

CRANFIELD UNIVERSITY

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Sustaining identities in the face of competing norms:
Returners' identity work

Cranfield School of Management
PhD

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Academic Year: 2013 - 2018

Supervisors: Prof Susan Vinnicombe CBE and Dr Deirdre Anderson

July 2018

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ABSTRACT

Management and organization studies indicate that motherhood can change women's working lives and that the transition to motherhood contributes to the leaky pipeline for female talent. The extant literature suggests that women manage tensions between cultural norms for 'good mothers' and 'ideal workers' by developing a consistent approach, such as prioritising their maternal identities over their worker identities or trying to segment the two identities to limit conflict. However, the suggestion that women can manage tensions between their maternal and worker identities utilising one strategy implies stability in these identities that is not evident in the everyday practices of working mothers. Drawing on a qualitative study of German women's experiences of returning to professional and managerial roles within a manufacturing company following parental leave, I describe the identity work returners engage in to sustain their maternal and worker identities in the face of competing norms for mothers and workers. The findings indicate that returners engage in dialectic identity work, which is the purposeful and situationally-emergent effort returners expend to construct coexisting maternal and worker identities. This study extends previous research by highlighting the instability and incoherence in maternal and worker identities following the return to work -- differentiating between the strategies returners describe using in response to identity challenges upon workplace re-entry and the dialectic identity work tactics that facilitate situationally-appropriate identity responses. Applying Kreiner et al.'s (2015) identity elasticity construct to individual identities, this study demonstrates how returners maintain maternal and worker identities that are shifting and incoherent. This study also extends our understanding of women's experiences in returning to work by revealing the influence of the length of parental leave taken and prior return to work experience on returners' identity work.

Keywords:

Women returners, intensive mothering, ideal worker norm, parental leave, maternity leave, working mothers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Supervisor, Dr Deirdre Anderson, for welcoming me into the Cranfield International Centre for Women Leaders (CICWL) fold and for guiding me through this journey. To my Supervisor, Prof Sue Vinnicombe, I would like to express my gratitude for the effort she invested in critiquing my work and helping me develop my writing skills. I would also like to thank my panel members, Prof Clare Kelliher and Dr Colin Pilbeam for challenging me to question my assumptions at every critical point of this research project.

My deepest thanks go to the women who participated in the exploratory work and in the main study. Their willingness and openness in sharing their experiences with me have made this thesis possible. I also received instrumental support from Ms Debbie Bramwell who patiently fielded countless administrative queries from across the pond. I'm happy to extend my gratitude to Ms Britta Nonhoff for peer-reviewing my coding and Ms Anke Mader for her assistance with back translations.

Many thanks to the former CICWL community members, especially Dr Manjari Prashar and Ms Andrie Michaelides, for providing a supportive environment in which to gain feedback and to practise my presentation skills. To Dr Pankaj Chandorkar and Dr Thora Thorgeirsdottir: from commiserating over lunches during the MRes to exchanging electronic messages from our different corners of the world, I am thankful to have shared this adventure with you.

My heartfelt thanks go to my family and friends who have stopped counting the number of social events I've missed and have interjected levity throughout the journey. Special thanks to my mother, Sharon Wilson, for repeating ad infinitum that I can do anything I set my mind to and to my mother-in-law, Lydia Kutzer, herzlichen Dank, Lydia, für deine liebevolle Unterstützung.

I dedicate this thesis to my husband Ingo and to our children, Audra and Noah, with my love and eternal gratefulness for your sacrifices, patience and support.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIT	Critical Incident Technique
FT	Full-time work
HR	Human Resources
IC	Individual contributor
PT	Part-time work
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter introduction

This thesis examines women's maternal and worker identity work upon organizational re-entry following parental leave. I begin by relaying my personal experience of becoming a mother, which motivated me to study other women's experiences of returning to work. I then describe the business problem prompting this research and how this problem is amplified within the German national context. I also state the research question and define key terms that appear throughout this thesis, namely: returners, identity work, maternal identity and worker identity. Next, I provide an overview of the primary contributions this study makes. Finally, I close the chapter by outlining the remainder of the thesis and summarising the key points of this chapter.

1.1.1 Personal motivation

My interest in researching women's experiences of returning to work after parental leave stems from my own experience of combining work with motherhood. I was raised in the United States (US) and both my mother and father worked full-time for most of my childhood, which I had also planned to do once I became a mother. Based in Germany when I became pregnant with my first child, I was surprised to learn that many of the people I interacted with, both within and outside of the company I worked for, did not share my expectation of resuming full-time work. Despite earlier reforms aimed at encouraging fathers to take parental leave and mothers to limit their time on parental leave to 12 months, instead of the 36 months available, German families still exhibited a traditional male breadwinner model, prompting another parental leave reform the year after I had my daughter. However, I did not have the opportunity to explore the issue at the time as we relocated to England for my husband's work when my daughter was three months old.

During my pregnancy, I had been in negotiations with a US-based firm to help launch their European subsidiary. We agreed to finalise negotiations following my move to England. However, having just arrived in a new country, with a new

baby and having a partner who was working over 50 hours per week, I didn't feel ready to take on a full-time role. I requested a reduced-hours working contract for the first few months, to allow time for us to settle in. The hiring manager responded that, as a US company, they did not negotiate part-time contracts, even for a limited time, but that they would be happy to welcome me on a full-time basis when I was ready. I declined the offer and, somewhat inadvertently, joined the ranks of other 'privileged' MBA-educated women who had opted-out of paid work after becoming mothers (see Moe and Shandy, 2010).

As I will elaborate upon in the methodology chapter (3), I acknowledge that my view of the world has influenced and has been influenced by this research (Cunliffe, 2003). The experiences I described above, in addition to those that I've had since becoming a full-time PhD student, have contributed to my understanding of the complexity of sustaining maternal and worker identities. Concurrently, researching women's experiences of dealing with the tensions between 'good mothering' and 'ideal worker' norms, while being physically located in the UK, Germany and the US over the course of this project, has prompted me to engage with these norms more critically than I had before becoming a student.

1.2 Research rationale

Despite growing proportions of women within lower levels of organizational hierarchies and increased regulatory and management attention, women still struggle to attain top management positions within European corporations (European Commission, 2013). Studies suggest that motherhood is partially responsible for the leaky pipeline for female talent within organizations (Herman, Lewis and Humbert, 2013; Hewlett and Luce, 2005). Scholars point to the increased likelihood of women opting out of paid work around the time they become mothers (Cabrera, 2007; Fitzenberger, Steffes and Strittmatter, 2016) and the potential adverse career impacts for mothers who return to work in part-time arrangements following parental leave as contributing factors (Gatrell, 2007a; Stone and Hernandez, 2013).

One of the key issues facing working mothers is that societal norms concerning what it means to be a good mother are often at odds with norms for what it means to be an ideal worker. Although research indicates that good mothering norms are culturally specific and privilege certain groups of mothers (e.g. married women who can afford to stay at home with their children) over others (Hays, 1996), societal expectations for mothers in Western cultures tend to emphasise mothering as labour intensive and child-centred (Hays, 1996; Sperling, 2013; Pas et al., 2014). For example, mothers in the US are subject to an ‘intensive mothering’ norm in which they are encouraged to prioritise the needs of their children above their own and to personally perform the bulk of caring work (Hays, 1996). Hays (1996) comments on the paradox of the existence of intensive mothering ideals in a culture in which the individual pursuit of rewards is prized and so many mothers are employed.

Concurrently, many organizations reward employees who project an image of being ideal workers – workers who seem to be ever-present and available to the organization (Acker, 1990). When women become mothers, the visible signs of pregnancy and new motherhood signal priorities outside of work, which are at odds with ideal worker norms (Gatrell, 2013). Furthermore, Cahusac and Kanji (2014) argue that pressure to meet ideal worker norms contributes to managerial working mothers exiting paid work because they feel forced to choose between being available to the organization or taking a lower-status position to allow them to be more available to their children.

Although norms related to good mothers and ideal workers reflect cultural ideals and not necessarily individuals’ ideals, these norms influence how women construct their identities, or their expectations of themselves, as mothers (i.e. maternal identity) and as workers (i.e. worker identity) (Shelton and Johnson, 2006). Huopalainen and Satama’s (2018, p.3) recent autoethnographic piece illustrates how the researchers, despite their interest in positioning themselves as non-traditional or ‘new’ mothers in the ‘neoliberal masculine working context’ of academia in Finland, still encountered and navigated (traditional) good mothering and ideal worker norms. Not surprisingly, therefore, norms related to mothers

and workers are particularly salient to women returning to work after parental leave (i.e. returners) (Haynes, 2008a; 2008b; Millward, 2006).

Studies highlight the tensions between good mothering and ideal worker norms (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press) and characterise returners' maternal and worker identities as being entwined (Haynes, 2008b; Hennekam, 2016; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012). In suggesting that returners are able to 'resolve' tensions between maternal and worker identities, researchers have found that returners prioritise (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press; Ladge et al., 2012), temporally segment (Hattery, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2007), neutralise (i.e. not satisfying either norm) (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press) or reframe the identities in response to competing norms (Blair-Loy, 2003; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Millward, 2006; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Christopher, 2012; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015).

However, the suggestion that returners achieve resolution with regard to their maternal and worker identities is called into question in Haynes' (2008b) study of female accountants' experiences of becoming mothers. In her discussion of five women's experiences of combining maternal and worker identities, Haynes (2008b) concludes that one of the women did not appear to resolve the tensions between her identities. Similarly, both Johnston and Swanson (2007) and Ladge and Little (in press) suggest that tensions between maternal and worker identities persist for a subset of returners but offer little insight as to how women might sustain both identities in a state of continuous tension. For example, Johnston and Swanson (2007) observed a group of working mothers within their study who appeared to vacillate between complying with maternal and worker norms. Similarly, Ladge and Little (in press) propose that women who are unable to align the desired image of the working mother they would like to be with their identities as working mothers may remain in a 'confused' identity state.

Furthermore, grouping working mothers according to the approach they utilise for dealing with tensions between their maternal and worker identities implies stability with regard to both identities. Although Herman et al. (2013, p.472) suggest that working mothers may change the approach they take in dealing with tensions between their maternal and worker identities, the qualifier 'particularly as they move through the life course,' suggests a fairly stable resolution of identity tensions in the face of competing maternal and worker norms. However, research examining identity from an identity work perspective, which conceptualises identity as an effortful process (Brown, 2015), suggests that identities lack the stability to be dealt with using a single approach.

A further limitation of the extant literature is the predominance of studies drawing on samples of UK- and US-based women. Given the influence of societal factors (Herman et al., 2013) and national pregnancy and parental leave regulations (Glass and Fodor, 2011) on returners' constructions of maternal and worker identities, the experiences of women in other countries may differ from those reflected within the literature examining returners' maternal and worker identities.

To begin to address these limitations of the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identities following the return to work after parental leave, in this thesis I examine how returners engage in identity work related to both their maternal and worker identities within a German multinational corporation.

1.2.1 The German national context

Germany is at number 12 in the overall Global Index (World Economic Forum, 2017) but only ranks at 43 with regard to economic participation and opportunity (which includes measurements of, for example, 'wage equality between women and men for similar work', and women and men's labour force participation). Prior to reunification in 1990, West Germany exhibited a 'male breadwinner/female carer model' and East Germany exhibited a 'dual earner/state carer model' (Adler and Brayfield, 2006). Since reunification, Germany has been converging on a dual earner model, with females working part-time (Adler and Brayfield, 2006), although mothers in former East Germany

are still more likely to work full-time than mothers in former West Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012).

Mothers of young children in Germany are less likely to be engaged in paid work in comparison with fathers. Government statistics indicate that in 2014, only 32% of mothers with children under the age of three were employed and 63% of mothers of three- to five-year olds, compared with 82% of fathers of children under three and 85% of fathers of three- to five-year olds (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016). Part-time work figures prominently in German mothers' working patterns with only 24% of mothers, compared to 95% of fathers working full-time in 2014 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016). The German tax system also penalises households in which both partners work full-time by taxing them at a higher rate than couples in which one partner works more than the other (Bach, Haan and Ochmann, 2013).

Opinion polls indicate that approximately 60% of people living in former West German states think that mothers of children under three should not work outside the home (Steiber and Haas, 2010). National maternity and parental leave policies both reflect and influence such beliefs. German maternity leave policy prohibits women from working six weeks before the anticipated delivery date of a child and until eight weeks after delivery, while receiving full pay from their employers. In addition to maternity leave, parents can access up to three years of job-protected parental leave. The German government subsidises two-thirds of employees' monthly salaries (capped at 1800 EUR/month) for the first 12 months of parental leave, with the possibility of an additional two-month provision when both parents take at least two months of leave. To encourage further sharing of parental leave and provide incentives for working mothers to increase their working hours, the German government introduced additional reforms in 2014. The new reforms provide additional subsidies to couples in which both work at least 25 hours, but not more than 30 hours per week.

In addition to its male breadwinner legacy, cultural beliefs about the negative impacts on children of spending too much time in the care of others (i.e. not the mother or father) (Stamm, 2011) and concerns about the developmental impact

of mothers' participation in the workforce (Röhr-Sendlmeier et al., 2012) discourage German mothers from working full-time. Furthermore, the limited availability of childcare for children under three and the limited hours of care provided by many childcare facilities both reflect and influence mothers' participation in the workforce (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016).

The pressure placed on mothers to perform the bulk of caring responsibilities is epitomised in the German term, 'Rabenmutter.' The direct English translation, 'raven mother' has no meaning; however, in German this term is used to refer to a woman who neglects her children (BBC News, 2011). Given such strong national pressures for mothers of young children to limit their participation in paid work, Germany provides an interesting context for exploring the maternal and worker identity work of female employees returning to work.

1.3 Defining terms

Throughout this thesis, I make frequent reference to returners, identity work, maternal identity and worker identity. However, like many concepts within academia, there are nuances to these terms apparent within the extant literature and therefore, each requires clarification before continuing.

1.3.1 Returners

The term 'women returners' refers to women who have exited paid work for a period of time to care for a child or a family member (Doorewaard, Hendrickx and Verschuren, 2004; Tomlinson, Olsen and Purdam, 2009). In contrast to research examining women who have taken an extended career break (e.g. Herman and Kirkup, 2008), this thesis utilises the term 'returners' to mean women returning to work for the same employer after taking statutory leave for the birth of a child (i.e. parental leave).

I also make a distinction between first-time returners, or women who are returning to work for the first time after giving birth to a child, and 'repeat' returners, those for whom this is not their first experience of workplace re-entry following parental leave because they returned to work after the birth of a previous child.

1.3.2 Identity work

Identity work is defined as, 'people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p.1165). As identity scholars concede, however, diversity in how researchers conceptualise identity means that what is examined as identity work differs with regard to the role of individual agency, as well as in the stability and coherence of the identities being examined (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008; Brown, 2015; Atewologun et al., 2017). Despite the range of perspectives on identity, however, Brown (2015, p.23) observes, 'an emergent consensus that identity refers to the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves, and developed and sustained through processes of social interaction as they seek to address the question "who am I?".'

Consistent with Brown's (2015) definition of identity, within this thesis, identity is treated as an individual construction that is influenced through interactions with others. Individuals engage in identity work when they experience self-doubt or uncertainty about 'who they are' and, by extension, how they should act in a situation (Alvesson et al., 2008). Furthermore, despite disagreement about whether identity work is ongoing (the view taken here) or tied to major life changes (e.g. starting a new job), there is consensus that women engage in identity work when they become mothers (Haynes, 2008b; Hennekam, 2016; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge et al., 2012; Millward, 2006).

The focus of this thesis, namely, returners' maternal and worker identities, also reflects the perspective that individuals construct multiple identities, which may be conflicting. Although individuals strive for coherence with regard to their multiple identities, this may be elusive when their expectations for both identities are competing (Down and Reveley, 2009) – an aspect of identity work that I will discuss further in the literature review in the following chapter (see Chapter 2).

1.3.3 Maternal identity

Within the nursing literature, maternal identity is the establishment of a sense of self as a mother, including boundaries between the infant and the new mother (Walker, Crain and Thompson, 1986). Furthermore, according to the nursing literature, maternal identity is formed through a process called, 'Maternal Role Attainment,' in which a mother synthesises the inputs she receives from others, concerning what mothers should do, with her own experience of her infant and herself (Mercer, 2004; Rubin, 1967; Walker et al., 1986). According to this definition, a component of maternal identity relates directly to the baby and, therefore, maternal identity must be established with each new child (Walker et al., 1986).

Definitions of maternal identity from a sociological perspective, in contrast, emphasise that mothers are not only responsible for giving birth to and nurturing infants, but they are also responsible for child rearing. Therefore, maternal identity is influenced by societal norms (Alexander and Higgins, 1993; Haynes, 2008a; Miller, 2005; Odland, 2010).

Within this thesis, I draw on the sociological perspective of maternal identity, defining it as an individual's understanding of herself as a mother that is influenced by socialisation experiences and reflected appraisals (Burke and Stets, 2009).

1.3.4 Worker identity

Corresponding to the definition of maternal identity I provided above, I conceptualise 'worker identity' as an individual's understanding of herself, which she constructs with regard to her involvement in paid work. Worker identity is used here to incorporate the inclusiveness of Dutton, Roberts and Bednar's (2010) 'work-related identity' (i.e. to encompass multiple foci of work-related identification, such as occupational, career and organizational identities) while also highlighting the contrast between work and nonwork domains, often accomplished with terms such as 'working identity' (Clark, Brown and Hailey, 2009) and 'work identity' (Sealy and Singh, 2010).

1.4 Overview of contribution

This thesis applies an identity work lens to examine returners' maternal and worker identity work, extending the literature by differentiating between identity strategies, or the consistent approaches returners claim to use to deal with tensions between their maternal and worker identities and dialectic identity work tactics, which, drawing on Kreiner et al. (2015), are the purposeful and situationally-emergent effort returners engage to sustain both their maternal and worker identities.

In addition to the elaboration of the dialectic identity work tactics, this thesis extends the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work by explaining how returners sustain maternal and worker identities, despite inconsistencies between their actions and their understandings of themselves as mothers and as workers, through the application of identity elasticity (Kreiner et al., 2015) to individual-level identities.

1.5 Thesis outline

Within this first chapter I have discussed the contribution of competing norms for good mothers and ideal workers to the 'leaky pipeline' for female talent within organizations. I argued that further research into returners' maternal and worker identity work is warranted due to the predominance of research approaching identity as stable and coherent – a perspective that has been questioned, but not addressed within the literature. Furthermore, I highlighted the scarcity of research conducted outside of the UK and the US, proposing that German norms concerning good mothers (e.g. the existence of raven mother), are likely to result in German returners experiencing the return to work differently from their British and American peers. I also defined the following terms: returners, identity work, maternal identity and worker identity, and provided a brief overview of the contribution this thesis makes.

In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the different approaches to conceptualising identity apparent in management and organization studies. I also discuss the literature regarding the influence of social norms concerning good mothers and

ideal workers on working mothers. I then critically review the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work, arguing that additional research is warranted to explore the experiences of both first-time and repeat returners in a context in which they have access to longer parental leaves.

Chapter 3 describes the idealist ontology and constructivist epistemology underpinning this research. I discuss the exploratory study that was conducted and how it informed the main research question: *How do women engage in maternal and worker identity work upon returning to work after parental leave?* I describe the rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews and how I recruited the 33 returners who participated in this study. I also provide an overview of the German manufacturing company (ManCo) in which I conducted the research and describe the thematic approach I took to analysing the data generated.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I present the findings of the study. Chapter 4 focusses on the findings concerning returners' identity work, revealing differences between returners' identity strategies and the dialectic identity work tactics they drew upon to sustain their maternal and worker identities. Within Chapter 4, I also discuss returners' engagement in image management and their constructions of working mother selves. I close the chapter with vignettes of returners' identity work to illustrate the different aspects of identity work within the data collected from three of the returners who participated in this study.

In Chapter 5 I present the findings of the study concerning three individual factors that influence returners' identity work: length of parental leave, prior re-entry experience and perceived organizational work-life support. I also present a conceptual framework, illustrating the different aspects of returners' identity work.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I discuss the findings of the study in relation to the extant literature, identifying three ways in which this thesis extends the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work. I also discuss three secondary contributions this study makes to the literature by confirming returners' maternal and worker identity work in the German context and by revealing the influence of parental leave length and prior re-entry experience on returners'

identity work. I then discuss the implications of the thesis for work practice and policy, and limitations of the research design, before concluding with directions for future research.

1.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have discussed the research rationale and the research question guiding this investigation into returners' maternal and worker identity work. I described the German national context in which the study is situated and my personal motivation for conducting this research. I defined the key terms: returners, identity work, maternal identity and worker identity. I then provided an overview of the contribution this thesis makes to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work and an outline of the structure of the thesis. In the following chapter, I will review the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work, and research examining identity work when identities are subjected to contradictory norms.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter introduction

Within this chapter I develop the rationale for undertaking this research project by first providing an overview of the three main research paradigms reflected within the literature concerning identity in management and organization studies. Next, I provide an overview of the literature examining the influence of good mothering and ideal worker norms on women's experiences of becoming working mothers.

Having situated the study within the broader literature, I present a synthesis of the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work following parental leave. The results of the literature review indicate that returners respond to maternal and worker identity triggers by developing identity strategies, revising their visions of themselves as working mothers and engaging in image management. Notwithstanding the insight the literature provides into returners' responses to identity triggers, I conclude that further research is warranted to fill a gap within the literature resulting from the predominance of UK- and US-based samples of returners and the exclusion of repeat returners from studies related to women's immediate workplace re-entry experiences.

I conclude this chapter with an overview of key debates within the identity literature before interpreting the research concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work from an identity theory perspective, and presenting the research questions guiding the exploratory study.

2.2 Identity in management and organization studies

Identity is an individual's answer to the question, 'Who am I?', and has implications for individual behaviour in and around organizations (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2015). As recent reviews indicate, identity scholarship within management and organization studies is growing and, with that growth, so are the ways of conceptualising identity (Alvesson et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2015; Corlett et al., 2017; Kenny, Whittle and Willmott, 2011).

Alvesson et al. (2008) suggest that most identity studies within management and organization studies can be grouped into one of three categories, roughly corresponding to the research paradigms of functionalism, interpretivism and critical theory (for a discussion of research paradigms see 3.3). For example, studies stemming from Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel and Turner, 1985) are typically approached from a functionalist perspective and emphasise individual cognition in identification (Alvesson et al., 2008). SIT studies typically examine the extent to which individuals see themselves as belonging to a specific group (Alvesson et al., 2008). From this perspective, identities are viewed as being relatively stable and identity change is described in terms of identity transition (Ashforth, 2001) or identity construction (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016).

Identity studies within the second group approach identity from an interpretivist perspective, which Alvesson et al. (2008) label 'identity work'. The identity work studies examine, 'the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued' (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008, p.15). Therefore, in contrast to the SIT literature, this group of studies conceptualises identity as less stable, with individuals engaged in a process of becoming, rather than in a state of being (Alvesson et al., 2008).

The third group, that of 'identity control', represents critical approaches to studying identity in organizations (Alvesson et al., 2008). The aim of this body of research is to explore the influence of power on how individuals define themselves, with a view to liberating them from the constraints placed on them by social structure (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Given the different philosophical perspectives underpinning identity scholarship in management and organization studies, the approaches to examining identity are somewhat disparate and have resulted in theoretical advancement progressing in silos (Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2017). Furthermore, because the aims of the research being undertaken are so different, the constructs used for investigation, while bearing the same name, do not always mean the same thing (Atewologun et al., 2017). For example, Atewologun et al.

