to help reentry women as they navigate this transition (Chae, 2002; Morgan & Foster, 1999). To do so effectively practitioners need both an understanding of the processes that shape career plans unique to this population of women (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) and helping strategies to address these processes that are grounded in career development theory.

To this end, this article integrates the literature pertaining to the experiences and needs of mothers contemplating reentry with key concepts from several career development models. In doing so, suggestions for helping methods that accommodate the unique needs of this group are extended. The article begins with an exploration of three particularly salient processes found to characterize the experiences of at-home mothers considering reentry, namely, changes in self-concept, priorities, and career-related self-efficacy. Key concepts from Super's Life-Span, Life-Space

Theory (Sharf, 2013; Super, 1980), Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory (Krumboltz & Mitchell, 1976; Sharf, 2013) and Happenstance Learning Theory (Krumboltz, 2009; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1999; Sharf, 2013), and Brown, Hackett, and Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent & Brown, 1996; Sharf, 2013) are then applied in an attempt to both conceptualize these phenomena within a career development context and explore their implications for counselling interventions that facilitate women's optimal reentry into a career - old or new.

The literature broadly defines reentry women as those who have been out of the workforce for 3-35 years and returning to work when their children are college age; however, a narrower definition suggested by Ericksen et al. (2008) will be assumed for the purposes of this article. The above authors defined reentry women as those who have been out of the workforce for 2-10 years and who are considering reentering old careers or looking into new ones while their children are still young. The main reason for utilizing this narrower definition is that, as Locke and Gibbons (2008) pointed out, women who have been at home fulltime for several decades or more arguably face a different set of challenges that reflect the considerable amount

of time they have been out of the workforce.

While due recognition is given to the challenges and barriers faced by reentry women once they have actually returned to work (pay inequity, discrimination impacting advancement), this article intends to focus on the complexities inherent in the *decision-making process* of a return to work, such as those informing the exploration of options and formulation of a plan; to this end, consideration will be given to the complex and challenging process by which reentry women reinstate themselves in the workforce in ways that work for them and for their families.

Issues Related to Mothers' Career Reentry Considerations

The many challenges inherent in becoming a mother and staying home to care for young children are manifested in changes to mothers' sense of self, abilities, values, preferences and relationships, among other things; consequently, mothers considering workforce reentry constitute a multifaceted population of women with unique counselling needs. As such, it is important to consider these women's career decision-making processes "as outcomes of potentially complex and interrelated experiences in their home, community, and previous work lives" (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012, p. 636).

This section explores three highly interconnected processes that characterize the transition

from career to motherhood and back to career in an attempt to contextualize the vocational counselling needs of women as they consider when, how and in what way they will reenter the paid workforce. These processes are changes to self-concept, changes in priorities, and changes to self-confidence and career-related efficacy.

Changes to Self-Concept

Becoming a mother is a significant life experience that marks many changes to women's lives; in particular, this transition has a profound and dynamic impact on a woman's sense of self. Oberman and Josselson (1996) contend that inherent in becoming a mother is a shift in boundaries such that women move from being relatively autonomous in their daily lives and decisions to accommodating the needs of their child around the clock. The implications of this shift in selfhood encompass movement between feelings of lost autonomy and feelings of increased self-esteem arising from the integration of new aspects of self as mothers find themselves in a new, nurturing role. This phenomenon is supported by Miller's (1996) findings that for some women, the emotionally-charged maternal facet of their identity comes as a shock and surprise to them, causing unprecedented changes to their values and beliefs. Further complicating this process, Hays (as cited in Johnston & Swanson, 2007) contended that the construction of a mothering identi-

ty occurs within the larger context of a dominant mothering ideology. This ideology holds mothers to a rigorous standard of intensive, hands-on mothering, positioning "mothers as the sole source of child guidance, nurturance, education, and physical and emotional sustenance" (p. 448).

Implicated in this new facet of the self as a mother is the interruption of vocational self-concept that occurs as women transition out of the paid workforce and into the home to care for young children (Killy & Borgen, 2000). Leaving the paid workforce may be initially characterized by a sense of lost identity as women shift from seeing the self predominantly in a professional context to seeing the self as a fulltime at-home-mother. For others, loss of identity may be off-set by an overwhelming sense of relief derived from being rid of the stress experienced in trying to balance work and family (Rubin & Wooten, 2007). Mothers who have left careers to stay at home fulltime may resolve their mother-worker identity tension by denying alternatives and embracing intensive mothering expectations and values in order to justify their decision to stay home (Johnston & Swanson, 2007). Bridges (as cited in Killy & Borgen, 2000, p. 121) conceptualized the transition from worker to mother identity as a three stage process that has an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. The ending stage involves a re-configuration of the self in which a woman must let of her old sense of self (vocational sense of self)

in order to find the person she has become in her new situation (mother). This can be a frightening experience since it means a break with the context in which a woman has both a sense of familiarity and a certainty of self. This is followed by a neutral zone during which she slowly adjusts and comes to recognize a new facet of self, and finally, a new beginning comes to bear as aspects of the old and new self are integrated. As women contemplate career reentry, a similar process can be expected as women again experience an ending (to the sense of self they have developed as at-home mothers), a neutral zone, and a new beginning (re-integration of aspects of fulltime mother identity with aspects of new career identity).