(2017) point to the varied usage of the term 'professional identity' to mean an individual's sense of self in relation to: a set of norms for one of the professions (e.g. accounting, engineering, etc.); the work s/he performs in relation to a profession; or the work s/he performs in relation to an occupation. Therefore, clarifying the identity perspective taken and defining key constructs are essential to the interpretation of identity studies.

Despite the proliferation of approaches to studying identity in management and organization studies, there is agreement that, unlike the psychological concept of 'personality', identity is influenced by society (Kenny et al., 2011). However, each perspective treats societal influence on individual identity differently. For example, within the SIT perspective, individuals' internalised meanings related to a specific role constitute a 'role identity' (Burke and Stets, 2009). According to Burke and Stets (2009, p.114), 'A role is the set of *expectations* tied to a social position that guide people's attitudes and behaviour' (emphasis in the original). Individuals learn the expectations associated with a role from others within society, including the media (Burke and Stets, 2009).

From the identity work perspective, in contrast, individuals are embedded in social relationships and identity is viewed as a process of becoming (Alvesson et al., 2008). Therefore, individuals are constantly engaged in constructing their identities in relation to the expectations of others. Within this perspective, however, there is variation in how scholars conceptualise the extent to which individual identity work is constrained by, or the product of, social norms (Alvesson et al., 2008). I will return to this topic in the methodology section when I describe the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research design and the study's positioning within the interpretivist research paradigm.

Finally, from an identity control perspective, social norms are viewed as an exercise of power over social actors in which identities can never achieve stability because they rely on the reactions of others (Knights and Clarke, 2017). Identities are performative and engagement with social norms accomplishes certain aims, such as the enactment of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

In the following section, I provide an overview of the literature concerning how social norms related to good mothers and ideal workers influence women's experiences of becoming working mothers.

2.3 The influence of social norms on working mothers

Culturally, being a good mother does not equate to the biological act of producing a healthy baby (Oakley, 1980). Rather, as Oakley (1980) observes in her critique of the medicalisation of motherhood, what is expected of mothers varies according to the historical time period and the culture in which mothering takes place. Although some studies suggest that expectations of mothers in Western cultures may be shifting toward 'shared caring practice' in which fathers are increasingly involved in caring responsibilities (e.g. Huopalainen and Satama, 2018), the cultural ideal of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) as a labour-intensive and selfless prioritisation of children's needs above mothers', remains influential in many cultures (Ralph, 2016).

Concurrent to the expectation that mothers invest their time and effort into anticipating and meeting the needs of their children, there is also an expectation that ideal workers will invest their time and effort into anticipating and meeting the needs of their organization. The ideal worker is completely committed and ever-available to the organization (Acker, 1990). Although the ideal worker norm can be challenging for other employees to emulate (Reid, 2015), the contradiction of ideal worker and good mothering norms is particularly problematic for working mothers (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014; Ranson, 2005; Stone and Lovejoy, 2004; Williams, 2005). Due to competing norms for good mothers and ideal workers, working mothers may feel conflicted about how to construct their maternal and worker identities (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007), an issue that I return to in greater depth below.

However, in addition to the problem of developing a sense of self as a working mother, women also encounter adverse consequences for violating good mothering and ideal worker norms. Having a child represents a violation of ideal worker norms because it indicates less than complete devotion to work. As a result, working mothers' commitment to work following parental leave is often

questioned (Gatrell, 2011; Sools, van Engen and Baerveldt, 2007). Furthermore, working mothers may decide to reduce their working hours, amounting to career and wage penalties for limiting their availability to the organization (Gatrell, 2007a; Webber and Williams, 2008).

Working mothers who are perceived as lacking commitment to work, may be sidelined from key projects, making it difficult for them to gain the visibility and organizational responsibility supportive of career progression (Dick, 2006; Gatrell, 2007a; Peus and Traut-Mattausch, 2008). In addition, women returning to work following parental leave are vulnerable to unfavourable work role revisions, which can even affect returners holding Executive-level positions (Ashcraft, 1999). Furthermore and, somewhat counterintuitively, mothers who do not reduce their working hours when part-time work is available are perceived less favourably (Vinkenburg et al., 2012). Therefore, working mothers are likely to feel pressured by others within the organization to comply with good mothering norms.

This stream of research, therefore, indicates the competing tensions between good mothering and ideal work norms, as well as the social pressure women encounter to comply with these norms after returning to work following parental leave. In the following section, I interrogate the literature to determine how women returning to work following parental leave (i.e. returners) experience their maternal and worker identities.

2.4 Maternal and worker identities following the return to work

Within this section, I critically review the literature concerning maternal and worker identity development following the return to work after parental leave. In the following subsections, I present the literature concerning identity triggers, experiencing validation, factors influencing maternal and worker identities and returners' responses to identity triggers. I also critique the literature's emphasis on first-time mothers in contexts with short durations of parental leave, arguing that further examination of the return to work experiences of both first-time and repeat returners, in a context in which they have access to longer parental leaves, is warranted.

2.4.1 Identity triggers

Becoming a mother is an event that triggers identity uncertainties, particularly for employed women (Haynes, 2006; Millward, 2006). In addition to the major transition of becoming a mother, women may encounter smaller events that prompt uncertainty about their maternal and worker identities (Ladge et al., 2012).

Workplace re-entry following parental leave prompts returners to experience uncertainties related to their maternal identities (Christopher, 2012; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006). Re-entering the workplace may remind returners of their (formerly) strong worker identities, which may cause them to question their developing maternal identities (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). Returners may also wonder whether they will be able to fulfil their expectations of themselves as mothers, in light of their involvement in paid work (Christopher, 2012; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006). For example, for professional and managerial women, childcare presents a difficult dilemma because these women generally have the financial means to allow them to place their children in care for long hours, but they may feel guilty about doing so and not being physically present in their children's daily lives (Haynes, 2008b).

Deciding whether to breastfeed while working (Gatrell, 2013) presents an additional trigger for identity work. While health narratives encourage women to continue breastfeeding, ideal worker norms demand the separation of nonwork concerns, such as breastmilk, from the workplace (Gatrell, 2013). Returners are, therefore required to choose between the demands of good mothering by continuing breastfeeding and the demands of ideal workers, which would mean reducing or stopping breastfeeding altogether.

In addition to returners experiencing uncertainties about their maternal identities, the literature also indicates that returners may experience events that prompt doubts about their worker identities.

Within the literature concerning the development of maternal and worker identities, there is debate about the salience of the worker identity. Derry (1994) suggests that adding a second important identity, such as the maternal identity,

may make the worker identity feel less important or central. However, Katz-Wise, Priess and Hyde (2010) indicate that after decreasing following the birth of a child, the salience of the worker identity levels off within one year post-partum.

The literature also characterises maternal and worker identities as incompatible (Dambrin and Lambert, 2008; Glass and Fodor, 2011) or oppositional (Hodges and Park, 2013). Dambrin and Lambert (2008) argue that talented women leave the organization before even reaching the glass ceiling as they anticipate the challenges of meeting competing expectations for mothers and workers. Glass and Fodor (2011), in contrast, cite discrimination on the part of employers as preventing working mothers from combining both identities successfully.

Despite this suggested incompatibility (Dambrin and Lambert, 2008; Glass and Fodor, 2011), some scholars contend that maternal and worker identities are entwined (Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007, Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge et al., 2012). Describing maternal and worker identities as 'dialectic,' Johnston and Swanson (2007) argue that the two identities form opposite ends of a continuum, pulling in 'mutually exclusive directions'.

Management and organizational studies portray maternal identity as being disruptive to the existing worker identity because women often modify their worker identities to fulfil their expectations of themselves as mothers (Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge et al., 2012). New time constraints related to childcare may strain workplace relationships and cause returners to be concerned about fairness towards their co-workers (Haynes, 2008b).

While returners may feel focussed on re-establishing their worker identities following parental leave (Millward, 2006), they may experience difficulty in doing so because their bodies no longer match the expectations of their occupation (Derry, 1994; Haynes, 2008a) or the 'gender neutrality' of the organization (Gatrell, 2013). Furthermore, parental leaves (even short leaves) require that the organization plan for maternity coverage during the returner's absence (Liu and Buzzanell, 2004). Therefore, returners' understandings of themselves as workers may be unsettled by returning to a work role that has been unfavourably

modified during their absence (Gatrell, 2013) – a problem that even the founder of an organization is not immune from (Ashcraft, 1999).

An additional trigger for returners to question their worker identities is managers' and colleagues' doubts about returners' commitment to the organization (Gatrell, 2011; Glass and Fodor, 2011; Sools et al., 2007), which is a particularly common problem for those returning to work on a part-time basis (Dick, 2006; Gatrell, 2007b; Peus and Traut-Mattausch, 2008). Moreover, superiors often assume that mothers have less flexibility and are less interested in advancement (King, 2008). Such assumptions about women having diminished interest in pursuing promotions can have obvious impacts on women's chances for promotion and potentially result in women modifying their worker identities and career ambitions as a result.

Concurrently, managers may evaluate returners' promotion potential based on the length of parental leave they take (Glass and Fodor, 2011). For example, HR managers may assume that women who take a shorter parental leave than they have available to them are more committed to the organization (Glass and Fodor, 2011). Therefore, one of the key tasks for women returning to work following parental leave is to 're-establish a viable employee identity' (Millward, 2006, p.324).

2.4.2 Experiencing validation

While the literature concerning the identity triggers described above suggests that the return to work is rife with challenge and identity uncertainties, some studies paint a more positive picture of returning to work after parental leave, in which returners experience validation of their maternal and worker identities.

For some women, such as Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women working in Israel, the prioritisation of the maternal identity is seen as a given, practically eliminating tensions between maternal and worker norms (Raz and Tzruya, 2018). Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women construct their worker identities as part of their familial responsibilities and work shorter hours than their non-Ultra-Orthodox counterparts (Raz and Tzruya, 2018). Despite the clear prioritisation of their

maternal identities, many of the women expressed different types of identity triggers, related to limits on socialising and pay (Raz and Tzruya, 2018).

However, returners may also experience validation for both their maternal and worker identities without following a strict prioritisation strategy. Haynes (2008b) suggests that when returners who reduce their working hours are still treated as valuable employees, identity work may not be as necessary:

‘Where opportunities for investing in the professional self are maintained, however, the women appeared to experience less discontinuity between their professional and mothering identities, and a more successful entwining of the professional and personal’ (Haynes, 2008b, p.635).

Haynes’ comment indicates the importance of returners’ perceptions of continued professional opportunity as validation for their maternal and worker identities. Additional factors influencing returners’ experiences of returning to work are discussed within the following subsection.

2.4.3 Influencing factors

Upon returning to work, returners look for role models within the organization to guide their efforts at constructing their maternal and worker identities (Millward, 2006; Pickens, 1982). In addition, friendships with fellow working mothers can provide returners with a space to express their identity challenges, without the concern of falling short of others’ expectations, which they might encounter at work or at home (Trussell, 2015).

National policies may influence how returners enact their maternal and worker identities (Barzilay, 2012) through provisions for parental leave or through a lack of regulations permitting long working hours, for example. Similarly, organizational policies concerning parental leave and flexible work arrangements may impact on returners’ experiences of being working mothers (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015).

However, regardless of the working pattern they choose, mothers may feel a lack of cultural support for the way in which they construct their maternal and worker

identities (Johnston and Swanson, 2004). Ladge and Greenberg (2015) indicate that cultural support in the workplace can be either a positive or a negative influence on returners' identity uncertainties upon returning to work.

2.4.4 Returners' responses to identity triggers

Having discussed the potential triggers for returners' uncertainties concerning their maternal and worker identities above, I now discuss *how* returners respond to such triggers. In the following subsections I discuss how returners develop identity strategies, modify their constructions of working mother selves and engage in image management in response to identity triggers.

2.4.5 Identity strategies for managing tensions between maternal and worker identities

Identity strategies are the consistent approaches returners draw upon to manage the tensions between their maternal and worker identities. The critical review of the literature concerning returners' identity work indicated that several authors referred to similar identity strategies using different terminology (see Data extraction table). The lack of consistent terminology is likely to be due, in part, to the range of identity perspectives (e.g. psychological and sociological approaches) underpinning these studies. An additional factor for the lack of consistent terminology may be that earlier studies were published as books, based on dissertations, rather than academic articles, therefore limiting the accessibility of these works. The following subsections, therefore, are based on my synthesis of the literature. The literature indicates that returners engage the identity strategies of reframing, prioritisation, segmentation and neutralisation to manage the tensions between maternal and worker identities following parental leave.

2.4.5.1 Reframing

The literature emphasises returners' abilities to reframe good mothering ideals to accommodate their decisions about work (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press; Millward, 2006). While 'stay-at-home' mothers

(i.e. mothers who exit paid work) maintain the need to be physically present and available to their children throughout the day, working mothers adapt or eliminate this requirement in their expectations of themselves as mothers (Johnston and Swanson, 2006).

Instead, working mothers may emphasise their role as coordinators of their children's fulfilment (Christopher, 2012), or they may highlight the social benefits to their children of attending childcare (Millward, 2006) and having a mother who is more focussed and patient, while emphasising the quality of time spent together rather than the quantity (Johnston and Swanson, 2006). Importantly, these approaches to reframing maintain the child-centred mothering principles characteristic of good mothering norms, while reinterpreting them to fit with mothers' working patterns (Christopher, 2012).

Alternative approaches to reframing maternal and worker identities include emphasising children's empowerment (Johnston and Swanson, 2006) and constructing good mothers as providers for their children (Garey, 1999).

Christopher (2012) also found that the mothers she interviewed rejected ideal worker norms, such as being ever-available to their employers.

Returners may also modify their understanding of what it means to be a good mother to accommodate their professional roles (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Schober and Scott, 2012). However, with the exception of the Schober and Scott (2012) study, these studies suggesting that a strong worker identity may influence the maternal identity, are based on samples of US mothers who are likely to be returning to work at a time the nursing literature suggests is particularly intense for maternal identity development (Mercer, 2004).

2.4.5.2 Prioritisation

Choosing to prioritise one identity over the other is a commonly reported strategy for dealing with competing norms for good mothers and ideal workers (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press). Returners choose to prioritise either their maternal or their worker identity upon organizational re-entry (Ladge

and Greenberg, 2015). Depending upon how the study is positioned, prioritisation of the worker identity over the maternal identity is characterised as either 'conformity' to ideal worker norms (Herman et al., 2013) or 'nonconformity' to good mothering norms (Hattery, 2001).

Popular mothering narratives advocate the prioritisation of the maternal identity over the worker identity (McGannon et al., 2012). However, it may also be that women prioritise their maternal identities as a result of feeling marginalised at work (Millward, 2006), or, alternatively, because they judge themselves to be unable to meet the availability demands of the job (Dick, 2010; Pickens, 1982).

Johnston and Swanson (2006) suggest that stay-at-home mothers resolve tensions between their maternal and worker identities by prioritising their maternal identities. This suggests that opting out of paid work is the result of a decision to prioritise the maternal identity over the worker identity.

However, for some women, the 'choice' to opt out of work is an outcome of not finding a suitable combination between their maternal and worker identities (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b). Research exploring the reasons behind mothers' decisions to opt out (Belkin, 2003), or to leave fast-track careers to focus on raising children, suggests that a combination of push and pull factors prompts highly qualified mothers to exit the workforce (Cabrera, 2007; Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). According to this view, mothers are pushed out of organizations by factors such as long working hours cultures and limited advancement opportunities and pulled by the desire to spend more time with their children (Cabrera, 2007; Cahusac and Kanji, 2014).

2.4.5.3 Segmentation

Returners utilising the segmentation identity strategy manage tensions between their maternal and worker identities by temporally segmenting them to limit the potential for conflict between the two identities. The segmentation identity strategy can reflect segmentation over the course of a day, as in studies focussing on boundary management (e.g. Duxbury, Higgins and Mills, 1992; Kossek et al., 2012), or over the life course (Garey, 1999; Herman et al., 2013).

Part-time schedules facilitate returners' efforts to maintain separation of their maternal and worker identities over the course of a day (Garey, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2006), as do alternative working patterns, such as working the nightshift (Garey, 1999; Hattery, 2001). While returners often engage in telework to meet the demands of work and home, doing so may impede the separation of maternal and worker identities because of an inability to 'leave' work when teleworking from home (Duxbury et al., 1992).

However, some working mothers focus sequentially on one identity then the other over the life course to manage the tensions between good mothering and ideal worker norms (Garey, 1999; Herman et al., 2013). Herman et al. (2013) observe that women in their study employed the identity strategy of 'lying low,' focussing first on their maternal identities and planning to resume their careers at a later point in time.

2.4.5.4 Neutralisation

For a subset of women, the resolution of the tensions between maternal and worker identities appears to be more challenging (Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2006; 2007; Raskin, 2006). For example, working mothers with full-time work schedules either aim to fulfil both norms and accept that they will fall short periodically, or they excel in one identity and then switch to the other (Johnston and Swanson, 2007). Johnston and Swanson (2007) refer to the vacillation between maternal and worker identities as neutralisation. The neutralisation strategy is also evident in studies proposing 'conflicted achievement' (Raskin, 2006) or 'confused work-family' (Ladge and Little, in press) identity states. From Raskin's (2006) perspective, the conflicted achievement status is associated with a stable, ongoing identity conflict between maternal and worker identities. Similarly, Ladge and Little (in press) suggest that the confused work-family identity represents a state of identity ambiguity.

The neutralisation identity strategy is also evident in some returners' management of breastfeeding, reflecting both conformance and nonconformance with good mothering and ideal worker norms (Turner and Norwood, 2013). While returners' continued breastfeeding is consistent with good mothering norms,

some returners hide breastfeeding practices to conform to ideal worker norms (Turner and Norwood, 2013). Other women, in contrast, practice what Turner and Norwood (2013) refer to as ‘unbounded motherhood’ – seeking accommodation for their maternal identities in the workplace. However, Turner and Norwood (2013) observe that returners do not fit neatly into either ‘bounded’ or ‘unbounded’ categories and suggest that practising unbounded motherhood is likely to be tied to being in a position of power.

In addition to utilising identity strategies to manage tensions between their maternal and worker identities, returners may also adapt how they think about their careers as a result of becoming mothers. The next subsection presents the literature concerning returners’ constructions of working mother selves.

2.4.6 Revising constructions of working mother selves

After returning to work, returners’ visions of themselves in the future combine their expectations for themselves as mothers and as workers (Haynes, 2008b). Changes in women’s worker identities contribute to changes in their future work selves, or their visions of themselves in the future with regard to work (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). Such visualizations are instrumental in shaping careers (Strauss, Griffin and Parker, 2012) and therefore can be expected to impact on the way a woman’s career develops. The concept of future work selves is based on Markus and Nurius’ (1986) conceptualisation of possible selves, which they regard as, ‘sites of both individual agency and of social determination’ (Markus, 2006, p.xii).

Returners maintain their career motivation, even with young children at home (Pas et al., 2011). However, their career motivation may be negatively impacted by a lack of structural work-life support, such as not having access to organizational policies that support them in fulfilling their work and family responsibilities (Pas et al., 2011). Furthermore, working mothers may distance themselves from the idea of pursuing a career to accommodate their maternal identities (Garey, 1999), or accept being placed on the ‘mummy track’ because of not meeting ideal worker norms (Herman et al., 2013). However, some women

contest ideal worker norms while maintaining their career aspirations (Herman et al., 2013).

2.4.7 Engaging in image management

Roberts (2005, p.685) defines professional image construction as, '...the process of assessing and shaping perceptions of one's own competence and character,' noting that individuals may attempt to appear more or less like prototypical members of the groups to which they belong. Projecting a professional image is a key aspect of positioning oneself as a worker, which returners struggle with, particularly while breastfeeding (Haynes, 2008a). Returners' efforts at projecting a professional image may be hampered by their use of work-family benefits, such as on-site childcare, because of the risk of being perceived by others as a mother rather than as a worker (Hoobler, 2007).

In a recent conceptual study, Ladge and Little (in press) propose that returners monitor how others perceive them as workers and as mothers for asymmetries with how they think of themselves as mothers and as workers. When asymmetries exist, returners may resolve them by attempting to integrate their maternal and worker identities, which might be achieved through the reframing identity strategy discussed above. Alternatively, returners may attempt to bring their image as a working mother into alignment with their maternal and worker identities by prioritising one of their identities to match the image they want others to have of them. Finally, Ladge and Little (in press) suggest that some returners may attempt to maintain the asymmetry between their image as a working mother and their maternal and worker identities, resulting in a 'confused' working mother identity (i.e. corresponding to the neutralisation identity strategy).

2.4.8 Limitations of the literature

The literature reviewed indicated that returners' maternal and worker identities are unsettled as women re-enter work following parental leave. Despite the literature's description of the identity strategies returners utilise to manage tensions between good mothering and ideal worker norms, and the indication that returners may modify their visions of themselves in the future and engage in

image management, there are some limitations to the literature base that warrant further examination into returners' experiences of returning to work.

Firstly, the empirical research concerning returners' responses to identity triggers is predominantly based on the experiences of women based in the UK (e.g. Haynes, 2008b; Millward, 2006) and the US (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). The US provides a 12-week unpaid medical leave for employees who work at a location with at least 50 employees, resulting in some returners having to negotiate with their employers to take parental leave at all. In addition, Millward's (2006) study was conducted before the UK parental leave provision increased from 26 weeks to 52 weeks in 2007, a change which Haynes' (2008b) participants may have experienced, although the length of parental leave taken is not specified within the paper.

The shorter the parental leave, the more likely it is that returners will have difficulty conforming to ideal worker norms related to professional standards of appearance (Gatrell, 2013; Haynes, 2008a) and keeping nonwork concerns, such as breastfeeding separate from work (Gatrell, 2013).

However, in many European countries, such as Germany, women have the right to take longer job-protected parental leaves. While women who take longer parental leaves may have a more established sense of themselves as mothers when they return, they may also encounter different challenges related to taking longer leaves of absence. For example, employers may change a woman's working role during her absence (Ashcraft, 1999). Being out of the office for an extended period of time could also result in being overlooked for new projects which arise while a woman is out on parental leave.

A second but related issue is that, given the influence of cultural norms concerning ideal workers and good mothers, how returners respond to identity triggers in a country such as Germany with the raven mother concept may diverge from how returners respond to similar identity triggers in the UK and the US.

A third limitation is the exclusion of repeat returners (i.e. women who have experienced the return to work following parental leave with a previous child) from

studies examining women's experiences of returning to work directly after parental leave. While studies examining working mothers' strategies for managing their maternal and worker identities often include repeat mothers without singling them out as being different from first-time mothers (e.g. Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2004; 2006; 2007), the literature examining immediate re-entry experiences tends to focus on first-time returners (e.g. Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006).

2.4.8.1 Research relating parental leave length with maternal outcomes

Although the influence of parental leave length on returners' maternal and worker identity construction has not been explored, there is a body of literature that examines the influence of parental leave length on a range of outcomes for returners. However, due to differences in national parental leave policies, what constitutes a 'shorter' or a 'longer' leave in one context is not the same for another, thus precluding direct comparisons.

Taking a shorter parental leave is associated with regrets about returning to work (<9 months leave/Australia: Whitehouse, Hosking and Baird, 2008; <7 months leave/Switzerland: Wiese and Ritter, 2012), less focus on the child (<12 weeks leave/US: Feldman, Sussman and Zigler, 2004) and earlier cessation of breastfeeding (Chatterji and Frick, 2005; Ogbuanu et al., 2011; Skafida, 2012). However, a qualitative study conducted in Malaysia suggests that women's beliefs about breastfeeding are more important than the length of parental leave available to them in determining breastfeeding duration (Sulaiman, Liamputtong and Amir, 2018). Differences in national cultural norms influence women's beliefs about breastfeeding and, therefore, their goals and practices concerning breastfeeding (Synnott et al., 2007).

In contrast to the outcomes related to shorter parental leaves, taking a longer parental leave is associated with occupational downgrading (Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow, 2009), lower wages and having fewer subordinates (>3 years leave, Germany: Wiese, 2005). Furthermore, the availability of longer leaves, such as the three-year leave available in Germany, reinforces traditional

gender roles and may decrease women's work commitment (Gangl and Ziefle, 2015).

Within this body of research, scholars debate how long parental leaves should be, pointing to the correlation between the availability of leave and the timing of re-entry (Feng and Han, 2010; Guendelman et al. 2014). In addition, studies indicate that while women may be physically ready to return to work, they may not feel emotionally ready to separate from their children (Vujinović, 2014; Farstad, 2015), or they may be reluctant to put children into the care of others before they reach a certain age, such as 12 months in Iceland (Farstad, 2015).

Studies concerning the implications of becoming a mother and the length of parental leave for working mothers predominantly draw on quantitative methods such as panel data and, to a lesser extent, surveys. As a result, few studies within this body of research provide insight into how the length of parental leave taken may influence women's experiences of returning to work and none explores the impact of parental leave length on returners' maternal and worker identity construction.

2.4.8.2 Differences between first-time and repeat mothers

While it might be expected that repeat mothers (i.e. women who have more than one child) would benefit from having already had a first child, studies suggest that repeat mothers are neither more confident, nor do they exhibit lower levels of stress than first-time mothers (Krieg, 2007). There are also no significant differences in how competent first-time and repeat mothers feel in caring for their infants (Holloway et al., 2006). While repeat mothers may be more committed to the mothering role, the maternal identity is no more salient for them than it is for first-time mothers (Holloway et al., 2006).

Both first-time and repeat mothers modify their personal goals when they become mothers, with first-time mothers altering their goals later than repeat mothers and making greater modifications (Salmela-Aro et al., 2000). While both first-time and repeat mothers need to integrate the new baby into their families (Mercer, 2004), this task is more complex for repeat mothers in that they have to manage the

needs of an older child in the process. Indeed, during the first year of their second child's life, both mothers and fathers report that their first-born children are a primary source of stress (Stewart, 1990).

Research indicates that with the arrival of a new baby, both first-time and repeat mothers report experiencing greater stress and gender-role differentiation (Krieg, 2007). However, for first-time mothers, gender-role differentiation recovers somewhat by the time their children reach 12 months (Katz-Wise et al., 2010). First-time mothers also perceive their marriages more positively than repeat mothers (Gameiro, Moura-Ramos and Canavarro, 2009; Krieg, 2007), who may also have a greater risk of developing depression (Shelton and Johnson, 2006). During the first week following the birth of a child, first-time mothers seem to have greater difficulty in adjusting to the shock of a new baby than do repeat mothers (Gameiro et al., 2009). However, by eight months post-partum, repeat mothers indicate feeling less happy and angrier than first-time mothers (Gameiro et al., 2009).

Krieg (2007) did not find any significant differences when comparing first-time and repeat mothers who were employed with those who were not; however, her survey was administered when most employed mothers were still on parental leave. When it comes to returning to work, repeat mothers may capitalise on their familiarity with the process of having a child and structure their parental leaves according to what suits them, rather than taking a standard length of parental leave, as most first-time mothers do (Barnes, 2013). Repeat mothers who have placed their older children into childcare are also likely to be more comfortable doing so with subsequent children, which may facilitate planning the return to work for these women compared to first-time mothers (Barnes, 2013).

However, Wiese and Heidemeier (2012) suggest that readjusting to work following parental leave may be more difficult for mothers with more than one child. The researchers explain that this may be a result of mothers being absent from work when children are ill or, as a result of childcare closings (Wiese and Heidemeier, 2012). In addition, mothers with more than one child in Wiese and

Heidemeier's (2012) study also took longer parental leaves and were more likely to change employers following parental leave.

Therefore, it may be that repeat mothers are more vulnerable to relinquishing or modifying their worker identities as a result of their cumulative experiences. For example, in Liu and Buzzanell's (2004, pp.336-337) study of women's experiences of parental leave, a sales representative within the broadcast industry commented on how she perceived her employer's treatment of her during her second parental leave differently, '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.' This comment illustrates the way in which the woman may have been shocked and upset upon her first return to work. Upon her second return to work, however, she was already prepared for her employer's actions and accepted that her career would not be progressing in the immediate future.

In contrast, repeat mothers may have an advantage over first-time mothers with regard to maintaining their worker identities. For example, Gatrell's (2013) study of professionals indicates that most women feel somehow marginalised by their organizations during pregnancy and the return to work. However, five of the women Gatrell interviewed gained accommodations for their returns to work, without compromising their professional standing. Gatrell (2013, p.637) comments, 'Each of these women had more than one child, all emphasized a desire to take better 'control' of her situation than on previous occasions and each had a high sense of her own value to her organization.' As such, it may be that repeat mothers are able to position themselves better within their organizations, facilitating their returns to work and helping them to maintain their worker identities.

2.5 Identity

As discussed above (see 2.2), identity, an individual's answer to the question 'Who am I?' has been conceptualised from a wide range of perspectives. The myriad approaches to studying identities within organizations are associated with multiple aspects of identity, of which assumptions about stability, coherence and

agency (Corlett et al., 2017) figure prominently within this thesis. First, I will provide an overview of these three key debates within the literature. Following the overview, I will specify the identity perspective that informed the initial research question, which guided the exploratory study. As I will reflect upon in the subsequent chapter concerning the study's methodology, the results of the exploratory study suggested that an alternative identity perspective would be more appropriate for the main empirical study, which I will also address within the methodology chapter.

2.5.1 Assumptions about stability, coherence and agency

Identity scholars conceptualise identities on a continuum from 'stable' to 'fluid' (Corlett et al., 2017). The functionalist research paradigm is typically associated with studies that characterise identity as stable, although Corlett et al. (2017) indicate that this assumption is also evident in some interpretivist approaches. Scholars viewing identity as stable suggest that identities remain the same and only change in times of transition (Atewologun et al., 2017). This perspective is the one associated with macro-role transitions, for example. Macro-role transitions involve, '...the psychological and (if relevant) physical movement between sequentially held roles' (Ashforth, 2001, p.7). During macro-role transitions, individuals look for role models to mimic and may experiment with different ways of enacting the new role (Ibarra, 1999). In stable conceptualisations of identity, individuals engage in identity work to re-establish a sense of self disrupted by an event, with the assumption that identity work will be completed, and stability will resume.

At the opposing end of the stability spectrum, interpretivist and critical studies conceptualise identity as fluid (Corlett et al., 2017). Fluidity in identity is reflected in studies that describe identity as a process of 'becoming' rather than a state of 'being' (Atewologun et al., 2017). Given the ongoing nature of identity work from these perspectives, scholars differ in their focus on identity work as requiring a conscious effort in response to 'micro-level incidents' or a mix of conscious and unconscious effort in constantly reconstructing a sense of self (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Another important assumption underpinning identity studies is the extent to which scholars assume coherence as a characteristic of identity and as an outcome of identity work. Coherent identities are ordered hierarchically so that when conflict occurs, the individual will endeavour to validate the identity that is most important to her (Burke and Stets, 2009). Studies examining identity work to resolve identity conflict reflect the assumption of identity coherence.

In contrast to studies that conceptualise identity as coherent, some studies reflect the view that identity is best understood as incoherent, highlighting individuals' insecurities and inconsistencies (e.g. Collinson, 2003). For example, examining the identity tensions inherent in being a musician, Beech et al. (2016) suggest that individuals are not always motivated to resolve identity conflict as it may be necessary or desirable to behave in contradictory ways.

Finally, an additional assumption concerning identity is the degree to which individuals are capable of agentic behaviour. Although this aspect of identity is also depicted on a spectrum ranging from 'agency' to 'structure' (e.g. Corlett et al., 2017), in practice most studies are positioned between these two opposite poles (Brown, 2017). Brown (2017) comments on the interplay between agency and structure evident in current identity theorising:

'For the most part, people are not unthinking 'cultural dopes', but nor do they choose unconstrained the contexts in which their identity work takes place or the influences which shape their preferred self-understandings' (Brown, 2017, p.308).

Therefore, there is no simple bifurcation between structure and agency in identity research; instead, studies are positioned on a spectrum based on individual choice and structural constraints of choice.

Following my review of the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identities after parental leave, I anticipated examining identities that were relatively stable and coherent but were unsettled by the process of re-entering work after parental leave. Furthermore, while recognising the influence of good mothering and ideal worker norms, I conceptualised an agentic actor. Burke and

Stets' (2009) discussion of identity control theory incorporates these assumptions, which I will now turn to.

2.5.2 Identities in transition

From an identity theory perspective, identity is conceptualised as an individual's understanding of herself in relation to the roles she performs, such as those of worker and mother (Burke and Stets, 2009). While women exercise agency in constructing their understandings of themselves, identities are also influenced by society, through socialization and through feedback from others in the form of reflected appraisals (Burke and Stets, 2009). As such, individuals strive to behave in a manner that is consistent with their expectations of themselves in a role and identity is relatively stable, although still considered to be an ongoing process (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Life changes, such as obtaining a promotion, or becoming a mother, raise an individual's awareness of the meanings she attaches to herself in the roles those changes impact on (Burke and Stets, 2009). As a result, identity work becomes a more conscious process in times of transition. Furthermore, individuals adapt their worker identities based on the work they perform (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006), so women who return to a different work role following parental leave may find it particularly necessary to modify their understandings of themselves as workers. Returning to work after parental leave is, therefore, a time during which it is anticipated that women will be particularly aware of their identities as workers and as mothers.

Individuals are generally resistant to identity change and will first attempt to modify their behaviour to bring feedback into alignment with their expectations of themselves for the identity (Burke and Stets, 2009). However, if individuals are unable to modify their behaviour in a way that changes the feedback they receive, and they are not very committed to the identity, then it is more likely that their expectations for that identity will change (Stets, 2005). Burke and Stets (2009) describe five paths to identity change.

First, identity change can result from changes in the situation. For example, research indicates that the birth of a first child impacts on the gender identity of a couple, making males more masculine and females more feminine (Burke and Cast, 1997).

Second, conflict between identities can result in identity change. The existence of two simultaneously activated and oppositional identities is referred to as identity conflict and is unsustainable (Burke and Stets, 2009). To resolve identity conflict, over time the individual will shift the meaning of one, or both, of the identities to bring them into alignment (Burke and Stets, 2009). When an identity is linked to many other identities, the individual will be less inclined to change it as doing so will result in a chain of identities to be modified (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Third, when individuals behave in ways that are inconsistent with their expectations of themselves for an identity, they may change their expectations for that identity to make it congruent with their behaviour. For example, in Pratt et al.'s (2006) examination of medical students, they found that the students adapted their professional identities to reflect the work that they were doing.

Fourth, an individual may change her expectations of herself for an identity through negotiation in situations in which two or more people are performing complementary role identities, such as husband and wife or leader and group members (Burke and Stets, 2009). In these situations, the individuals can verify their own and others' identities in the situation. Misalignments may be discussed and resolved between the individuals resulting in mutual verification, which contributes to bonding.

Finally, the fifth form of identity change is identity creation. Burke and Stets (2009) attribute identity creation to 'social learning, direct socialization and reflected appraisals'. Within the management literature, observing and mimicking role models (Ibarra, 1999) provides an illustration of social learning within organizations. Concurrently, socialization serves to educate organizational newcomers and those changing roles about work role expectations. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) suggest that each work role transition is accompanied by

socialization. Theorisation concerning organizational socialization centres on the impact of organizational socialization tactics and newcomer proactive behaviour on socialization content and newcomer adjustment (Ashforth, Sluss and Saks, 2007). Finally, reflected appraisals, or how an individual thinks others view her, are not only important in changing an identity, but also in creating one if this feedback starts from the moment of role entry (Burke and Stets, 2009).

2.5.2.1 Examining returners' maternal and worker identities from an identity control theory perspective

Considering the return to work following parental leave from an identity control theory perspective offers some insight as to why some returners struggle to re-establish themselves at work while others continue to progress their careers. Firstly, according to identity control theory it might be expected that some women have a clear hierarchical ordering between worker and maternal identities. In such cases, the identity that is more salient will influence expectations for the other identity and the woman will feel positive about the combination of working and being a mother.

Returners who do not have a clear hierarchical prioritisation of one identity over the other may also feel positive about combining worker and maternal identities due to alignment between the two identities. When two identities are aligned, they share similar meanings and, therefore, prompt similar behaviours. For example, a woman may consider providing financial support to her children to be an important part of her maternal identity (Garey, 1999). She may, therefore, strive to perform well in her job to attain bonuses, which will simultaneously confirm both her maternal and worker identities.

Alternatively, some returners' maternal and worker identities may not be aligned, but as long as they are not activated at the same time there is no reason to change behaviour or expectations for the identities. For example, women who work a shift pattern that allows them to spend time with their children during the day, while working in the evenings, may be able to comfortably accommodate maternal and worker identity standards with very different meanings (Garey, 1999).

However, identity control theory also suggests an explanation for the experiences of women who encounter conflict as a result of combining their maternal and worker identities. Hodges and Park (2013) indicate that many women are likely to experience identity conflict between maternal and worker identities as the identities stereotypically call for different behaviours.

Ladge et al.'s (2012) description of cross-domain identity transition suggests that pregnant working women question the impact that the developing maternal identity will have on their worker identity. Furthermore, during pregnancy, working women start to devise strategies aimed at separating or integrating maternal and worker roles. The researchers conclude that pregnant women may deny, actualise or put off changes to their worker identities as a result of the developing maternal identity.

Interpreting Ladge et al.'s (2012) results from an identity control theory perspective, women who do not anticipate problems between their maternal and worker identities during pregnancy may believe that the identities will be activated in separate situations or that the identities are aligned. Those that anticipate and act to resolve potential issues during pregnancy may have a clear hierarchical ordering of the two identities, as indicated by Ladge et al.'s (2012) comment that these participants seem to prioritise the maternal over the worker identity. Alternatively, women who actualise changes in the worker identity may be responding quickly to resolve the identity conflict they experience between two equally salient identities.

Finally, those women who take no action to resolve anticipated identity conflict may be expected to deal with the conflict upon their re-entry into work following parental leave. However, because Ladge et al. (2012) focussed on the experiences of pregnant women, it remains unclear how women resolve identity conflicts that are anticipated, but unresolved during pregnancy, once they return to work. Therefore, further research is needed in order to determine how women resolve identity conflict upon workplace re-entry following parental leave.

Ladge and Greenberg (2015) examined women's workplace re-entry following a parental leave of three months or less in the US, characterising it as a period of

organizational resocialization. Resocialization is defined as a ‘...process whereby an identity which has been previously established undergoes a re-evaluation and realignment as a result of dramatically new circumstances’ (Daly, 1992, p.399).

Examining first-time returners’ workplace re-entry, Ladge and Greenberg (2015) found that returners experienced identity and self-efficacy uncertainties regarding their maternal and worker identities, which were influenced by perceived organizational support. The researchers suggest that during the adjustment period, women engage in identity and self-efficacy adjustment tactics that impact on their future work selves and, ultimately, their career attitudes and behaviours. In this regard, Ladge and Greenberg (2015) suggest that women returners change their maternal and worker identities upon returning to work after parental leave.

However, Ladge and Greenberg’s (2015) model of resocialization raises some questions as to whether all women who are returning to work following parental leave experience changes in their identities and whether both identities are changing. Based on Gatrell’s (2013) finding that some women returning to work adapt their work situations (e.g. engaging in flexible working, changing work roles) around their new maternal identities, further research is necessary to ascertain how such a situation might develop.

2.6 Initial research questions

The literature review revealed theoretical gaps concerning returners’ maternal and worker identity development following workplace re-entry. Firstly, a predominance of research drawing on samples of women who had access to shorter durations of parental leave than are currently available in many European countries suggests the omission of the potential impact of differing lengths of leave on returners’ maternal and worker identities. Secondly, research concerning returners’ maternal and worker identities has focussed on the experiences of first-time mothers, implying that tensions between maternal and worker identities are resolved following a first return to work, as suggested by Ladge and Greenberg’s (2015) model of the resocialisation of new working

mothers. However, a few studies indicate that for some women tensions between maternal and worker identities are unresolved following workplace re-entry (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press; Raskin, 2006), a phenomenon that has received little attention within the literature.

Qualitative research designs were the most common methodology employed. In many cases (e.g. Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Garey, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2004; 2005; 2007), however, data collection took place years after the women returned to work following parental leave, which may have contributed to more coherent and positive accounts of their experiences (Smith, 1994). Furthermore, with the exception of the oral history approach implemented by Haynes (2008a; 2008b), researchers predominantly relied on data generated during single interviews, which provides limited insight into the processes that underpin returners' maternal and worker identities.

Given these critiques of the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity development following parental leave, I identified the following research questions for the exploratory study:

- 1) What are the experiences of women regarding maternal and worker identities as they return to work from parental leave?

In addition to this main question, I further sought to address the sub-questions:

- a. How do women returning to work respond to tensions between maternal and worker roles?
- b. How do first-time and repeat returners' workplace re-entry experiences compare with regard to maternal and worker identities?

2.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I positioned this study in the broader literature concerning identity in management and organization studies, and the influence of good mothering and ideal worker norms on women's experiences of becoming working mothers. I then examined the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker

identities following the return to work after parental leave. My critical review of the literature indicated that returners respond to maternal and worker identity triggers by engaging an identity strategy to manage the tensions between good mothering and ideal worker norms. Returners also revise their constructions of working mother selves and engage in identity management practices upon returning to work after parental leave.

I found a predominance of UK- and US-based studies, in which parental leaves have historically been shorter than in other European countries, such as Germany, and few studies discussing repeat returners following the immediate return to work. I argued that further investigation of returners' maternal and worker identities upon organizational re-entry following parental leave was warranted in order to examine repeat returners' experiences and to explore the impact of longer parental leaves on women's experiences of re-entry.

I then discussed the issues of stability, coherence and agency within the literature on identity. I closed this chapter by interpreting key studies from an identity theory perspective and presented the initial research questions guiding the exploratory study. In the next chapter, I will discuss the exploratory study and how it informed my approach to the main study. I will then present the revised research question and the methodology for the main study.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter introduction

I begin this chapter by discussing the philosophical assumptions underlying this research. I explain the rationale for ontological idealism and epistemological constructivism, which underpin this study and are aligned with the decision to undertake qualitative research.

I present an overview of the methodology and findings of the exploratory study conducted prior to the main study, discussing how the findings and experience of conducting the exploratory study informed the research design for the main study. One of the key outcomes of the exploratory research was my observation that returners' maternal and worker identities were less stable and less coherent than I had assumed following my review of the literature. As a result, I include an overview of the literature concerning identity work that conceptualises identity in more fluid and less coherent terms, focussing on the influence of competing norms on identity work.

The remainder of the chapter details the way I designed and conducted the research to answer the revised research question: ***How do women engage in maternal and worker identity work upon returning to work after parental leave?***

I describe how I selected the organizational setting for the research and recruited the 33 participants. After designing the research to include participant note-taking and semi-structured interviews, I explain how I responded to practical constraints by focussing the analysis on the semi-structured interviews.

I then close the chapter with a discussion of the measures I took to establish the trustworthiness of this research.

3.2 Research strategy

A research strategy is an approach to answering the research question that specifies the starting point and the intended outcome of the research (Blaikie, 2007). Philosophical assumptions about the nature of the social world (i.e.

ontology) and how knowledge can be created (i.e. epistemology) are inherent in the choice of a research strategy.

3.2.1 Ontology

One of the key assumptions a researcher makes concerns his/her view of reality, or his/her ontology. Within the natural sciences, it is assumed that one universal reality exists and that the scientist's task is to discover it. Applying that same logic to the social world, realism is based on the idea that reality exists independently of social actors (Blaikie, 2007). This view of social reality is positioned in contrast to idealism, which is based on the idea that social reality is the product of human construction (Blaikie, 2007). From an idealist perspective, people develop different perspectives of the world, influenced by contextual factors such as nationality and class (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). Idealism reflects the perspective that 'truth' is not independent but is created through discussion and agreement (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

Idealism allows for multiple perspectives of how returners might construct their maternal and worker identities following parental leave. This is important as part of the construction of maternal and worker identities involves modifying the expectations of good mothers and ideal workers, which may be viewed differently and are influenced by contextual factors, such as a mother's financial situation and the country in which she lives (Miller, 2005; Tienari, Quack and Theobald, 2002).

3.2.2 Epistemology

Consistent with idealism, I approach this study from a constructionist epistemology. Blaikie (2007, p.18) defines epistemology as, '...a theory of how human beings come to have knowledge of the world around them....' There are two branches of constructionism: one in which the individual is viewed as the constructor of reality and one in which reality is considered to be socially constructed (Blaikie, 2007). The distinction between an individually and a socially constructed reality stems from the researcher's perspective of human agency and the influence of social forces on constructions of reality (Burr, 2015). Individual

constructivism, while acknowledging the influence of others, focusses on individual ways of viewing the world and making meanings (Raskin, 2002). Social constructionism, in contrast, regards individuals' constructions as an outcome of social forces (Burr, 2015).

The research question focusses this study on individual constructions of reality as key to forming the social world and privileges human agency. However, I consider individual constructions of reality to be influenced by social structure, a view Young and Collin (2004) label as social constructivism. Furthermore, the social constructivist view also addresses earlier limitations of constructivist approaches, which separated mind from body, through a focus on meaning (Young and Collin, 2004). From this perspective, therefore, the focus of research is to gain insight into how individuals construct the social world.

3.2.3 Choice of research strategy

In combination with the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study, the research strategy reflects an assumption about the logical beginning and outcomes of the research (Blaikie, 2007). While textbooks commonly focus on inductive and deductive research strategies in relation to qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection (e.g. Bryman, 2016), Blaikie (2007) critiques the belief that either induction or deduction can transpire without the other. Blaikie (2007) argues that a purely inductive research strategy cannot be conducted because the researcher must have some theoretical concept to begin the study. Concurrently, pure deduction is equally impossible because the impetus for research stems from observations (Blaikie, 2007).

Instead, Blaikie (2007) proposes retroduction, in which the researcher investigates observed patterns to determine their underlying cause, or abduction, in which the researcher draws on the language and meanings participants give of a phenomenon to generate a technical account of it. Furthermore, the abductive research strategy differs from inductive, deductive and retroductive research strategies through its focus on how social actors construct reality (Blaikie, 2007). Given the centrality of individual constructions of maternal and

worker identities to this study, the abductive research strategy is most appropriate for the aims of this study.