According to Super's description of self-concept development (Sharf, 2013; Super, 1980), as mothers adjust to their new role and take up the challenge of managing a home and caring for young children, self-concept can be expected to undergo further adjustments reflective of how these women come to see themselves and their new situation. Lovejoy and Stone's (2012) findings concurred with Super's view that the development of self-concept is brought about via an individual's interaction with many facets of society. In particular, women's interactions with individuals and involvement in the home and community may profoundly affect values, interests, and priorities. Four features of women's environmental conditions in the role of homemaker appear to be especial-

ly salient with respect to changes in self-concept: (1) a shift toward a more gendered division of labour in the home; (2) increased involvement in hands-on mothering; (3) participation in volunteer and community work; and (4) more time for self-exploration. Over the course of women's time at home, these factors combine to bring about changes in values, interests and priorities that inevitably impact women's decisions surrounding workforce reentry, in some cases representing opportunities for women to springboard into a new career direction (Chae, 2002; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).

Changes in Priorities

Inextricably linked to mothers' self-concept development is the process whereby becoming mothers, many women experience changes in priorities that reflect the newfound importance of family and balance in their lives. For many, experiences in the workplace prior to taking time away combine with later experiences at home in such a way as to render the linear career model characteristic of former professions to be problematic going forward (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).

Not surprisingly, the decision to stay at home for an extended duration to raise young children is an emotional one comprising many considerations, including beliefs about what is best for the family and children and the circumstances of women's work lives (Rubin & Wooten, 2007; Schultheiss, 2009; Vejar,

Madison-Colmore, & Ter Maat, 2006). The stress of trying to balance work and family combined with work environments lacking understanding and flexibility may act as the catalyst in some women's decision to take time away from careers while children are young (Rubin & Wooten, 2007). Negative experiences with regards to family friendly occupations may in fact play a greater role than any other factor; hostile work environments characterized by an expectation of long hours combined with a lack of options to accommodate family needs and an overly-demanding workload leave some women feeling there is little choice but to leave their careers. The implication of these negative experiences are significant in that they contribute to women's later thinking about when, how, and in what capacity they will reenter the workforce (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). This significance is echoed by Cabrera (2007) and Ingols and Blake-Beard (2008), who maintain that due to the changes in life circumstances that come with raising a young family, it becomes impossible for women to work within the dominant "work is primary" career model in which masculine values of organizations discriminate against mothers.

Experiences in the home and community play an additional role in the reprioritization process. As Miller (1996) contended, the emotional significance of being a mother takes many women by surprise and results in a reevaluation of personal and family needs, values, and practicalities. Lovejoy

and Stone (2012) elaborated this observation, finding that as women adapt to new constraints and opportunities at home profound changes to their values, interests and priorities may result. In the home, mothers may become more acutely aware of the subtleties of their children's world and may develop a strong desire to be at home as much as possible in order to be available to both witness and influence their children's development. In addition, community involvement in children's schools and other places is often characterized by values similar to those found in mothering work, such as care, altruism, and connectivity; this reinforcement of values around care of others and the experience of participating in work centred around such values may inform women's thinking with regards to their future career development.

Although the initial intention to combine or integrate career and motherhood may hold steady, the specifics of this undertaking are likely to change over the course of women's time at home (Miller, 1996; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Ericksen et al. (2008) considered this process as resulting from the interplay of certain driving forces (i.e., financial, environmental, self-image, skills, abilities and interests), which are considered within the context of various filters, namely, the demands of family, the nature of support, education level, experience, self-concept, and a cost-benefit analysis. Ericksen et al.'s conceptualization of the reprioritization process is supported by Sullivan and Main-

iero's (2007, 2008) description of the kaleidoscope career model. Just as the pieces in a kaleidoscope move around and change form, so too do the various facets of women's lives; different aspects of women's experience move in and out of focus at different times in their lives reflecting the relative importance of each in a given moment, such that priorities are constantly in flux. Cabrera's (2007) findings showed preliminary support for the idea that women tend to shift their focus from challenge early on in their careers to prioritizing balance and authenticity later on as family responsibilities become paramount.