3.2.4 Researcher's stance

Aligned with the constructivist approach to this research, I acknowledge that my own way of viewing the world will necessarily impact on the data I collect and the way I analyse them. I, therefore, consider myself to be an 'insider' in this research project (Miller and Glassner, 1997), in that conducting this research may change both the way the participants think about being mothers and workers as well as my own understanding of these roles. I also consider myself to be a 'learner' (Blaikie, 2007) because, despite the knowledge of returners' identity work I have gained through reading the literature, I approach this study with the intent of understanding how the participants construct and adapt their maternal and worker identities. However, in the process of conducting this research, I may support the participants in this study by helping them to reflect on their circumstances and potentially change them, which is the role of a reflective partner (Blaikie, 2007). I, therefore acknowledge the critical leanings of this research project in that I hope to support gender equality in management through this research (Blaikie, 2007).

3.2.5 Qualitative research

The main distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is that qualitative studies are focussed on data collected in the form of words, as opposed to numbers (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The goal of this research is to access individual meanings associated with being a mother and a worker. This type of research is often facilitated by adopting a qualitative approach to data collection (Johnson et al., 2006). However, depending upon the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the researcher, qualitative research designs can vary based on the type of data collected and how the data are analysed.

Typically, qualitative research is focussed on how people make sense of the social world and offers enough flexibility in the instruments of data collection to generate detailed accounts (Ritchie et al., 2014). These features of qualitative

research correspond to the research question's focus on individual meanings associated with maternal and worker identities. Furthermore, qualitative research fits with the philosophical assumptions associated with idealism and constructivism.

3.3 Research paradigm

The choice of a research paradigm is entwined with the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions. Blaikie (2007) identifies 10 different research paradigms. I will, however, focus on the functionalist, interpretivist and critical research paradigms that I introduced in the overview of the identity literature in management and organization studies. The functionalist research paradigm suggests that principals of research in the natural sciences can be applied to the social sciences (Blaikie, 2007). Moreover, reality exists separately from human constructions and is observable (Blaikie, 2007). The researcher's role, therefore, is to design research to discover the reality 'out there' and to produce generalisable theories to explain it (Blaikie, 2007).

In contrast to the functionalist view, interpretivism views the social world as fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences and argues that research must be conducted differently to gain an understanding of people's constructions of the world (Blaikie, 2007). Therefore, the key issue for research designs is how to investigate and identify typical patterns in the meanings that social actors attribute to the world, given that these meanings are not fixed (Blaikie, 2007).

The research paradigm associated with critical theory emphasises the use of rationality to free humans from social structure (Blaikie, 2007). Critical theory may draw on functionalist and interpretivist methods to further the agenda of human emancipation (Blaikie, 2007).

Corresponding to the ontological and epistemological assumptions I declared above, I have chosen to design this study using an interpretivist research paradigm. The interpretivist research paradigm places the focus of this study on the meanings that individuals construct for their maternal and worker identities, which is consistent with the research question I have identified.

3.4 Research design – exploratory study

The literature review I conducted (see Chapter 2) indicated a predominance of studies focussing on returners' identity work following parental leave in the UK and the US. I argued that in a country such as Germany, in which the raven mother concept reflects different social norms and parental leave provisions are longer, that returners' experiences regarding their maternal and worker identities following the return to work after parental leave may differ from the accounts in the literature. Moreover, I found that most studies focussing on women's experiences upon immediately re-entering work after the birth of a child tended to focus on first-time returners, to the exclusion of repeat returners' experiences.

The purpose of the exploratory study, therefore, was to answer the following main research question and two sub-questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of women regarding maternal and worker identities as they return to work from parental leave?
 - a. How do women returning to work respond to tensions between maternal and worker roles?
 - b. How do first-time and repeat returners' workplace re-entry experiences compare with regard to maternal and worker identities?

The following subsections describe the methodology I used to conduct the exploratory study, the findings of the study and the influence of the exploratory study on the main study.

3.4.1 Exploratory study methodology

The eight women I interviewed for this study were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I sought to interview equal numbers of first-time and repeat returners. To facilitate comparisons between women's accounts, study participants were required to have at least five years of work experience and to be returning to the same organization in which they worked before taking parental leave (although not necessarily to the same job role within the organization) and have returned to work within the previous 18 months. To limit

the potential impact of negative career consequences associated with part-time work (Gatrell, 2007a), while being sensitive to the high percentage of employed mothers who work part-time in Germany (BFSFJ, 2015), participants were required to be working a minimum of 20 hours per week. With these requirements established, participants were recruited through personal contacts, referrals and through flyers posted at local day care providers. Although not a requirement of the study, all of the women I spoke to were living with a husband or partner.

The interview guide (see Appendix B) was designed to explore participants' perceptions about parental leave, maternal and worker identities, possible tensions since returning to work and thoughts about future career development. Drawing on my fluency in the German language, gained from 10 years living and working in Germany (including at the time of the study), I conducted six of the interviews in German. Two of the women, one who was married to an American and one who had been an au pair in the US, offered to conduct the interviews in English. To preserve the participants' meanings, the transcripts were uploaded in the original language into NVivo 11 for analysis (Im et al., 2016). While coding was completed using English labels, no further translation occurred during analysis. However, to facilitate discussions with my Supervisor, I translated large passages of text and relevant quotes so that we could discuss my coding and the themes as I developed them. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, defined as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79).

For the illustrative quotes included below, I (a native English-speaker and German resident) translated the quotes into English, drawing on my fluency in the German language. The quotes were then reverse translated by two native German speakers with English-language fluency (Chen and Boore, 2010). To protect participants' confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms in reporting the quotes.

3.4.2 Exploratory study findings

The women I interviewed indicated making adjustments to their expectations of themselves as mothers and as workers in the process of returning to work after

parental leave. I identified three main themes in the interviews: reframing maternal identity, reframing worker identity, and the influence of the length of parental leave. Importantly, I did not detect any differences between first-time and repeat returners.

The study confirmed previous research indicating that women adapt their understandings of being a mother to accommodate their involvement in paid work (Johnston and Swanson, 2006). Comments from only one of the participants conveyed intensive mothering beliefs (Hays, 1996), while the remaining participants indicated expectations of themselves consistent with extensive mothering beliefs (Christopher, 2012). For example, Lisa, a repeat returner, expressed her understanding of motherhood as coordinating her children's care:

Your children aren't less important to you because they spend the day in childcare. Of course, you have to know that they are in good hands. But, otherwise I don't feel that you have a less close relationship with your child just because you don't see them until 3:30 in the afternoon.
(Lisa, repeat returner)

As is reflected in Lisa's comment, in emphasising her role as the coordinator of her children's care, returners were able to construct their maternal identities in a way that made a lack of constant physical presence throughout the day acceptable in their identity construction.

In addition to adjusting their maternal identities to fit their decisions about working, the results of this study indicated that returners positioned themselves as more efficient workers following their returns to work and sought out opportunities for flexible working, in order to meet long working hours norms. However, as Stephanie, a first-time returner expressed, working flexibly made it more difficult to maintain an ideal worker image:

As I said, I can only reiterate, I arrive at work very early. But, like in every company, the people who get noticed are the ones who turn out the lights at 10:00 pm, not the ones who are already sitting there at 7:00 am. (Stephanie, first-time returner)

Through its focus on the experiences of German women, the study also highlighted the potential impact of national maternity-related policies on women's experiences of returning to work after leave. Contrary to previous research indicating that repeat returners are more likely than first-time returners to adapt the length of their parental leaves (Barnes, 2013), the first-time and repeat returners I interviewed used parental leave similarly.

Perhaps more importantly, the findings highlighted consensus among the participants that taking a shorter length of leave was a signal of commitment to employers. Returners, such as Evelyn, strategically decided to take a shorter parental leave to ensure that they would return to the same work roles upon return:

You have to understand, I loved my role. I built it. I'd seen the way women returning from parental leave [pause] how no one gives any thought to where they will end up and then they get parked somewhere for a year, during which they have to find a new job, which they generally have little choice about. And I knew that if I was gone for less than six months they would have to hold my position for me. (Evelyn, first-time returner)

Evelyn's comment supports Glass and Fodor's (2011) finding that Hungarian human resource managers assume that women who take shorter leaves are more dedicated to work. However, this presents issues for women who want to maintain their working roles, but also want to spend time with young children, or who have difficulty organizing sufficient childcare to cover the demands of their full-time work schedules.

However, despite Evelyn's determination to maintain her work role by returning to work within six months, upon re-entry, she was disappointed to find that she was no longer receiving the best projects:

I actually had more capacity to take on projects, but without even asking me they landed with a neighbouring team, for example, which didn't have primary responsibility for them. So, it was simply through the

distribution of projects that you noticed, aha, you're not getting the super sexy exciting projects anymore. (Evelyn, first-time returner)

The results of this study, therefore, indicated that despite being considered a signal of commitment to the organization, taking a shorter parental leave did not ensure that pre-leave working roles were maintained.

Furthermore, the data suggested that women's experiences of returning to work were potentially influenced by the length of leave they had taken. The three women who took shorter leaves in this study (i.e. less than six months) also discussed experiencing a period of adjustment during which they questioned their decisions about returning to work. In contrast, women who took a longer period of leave (i.e. more than six months) reported the need to adjust to their new roles, but did not indicate any doubts about returning to work. Thus, the findings suggested that the length of leave taken may impact on returners' maternal and worker identities upon re-entry.

All of the women I interviewed reported working fewer hours than they had before their parental leaves; however, the first-time returners maintained full-time working contracts while the repeat returners returned to part-time positions (although one later increased her hours again). The working patterns exhibited by these women are consistent with national statistics indicating that women with more than one child may be more likely to reduce their working hours (BFSFJ, 2015).

Gatrell (2013) suggests that repeat returners may be better positioned within their organizations to secure more accommodations for their roles as mothers. Two women that I interviewed were successful in having their managers and colleagues accommodate their maternal roles. Anne, a first-time mother, held a senior management position within her organization and described how she was able to train her colleagues to understand that she was unavailable during the early evening hours. Similarly, Lisa, a repeat returner, was able to secure a home-office day, despite this being virtually unprecedented within her department. Both viewed the accommodations they had negotiated as the reward for being highly valued employees. This finding suggests that

organizational standing may influence return to work experiences. Although Anne was a first-time mother and held a senior management position, it might be expected that repeat returners, who generally have more years of corporate service, would be better placed within the organization.

3.4.3 The influence of the exploratory study on the design of the main study

Conducting the exploratory study was an invaluable experience, which helped to shape several aspects of the main study. In the following subsections, I describe the impact of these learnings on my research design for the main study.

3.4.3.1 Working within an organization

My analysis of the exploratory interviews confirmed the influence of organizational policy on women's experiences of returning to work (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). For instance, some women had access to 'Keeping in Touch' days while others did not. In addition, some women were able to draw on flexible work arrangements, such as working from home and job-sharing, while others could only request part-time work arrangements. Thus, although all of the repeat returners and only one first-time returner had a formalised flexible work arrangement, the women did not have comparable access to flexible work arrangements. Minimising contextual differences by recruiting women from the same organization would facilitate comparison between women's experiences of returning to work following parental leave. For this reason, I decided to conduct the main study within one organization.

A further outcome of the exploratory study was that the length of parental leave seemed to influence participants' re-entry experiences. While some of the women I spoke with discussed having to learn a new job, all described having to adapt their routines upon returning to work. However, the women who returned to work within six months of childbirth spoke differently about their returns to work, expressing doubts about their decisions about the timing and nature of their returns to work.

My initial plan to design the sampling strategy for the main study based on the length of parental leave, in order to explore the influence of the length of leave on returners' identity work, however was revised after a discussion I had with the Human Resource Manager of the organization in which I planned to conduct the main study. She informed me that the length of parental leave women took within the organization seemed to correspond to their level in the organizational hierarchy. She indicated that senior managers were likely to take six months of leave; middle managers nine months of leave; and first-line managers and project coordinators a little over one year of leave. Her comment not only underscored the importance of understanding the organizational context of the study, but also raised the question of the influence of hierarchical level on identity work experiences upon returning to work after parental leave. As such, I chose not to narrow my research question to focus on the influence of the length of parental leave.

3.4.3.2 Adding Critical Incident Technique (CIT) participant notes

During the exploratory interviews, some of the women I spoke with had difficulty describing how they had come to view themselves differently in the context of work. While in some cases they were eventually able to provide me with examples of situations that made them feel differently, others described 'just knowing' or 'having a feeling'. To address this issue in the main study, I planned to ask participants to note situations that raised their awareness of themselves as mothers and as workers over a four-week period prior to conducting an interview about their experiences.

This method represents an adaptation of the CIT, in which participants are invited to self-reflect on situations that they consider to be significant to their understanding of themselves (Butterfield et al., 2005). The notes were intended to serve as an 'aide-memoire' (Atewologun, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2016) to participants about their initial return-to-work experiences and to be discussed and probed during a semi-structured interview.

3.4.3.3 Conducting interviews in German

I conducted two of the interviews within the exploratory study in English because the participants were fluent in the English language and had volunteered to do so. However, despite their obvious fluency in the English language during the interview, as I listened to the recordings and completed the analysis, I noticed differences between the interviews conducted in English and those conducted in German. The lack of an English-equivalent for raven mother and the names of German parental leave policies provide two examples. However, as with any language, individuals choose phrases to illustrate concepts which may go beyond the literal translation of the words, presenting a challenge for achieving conceptual equivalence in translations (Philips, 1960, cited in Temple and Young, 2004, p.165).

Planning translation into the research design was necessary because I intended to write this thesis in English. However, in considering the abductive research strategy underpinning this project, the focus of the first stage is to gain insight into the participants' meanings. I reasoned that if participants could speak freely, without having to grasp for words in a second language, then that would enable me to approach their constructions of their maternal and worker identities.

Furthermore, since, as the researcher, I would be building a technical account based on the participants' accounts, 'translation' from the participants' words to mine would occur at that point in the research process anyway, thereby minimising the risk of losing meaning (Van Nes et al., 2010). Therefore, I planned to do the translation later in the study, when illustrative quotes were required in the reporting phase.

3.4.3.4 Allowing for unresolved tensions and incoherence in identity work

The literature characterises maternal and worker identities as oppositional (Hodges and Park, 2013), often focussing on conflicts between work and family roles (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Given this background, I approached the exploratory study with a somewhat binary perspective of women's returns to work, expecting that they would either be characterised as a time of struggle or a time of confirmation for their maternal and worker identities. As I analysed the

exploratory data, however, I noticed that each participant expressed both certainty and uncertainty regarding maternal and worker identities. Similarly, the women I interviewed discussed having both positive experiences (e.g. gaining a promotion) and negative experiences (e.g. the promotion did not materialise as planned). Likewise, colleagues could be encouraging by commending a returning mother on what a great job she was doing and, at the same time, critical in questioning the timing of her return to work (i.e. too early or too late).

As I alluded to in my discussion of the assumptions framing my view of identity following the literature review (see 2.5.1), the exploratory data indicated less coherence in maternal and worker identities than I had anticipated based on the extant literature. As a result, I returned to the literature to explore more fluid and incoherent accounts of identity.

3.5 Conceptualising identity work when identities lack stability and coherence

Goffman (1959) suggests that although social identities are experienced as being relatively stable and intrinsic, they are created and rehearsed in interaction with others. Individuals construct and revise their understandings of themselves when faced with norms that run counter to who they think they should be and, consequently, how they think they should behave. Furthermore, this perspective recognises both individual agency and the influence of society on individual identities (Brown, 2015). As Brown (2015: 33) comments, identity work, 'helps fix attention on identities-in-action and unpick processes of continuity and change, rather than apply labels to notional end states.' Inherent in this approach, therefore, is the idea that an individual's understanding of herself is shifting and potentially conflicting.

Identity work studies typically describe the challenges individuals encounter in crafting their identities in the face of competing expectations for their behaviour, such as in the case of academics pressured to simultaneously excel in publishing, teaching and thinking (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Researchers have explored identity work related to multiple foci of identification, such as that experienced by manager/professionals in the context of New Public Management (Thomas and

Davies, 2005) and senior ethnic minority professionals (Atewologun et al., 2016). This stream of research indicates that developing a sense of who one is is an ongoing process.

A subset of the identity work literature explores how individuals navigate contradictory normative demands. For instance, changes in institutional logics may result in individuals engaging in identity work to craft a worker identity that is better suited to the demands of a newly shifted professional environment (Kyratsis et al., 2017). Alternatively, taking on a leadership role may require the development of a leader identity that is at odds with an individual's occupational identity (Croft, Currie and Lockett, 2015). Essers, Doorewaard and Benschop (2013) illustrated how women of Moroccan and Turkish descent living in the Netherlands selectively complied with, or rebelled against, familial norms discouraging women from taking on public-facing roles as they pursued entrepreneurial careers. However, while these studies explore how individuals engage in identity work, influenced by competing norms, the studies are also framed to suggest that one identity (e.g. leader) is preferable to the other (e.g. occupation).

In contrast, Johnston and Swanson (2007) characterise maternal and worker identities as dialectic. Furthermore, in discussing the 'neutralisation' identity strategy, Johnston and Swanson (2007) note that women in their study who were employed full-time were most likely to accept not satisfying either identity, a condition they contend results in 'a state of perpetual disequilibrium in which they are ricocheted back and forth between dialectic poles' (p. 456). However, the researchers offer little explanation of how women who are unable to resolve tensions between maternal and worker identities might manage them.

The literature offers some initial insight as to how women who are unable to resolve tensions between their maternal and worker identities might sustain them. Firstly, Haynes (2008b) indicates that following parental leave, women engage in identity work to construct visions of themselves as working mothers and seek compromises between their two important identities. Despite the rich data Haynes (2008b) presented in her account of five women's experiences of

becoming mothers, the small sample size suggests that additional exploration of returners' identity work is warranted to probe how returners may engage in identity work differently from one another.

Additionally, Purchase et al. (2018) conceptualise equipollent identity work as the individual struggle to construct a hybrid identity while drawing on two equally powerful and competing discourses. Individuals engaging in equipollent identity work practices may present 'contrasting inward and outward facing' identities (Purchase et al., 2018). In addition, they may exhibit 'qualified positioning of the self' (Purchase et al., 2018), which resembles the temporal segmentation identity strategy identified in the preceding chapter, in which individuals focus on one identity for part of the life course before switching to focus on the other (Garey, 1999; Herman et al., 2013). Finally, individuals engaging in equipollent identity work attempt to reconcile the two identities (Purchase et al., 2018), which was also revealed as an identity strategy used by returners in the literature review (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press; Millward, 2006).

The outcome of equipollent identity work can either be a somewhat stable resolution of identity work or, in the 'acute' case of identity equipollence, identities that lack stability and coherence (Purchase et al., 2018). While Purchase et al.'s (2018) discussion of equipollent identity work offers insight into the identity work involved in maintaining equipollent identities, it does not explain how such a state of incoherence is mentally sustained by the individual.

However, Kreiner et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of identity elasticity in reference to organizational identity may help to explain how individuals continue to maintain identities that are influenced by competing norms. Identity elasticity is defined as, 'the tensions that simultaneously stretch, while holding together, social constructions of identity' (Kreiner et al., 2015, p.981). In examining Episcopal Church members' reactions following the election of its first openly gay bishop, Kreiner et al. (2015) suggest that organizational identity is constructed by

members' divergent views 'expanding' and 'constricting' constructions of the Church's identity.

Kreiner et al. (2015) liken organizational identity to an atom, which is comprised of simultaneous and opposing forces, forming what appears to be a cohesive whole. Similarly, the researchers argue, organizational identity is the product of organizational members' simultaneously occurring divergent claims regarding the organization's identity. Moreover, individual members' claims concerning organizational identity can push to expand and revise the organization's identity or to resist change through maintaining a constricted sense of who the organization is. Within the study, Kreiner et al. (2015) identified an 'overarching dialectic' between members who thought that the Church could expand its understanding of itself to be more inclusive and members who thought that the issue of homosexuality would cause irreparable rifts within the Church.

Kreiner et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of identity elasticity, therefore, provides a potential explanation for how incoherence with regard to competing identity claims may be experienced internally while an identity is still perceived as intact. Given the study's focus on organizational identity, the dialectic tensions Kreiner et al. (2015) propose relate to the core attributes of organizational identity as defined by Albert and Whetten (1985), namely: centrality, endurance and distinctiveness. Kreiner et al. (2015) argue that identity can be viewed as both a 'thing' (i.e. something central, enduring and distinctive) and a process underpinned by dialectic tensions relating to members' claims concerning what about the organization is central, enduring and distinctive. The concept of identity elasticity, therefore, may offer insight into how individuals maintain identity equipollence, although the concept has not yet been applied to the individual-level. I will return to this point and offer a conceptualisation of identity elasticity related to the individual as I present the results of the study and discuss the implications of the findings later in the thesis.

3.6 Developing the research question

The exploratory study and my subsequent review of the identity work literature indicated that a revision of the research question for the main study was necessary. Rather than describing a process of identity change and resolution, as I had initially anticipated, the aim of the project shifted to deepening the understanding of how individuals returning to work after parental leave are engaged in an effortful and recursive process of shaping their understandings of who they are as mothers and as workers. Furthermore, despite indications within the identity work literature that individuals may sustain unstable and incoherent identities, further research is required to explore how women returning to work after parental leave sustain their maternal and worker identities under conditions of competing norms.

The revised research question, highlighting the revised assumptions concerning identity work is: *How do women engage in maternal and worker identity work upon returning to work after parental leave?*

3.7 Research design – main study

The revised research question maintained emphasis on individual constructions of maternal and worker identities and therefore the interpretivist research strategy, which I described at the beginning of this chapter, was aligned with the research aims. In the following subsections, I describe the revised research design for the main study.

3.7.1 Methodology

Having revised the research question and benefitted from the experience I gained conducting the exploratory study, I modified the design of my main study. The remainder of this chapter describes how I constructed my sample, the data I collected, how the data were analysed and what I did to ensure the trustworthiness of the results.

3.7.1.1 Selecting the research organization

The exploratory study raised the issue of variability regarding access to organizational policies that could facilitate returners' re-entry into the workplace following parental leave and, therefore, would be expected to influence returners' identity work (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). Furthermore, I expected that differences in the availability of flexible work arrangements could also be related to differences in cultural support for employees' work and family concerns. Therefore, to limit the influence of differences in organizational support and to maintain the focus on the individual returners, I chose to conduct this study within a single organization that I was familiar with. Returners had access to flexible work arrangements, but because of the industry (i.e. manufacturing) and the lack of women in leadership roles, I expected the contrast between individual constructions of the ideal worker and the good mother would be pronounced.

All participants worked for a company referred to within this thesis as ManCo (pseudonyms have been used for the organization and in place of participant names throughout the thesis). ManCo is a multinational manufacturing company headquartered in Germany. Employing over 100,000 people within Germany alone, ManCo utilises bureaucratic modes of organizing. For example, there is a strict hierarchy within the organization and a formalised talent management system. ManCo's website and investors' report discuss the company's interest in promoting gender diversity throughout the organization, observing that while 40% of management trainees are female, only 16% of the company's managers (first-line supervisor to board-level management) are women. To increase gender parity within its management ranks, the company has self-imposed quotas for women at every organizational level. The company also advertises a family-friendly work environment and offers flexible work arrangements, such as reduced working hours, job-sharing and telework. To support employees with young children, the company offers childcare at several of its campuses. Spaces within company childcare facilities are coveted as these are limited and generally offer longer opening times than public childcare facilities, fewer closing days and subsidised rates, dependent upon the employee's salary.