Changes to Self-Confidence and Career-Related Efficacy Beliefs

Several factors are identified in the literature with regards to changes in self-confidence that inform efficacy expectations for former careers. According to Schultheiss (2009), dominant social values that tend to devalue the work mothers do in the home account for a significant portion of women's experiences of guilt and shame in deciding to stay at home and care for their children. Co-workers, family and friends often relay these messages to women by greeting their decisions to stay home with shock and disapproval. Inherent in this reaction is the belief that women who decide to transition out of a career to stay at home are essentially throwing away all of the hard work, time, and money that went into acquiring an education; furthermore, it

implies that there is little or nothing to be gained from the work of mothering, only losses and career devastation.

Rubin and Wooten (2007) illustrate the contentions of Schultheiss in their account of women's real experiences with this kind of social devaluation and their finding that the loss of validation experienced is often mirrored internally. With the awareness of societal disregard for stay at home mothers comes feelings of guilt about not utilizing their education and skills, shame arising from beliefs that they should be able to work and mother, yet they are only doing one of those things, and felt lack of importance stemming from the belief that anyone can be a mother - essentially, that no special skills or qualifications are required. Ekstrom et al. (1981) spoke to the implications of such findings, suggesting that although they have developed many skills relevant to work environments through such experiences as homemaking, parenting, and volunteering, reentry women often under-rate or undervalue their actual abilities.

As the length of time women are away from the workplace grows, so do concerns about skill depreciation, which for many women act to undermine self-confidence in terms of their prospects for returning to former careers. This is especially true for women in fields with linear career trajectories or in faced-paced technologically oriented fields (Locke & Gibbons, 2008; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Cabrera (2007) contended

that time away from the workforce may leave women behind in terms of knowing how (unused career-specific skills weaken over time) and knowing whom (networking losses); however, these mothers may be at an advantage in terms of knowing why - that is, time away may actually clarify what is important to these women.

In summary, the career development of mothers considering when, how, and in what capacity they will reenter the workforce is influenced by several processes inherent in the transition to motherhood and back to career, including changes to self-concept that allow for a maternal facet of identity representing new values and beliefs; a reprioritization of work-family balance ideals informed by a combination of prior workplace experiences and experiences in the home and community, and lowered self-confidence impacting self-efficacy expectations for former careers. The outcome of these processes is that women tend to undergo a shift in their preferences, interests, values, abilities, priorities, and career-related efficacy beliefs such that they may favour career redirection over returning to former workplaces.

Career Counselling for Reentry Women: Some Recommendations for Helping Strategies

A review of the literature surrounding women's transitions from career to fulltime mothering work and back to career reveals that complex and highly interre-

lated processes inform the decision-making approaches of these women in terms of their future career plans. Drawing on key concepts from three career theories particularly relevant to the nature of this transition in women's lives, this section extends some considerations for helping strategies aimed at optimizing the career counselling experiences of women navigating the career reentry territory. The suggestions that follow aim to address the unique needs and experiences of this population of women as described in the literature; to this end, the following helping strategies should always be applied within the context of a counselling environment that allows women maximal exploration of self in relation to the various life roles performed in order to facilitate women's realization of personal growth (Padula, 1994).

Explore Self-Concept and Implications for Career Reentry

The significance of changes to self-concept that many women undergo during their time out of the workforce is best captured in Super's description of vocational development "as the process of developing and implementing a self-concept" (Sharf, 2013, p.178). According to Super (1980), self-concept is the amalgamation of an individual's biology, social roles performed, and how they feel they are perceived by others, reflecting needs, values, and interests. As indicated in the literature, with the transition from career to fulltime motherhood and back to

career, women's sense of self is in flux, continually adapting to the changes taking place within the person as well as within women's physical environment and social-relational context. Thus, it becomes critical that helping interventions for this population facilitate the client's exploration of the many factors molding her sense of self, including helping women to understand and be comfortable with the evolving nature of self-concept and being flexible in terms of adapting self-concept in response to the many contextual changes bound to arise during such a transitional process as career reentry (Coogan & Chen, 2007). Inherent in this exploration is the normalization and reframing of self-concept development such that the client may feel reassured that she has not become "lost" in transition. This is important because a woman's self-concept and the confidence she feels about her situation affects her ability to make the decision that is best for her. To this end, the exploration of self may be particularly helpful within a group counselling format in which women can benefit from the therapeutic factor of universality (Erickson et al., 2008).