In summary, although ManCo exhibits a male-dominated organizational hierarchy, its human resource policies indicate initiatives to support employees' work and family responsibilities, while also supporting women's career advancement.

3.7.1.2 Access and ethical considerations

I gained access to ManCo through a manager in the Human Resources (HR) Department. Having worked for ManCo before moving to England and beginning my doctoral studies (I am currently on sabbatical), I was aware of the organizational structure and sent an introductory email to the manager responsible for diversity issues. After meeting with her in person and informing her of the research design, she agreed to facilitate my recruitment efforts by inviting me to present my study at a 'Keeping in Touch' day for employees on parental leave and by forwarding a recruitment letter on my behalf. Both pieces of communication were branded with the Cranfield logo and did not include any reference to ManCo (see Recruitment Letter, Appendix C).

In my communications with potential participants I stressed that I was conducting the research independently, as part of my doctoral studies at Cranfield and that their participation was completely voluntary. I communicated that participation was voluntary on three separate occasions prior to the interview. Firstly, the recruitment email asked for volunteers and described the format of the study. Secondly, once prospective participants volunteered in response to the initial recruitment email, I sent them an informational sheet describing the study in further detail and requesting an interview appointment for those who were still interested in participating. Thirdly, in scheduling the interview, I once again communicated that participation was voluntary. One woman who indicated her interest in the initial stages did not respond to my requests for an interview appointment.

Before beginning each interview, I reiterated that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants could decline to participate, to have the interview recorded or to answer any question. One participant declined permission to be recorded but allowed me to take notes during the interview.

In addition to completing ethics training as a Cranfield doctoral student, my research design was also approved by the Cranfield University Research Ethics Committee prior to contacting the organization and commencing fieldwork. Furthermore, ethics training has been a part of my undergraduate training in Psychology (University of Maryland, USA) and in my Certificate in Coaching (University of Cambridge, Institute of Continuing Education).

3.7.1.3 Selecting participants

I implemented a purposive sampling strategy to recruit returners for this study (Ritchie et al., 2014). To begin, I introduced the topic of my research to employees on parental leave during a 'Keeping in Touch' day at ManCo, in which those on leave were informed of organizational policies supporting the combination of work and family. Following this introduction, an HR Manager within the company forwarded an email about the study to women who had recently returned from maternity leave. Due to concerns about employee privacy, I was not given access to employee data, nor was I informed of how many women fulfilling my participation requirements received the information about the study. In addition to the introductions facilitated by the HR Department, I also drew upon personal connections within the company and used snowball sampling to recruit the 33 participants. Apart from contacts generated through the HR Manager, no contact provided more than three participants. Participants were recruited and interviewed from September 2016 to January 2017.

All participants started the study within six months of returning to work and were interviewed within seven months of returning from maternity leave. Each of the women had taken maternity leave from ManCo and returned to a job in which they planned to be working at least 20 hours per week. At the time of the interview, all but one of the participants was married to, or living with, the father of their youngest child. The women differed in the length of maternity leave they had taken and in whether they returned to the same position within the organization that they had previously held. All participants performed professional (i.e. engineering; IT; accounting) or managerial work at either the individual contributor (IC), first-line supervisor or senior manager level within the

organizational hierarchy. Because of the small number of women in senior management, to protect participant anonymity, I have labelled first-line supervisors and senior managers as ‘manager’ in Table 1 Participant summary, which summarises participants’ characteristics.

Table 1 Participant summary

	Participant	Age	Birthplace	Return	Level	Leave (months)	Working hours
1	Anke	25	W Germany	First	IC	30	PT
2	Anne	31	W Germany	First	IC	12	PT
3	Babette	32	E Germany	First	IC	8	FT
4	Britta	31	E Germany	First	IC	10	PT
5	Caroline	31	Foreign	First	IC	6	FT
6	Chloe	40	W Germany	First	Manager	36	FT
7	Dagmar	36	W Germany	First	Manager	5	PT
8	Doreen	27	W Germany	First	IC	12	PT
9	Emma	34	E Germany	First	IC	12	PT
10	Eva	35	E Germany	First	IC	15	PT
11	Femke	32	W Germany	First	IC	12	PT
12	Frauke	36	E Germany	First	Manager	12	PT
13	Gabriele	35	Foreign	First	Manager	8	PT
14	Gisela	34	Foreign	First	IC	24	PT
15	Heike	37	W Germany	First	Manager	18	PT
16	Ina	35	W Germany	First	Manager	12	PT
17	Julia	36	W Germany	First	Manager	14	PT
18	Katrin	36	W Germany	First	IC	9	FT
19	Lara	32	W Germany	First	Manager	11	PT
20	Lena	36	W Germany	First	IC	7	FT
21	Marion	40	W Germany	Repeat	Manager	18	PT
22	Melanie	38	W Germany	Repeat	IC	3	FT
23	Natalie	38	Foreign	Repeat	IC	12	FT
24	Nora	33	W Germany	Repeat	IC	8	PT
25	Petra	36	E Germany	Repeat	Manager	14	PT
26	Pia	36	W Germany	Repeat	IC	36	FT
27	Rebecca	39	W Germany	Repeat	Manager	15	PT
28	Sandra	33	W Germany	Repeat	IC	14	PT
29	Sophie	36	Foreign	Repeat	IC	14	PT
30	Tanja	32	E Germany	Repeat	IC	12	PT
31	Ute	40	Foreign	Repeat	IC	18	PT
32	Wendy	39	W Germany	Repeat	Manager	16	PT
33	Zoe	34	E Germany	Repeat	IC	14	PT

3.7.2 Data collection

Given the individual constructivist philosophical perspective underlying this research, data generation was preferred to the collection of naturally occurring data as the latter tend to prioritise the researcher’s construction of meaning over

that of the participants' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). I identified semi-structured interviews and participant notes as two methods for generating qualitative data that were particularly well suited to answering the research question, which I discuss in the following subsections.

3.7.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the meanings that participants gave to their maternal and worker identities and how the experience of returning to work after parental leave might influence their understandings of themselves as mothers and workers. Interviews enable the researcher to focus on the individual (Ritchie et al., 2014). Furthermore, through discussion and probing, the researcher has the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of individual perceptions and meanings during the interview (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

In contrast to unstructured interviews, in which participants are typically asked a single question to start and then encouraged to go in the direction of their choosing, the semi-structured interview is designed to facilitate comparison between respondents while also enabling respondents to discuss aspects of the topic that are relevant to their experience (Bryman, 2016). Based on the experience I gained from the exploratory study, I designed the semi-structured interviews in this study to fulfil three functions. The first function was to gain an understanding of how individual participants constructed their maternal and worker identities. The second function was to gain an understanding of how participants responded to situations in which they felt their maternal or worker identities were being challenged. Finally, the interview offered me greater insight into contextual factors that influenced participants' identity work.

3.7.2.1.1 The interview guide

I designed the interview guide (see Appendix D) to prompt participants to discuss their experiences related to parental leave and the immediate return to work following parental leave, and how these experiences might influence their understandings of themselves as mothers and as workers. I discussed and finalised the interview prompts with my Supervisor before piloting the interview

guide with two women who met the recruitment criteria but worked for a different organization.

During the four weeks leading up to the interview, I asked participants to notice and record situations in which their maternal or worker identities became salient to them (see 3.7.2.2 Participant notes). In the interview, participants were then asked to discuss the situations they had noticed and to select situations that seemed particularly relevant to their understandings of themselves as mothers and as workers.

After conducting the first six interviews, I noticed that the focus of the interviews seemed to be skewed toward discussing participants' worker identities and that during the interviews less time was devoted to discussing participants' maternal identities. After discussing the issue with my Supervisor, I changed the order of the questions so that I asked questions concerning maternal identity first in the interview guide, which increased the time spent discussing maternal identity during the interview.

3.7.2.2 Participant notes

Taylor and Thorpe (2004, p.205) suggest that integrating CIT into semi-structured interviews can help, 'to focus respondents and encourage them to elaborate on their behaviour in the context of these particular incidents.' By asking participants to describe situations from their experiences of returning to work, which heightened their awareness of being mothers and/or workers, participants self-selected situations that were important to their understandings of themselves. As such, the analysis did not rely solely upon my selection of identity relevant statements within the interviews (Alvesson et al., 2008).

In designing this study, I was conscious of the demands that returning to work and having at least one child under the age of four were likely to make on participants' time. However, the analysis of the exploratory study data suggested that having examples of situations in which participants felt their sense of themselves as mothers or as workers was unsettled could provide a better insight into how returners engaged in identity work.

Among the benefits of requesting that study participants take notes is that they can record their thoughts as they occur and in the environment in which they occur (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003). Thus, using participants' notes may help to overcome the criticisms of findings based on participants' retrospective accounts (Ohly et al., 2010). However, research based on diary studies indicates that the risks of using such an approach include participant attrition and variability in the way individuals complete the assignment (Bolger et al., 2003).

To minimise the risk of attrition, I provided participants with a clear description of what was expected in the study before asking for their commitment (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014). In addition, I sent email reminders to encourage participants to record their observations (Atewologun et al., 2016; Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014).

Limiting the data collection period encourages participation and retention in diary studies (Pilbeam et al., 2016). However, events that raise individuals' awareness of being a mother, being a worker, or both, were not expected to occur on a daily basis. Therefore, the study duration was set at four weeks to ensure that the phenomenon of interest was captured within the note-taking period.

Adapting the reflective journal instructions Atewologun et al. (2016, p.246) developed, I asked participants to write down situations that raised their awareness of themselves as mothers or as workers. I instructed participants that a situation could be anything from a random thought to a conversation with someone. To explain what counted as a situation, I also provided the examples of being selected for a new job that required extensive travel or cleaning equipment used for expressing breastmilk at work. I utilised Atewologun et al.'s (2016, p.247) probing questions, by asking participants to reflect on their reactions (e.g. responses, thoughts, feelings). Although I asked participants to take notes as situations arose, as a guide, I indicated that participants could estimate spending approximately five to 10 minutes, two to three times per week on note-taking.

3.7.3 Insider academic research

An insider is a researcher who conducts research in a group to which they belong and, therefore, can be expected to share at least one common target of identification with the study's participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Conducting research as an insider has been critiqued from a functionalist perspective due to the risk it presents to researcher 'objectivity' (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). However, there are mixed perspectives on insider research from an interpretivist perspective (i.e. the research paradigm informing this thesis).

The benefits of conducting research in a group to which one belongs include that it facilitates access and rapport (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). However, being an insider may also create identity conflicts, as researchers may encounter situations in which their loyalty to one group is challenged (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Moreover, while being an insider facilitates access to the group, participants may assume shared understandings of their experiences and, therefore, provide less detail than they would when speaking with a non-group member (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

I shared two foci of identification with the participants I researched. Firstly, I am a mother conducting research about the experiences of mothers. Secondly, although not currently employed by ManCo, participants were aware that I had been employed with ManCo in the past and that I was on sabbatical, which meant that I could return to ManCo in the future. From my perspective, we may have also shared a third source of identification, that of being a worker; however, because of the type of work I was engaged in (i.e. research), participants who commented on that aspect of my identity regarded it as an area of difference.

I encountered the issue of having participants assume shared meanings during the exploratory study and was careful to watch for this in the main study. Eager to maintain rapport with participants during the interview, I developed the habit of saying, 'I think I know what you mean, but could you please explain that so that I'm sure to get it right in the analysis?' I found this strategy to be quite helpful both in clarifying participants' meanings so that I could probe them further during the interview, but also in providing quotes to substantiate my claims.

3.7.4 Data analysis

3.7.4.1 Unit of analysis

The research question focussed on individual-level identity work regarding maternal and worker identities. Corresponding to the research question, the unit of analysis was the individual and the analysis centred on how individual returners engaged different aspects of identity work as they discussed their return to work experiences.

3.7.4.2 Defining identity work

Developing clarity concerning what constitutes identity work was a key requirement for answering participants' questions about note-taking, probing participants' answers during the interviews and analysing the data. The focus of the research was to ascertain how participants constructed their maternal and worker identities and how they responded to situations that unsettled their understandings of themselves as mothers and as workers. I focussed on participants' usage of personal pronouns (e.g. I; me; mine), 'not me' expressions (e.g. I couldn't leave my child in care that long) and emotions (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

One of the specific challenges I encountered was separating scheduling conflicts from identity work. I found it helpful to ask myself, '*How is the situation relevant for the participant's understanding of herself?*' as I thought about the participants' responses. To illustrate this issue, here are two examples from the notes Melanie submitted. The first provides an example of a scheduling conflict in which Melanie experiences discomfort, but this does not result in her engaging in identity work:

Since [my son] was wheezing during the night from Thursday to Friday and the weekend was coming, I wanted to go to the paediatrician on Friday afternoon. I called and texted, but I couldn't reach my boss.
(Melanie, notes)

After resolving the situation so that she could take her child to the doctor and still attend an important meeting at work, Melanie's reflection on the situation was,

'You have to be organized as a working mother!' (Melanie, notes). While the situation was likely to have raised the salience of both maternal and worker identities in Melanie's mind, her notes did not indicate any further reflection or self-questioning in the situation that would have suggested that she engaged in identity work in response.

In contrast to this situation, Melanie described how her younger son cried every evening, during her first week back at work, when she came home:

Every night during the first week, as soon as my little one saw me walk into the living room, or when he heard my "hello" from the hall, he started to cry and refused to be put down for the rest of the evening.
(Melanie, notes)

Melanie's notes reflected that she responded to her son's behaviour by questioning her maternal identity, '*Am I raven mother?*' She then engaged in identity work to enable herself to continue working by positioning herself as the family breadwinner:

I'm the breadwinner! We have a house and need the money! (Melanie, notes)

Melanie's use of exclamation points in her notes indicated her efforts to emphasise the importance of her involvement in work for the good of the family. As these examples illustrate, being alert to the difference between scheduling conflicts and identity work was important to the analysis.

3.7.4.3 Analysing the participant notes

The literature concerning the use of multiple methods of data collection generally centres on the challenge of pairing qualitative and quantitative methods (Ritchie and Ormston, 2014). Thus, little guidance is available for integrating qualitative data from different sources. However, Cronin et al. (2008) suggest a technique they refer to as '*following a thread.*' The technique involves analysing the data collected separately to respect different epistemological assumptions underlying the data collection methods. Data integration occurs through the investigation of theoretically interesting findings from one data set in the other.

However, as Bolger et al. (2003) caution, there was considerable variability in the frequency and comprehensiveness of the participants' notes. Some of the participants indicated that they had written down the first few situations that had caused them to think about their roles as mothers or as workers but stopped recording incidents as they seemed to repeat. Others had taken handwritten notes within working papers and, therefore, did not submit them to me at the time of the interview. One of the women admitted that she hadn't taken any notes. In contrast, some participants submitted detailed accounts of the situations they experienced, which illustrated personal reflection and active meaning-making. Out of the 33 participants, 16 submitted participant notes to me.

The participant notes, therefore, served primarily to heighten participants' awareness of identity triggers and to improve participants' recollection of situations that contributed to their understandings of themselves as mothers and as workers during the interview. In addition, I used the notes to add to my understanding of the returners' experiences of returning to work and to gain insight into how the return to work unfolded for each individual.

The time constraints and exhaustion women often experience upon returning to work after parental leave and having a young child at home are likely to have contributed to the low completion rates in the diary component of the study. In addition, the lack of an initial interview or face-to-face meeting at the start of the study may have resulted in limited participant commitment to the study (Bolger et al., 2003), or contributed to questions about the diary going unanswered. Despite my efforts at contacting each participant immediately after sending the study instructions, I was not always able to reach them by phone.

3.7.4.4 Translation

Although most of the participants possessed a high degree of fluency in the English language, I conducted the interviews in German, reasoning that doing so would facilitate participants in their efforts to convey their lived experiences. After uploading the interview transcripts and participant notes into the NVivo 11 software programme, I labelled codes in English, because this is 'the language I think in' (Srivastava, 2006: 217). To preserve participants' meanings to the

greatest extent possible (Im et al., 2016), no further translation was undertaken during the analysis. However, in producing the written account of my findings, I have drawn upon my familiarity with the German culture, gained from doing business and living in the country for 10 years, to provide conceptual equivalency in the translations of the illustrative quotes (Birbili, 2000). To compare my interpretation with others' and to provide illustrative quotes that mirror the participants' speech as closely as possible, a native German-speaker performed back translations (Chen and Boore, 2010).

In contrast to the exploratory study in which I used two native German-speakers, fluent in English to aid with back translations, for the main study, I opted to rely more heavily on my own translations of the data. During the exploratory study the translators' outsider status made it difficult for them to understand the situation, which adversely impacted on the translation (Temple and Young, 2004). Therefore, for the main study, I translated the quotes into English and worked with a native German-speaker, fluent in English and familiar with the study context to perform back translations.

3.7.4.5 Progression of analysis

I took a thematic approach to analysing the data I collected through the interviews and participant notes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To begin, I transcribed the first six interviews to gain a sense of the data being generated. The remainder of the interviews were professionally transcribed. To familiarise myself with the data, I checked each transcript while listening to the recorded interview to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. The corrections I made were minor, typically resulting from the interjection of an English business term or a reference to something internal to the organization, such as a policy or the talent management system.

After checking the transcripts, I uploaded them to NVivo, using pseudonyms in place of participants' names. Consistent with the interpretivist assumptions underpinning this research, I used NVivo as an aid to manual coding (as opposed to auto coding). I also created a journal within NVivo, using the date and time stamp function to record the progression of my thoughts and to facilitate

reflexivity. I began coding the data by using the English equivalents of the German expressions used by the participants. After coding the first six interviews, I discussed the codes that I was identifying with my Supervisor. I also translated passages of text to facilitate our discussion of the coding structure throughout the project to enable continued discussions as coding progressed. After coding the first six interviews, I was already experiencing a 'proliferation' of codes (Bryman, 2016) and I collapsed codes that were similar into one. Engaging the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), I proceeded with the coding by comparing each new example of a code with the examples I had coded previously.

Once the initial coding was complete, I looked to develop themes, drawing again on the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) and following the abductive logic Blaikie (2007, p.101) describes by moving from first-order concepts (i.e. codes), mirroring participants' speech, to second-order technical concepts (i.e. clustered themes). I regrouped the codes into groups based on themes appearing in the literature. As I progressed with the analysis, I modified the coding structure, comparing my analysis with the literature.

One of the themes that emerged early in the analysis was originally labelled 'escapist identity work' to reflect participants' manoeuvring in relation to good mothering and ideal worker norms. However, in the initial stages, I was not yet certain how this theme related to others. To make the data more manageable, I attempted to create illustrative vignettes of how the participants constructed their maternal and worker identities but I experienced two issues in pursuing this approach.

Firstly, I found myself drawn to categorising participants according to their conformity or lack of conformity to ideal worker norms. While the anchoring poles of this spectrum were fairly clear to me, I had a group in the middle that I called 'Chameleons' who didn't fit neatly into either group. Secondly, and importantly, examining individual interview transcripts for 'deviant cases', or examples within the cases that didn't fit the overall pattern (Silverman, 2000), I found that as I began to group the women according to these ideas, the demarcation between

one group or another seemed arbitrary – *Was it working hours, or contentment with her situation?* Moreover, as I tried to resolve this issue, I located a number of inconsistencies in how returners responded to identity challenges. I decided to abandon the attempt to ‘categorise’ the participants. Instead, I selected eight women from the ‘extremes’ of my data set. I chose women with the greatest divergence in working hours, length of parental leave taken and both first-time and repeat returners and compared the situations they encountered and how they described responding to them.

Through analysing the identity work of the eight extremes of my data set, I began to make sense of the ‘escapist identity work’ and, drawing on Johnston and Swanson (2007) and Kreiner et al. (2015), I revised this theme to ‘dialectic identity work’. I presented the initial results of my analysis to my panel. After reflecting on the feedback I received from the panel, consulting the literature and reviewing my data, I revised the themes. I then examined the entire data set in relation to the themes as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, going back through the data set to ensure that the revised themes were supported and reflected the data. Table 2, adapted from Corley and Gioia (2004), indicates the development of overarching themes from codes that mirrored the participants’ language.

Table 2 Data structure

Code	Clustered theme	Overarching theme	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ My child is my first priority 	Prioritisation	Identity strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mother at home/worker in the office ▪ Lacking energy to pursue promotion ▪ Children grow up so fast ▪ It’s now or never for my career 	Segmentation		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I need to be there for my child ▪ That’s what mothers do ▪ Who would you hire if you were the boss? 	Defending norms		Dialectic identity work tactics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Looking for a compromise ▪ Making an ‘exception’ 	Permitting shortcomings		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Concealing mothering while at work ▪ Being excluded by other mums ▪ Am I a raven mother? 	Accepting marginalisation		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A problem with our society ▪ ManCo could make better use of its HR ▪ I thought my partner and I would be sharing more of the responsibility 	Contesting norms	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Being a mother today is different from how it used to be ▪ I need to work for me ▪ Being a worker makes me a better mother ▪ Being a mother makes me a better worker 	Reframing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mothers sometimes need additional accommodations ▪ Not being the primary caregiver doesn't make me any less of a mother ▪ I deserve a good job 	Refusing marginalisation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Avoiding confrontation with others ▪ Wanting to be seen as a good working mother 	Competent working mother	Image management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keeping up a professional image ▪ Being upfront about the need for accommodation 	Managing ideal worker image	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limiting career plans to enable family time ▪ Having a career is incompatible with being a good mother 	Incompatibility of career and motherhood	Constructions of working mother selves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Career plans remain on track 	Maintained career plans	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I want to advance but not at the price of my children ▪ Uncertainty about having a career and being a mother 	Career plans uncertain	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keeping the same job upon re-entry ▪ Maintaining career momentum ▪ Uncertainty about becoming a mother ▪ Extending parental leave while on leave 	Protecting worker identity	Length of parental leave
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engaging in work-related activities while on leave ▪ Keeping in touch with manager and/or colleagues while on leave ▪ Losing touch while on leave 	Maintaining visibility as a worker	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Receiving key assignments upon return ▪ Feeling side-lined upon return 	Reclaiming worker identity	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ready to return to work ▪ Feeling insecure as a mother 	Defending maternal identity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No changes at work ▪ Things are different at work ▪ Having to prove myself again 	Work-role continuity	Prior re-entry experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Delayed promotion ▪ Cumulative impact of multiple leaves 	Career trajectory	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support from managers and colleagues ▪ Experiencing validation ▪ Experiencing bias 	Cultural support	Perceived organizational work-life support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using flexible work initiatives ▪ Disadvantaged in the talent management system 	Structural support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Window of opportunity to next child ▪ Maintain <i>status quo</i> and focus on next child 	Planning another child	

3.8 Evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research

Due to divergent ontological and epistemological assumptions, the aims of qualitative research differ from those of quantitative studies and, therefore, evaluation criteria for qualitative research should be adapted appropriately (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Bryman (2016) sets forth criteria specific to judging the trustworthiness of qualitative studies.

Trustworthiness, according to Bryman (2016, p.384), can be assessed based on ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’ and ‘confirmability’. To support the credibility of my technical account of returners’ identity work, I sought to confirm that the foundation of my account, namely the interviews, were captured accurately. Following the interviews, I forwarded the interview transcripts to the participants, inviting them to share their reactions and comments with me. In addition, I have discussed the initial findings with the HR Manager, who found them to be consistent with her experience.

In addition to credibility, qualitative research can be assessed on transferability. Geerty (1973, cited in Bryman, 2016) suggests that qualitative researchers, therefore, provide a ‘thick description’ of the cultural context of the study. I have

sought to address this criterion through the inclusion of detailed information about the national and organizational context of the study. I have also included the dates during which I collected data to facilitate future contextual comparisons.

Finally, to support confirmability, I incorporated opportunities for feedback from others into the analysis phase. For example, after I coded the first six interviews, I discussed and modified the coding structure based on my Doctoral Supervisor's input. As coding progressed to generating themes, my Supervisor and I met regularly to discuss my interpretations of translated passages of transcripts. Once my coding structure was finalised, I enlisted the help of a native German-speaking doctoral student to review my coding for four participants. She confirmed that I had been consistent in my coding and that the codes were appropriate to the passages of text.

In addition to engaging in discussions with my Supervisor throughout the analysis, I also received feedback on my initial findings through doctoral colloquia, both within Cranfield and at international management conferences (see Appendix E).

3.8.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity represents the researcher's effort to account for their own influence in the process of conducting research (Haynes, 2012). Realist approaches to conducting research assume an external reality and reflexivity from this perspective entails identifying and controlling for bias in the research process (Haynes, 2012). However, in contrast to realism, idealism (i.e. the perspective taken in this thesis) assumes that the researcher constructs an account of the social world. Taking a reflexive approach from an idealist perspective, therefore, involves bringing the researcher's role in the process of knowledge creation to the foreground and considering the implications of the research on the researcher (Haynes, 2012).

As James and Vinnicombe (2002) observe, doctoral students are often drawn to investigate a topic because of their personal experience with it. As a researcher, therefore, the challenge is to make my potential sources of bias known to the

reader and to engage in reflexivity throughout the project to keep my assumptions salient (James and Vinnicombe, 2002). Haynes (2012, p.79) offers practical suggestions to facilitate the foregrounding of the researcher's assumptions throughout the research process, such as, through recording theoretical assumptions, keeping fieldwork notes and maintaining a research diary. Following Haynes' suggestion, I kept a journal throughout the study. Within the journal, I reflected on my reactions to the data and recorded the progression of my thoughts about changes in coding. In addition to the electronic journal I used during data analysis in NVivo, I also took notes following each interview in a physical journal. The notes that I took throughout the project helped to raise my awareness of the assumptions I brought to the research, as well as how those assumptions were changed by conducting the study.

Hibbert, Coupland and MacIntosh (2010) conceptualise reflexivity as a four-dimensional process comprised of 'repetition', 'extension', 'disruption' and 'participation' in which both repetition and participation are passive processes. To illustrate my engagement in reflexivity, I draw on an example that I alluded to in discussing how I adapted my perspective of identity work following the exploratory study (see 3.4.3.4).

Reflexivity begins with the researcher engaged in reflection in a way that is consistent with existing frames, a phase Hibbert et al. (2010) refer to as repetition. For example, at the start of this study, I questioned how maternal and worker identity development would be impacted by contextual differences, but I did not question my assumptions, rooted in my background in psychology, that identity could be conceptualised as something relatively static. In fact, this was an assumption that I detailed in my notes at the beginning of the project. However, conducting the exploratory interviews prompted the realization that identities were less stable than I had anticipated, thus initiating the extension phase of reflexivity.

The extension phase is characterised by a shock that alerts the researcher to the inadequacy of existing frames (Hibbert et al., 2010). In my case, I was beginning to realise that a static view of identity did not adequately represent what I was

learning from the returners I interviewed. Moreover, in reviewing the literature, I was struck by the prevailing view of coherence in returners' maternal and worker identities. Despite my growing awareness that extant theory was unable to account for what I was learning from the returners I interviewed, the reflection I engaged in was still confined by my own assumptions about being a mother and returning to work.

Although I shifted my perspective concerning identity to allow for incoherence and instability in identities as I designed the main study, I remained in the extension phase of reflexivity until I began analysing the results of my main study. It was only when I started comparing the narratives participants constructed about their maternal and worker identities within the interview with their discussions about identity-heightening incidents that I started to truly question the frames I had for thinking about returners' maternal and worker identities. Hibbert et al. (2010) suggest that this third phase of reflexivity, 'disruption', is often tied to an emotional response within the researcher. My emotional response at this stage of the research was one of embarrassment. Specifically, I felt embarrassed by some of the assumptions that I had made about a relationship between working hours and career commitment. I was also embarrassed by the naivety with which I had embarked on the PhD programme, thinking that I would use my research to inform a maternity coaching practice focussed on the individual returner when so much of the data pointed to the influence of others and the organization on how returners shaped their maternal and worker identities.

The unsettling of my assumptions and the critical self-reflection I engaged in during the disruption phase, opened up the possibility of engaging with the data more completely. In the final phase of reflexivity, which Hibbert et al. (2010) refer to as 'participation', the researcher, unburdened by many of his or her pre-existing assumptions, is able to trust and to integrate the data gained from study participants into his or her account of the phenomenon. In my case, this final phase of reflexivity entailed focussing on the participants' accounts to understand how they engaged in dialectic identity work tactics, as presented in the following chapter (4.3).

In summary, I engaged in reflexivity throughout this research project to raise my awareness of both the assumptions that I brought to this project as well as how those assumptions were changed as a result of conducting this study. My involvement in the reflexive process was facilitated by journaling, note-taking and discussing my research with others (e.g. supervisors and panel members) throughout the project. Within this section, I have chosen one example from this study to illustrate my engagement in the reflexive process.

3.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter I discussed the philosophical assumptions underpinning this study and the implications they have for the outcome of the research. I also described how the experience of conducting the exploratory study shaped the main study, including the development of the research question and the focus on identity work. I discussed the rationale for the data I generated and how I proceeded with the analysis. I then acknowledged my personal relationship to the data and discussed steps I took to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

4 FINDINGS: RETURNERS' IDENTITY WORK

4.1 Chapter introduction

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the methodology I used to answer the research question:

How do women engage in maternal and worker identity work upon returning to work after parental leave?

Having described how I generated and analysed the data, in this chapter and the next, I present the findings of the study. This chapter reports on four aspects of returners' identity work that emerged from the data. I begin the chapter by reporting on the identity strategies, or consistent approaches, that returners discussed using to manage their maternal and worker identities. In the second section, I introduce the concept of 'dialectic identity work tactics,' which is defined as the purposeful and situationally-emergent effort returners engaged to sustain both their maternal and worker identities in a state of continuous tension. I present the findings concerning six identity work tactics, which I group into functional groups of constricting and expanding identity work tactics. In the third section, I describe how returners employed image management practices. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how returners constructed working mother selves, linking their identities as mothers and workers in their images of themselves in the future. Finally, I conclude this chapter by presenting vignettes from the data to illustrate how returners utilised the four aspects of identity work to construct their maternal and worker identities and highlight some of the inconsistencies evident in returners' accounts.

In the subsequent findings chapter, I examine the findings concerning the influence of length of parental leave, number of parental leaves and perceived organizational work-life support on returners' experiences of identity work.

4.2 Identity strategies

Despite designing this study to allow for instability and incoherence related to returners' constructions of their maternal and worker identities, during the semi-

structured interviews, a third of the returners referred to the use of a consistent approach, or identity strategy, to enable them to maintain both their maternal and worker identities. The approaches returners discussed using corresponded to the prioritisation and segmentation identity strategies found within the literature. To be clear, the results reported below reflect returners' self-initiated comments and were neither inferred nor the response to a specific question within the interview guide. I will begin by presenting returners' comments about prioritisation before continuing to the segmentation identity strategy.

4.2.1 Prioritisation

A few returners discussed managing tensions between their maternal and worker identities by consciously deciding to prioritise one identity over the other. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015), returners utilising the prioritisation identity strategy, described perceiving one of their identities as being more important to them, or requiring more of their attention. The analysis of the findings indicates that returners discussed prioritising their maternal identities in response to questions about their career plans. For example, Ute expressed uncertainty about pursuing career advancement because she thought that it would amount to her having to take resources away from her maternal identity:

I see my primary role as being a mother, my other role is now work and I really want to maintain it on the current level. (Ute)

Despite prioritising her maternal role over her worker role, Ute's comment about wanting to 'maintain' her work role indicated that although she did not imagine herself pursuing a promotion, she also did not want to relinquish or lessen her work role.

Tanja also discussed prioritising her maternal identity over her worker identity, but in doing so she indicated that pursuing career advancement was not a key element of how she constructed her identity as a worker:

I've been asked that so many times because I started in the [management trainee] programme and everyone automatically

expects that you want to make a career. I couldn't say that now and I never said it then, not even in any [Assessment Centre] or anywhere. It's not a priority for me. The family comes first for me. (Tanja)

Tanja's comment about prioritising her maternal identity over her worker identity indicated her construction of career and family as dichotomous. However, Tanja's reference to the past indicated that she did not experience her worker identity as having changed since she was hired.

In contrast to the consistency Tanja communicated regarding her prioritisation of her maternal identity, Gisela's comment about prioritisation suggested some indecision on her part:

Now that my daughter is in the world, she is now number one, or should be. (Gisela)

Gisela's comment indicated that she may have been unconvinced that her maternal identity was her priority, despite thinking that it 'should' be prioritised. Furthermore, as I will discuss in the section concerning identity work tactics below (4.2.2), despite claiming to prioritise one identity over the other, situations arose in which returners acted inconsistently with their prioritisation strategy.

4.2.2 Segmentation

The segmentation identity strategy involved creating boundaries between maternal and worker identities to reduce potential conflicts and to maintain focus on one identity (Johnston and Swanson, 2007). Consistent with the literature, returners employed two different segmentation strategies: one segmented the identities over the course of a day (Garey, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2006) and the other over the life course (Garey, 1999; Herman et al., 2013).

While most of the returners in part-time positions described spending morning hours, while their children were in childcare, focussed on work, and afternoons with their children, the returners who discussed using segmentation as an identity strategy emphasised the importance of maintaining boundaries between home and work:

But otherwise I'm just here from 9 to 3:30 full stop. And I do not read my emails in the afternoon and I'm not going to hang out on any afternoon videoconferences. I am very strict. (Sophie)

Sophie's word choice 'full stop' and 'strict' convey the sense of having to make a hard cut between work and home to prevent work from spilling over. While her comments indicated the identity strategy she claimed to use, in practice maintaining this strategy proved to be difficult. Indeed, in her very next sentence, Sophie indicated that the boundary she constructed between work and home was, perhaps, not as rigid as she first indicated:

I look at my mobile again in the evenings to see what went on during the day and that's it, unless I know, it's kind of an exception if my intern still needs some information from me or I somehow still need an urgent update from someone or something like that. (Sophie)

Although Sophie and other returners who discussed using the segmentation identity strategy presented clear boundaries for work and home, in practice, situations arose that challenged those boundaries.

In addition to segmenting their maternal and worker identities over the course of a day, other returners discussed employing a longer-term strategy of identity segmentation, in which they focussed on one identity in the present while planning to focus on the other identity in the not-too-distant future. Like those 'lying low' in Herman et al.'s (2013) study, these returners commented on creating an identity priority for a limited period of time:

I've been with ManCo a relatively long time and I'm very well connected within my department and I know who to approach. And I've said to myself, I'll put out my feelers when I'm ready. And I'm just not ready right now, because I can't bring that flexibility right now. As I said, in one year it will be different and in two even better. (Rebecca)

Like other returners who indicated that they were segmenting their maternal and worker identities over the life course, Rebecca considered her child's age in relation to when she thought she could pursue a more challenging role within the company. Rebecca's immediate focus on her maternal identity and resultant lack

of flexibility for work was not only an outcome of the importance she placed upon caring for her children, but also due to constraints related to childcare opening hours.

While Herman et al. (2013) define the 'lying low' strategy as one in which working mothers focus on their maternal identities at the expense of their worker identities, my data indicated that a small minority of returners also chose to focus on their worker identities over their maternal identities for a period of time. Qualifying the decision to focus on work for a time period indicated the continued importance of the other identity, as was evident in Lena's thoughts about a future in which she would have more time for her daughter:

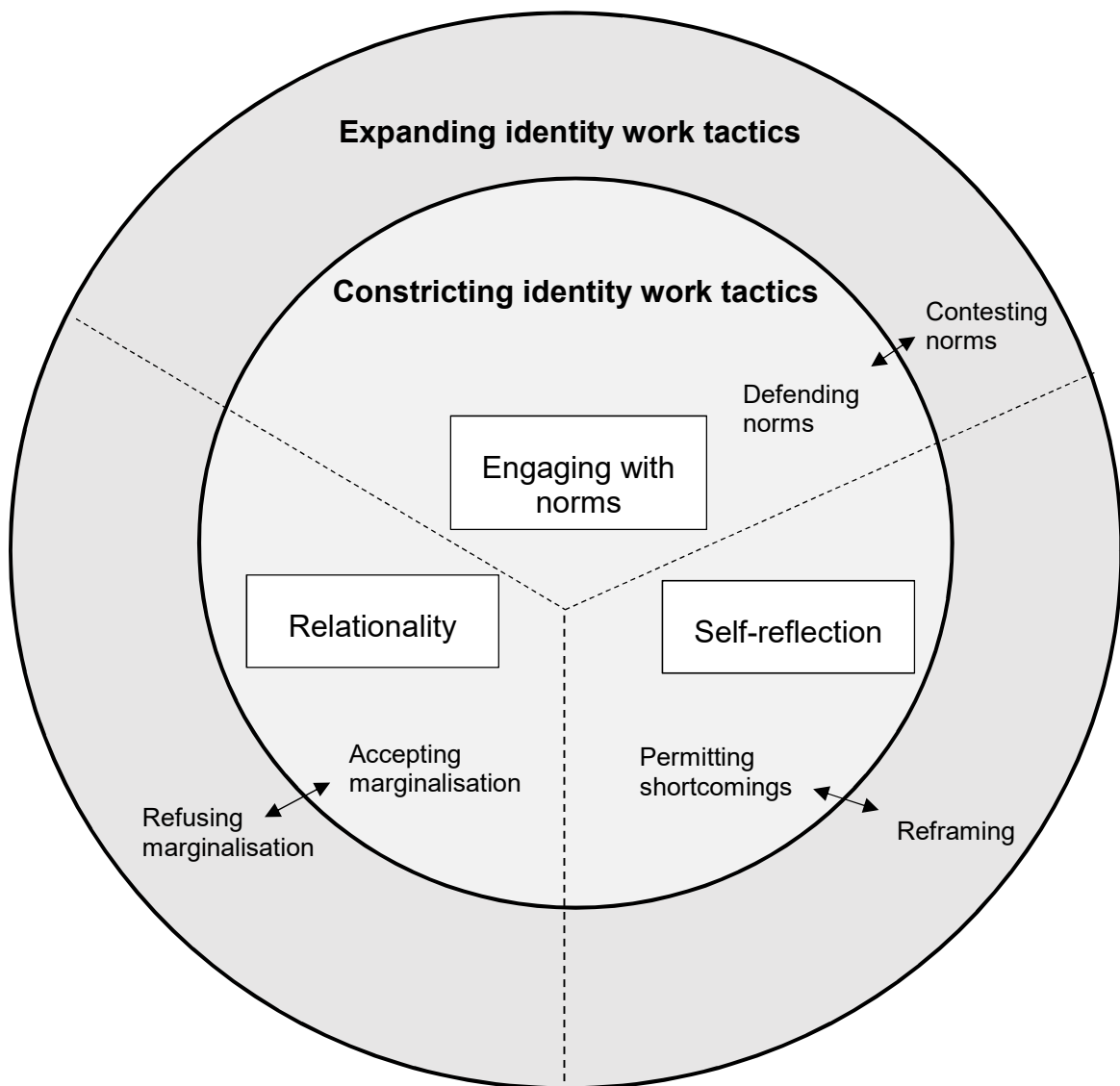
But I think if I had more time, or when I have more time later, I could do things with her that I definitely cannot do now. (Lena)

However, regardless of the intention, the decision to focus on one identity over the other, even if only for a short time, created a potential threat to the secondary identity. In the following section, I present the findings concerning how returners responded to identity triggers in ways that at times violated the identity strategies they claimed to use, but that enabled them to sustain their maternal and worker identities.

4.3 Dialectic identity work tactics

In contrast to the consistent approach that some returners described using to manage tensions between their maternal and worker identities, returners' responses to situations in which their maternal and worker identities were challenged indicated inconsistencies between returners' espoused identity strategies and the identity work tactics they drew upon in a given situation. Drawing on Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep (2006), I define identity work tactics as both the purposeful and situationally-emergent effort returners engaged to sustain both their maternal and worker identities. The analysis of the data indicated that, confronted by situations in which they felt pressured to separate their maternal and worker identities, or even to relinquish one of their identities, returners engaged in identity work tactics that either facilitated or impeded

compatible constructions of their maternal and worker identities. In this way, returners' identity work tactics served to create 'elasticity' (Kreiner et al., 2015) between maternal and worker identities, without resolving the tensions between them. The data revealed three pairs of identity work tactics (see Figure 4-1) related to returners' engagement with norms (i.e. defending/contesting norms), relationality (i.e. accepting/rejecting marginalisation) and self-reflection (i.e. permitting shortcomings/reframing). Within each pair, one identity work tactic (depicted in the inner circle) constricted returners' constructions of maternal and worker identities, supporting narrow definitions of good mothers and ideal workers that reflected cultural norms. In contrast, the opposing identity work tactic (depicted in the outer circle) broadened the constructions of maternal and worker identities, 'expanding' the two identities to create opportunities for maintaining a positive sense of self as both a worker and a mother.



*Figure adapted from Kreiner et al. (2015)

Figure 4-1 Dialectic identity work tactics*

Table 3 Dialectic identity work tactics overview

	Identity work tactic	Definition	Illustrative quotes
Constricting identity work tactics	Defending norms	Internalising norms related to good mothers and ideal workers	<p>I think one year old is too young to go to nursery. So 15-20 children over a whole morning or a whole day, I think that would be exhausting for her and I can't imagine that. (Katrin)</p> <p>I want to go home to my children. I want to know: What's happening with my children? How are they developing? When will he take his first steps? When will he start walking? What is he saying? You just want to be there for that as a mother, that's just inside of you. (Melanie)</p> <p>So, that's the point that I feel like part-time work is different, isn't it? (Britta)</p> <p>But I think it will help me to be back full time, so that I'm there every day, that when the boss is there, he can call on me every day for eight hours. (Lara)</p>
	Permitting shortcomings	Falling short of their expectations of themselves as mothers or as workers without changing their standards for these identities	<p>And I always have a guilty conscience and I'm always apologetic, at work I have to apologize because of the traffic and at home, 'Yes I had to work late and then something came up.' And somehow you are always in this negative role, no matter how you do it, everywhere you are the scapegoat. (Pia)</p> <p>But of course I also had a guilty conscience with regard to my child, because I was present, but not always one hundred percent, mentally. Like turning on the laptop when your child is literally hanging onto your leg and crying, that's usually a situation where I would disregard everything else and would pick up my child and calm him down. But instead I said: 'Ok, please let me just finish this e-mail and then I can do that' ... So ... yes, so a lot of guilt feelings in both directions. (Ute)</p> <p>I make an exception and accept the meeting invitation, because there is no other way and it is important that I attend, but I can't do this every week. One long day, working until 5 pm, is a good compromise. (Anke, notes)</p> <p>I've had few situations where I felt really restricted. More out of your own expectations that you sometimes have to stop yourself and say, o.k., now you're really going [home] now. [Daughter] is waiting. Sometimes you also have a guilty conscience because you're still at work and she's had a long day [at nursery] and you would rather say, o.k., time to go. (Britta)</p>

	Accepting marginalisation	Acquiescing to the idea that maternal and worker identities are in some way incompatible	<p>We've also had discussions where I say, we've agreed and why isn't it working again? And then [my partner] says, yes, but then a meeting was scheduled. Then my response is, well, if I get a meeting request, then I decline it. I say that I can't go. And he hasn't been able to manage that. (Britta)</p> <p>My boss didn't spend any time with me. He didn't know, I think, until the call came, whether I was going to be on the project. He did not even ask what I was doing all day. I was already here for six weeks. No re-entry interview conducted, gave me no tasks, I got it all through the network drive and through colleagues. I worked through all of it myself in the six weeks. (Eva)</p> <p>It's like a woman having her period or something. You don't talk about it, you try to keep it hidden from men ... That's how it felt to me. And it was stupid for me to go from door to door peddling or begging: Where can I store my [breast]milk? (Melanie)</p> <p>I said: No, I'm not doing that. Somehow on the toilet or in the medical room ... And then putting the breast milk in the fridge. I thought, no, oh god, no! I pumped in the evening and then breastfed her at night and then she got a bottle in the morning. But then we gave that up relatively quickly, so that I only breastfed at night. (Katrin)</p>
Expanding identity work tactics	Contesting norms	Questioning cultural norms concerning good mothers and ideal workers	<p>I can see that with my colleagues, who are also in the classic model of working around the clock and stuff like that and the wife keeps her husband unburdened, so he can bring all the money home. But it's clear that if people keep doing this and that model continues, it will not change, but as long as we have childcare facilities that make it so inflexible, it will not change. (Chloe)</p> <p>In my opinion, it can't really be that in this day and age, if I want to have children and if I'm a mum, I can't have a career or even be considered a fully-fledged worker. (Gisela)</p> <p>If someone says he's doing shop floor management every day from three o'clock, then you don't schedule the appointment at three o'clock. That's somehow more important. But when it comes to children, it's like that doesn't count. (Wendy)</p>

	Reframing	Reframing maternal and worker identities, without achieving resolution of the dialectic	<p>At the moment I'm working six hours a day and I have roughly four and a half to five hours of meetings. That means that I have to look, and this is what I tell [my team], that they have to be active and not say: we should talk about this. But to actively set up a meeting and follow up, and if there are important topics, to please tell me, to say: I have something that we have to quickly clarify. That they are really on top of things and that they steer me a bit too. (Ina)</p> <p>I'm now better at prioritizing. Before it was always: O.k., we'll finish everything at work, and then we'll see what's left for my spare time and so on. I'm now much more critical about the topics and I try, to the extent possible, to find the time for my child every day. (Lena)</p> <p>That's why it's nice for me to work, to develop, to be engaged and to achieve something. [My son] has fun over there [at nursery] and in the afternoon we still have enough time to do things together. (Eva)</p>
	Refusing marginalisation	Rejecting the idea that maternal and worker identities are incompatible	<p>And then I told them: That's not going to work, it's just not possible. The project has grown like a little cancer, grown and grown, there is no support, and with 20 working hours it's set for failure, I can already say that. (Gabriele)</p> <p>It was like this: I want to progress and you have to evaluate me. If you don't agree, then ok, that's the way it is, of course, I'll accept that too. But I've shown my intention or my ambitions and then he'll definitely have to talk to me about it in the next few weeks. (Caroline)</p> <p>I negotiated for eight weeks and in the end, after a lot of back and forth, they said, "Yes o.k., we'll do it." But you really have to put pressure on and you have to stand your ground as a woman and I really suffered for the eight weeks. (Chloe)</p>

4.3.1 Constricting identity work tactics

Returners encountered situations in which they felt compelled to live up to good mothering and ideal worker norms, or to justify their reasons for not doing so, both to themselves and to others. To meet these standards, returners described feeling pressure to keep their maternal and worker identities separate and, in some cases, to relinquish their worker identities altogether. At times, returners exhibited conformity to these pressures by engaging constricting identity work tactics, resulting in conflicting constructions of their maternal and worker identities. The constricting identity work tactics consisted of ‘defending norms,’ ‘permitting shortcomings’ and ‘accepting marginalisation’.