Helping strategies should further explore the implications of women's evolving sense of self in terms of career reentry considerations. Career counselling with this population should allow women time for self-reflection in terms of how personal experiences and consequent changes in values, interests, and priorities have impacted the importance given

to the various life roles women perform (Ericksen et al., 2008). Super's (1980) Life-Space, Life-Span Theory and its recognition of the various roles individuals play in the course of their lifetime (e.g., student, worker, homemaker, community service worker) as well as the changing nature of involvement in these roles may be particularly helpful here, providing a framework within which the client can be encouraged to reflect on the personal meaning of the various roles in her life as well as the complex interaction of these roles and how this interplay impacts her life career journey (Coogan & Chen, 2007). The helping process should facilitate the client in evaluating the salience of these various roles in her life as a result of her previous experiences at work and her recent experiences in the home and community. Salience can be assessed by listening to the client reflect on her participation, commitment, knowledge, and values expectations regarding the various roles; this process may be helpful to counselor and client in conceptualizing a career direction. In considering values expectations for instance, her previous career, role as homemaker, and work in the community can be evaluated to see which role best meets her current value needs - needs that are tied to her self-concept (Sharf, 2013; Super, 1980).

Integrate and Consolidate Learning Experiences

Importantly, career counselling for women navigating the transition from homemaker back to career should include an exploration of the various push and pull factors experienced first in the workplace and later in the home and community that influence women's decision-making with regards to how, when, and in what way they will return to the workforce (Cabrera, 2007; Ericksen et al., 2008). The concept of learning experiences from Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory (Krumboltz & Mitchell, 1976) offers a meaningful way of conceptualizing the mechanism by which various push and pull factors that women encounter across their life roles impacts future career directions. Instrumental learning experiences consist of antecedents, behaviours, and consequences, while associative learning experiences involve the pairing of a previously neutral context with a positive or negative experience. The outcome of both modes of learning is, respectively, either the increased or decreased likelihood of an individual repeating a behaviour or putting him or herself in a similar situation in the future (Krumboltz & Mitchell, 1976; Sharf, 2013). Such consequences are significant to the career development considerations of women navigating reentry.

In assisting women to assess the relationships among the various filters (push and pull factors) which inform her career reentry decision-making process,

counsellors utilizing Krumboltz's concept of learning experiences can help women make meaning of these experiences by exploring the various instrumental and associative learning experiences that clients have encountered in their previous work environments, in the home as fulltime mothers and in the community through volunteer work (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). For instance, learning experiences can be helpful in understanding the experiences of some women who, upon becoming mothers, find their work environments (previously neutral) to be hostile, inflexible, and not conducive to work-family balance (negative association) and in which they felt they had no option but to quit and stay at home with their children. As indicated in the literature, many of these women are later reluctant to return to former workplaces or former fields (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rubin & Wooten, 2007), a consequence which can be understood as resulting from the generalization of their previous negative experience to future career contexts. Helping women to evaluate their experiences in such a way facilitates women to integrate and consolidate learning experiences such that they may better understand how they got to where they are presently in terms of their preferences for future career direction and management. In line with Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory, the emphasis of interventions around learning experiences should be on personal growth and understanding rather than making a choice

(Krumboltz & Mitchell, 1976; Sharf, 2013).

With respect to the many unforeseen changes that manifest from women's experiences in prior workplaces, at home and in the community, Krumboltz's Happenstance Learning Theory (2009) proves highly relevant in its focus on recognizing, adapting to, and capitalizing on unexpected events in people's lives. In particular, Krumboltz's concept of curiosity provides a useful framework within which to apply helping strategies for this population of women. As an approach or skill, counsellors can use curiosity to explore with clients new learning opportunities and to investigate possibilities arising from unexpected events (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1999). Many women who stay home fulltime become active in their communities, such as volunteering in their children's schools; becoming engaged in personal pursuits, such as taking classes; and networking through various community involvement experiences. Together, counsellors and clients can explore the ways that involvement in these areas has resulted in learning experiences affecting values, interests, and abilities and the implications of this learning for career considerations. Furthermore, unexpected events can be explored to see what kinds of new opportunities and avenues are available to women in the new, unplanned for situation. Finding oneself with few alternatives but to stay at home with children due to inflexible, limiting work environments, or being unexpectedly

invited to become involved in a community organization or event through one's network are both examples of instances in which counsellors can help clients to recognize and incorporate opportunities for new directions into their life. In line with the idea of planned happenstance, counsellors can encourage women who are not already doing so to take advantage of chance events or generate them by becoming involved in their community, as many learning experiences will inevitably arise from this involvement which may facilitate or lead to career opportunities (Chae, 2002).