4.3.1.1 Defending norms

Internalising norms related to good mothers and ideal workers created an obstacle for returners in that, within the study context, fulfilling cultural expectations for both identities was practically impossible because of the time and dedication required to do so. However, the data indicated that a minority of returners had internalised aspects of these unattainable identity standards and when probed, revealed expectations of themselves that showed conformity to the norms. Furthermore, returners engaged the defending norms identity work tactic to justify behaviour that could be construed as illogical. For example, when I questioned Zoe about her decision to work fewer hours despite earning more than her partner she engaged the defending norms identity work tactic by referring to a ‘shared’ perception of mothers wanting to be more engaged in their children’s lives in comparison to fathers:

Good question, I think, on the one hand, I don’t know, certainly dads can also do it. But I always think that as a mother you want to have more time for your children and be there for them. (Zoe)

In defending norms, returners appealed to social constructions of mothers having special relationships with their children and to the mothering role being different from the fathering role, as is evident in Zoe’s example above. Although Zoe

allowed for the possibility that fathers could perform caregiving tasks, by engaging the defending norms identity work tactic, Zoe explained her decision to scale back at work by referring to good mothering ideals of mothers as primary caregivers.

Engaging the defending norms identity work tactic constricted returners' maternal and worker identities by constructing them as incompatible. Defending the idea that mothers' relationships with their children were 'naturally' different to fathers' relationships with their children solidified a mother's position as primary caregiver. However, this positioning of mothers was problematic for continuing engagement in paid work without modifying or creating an accommodation for one's worker identity. For example, Gisela described feeling guilty about leaving her colleagues and manager to cover her work while she stayed home with her sick daughter. She used the defending norms identity work tactic to excuse her neglect of her work responsibilities:

In the beginning, it was really that I first had to understand, I'm not just an employee any more, I'm not just [Gisela] but now there's someone else and now I have to, and that person has priority. And I'm still, sometimes, fighting that a bit. (Gisela)

Gisela's comments reflected an inner struggle to accept that her daughter and, consequently her maternal identity, should be prioritised over her worker identity. By drawing on the defending norms identity work tactic, Gisela avoided interrogating the assumption that her maternal identity must be prioritised over her worker identity.

While Gisela's use of the defending norms identity work tactic suggested passive acceptance of maternal norms, Melanie drew on maternal norms to explain why she breastfed her child longer than she had intended:

But I also needed it myself. I just needed to be close to the child. And I realised, he needs it too, and I'm not going to take that away from my child. (Melanie)

Drawing on the idea of a unique bond between mother and child and the intimacy of breastfeeding, Melanie referred to maternal norms to explain her reasoning behind continuing breastfeeding. However, there is a slight desperation in the repetition of the word 'needed,' which taken together with her full-time work schedule and situations in which she described feeling as though her role as a mother had been usurped by her partner, suggested that she was clinging to breastfeeding to bolster her maternal identity.

In addition to defending norms related to good mothering, returners also defended norms related to ideal workers to justify bias they encountered on the part of hiring managers. Defending ideal worker norms allowed returners to excuse bias against mothers as a rational business decision and was often drawn upon by returners as they discussed changes in their worker identities. For example, Lara engaged the defending norms identity work tactic, drawing a parallel between her own difficulties securing a promised promotion following parental leave and the broader issue of gender diversity within the organization:

You want to promote more women, or bring them in, and everyone has a quota but, nevertheless, the more attractive candidate is the one who will probably not be absent. (Lara)

Engaging the defending norms identity work tactic, Lara implied that the logical choice for staffing decisions is 'the one who will probably not be absent,' in other words, the ideal (male) worker.

Similarly, part-time workers utilised the defending norms identity work tactic to justify hiring managers' aversion to part-time applicants:

If I were the boss I would probably do the same. If I had five applicants for the same job, four full-time and one part-time, then I know what I would do. (Doreen)

Doreen's comment reflected the resilience of the ideal worker norm in that even someone with experience working part-time expressed an unqualified preference for hiring a full-time worker. Given that part-time work is often viewed as a solution for meeting the demands of both mothering and working roles in

Germany, Doreen implied that part-time workers and, by extension, many working mothers, were undesirable to hiring managers. As a result, the use of the defending norms tactic here also increased the disparity between being a mother and being a desirable worker.

In addition to defending norms related to good mothers and ideal workers, returners also utilised the identity work tactic of permitting shortcomings.

4.3.1.2 Permitting shortcomings

Engaging the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic allowed returners to fall short of their expectations of themselves as mothers or workers without changing their standards for these identities. In this way, returners were able to accommodate acting in ways that did not meet their own ideals for themselves as mothers or workers. However, by allowing behaviour that was discordant with returners' ideals, the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic also supported the tension between maternal and worker identities by not forcing returners to seek further alignment between their identities. Interestingly, all of the returners drew upon the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic to make situational compromises between their maternal and worker identities, or to rotate identity priorities.

Consistent with Haynes' (2008b) exploratory study, the data indicated that returners sought temporary compromises between their maternal and worker identities by not meeting their expectations for either identity. Returners drew upon this identity work tactic when confronted by unexpected changes, such as a child's illness, or a work deadline. For example, returners used the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic when failing to live up to their expectations of themselves as mothers who care for children when they are ill:

One day later. My child is still sick. But since I have to work to avoid running into negative hours, I bring my sick son to his nan's with a bad feeling and a guilty conscience. Because I do not want to pass him off when he's ill. So I compromise and work a few hours from home and then pick up my child again. (Anne, notes)

Or you realise that somehow you're always compelled to get the child back to nursery school as quickly as possible and not to say, "Ok, you just stay home from school this week and relax, mummy will stay with you." Instead, you're thinking, "Oh God, I hope everything will be all right tomorrow, so I can go back to my normal routine." (Petra)

Evident in both Anne's and Petra's comments was that caring for their sick children was part of how they constructed their maternal identities. However, both women engaged the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic to excuse themselves for not meeting their expectations of themselves as mothers, which would have meant waiting for their children's illnesses to run their course before returning to work.

Motivation to fulfil competing demands with constrained resources, such as time, prompted returners to seek temporary compromises between their identities. In such situations, returners' comments reflected an acknowledgement that the behaviour they engaged in did not meet their expectations for themselves for either identity. However, the implication was that such situations represented exceptions, despite recurring within returners' accounts.

Pia commented on the frequency of such episodes in her experience of combining working and being a mother, indicating that she felt that she was often falling short of her own expectations of herself, as well as the expectations of others for her performance of both roles:

And I always have a guilty conscience and I'm always apologetic, at work I have to apologize because of the traffic. And at home, "Yes I had to work late and then something came up." And somehow you are always in this negative role, no matter how you do it, everywhere you are the Bogeyman. (Pia)

The repetition of the word 'always' indicated a pattern in Pia's mind and her reference to being a 'Bogeyman' revealed her concern about falling short of others' expectations, in addition to the 'guilt' she felt for not meeting her own expectation of herself as a mother and as a worker. Pia's perception of repeatedly falling short of her expectations of herself in both roles, indicated that

the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic supported returners' efforts at sustaining maternal and worker identities that corresponded to norms for these identities, without behaving in a manner consistent with those norms.

A further way in which the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic was utilised by returners involved rotating priorities between their maternal and worker identities. In some instances, returners were confronted by situations in which their behaviour, supportive of one of their identities, did not meet their standards for the other identity. When this occurred, returners focussed on the benefits of their actions in support of the favoured identity by temporarily rotating their priorities. Melanie illustrated this aspect of the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic as she described making scheduling changes to accommodate her son's special request that she attend an event at kindergarten:

I really can't participate in that. I would have to leave here at 3:30 pm at the latest, so that I can be home for the festival at 5:00 pm. Well, then he looked at me and said, "But I wish you could. Can you see if you can come?" How could I say no? "Daddy's going, my brother's going, but you should be part of it too." All right then. I made it possible. I have postponed all my appointments and will work from home that day, so I can work longer. And that's how I juggle things. (Melanie)

Despite her partner attending the kindergarten event and having made references to working overtime in her full-time job during the interview, Melanie felt compelled to reshuffle her work commitments to enable her to attend her son's kindergarten event. Her decision to prioritise her maternal identity in this situation reflected the temporary shifting of identity priorities that was made possible by engaging the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic.

While Melanie focussed on her maternal identity in deciding to put aside her work responsibilities to attend her son's event, Anke described prioritising her work identity to accomplish a work task instead of picking her daughter up on time from nursery:

It was one of those moments when I thought, I have to go to the day nursery now, and I want to go now, but at the same time I'm almost finished, and I have to send this email out today. (Anke)

Despite the importance Anke placed on reducing her working hours to better accommodate her maternal identity, she prioritised her worker identity to ensure that the work task was completed on time.

As illustrated by the examples within this subsection, the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic allowed returners to act in ways that did not fulfil their standards for one or both identities in a given situation. However, while allowing returners to pardon behaviour that was inconsistent with their maternal and worker identities, the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic did nothing to make their identities more compatible or to challenge good mothering and ideal worker norms.

In the same vein, the identity work tactic in the following subsection, describes the tactic of accepting marginalisation.

4.3.1.3 Accepting marginalisation

The final identity work tactic within the constricting identity work tactic theme was that of accepting marginalisation and was drawn on by a third of the returners. Accepting marginalisation was the most extreme form of the constricting identity work tactics because it indicated returners' acquiescence to the idea that maternal and worker identities were in some way incompatible.

Returners drew upon this identity work tactic to accept downward revision of their work roles, or career stagnation, as a result of their status as mothers. For instance, although Melanie had returned to work early to help her colleagues during the busy season, she commented on giving up hope that she would be recognised for promotion because her manager said that she had missed too much work during the year she was pregnant, although she was on parental leave:

So in that sense, it's two career years simply lost because I'm stuck here. Yes. But what should I do? I always ask myself: What should I do about it? If that's how they justify it. (Melanie)

Posing the rhetorical questions, 'But what should I do?' and 'What should I do about it?' reflected Melanie's use of the accepting marginalisation identity work tactic, which allowed her to accommodate her manager's refusal to consider her for promotion by viewing herself as powerless in the situation. However, engaging the accepting marginalisation identity work tactic also opened returners up to the possibility of revising their expectations of themselves as mothers and as workers to correspond to the work they were doing (Pratt et al., 2006).

Like Melanie, other returners utilised this tactic to accept the situation as it was, without expending further effort to change it. Unlike the frustration that was evident in Melanie's comments, however, Gabriele used the simile of a flower waiting to be replanted into the soil, to describe being side-lined at work:

I always say that it feels like being put in a corner, and when you re-emerge from that mummy role and say, 'I've re-awakened, I'm not a mum any more' and then you're planted back in the flowerbed. And until then, you're just a plant in the room. (Gabriele)

While the visual of a flower and the idea of a future in which she, like the replanted flower, would thrive again presented a peaceful image, it also illustrated an acceptance of her marginalisation as a worker.

In addition to engaging the accepting marginalisation identity work tactic to allow for unfavourable revisions to their worker identities, returners exhibited a subtler form of accepting marginalisation by trying to make their maternal identities invisible at work. In contrast to the identity strategy of prioritising the worker identity, in which returners consistently seek to conform to ideal worker norms (Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007), returners used the accepting marginalisation identity work tactic on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, despite violating ideal worker norms by reducing her working hours when she returned to work, Anke chose not to stay at home when her child was ill, keeping her maternal identity invisible to her manager in the situation:

But if in my second week I say that I'm missing work now because [my daughter's] sick, then you don't have to say anything and I'll still know what you're thinking. So that's what I did. And that pressure existed at the beginning or persisted for me, and, thank God I had my parents to fall back on. (Anke)

Anke's comments revealed how her concern about what others might think of her staying home with a sick child during her second week prompted her to attend work and have her parents look after her child.

Returners also described situations in which they accepted marginalisation as mothers because of their status as workers. For example, Melanie described a situation in which she accepted marginalisation from her antenatal group because of her involvement in paid work:

Women from the antenatal group wanted to meet and I couldn't on any of the proposed days since all were during the week and in the mornings. When I wrote back that, unfortunately, I can only meet on the weekend, because as they know I work, I got a response from two of the women, that I wouldn't participate in any of the events and that I can't contribute to their discussions of problems/topics anyway because I don't deal with my child but "give it away." (Melanie, notes)

Although her notes reflected her hurt feelings, 'Stupid cows! Are you better mothers than me?' they also revealed that she accepted being excluded as she 'got out of the WhatsApp group' and listed reasons for the difficulties she had with the group. Her list included, 'Acceptance of some mothers low ("raven mother").' The raven mother label was a powerful form of bias against returners who violated maternal norms by working 'too many' hours or returning to work 'too soon' – a point which I will return to in the next chapter (see 5.2.5). However, by invoking the raven mother label, Melanie accepts 'othering' by the group as socially acceptable because she violated maternal norms.

In summary, the thematic analysis of the data indicated that returners drew upon constricting identity work tactics, which enabled them to construct expectations of themselves as mothers and as workers that did not challenge societal norms

for good mothers and ideal workers. As a result, utilising these identity work tactics indicated that returners' constructions of their maternal and worker identities were, at least partially, incompatible.

In contrast to the constricting identity work tactics, returners also drew upon identity work tactics that facilitated their construction of maternal and worker identities as being compatible. Within the following section I, therefore, discuss the data concerning expanding identity work tactics.

4.3.2 Expanding identity work tactics

While societal norms for good mothers and ideal workers exerted pressure onto returners to separate their maternal and worker identities, returners resisted these pressures by engaging in expanding identity work tactics. Consisting of 'contesting norms,' 'reframing' and 'revising,' the alignment tactics served to hold maternal and worker identities together and to resist the potential consequences of engaging in the separation tactics described in the previous section.

4.3.2.1 Contesting norms

Contesting cultural norms concerning good mothers and ideal workers enabled returners to voice their objections to those norms and to create the possibility of harmonising maternal and worker identities. Returners who utilised the contesting norms identity work tactic called attention to accepted practices that marginalised working mothers. In the following example, Pia implemented the contesting norms identity work tactic by highlighting the absurdity of unfavourably revising returners' work roles:

I don't understand, because if you would do that with men, after not being there for half a year or a year, and then say, "Sorry, now you only get what the Administrative Assistant doesn't feel like doing," they would say, "You're crazy! I'm not stupid!" But with women that happens somehow. (Pia)

Imagining men treated in the same way as mothers following a period of leave, drew attention to both the gender bias that Pia felt was present in her situation,

but also suggested that she, like other returners, was complicit in her marginalisation by not protesting her mistreatment as a man would.

Like Pia, Ute objected to the poor treatment she and another returner had received from management, describing the phrases managers had used in the following quote:

It can't be that taking a parental leave or two parental leaves erases experience and know-how to the extent that you're confronted with [comments, such as]: 'Whether you work here or not' or [you are] 'flexibly deployable.' So that doesn't give you a good feeling. (Ute)

Ute's quote reflected her disbelief and disappointment in that, despite working for the company for 13 years, following her parental leave, her contribution was deemed to be of such little value that it wouldn't matter if she decided to leave the project she was assigned to work on.

In addition to employing the contesting norms identity work tactic to object to unfair treatment in the workplace, some returners also used it to call into question other norms and policies that were unfavourable to working mothers. For example, many returners commented on the difficulty of organizing childcare; however, only a few questioned the *status quo* by challenging the practices of the government-sponsored childcare facilities. Tanja, however, exhibited the contesting norms identity work tactic in objecting to the lack of accommodation her kindergarten made for working mothers:

I think lunch is important, but why isn't it at half past eleven? It probably even happens then, and yet they're just putting in place that you have to book the after-hours care. Then you have to book until 1:00 pm or 2:00 pm. It's just fixed, that's just the way it is. For me it makes no sense. (Tanja)

Here, it is important to note that in Germany, lunch is typically the main hot meal of the day. Therefore, Tanja's childcare provider's policy is particularly inconvenient and costly for working mothers who, unlike their nonworking

counterparts, are unable to spend time prior to lunch preparing a hot meal before picking up their children from childcare.

The design of the study did not enable me to ascertain whether engaging the contesting norms identity work tactic resulted in further alignment between maternal and worker identities. However, resisting existing norms and policies presents the potential to incite change by identifying taken for granted barriers that prevent returners from achieving compatibility between maternal and worker identities. Therefore, I have classified this identity work tactic within the expanding identity work tactics.

4.3.2.2 Reframing

Engaging the reframing identity work tactic enabled returners to adapt their expectations of themselves as mothers and as workers to facilitate alignment between the two identities. Therefore, in contrast to the constricting identity work tactic of defending norms discussed above, reframing permitted returners to construct maternal and worker identities that were more compatible, which the majority of returners did.

One way in which the reframing identity work tactic was utilised was in returners' claims of alternative ideals for their maternal and worker identities. Returners referred to having different socialisation experiences in explaining divergence from good mothering and ideal worker norms:

I'm from the East, so from East Germany, and there it has always been like that, that you will work again. So I don't know anything different, I was always in day nursery. (Zoe)

Zoe's reference to the differing maternal and worker norms she was exposed to as a child growing up in former East Germany enabled her to construct being both a worker and a mother as normal. Notably, however, Zoe returned to work in a part-time position rather than working full-time as would have been customary in East Germany, thus illustrating the way in which returners used the reframing identity work tactic to suit their preferences for pairing maternal and worker identities.

In addition to drawing upon alternative socialisation experiences to revise their expectations of themselves as workers and as mothers, consistent with Haynes (2008b), returners also reinterpreted mothering and worker norms to be more congruent with their enactment of both roles. For example, Wendy emphasised how happy her children were in childcare to reconcile her participation in paid work:

My older son started day care at 12 months. So of course, you wonder whether it's right to send a child [to day care] that early. And then he was usually the last Mohican, first dropped off, last picked up. Hmm, great. Though all in all, I think that things are working well for us. I think the kids are happy where they are, they are really well looked after there. (Wendy)

Wendy made a reference to violating two maternal norms in her comments: that of returning to work 'too soon' and that of working 'too many hours.' However, consistent with Christopher (2012), Wendy engaged the reframing identity work tactic to reinterpret good mothering ideals to mean ensuring that her children were happy and well cared for, rather than her doing the entertaining and caring herself. Although Wendy's use of the reframing identity work tactic was supportive of her maintenance of both identities, she still experienced tensions between them. Thus, although reframing enabled returners to construct their maternal and worker identities as being more compatible, engaging this identity work tactic did not resolve the tensions between the identities.

In addition to using the reframing identity work tactic to modify maternal norms, returners also used it to revise their worker identities. Returners discussed increased efficiency and improved delegation skills in relation to reducing their working hours. Similarly, returners suggested that the acquisition of a caring role helped them to develop their managerial skills. However, returners also indicated that constructing a maternal identity also opened their minds to changing the work they did:

In that sense, being a mother has changed my life extremely. So much so that I could imagine doing something completely different for my

job. But I can't imagine just taking care of the household and the children. Yes, but in that sense, the job isn't as important as it used to be. It's no longer my highest priority. It is no longer the most important thing I think about in my life. (Marion)

As was illustrated in Marion's comments and consistent with Derry (1994), the addition of the maternal identity, may have created the impression that the worker identity was less important than it once was. However, as was also evident within this quote, Marion was careful to point out that relinquishing her worker identity was not an option. Marion's reframing of her worker identity, therefore, was likely to be an effort to minimise the tension within her current job to give herself a reprieve from fulfilling the ideal worker norm of prioritising work above all else. As such, using the reframing identity work tactic facilitated returners' efforts to achieve compatibility between their maternal and worker identities by redefining the identities.

4.3.2.3 Refusing marginalisation

In addition to contesting norms and reframing, most returners conducted identity work to construct maternal and worker identities that were more compatible, by refusing marginalisation. Upon workplace re-entry, returners encountered identity triggers in which they felt compelled to defend their maternal and worker identities and responded by drawing on the refusing marginalisation identity work tactic.

Returners described being questioned both outside of work and at work about their decisions concerning their working hours, the length of parental leave they took and whether they should be working at all. For example, Rebecca felt it necessary to reiterate to her manager her plans to remain in paid work:

But in the situation, I told him what my plans are, so I first told [my manager] why I wanted to do this. That I certainly will not go back to my stove and that my husband's position has nothing to do with me. I make my own way and that's independent of my husband. I think the times have simply changed as well. I don't think that I have to justify why I want to work to him, but of course I did. (Rebecca)

Drawing on the imagery of a woman standing at a stove to represent the belief that 'a woman's place is in the kitchen,' Rebecca's description of the confrontation she had with her manager was indicative of the pressure returners encountered to conform to good mothering norms, even within the workplace. Contrary to research suggesting an expectation of devotion to work within the organization (Blair-Loy, 2003; Herman et al., 2013), situations such as the one described by Rebecca conveyed the pressure returners faced to relinquish or to place limitations (e.g. working part-time) on their worker identities, even within the workplace.

In addition to refusing marginalisation by staking claim to their identities as workers, some returners also tried to revise workplace norms by making maternal challenges workplace issues. In contrast to the more common practice of trying to make motherhood invisible at work (Haynes, 2008a), these women engaged the refusing marginalisation identity work tactic to draw attention to hurdles they faced as working mothers.

Refusing marginalisation by making maternal challenges workplace issues was evident in Melanie's comments about having gone to the plant safety office to organize a parking permit towards the end of her pregnancy. Before demanding a special parking permit, Melanie was forced during her pregnancy to climb several flights of stairs, while carrying her laptop shoulder bag in the middle of summer:

I went myself and said, directly to plant safety: Hey, people, this isn't going to work! And the next step would have been, I would have gone to the plant doctor. (Melanie)

Rather than accepting her senior manager's refusal to organize a parking permit for her, Melanie went to a department that was typically concerned with the safety of production workers and demanded help. Her comments about going to the plant doctor, located on-site to provide first-aid in the event of manufacturing accidents, indicated her determination, not only to solve her issue, but to also be treated just as any other worker facing a health risk would be.

Returners also refused marginalisation by resisting unfavourable revisions to their work roles. Although ManCo's parental leave policy ensured that returners re-entered work at the same hierarchical level and pay that they had during pregnancy, returners defended themselves against marginalisation in the form of work content (e.g. administrative tasks rather than project work) and being assigned work by peers as opposed to their managers, as illustrated in this example from Ute:

I made it clear that I would gladly take a defined work package out of it, or perhaps several, depending on how much capacity is necessary, but I will not take on all the unwanted, lowly tasks. (Ute)

Returners, like Ute, were challenged to remain professional and collegial while defending themselves from being treated as 'interns.' However, returners encountered challenges in refusing marginalisation of their maternal and worker identities, with some viewing changing jobs their only recourse to stave off the unfavourable revision of their worker identities:

And at that moment I realised that he does not want me in this job any more. And then I was immediately open and I did not fight any more either, because then it was spoiled. Then you don't want to work there any more either. (Rebecca)

This episode demonstrated the way returners using the refusing marginalisation identity work tactic sometimes came to the decision to search for another job that would better accommodate their maternal and worker identities.