Enhance Self-Confidence and Career-Related Self-Efficacy

A review of the literature reveals that women who transition out of careers and into the home are likely to experience losses in self-confidence and career-related self-efficacy beliefs due to societal devaluation of the mothering work that they do in the home as well as perceived depreciation of job-specific skills and networks over time (Ericksen et al., 2008; Killy & Borgen, 2000; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). The significance of such findings for the career development of reentry women is best articulated by several of Social Cognitive Career Theory's (Lent & Brown, 1996; Sharf, 2013) concepts; namely, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations. Borrowing from Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory views self-efficacy as the strength of an individual's beliefs

that they have the abilities necessary to accomplish a certain task or behaviour. This belief or lack of belief in self is thought to impact career choice by influencing interests, values, and abilities. Meanwhile, outcome expectations refers to an individual's beliefs or evaluations regarding the *outcome* of performing a given task or behaviour. It follows that decisions are then made based on the individual's evaluations of these two things. As such, both of these concepts are highly relevant for reentry women and should inform helping strategies for this population.

Importantly, counsellors should help clients to contextualize their self-efficacy beliefs, situating them within the various relevant internal and external variables that inevitably shape them. Within-person factors, relationships, family, community and environment all play a role in shaping women's evaluations of ability. Facilitating clients to understand that their perceptions of self-efficacy for a task or behaviour are based in a much broader context than simply their own assessment of themselves can be a powerful tool in the task of enhancing self-efficacy beliefs (Coogan & Chen, 2007). This is particularly important because many reentry women, given the reasons discussed in the previous issues section, gravitate toward career redirection rather than returning to former workplaces. Breaking new ground and seeking to integrate career and family in creative ways that allow women to work on their

own terms requires much courage and strong self-efficacy beliefs for the task at hand (Jackson & Scharman, 2002).

As discussed earlier, many women who work in the home experience a shift in values, interests, and priorities that reflect values inherent in the caregiving work they have been immersed in over the years as mothers and community members (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Some of these women may be considering career redirection in line with these new values, interests, and abilities, but may lack the confidence and task-specific efficacy beliefs to move forward. Career practitioners can further help to increase self-confidence related to self-efficacy beliefs by encouraging women to be proud of their accomplishments in the home and community through exploring with their clients the many skills they have acquired in managing a home, raising children, and being involved in various forms of community work (Killy & Borgen, 2000).

In facilitating reentry women's decision-making process, helping strategies should also target outcome expectations with regards to various career development options women are considering. An exploration of the client's beliefs about what may happen in a given situation can lead to a discussion of perceived internal and external outcome barriers that may be preventing the client from planning and implementing a strategy to follow a desired path. For instance, women who found previous work environments or fields

to be impossible to integrate with family responsibilities likely have negative outcome expectations for reentry into a similar situation (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Career counsellors can help women explore alternate options and work arrangements that produce more hopeful, positive beliefs about outcome; essentially, this involves giving women permission to act in ways that work for them. One way that this can be accomplished is by helping women to reframe conventional beliefs they may hold about careers reflective of the "work is primary" paradigm. Reframing involves offering women alternative language and an alternative career model that may better reflect the complexities, needs and desires of this population. For instance, exploring the characteristics of the boundaryless career type or the kaleidoscope career model, or encouraging women to use language such as "we are self-employed" may be reassuring and empowering to women. Such strategies normalize many of the things women in this transition process are feeling and can help them to feel more confident in creating a career that best suits their broader life goals (Shapiro & Blake-Beard, 2008).

Conclusion

The literature pertaining to the needs and experiences of at-home mothers contemplating eventual workforce reentry reveals that complex processes inform these women's decisions with respect to future career plans. Changes to self-concept, priorities,

and career-related self-efficacy beliefs characterize the transition to motherhood, as well as women's experiences initially in the workplace and later in the home and community. The compounded effect of the changes women experience in these areas is that women may become increasingly disenchanted with previous work environments or careers and more interested in exploring career avenues that both reflect the new values, beliefs, interests, skills, and abilities that they have acquired during their time at home and offer the flexibility and work-family balance these women need and want for themselves and their families. In an attempt to address the unique experiences and needs of this population of women, relevant key concepts from the career development theories of Super, Krumboltz, and Brown, Hackett, and Lent to inform career counselling considerations aimed at optimizing the reentry experiences of women. Although it was beyond the scope of this article to address the entirety of issues reentry women may face, it is hoped that the exploration of the particularly salient issues of focus and the application of career development theory to these issues will serve to enhance knowledge and practice in the career counselling of this population of women to better meet their needs.

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