To summarise this subsection, therefore, returners drew upon expanding identity work tactics to gain accommodations for their maternal and worker identities and to construct these identities as more compatible. In the following subsection, I present the findings concerning returners' engagement in image management.

4.4 Image management

Returners drew on image management practices to shape the feedback they received from others concerning their maternal and worker identities. Consistent

with Ladge and Little (in press), the analysis of the data indicated that returners monitored and exerted effort to manage the image others had of them as working mothers. Importantly, returners' efforts at image management were initiated based on their own perceptions of how others viewed, or could view, them in a situation and not on how others *actually* viewed them.

Returners were keen to present an image of competence, both as a worker and as a mother, which at times, meant withholding information that could suggest incompetence in either role. For example, Babette commented on withholding the details of her son's fall from the changing table, which happened on her watch, from her colleagues:

I'm just more worried, that they'll say, "working mother, she's overwhelmed." At least, as a woman that's what you imagine. I guess only a minority think that way, but as a woman one is, or I am still in this role, maybe because of our society, that as a working mother you're always worrying, that you might be overwhelmed or that you are doing something wrong. (Babette)

Interestingly, Babette expressed concern about what her colleagues would think about her baby's fall from the changing table not only in terms of her maternal identity, but in relation to both her maternal and worker identities. Furthermore, Babette's fear that others would think that she was 'overwhelmed' or 'doing something wrong' indicated her perception that being a worker and a mother was socially deviant.

In addition to withholding information from others, some returners attempted to proactively change others' images of them as working mothers by engaging in management practices, such as building trust or educating colleagues about alternative gender roles (e.g. 'my partner can do it too'). Returners who shared childcare responsibilities more equally with their partners, or those, like Katrin, whose partners were on parental leave when they returned to work highlighted their partners' involvement in childcare to their colleagues:

It was always these reactions when I said yes, I'm working full time again: "OK and your daughter?" I am not a raven mother. She is with

her dad and he is super and everything is working well. So those reactions were always a bit difficult. (Katrin)

Returners like Katrin pointed to their partners' participation in childcare to demonstrate their compliance with cultural norms about not placing young children in the care of non-family members for 'too many' hours.

A small number of returners attempted to preserve an image of a competent worker by minimising references to themselves as mothers while at work. For example, Caroline discussed trying to distance herself from her role as a mother in communicating with her supervisor:

As a feminist, I'd be stupid to talk to my boss about my child, right? Then I've lost. If he asks me about [my child], then I answer politely, because that's just a courtesy. That's normal. I also ask him how his children are doing, that's normal, right? But we do not want to talk about [children] during working hours. (Caroline)

Caroline's use of the word 'lost' indicated that she felt engaged in a struggle to maintain her professional image. However, based on her comment, it seemed that the opponent Caroline felt she was struggling against was not her manager, indicated by her use of the word 'we' in the statement, 'we do not want to talk about children'. Instead, labelling herself as a 'feminist' suggested that she felt engaged in a broader struggle, related to the position of women in society.

A minority of returners sought to proactively manage their colleagues' expectations of them as working mothers to avoid criticism in the future. For example, negotiating a new work role within the company, afforded returners the opportunity to gauge a new team's support for working mothers and to communicate how they planned to enact both roles. For example, Doreen wanted to be certain that her new manager was prepared for the eventuality that she would not fulfil the ideal worker image before starting in her new position, so she communicated her intentions to him:

You know that I just want part-time [work] and we definitely want a second child at some point. Of course, not in half a year or in two

years, but definitely. And clearly, people who have children also miss work from time to time due to illness, because of the child's illness.
(Doreen)

By clearly stating her interest in flexible work arrangements and her anticipation of going on parental leave in the future, Doreen worked proactively to stave off negative feedback from managers and colleagues. Moreover, Doreen's upfront communication also indicated her willingness to risk losing the new position in favour of ensuring a supportive work environment.

The analysis of the data indicated that Doreen was not alone in allowing her career to be influenced by how she visualized herself as both a mother and a worker, which I explore further in the following section.

4.5 Constructing working mother selves

Consistent with Haynes' (2008b) observation that returners construct working mother selves, the data indicated that returners' visions of their future work selves included adaptations for their maternal identities. However, the data revealed that returners held opposing views of the possibilities of being able to fulfil their expectations of themselves as both mothers and workers.

For some returners, constructing working mother selves entailed first testing the waters of working life with one or more children. In Pia's case, for instance, she returned to work while her partner was on parental leave. As a result, she expressed hesitancy in making firm plans related to her working hours until she knew how she and her partner would manage the household once he returned to work:

We wanted to try it out. If it doesn't work, then I would just, after two months you can change again and I would just reduce to 20 hours or so, if I think we can't do it. (Pia)

Pia's uncertainty concerning her working hours was indicative of the way that returners constructed their maternal and worker identities together.

Some returners indicated having confidence that their careers were still on track after returning to work. For example, Caroline remained positive about her promotion prospects, but acknowledged that the management team might not be convinced that she was ready:

It may be that they say: No, this is not for next year, because they know the risk with children at day nursery. I can accept that if they bring me arguments or tell me: O.k., but then you get this training, which is important. Yes, if I can develop myself differently then I'll accept that. I don't have to be team leader tomorrow, it can be the day after tomorrow or in two years. I'm in no hurry, right? (Caroline)

While returners like Caroline discussed making little or no revisions to their career plans as a result of having children, other returners constructed their maternal and worker identities in ways that positioned pursuing career advancement as being incompatible with being a mother. These returners expressed their disbelief about being able 'to have it all.' For returners working in part-time positions, their constructions of working mother selves were also tempered by the perceived difficulty of being promoted, as illustrated in Petra's comment:

So now I do not just want to live for work, but I really want to be there for my children as well. Well, and in my view it is simply unrealistic to say that you can still make a career part-time. (Petra)

In contrast to returners who constructed career advancement as incompatible with motherhood, some returners discussed their interest in pursuing promotion either in the near or mid-term future but maintained that they would do so on their own terms.

For instance, Katrin recognised the risks working part-time presented to her chances for promotion, however, she reasoned:

And clearly, I've reduced to 30 hours. But my view is just - so we are two teams that deal with this [topic]. In these two teams there are 25 people. I am the only woman. And if ManCo wants to increase women in leadership, then they must also accept that women have children. And, therefore, there will be restrictions and gaps. (Katrin)

Taken in combination, the quotes from Katrin and Petra above, illustrated how returners' constructions of their working mother selves could differ. Petra constructed maternal and worker identities as being incompatible in the sense that she viewed career advancement as unlikely in light of the way she wanted to mother and because of her decision to work part-time. However, planning to work only five hours more than Petra per week, Katrin regarded advancement as possible with the support of organizational quotas for women in management. These examples, therefore, illustrate the way in which returners with similar constraints (i.e. part-time work) might construct different visions of themselves in the future.

4.6 Vignettes of returners' identity work

Within this subsection, I illustrate how the different aspects of identity work manifested themselves in individual returners' accounts of their re-entry experiences. Consistent with the constructivist approach underpinning this research, the purpose of this subsection is not to reduce the idiosyncrasies evident in returners' accounts of returning to work into a typology, but to provide the reader with an understanding of how identity strategies, identity work tactics, image management and constructions of working mother selves came together for individuals. In this vein, I present examples based on Wendy's, Doreen's and Lena's experiences.

I have chosen to focus on these three women's experiences of returning to work because they illustrate different approaches to dealing with the tensions between maternal and worker identities. Both Wendy and Doreen, like most of the returners who participated in this study, chose to reduce their working hours to accommodate their constructions of their maternal identities. However, while Wendy struggled to reclaim her identity as a valued worker, Doreen indicated feeling validated as a worker, but having difficulty living up to her own expectations of herself because of the time constraints of working part-time. Unlike Wendy and Doreen, Lena resumed her full-time work role upon re-entry, but experienced uncertainties related to both her maternal and her worker identities after returning to work.

4.6.1 Wendy

Wendy's example was typical of many of the returners who participated in this study in that she viewed her maternal identity as being her priority. However, her comments during the interview and her notes indicated that she was dissatisfied with being side-lined at work and that she was intent upon reclaiming her worker identity.

Wendy described prioritising her maternal identity over her worker identity as her identity strategy:

And so, for me, if you think about it, work is the second priority at the moment, if that's how you want to express it. So when push comes to shove, the kids would always be more important. (Wendy)

In line with her prioritisation of her maternal identity, Wendy worked part-time to accommodate her maternal responsibilities, stating that when meetings fell outside of her working hours she would either reschedule them or decline them. Furthermore, Wendy drew on the reframing identity work tactic to construct her maternal and worker identities as being compatible by highlighting how happy her children were at childcare and how they still had afternoons with her:

I think the kids are happy where they are, they are really well looked after there. I'm not over doing it. I'm not picking them up at 7pm and putting them straight to bed. There's still a bit of free time for us during the day. (Wendy)

Through reframing her maternal identity, Wendy was able to construct her participation in paid work as acceptable because her children were happy and because she was still able to devote her attention to them in the afternoons. However, Wendy perceived her prioritisation of her maternal identity to be at odds with her worker identity. Her comments indicated that she engaged the accepting marginalisation identity work tactic, eschewing hopes of a promotion because of her part-time working hours:

So it doesn't have to be a promotion, in other words, I can stay at my level, that's fine. But just a chance to gain some new experience. And

it's just incredibly difficult as a part-timer to even get another position.

(Wendy)

Despite her statement indicating that she accepted that she wouldn't be advancing to the next level within the organization, Wendy engaged the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic, rotating her priorities to attend a work meeting on her day off:

Come to the plant because the meeting is so terribly important and missing it would be unacceptable and then I get to listen for an hour to them telling me that they don't need my support. I should really stay at home on my days off. (Wendy, notes)

Given the laws protecting workers' rights in Germany, coming into work on a scheduled day off suggested an interest on Wendy's part to create an image as a team-player. Furthermore, Wendy's comments during the interview revealed her resistance to the idea that she couldn't be given more challenging work, as is illustrated in the following example in which she drew upon the contesting norms identity work tactic:

There was a colleague who used to sit next to me, who is in [Asia] every other week. He leads a team and still has projects. And he is physically absent every other week and only available by mobile with a time lag. I would be present every week, not the whole day, but I mean, [individual contributors] can work for three hours without their team leader sitting next to them. And if anything comes up, then they would just have to call. (Wendy)

Comparing her availability as a part-time worker with her colleagues' availability spending half of his time in a different time zone, Wendy questioned management's decision to side-line her from project work, the department's core function. While Wendy's acceptance of marginalisation through giving up her hopes of being promoted could be read as an acceptance of being placed on the mummy-track, as in Herman et al.'s (2013) 'cul de sac' group, her comments also indicated that she would continue to fight for more challenging assignments:

I am actually relatively open about this [to management] because I don't want anyone to criticise me for not having said that I am looking for something else when I'm no longer in the department, because I've found an interesting job elsewhere. I don't want to be accused of that.

(Wendy)

Thus, the identity work Wendy displayed indicated a combination of acceptance that her worker identity would be modified, but also a mental limit as to how far she was willing to allow her worker identity to change. Her construction of her future self as a working mother reflected a desire to advance within the company, but not at any cost:

In principle, I would also be open to taking it a step further, but it's not that I say it's really important to me because I decided to have children and I would do so again...I'm asked when I will work full-time again, I can't answer that. I don't know what it's like when the kids first go to school and there's always a new phase that may not make life easier.

(Wendy)

Therefore, although Wendy prioritised her maternal identity, adapting her working hours to fulfil her expectations of herself as a mother, Wendy was unwilling to relinquish her worker identity. Instead she demonstrated determination in her search for challenging work. Furthermore, her comments indicated that she would pursue career advancement, if there were the opportunity to do so while continuing to work on a part-time basis.

4.6.2 Doreen

Like Wendy, Doreen also reduced her working hours upon returning to work after parental leave. However, in contrast to Wendy's struggle to reclaim her worker identity, Doreen expressed feeling validated as a worker. Doreen did not mention using a specific identity strategy to deal with tensions between her maternal and worker identities. Based on her working hours, it could be inferred that she prioritised her maternal identity; however, the way she discussed her maternal and worker identities suggested the neutralisation identity strategy (Johnston and

Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press; Raskin, 2006;), in which both maternal and worker identities are equally important.

When asked about how she settled on her working hours, Doreen responded in a way that suggested conformity to good mothering norms and an example of the defending norms identity work tactic:

20 [hours]. I've got exactly half of what I had before, and that has always been important to me, because I don't need to have a child if I don't have time for one, if I would give it away from 7am – 6pm.
(Doreen)

Doreen's comment about giving her child away reflected an expression commonly used in Germany in reference to putting a child in childcare (i.e. not in the care of a family member) for an extended period of time each day. Often used in relation to raven mothers, Doreen's use of the phrase here indicated that physical presence was an important part of being a good mother to her.

Doreen drew on the reframing identity work tactic to construct her involvement in work as beneficial for her son and for herself:

I was never bored or anything [while on parental leave], but I realized, hmm, the little one is getting bored at home, so it's good that he's going to kindergarten. So that he gets more stimulation. It has also been good for me, mentally, to do something with my mind again. (Doreen)

By discussing the dual benefits of returning to work in this statement, Doreen indicated the centrality of work to her understanding of herself.

However, her decision to reduce her working hours created challenges for her worker identity in that Doreen found it difficult to meet the demands of her job within the hours that she had. Doreen described trying to be flexible for her manager out of gratitude for the effort he put into designing her job:

For the important things, it's important to me that I'm here. I make sure that I can do that. And [my manager] was like, "Wow, good that you made it. I think that's great." And that's just a bit of the mutual...where

I think, okay, I'm trying to repay him for how he's trying to set things up as optimally as possible for me. (Doreen)

By engaging in ideal worker behaviour, such as making herself flexible to her employer and working beyond her normal working hours, Doreen also signalled her commitment to her manager. Importantly, however, while other returners may have engaged in identity work in such a situation, employing the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic to enable a temporary shift in priorities to allow them to come into work outside of their normal working hours, Doreen's comments did not reveal conscious identity work on her part. After discussing the topic further, Doreen revealed that her ability to be flexible to her manager was facilitated by her parents living in the same village and, therefore, being able to look after her child on such occasions. Culturally, having a child looked after by a family member is compatible with being a good mother, in contrast to having your child at a nursery or with a childminder.

The few occasions when Doreen's parents could not step in to watch her child prompted Doreen to engage in self-doubt as she discussed here:

He didn't say that wasn't okay, or that it was a problem, nothing at all. Rather, it was me, where I was thinking I feel totally bad about it, I'm totally inflexible all of a sudden and now I have the feeling that I'm being unfair to him. (Doreen)

Doreen's comment revealed that, despite her part-time contract, she had not relinquished the ideal worker norm in that she still felt compelled to make herself available to her manager beyond her normal working hours. In addition to having doubts about her ability to fulfil her expectations of herself as a worker, Doreen also had doubts about fulfilling colleagues' expectations of workers. For example, when one of her colleagues commented, after hearing that her son was starting nursery, that she could 'just call in sick for the next six months now,' Doreen started to question her decision to return to work:

I really had a moment where I was thinking, I've made the wrong decision to go back to work. Maybe it's too early now and, when you're back, you think...I know that this is a bit of an exaggeration, but you're

basically always wondering if maybe it was wrong to come back. I've let it go now though. Just because he sees it that way. Well, I hope I can prove him wrong. (Doreen)

Her colleague's comment indicated his expectation that, as the child's mother, Doreen would be the one to care for her child when he was unwell. Although Doreen was able to engage the refusing marginalisation identity work tactic to dismiss his comment and claim her worker identity, the fact that a comment like this would prompt Doreen to question her choice to return to work demonstrates how susceptible she was to negative feedback upon immediate re-entry.

Doreen also engaged the refusing marginalisation identity work tactic in her insistence that her partner and she take turns looking after their child when he was unwell:

I always think, I'm somebody too and I also need to keep up with work as expected of me, which I also expect from myself. And just because [my husband] works full-time and I work part-time, for me, that's not a reason for me to always be the one to compromise when the child is sick. (Doreen)

Her remark, 'I'm somebody too' as she talked about the necessity of getting her work done underscored the importance of her worker identity to her sense of self and demonstrated her perception that she had to defend her worker identity.

During the interview, Doreen relayed a situation in which her child had been admitted to hospital overnight. She shared her concern about how others might perceive her decision to leave her child with her partner so that she could attend a meeting at work the following morning:

That's now the image I have, that everyone thinks, "What kind of a mother leaves her child in the hospital so that she can go to work?" (Doreen)

As her comment illustrates, Doreen was concerned about the negative image others might have of her for coming to work instead of staying at her child's bedside. Noticeably absent from her comment is any reference to the potential

of such a situation contributing to her image as a dependable (ideal) worker. The focus of Doreen's concern in this situation was clearly her image as a good mother among her colleagues.

Doreen summarised her ongoing identity work, relating the example of the hospital to others and pointing out the difficulty she experienced in choosing between her two important identities. Despite knowing that her spouse was with their child, Doreen still wasn't sure that the decision to attend the meeting was the right one:

As a mother you still feel kind of bad in the moment and think, hmm, "Was that a good idea?" But I think that's the dichotomy you're often faced with. In fact, you can't do everything and I find it difficult to constantly decide and to weigh, what do I prioritize now? (Doreen)

The examples Doreen shared demonstrated her continued struggle to fulfil her expectations of herself as a mother who was physically present for her children while also fulfilling the expectations she had of herself as a dependable and committed worker.

Doreen did not have a clear construction of her future working mother self. When asked about how she saw her career in the future, like many of the returners I interviewed, she expressed an interest in advancement, but also uncertainty about whether that would be compatible with her maternal identity:

Before I thought I needed a few more years of work experience, but then it could happen. And now I'm starting to think, okay, you have a child, you have a family and I have the feeling, that's important in many ways, or I feel like that's more important. So now I've put my career on the back-burner for a bit. I haven't ruled it out and if it works out then great, but I don't have to pursue it no matter what. I'm happy. I have a fulfilling life and it's alright for me to have an [individual contributor] job, which I can do well, which I enjoy and which satisfies me. (Doreen)

Although Doreen left the possibility of pursuing advancement open, her statement indicated that the meaning of a career was shifting in her mind from upward mobility to having satisfying work. Furthermore, her foregrounding of family and

her maternal identity when asked about her career plans demonstrated the way she linked her maternal and worker identities together in her plans for the future.

4.6.3 Lena

In contrast to the vacillation Doreen exhibited in seeking to fulfil contrasting expectations of herself as a mother and as a worker, Lena pursued a segmentation identity strategy in which she planned to focus on her worker identity until she received a promised promotion. However, her promised promotion was put on hold in the midst of a divisional restructuring programme and she began to question whether the plan of having her partner be a stay-at-home dad while she worked full-time was the right one:

What am I doing this for? I like doing the job, but it is extremely challenging, and at home, my child is getting bigger. I'm not progressing, and I only get to see [my child] on the weekend, so why should I do this? Wouldn't it be smarter if I'm noticing now that nothing is happening – shouldn't I say: OK, then give me some boring coordinator job? I'll do that from nine to five and then at least I'll have some work-life balance. I have some doubts about our plan. (Lena)

Lena's comments revealed an inner turmoil in which she debated giving up on her hopes for promotion in favour of spending more time with her child. Lena was one of only a few returners who chose to focus on their worker identities and her identity work demonstrated more consistency in her responses to identity challenges than most.

Unlike most of the returners I interviewed, Lena constructed her worker identity in a manner that seemed in alignment with ideal worker norms. Although she expressed frustration at herself for doing so, she discussed multiple examples in which she behaved consistently with her identity strategy. For example, she described checking her work phone frequently while at home:

The thing that annoys me is that I'm always looking at the phone in the evenings while I'm holding the baby. It's daft. It's really daft of me, because it's silly to have this [phone] in front of my face while I'm doing

something with her, even if it's only pushing the pram while I'm talking on the phone. (Lena)

She also mentioned taking work calls at inopportune times out of fear that she would miss an important call:

Maybe it's important. Usually it's not. But then I answer the phone anyway. (Lena)

Even when she did engage the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic so that she could forgo the end of a meeting to be able to tuck her child into bed, Lena expressed regret at making the decision to do so:

Then at some point I left [the meeting] with the goal of getting home five minutes before bedtime. [My daughter] was already very tired. Then, of course, she got all hyper again, and the upshot of it was: No one was satisfied in the end. Not me, because I left the meeting too soon. Did I miss anything? What information don't I have now? I didn't do my job properly. On the other hand, I didn't really get much benefit from rushing home. (Lena)

Consistent with her identity strategy, Lena explained her constant engagement with work in terms of her identity, with her comments demonstrating how central work was to her understanding of herself:

But that's just how I'm wired. I have to check: Is everything alright? Is there anything else? Have I overlooked something? Is anyone asking for something? (Lena)

Despite focussing on her worker identity as an identity strategy and constructing her worker identity in alignment with the ideal worker norm of being ever-available to the organization, Lena repeatedly expressed uncertainty related to her maternal identity. However, she drew on the reframing identity work tactic to position herself as a good mother because she knew that her child was well looked after:

Sometimes I choose work instead of my child, and that ... If you do that consciously, it's really terrible. And I do that and think: why are you

doing this? Because I know she is in good hands at home. I know her father is there. Otherwise I would not do it. And then sometimes I do not really know what to think of it. If it's o.k. to choose this way, or if actually ... if it's completely the wrong decision. (Lena)

Lena's use of the reframing identity work tactic in this quote, however, did not resolve the uncertainty she felt, which was evident in her questioning whether focussing on work might be the 'wrong' decision. Her use of the word 'wrong' implied judgement, possibly stemming from others as she brought up the raven mother term during the interview, which I will return to shortly.

In addition to highlighting her focus on her worker identity, she also drew on the reframing identity work tactic to construct herself as the family breadwinner out of necessity:

My husband is also not the type – I don't know how else to say it – [he's] not as resilient as me. So he's much faster ... [he] reaches his limits much faster. I'm more of the type who grits her teeth and thinks: Yeah, this is crap, but I'm going to get through it anyway. (Lena)

Lena's construction of her husband as being ill-suited to the corporate world, as opposed to her portrayal of herself as tough (i.e. someone who 'grits her teeth' and carries on) enabled her to construct a maternal identity in which she was the family breadwinner. However, in contrast to the strong capable image Lena projected in comments like the one above, later in the interview she began to tear-up when talking about not spending time with her daughter:

And today, for example, I'm running around the whole day and I'm not getting [my work] done. And then here I am again and think to myself: People ... Now, for example, someone is coming to swap my boss' stupid mobile phone. I get to do that. Where I think, that's not my fucking job. But, ok, fine, I'll do it. (Lena)

The emotional response Lena showed, communicated both in the strong language she used and through her eyes welling up with tears at this point during the interview, revealed her frustration in the situation. Despite her efforts to

remain rational and to maintain a clear identity strategy, in which her focus was placed squarely on work, Lena struggled with doing so.

In addition to the uncertainties evident in Lena's construction of her maternal identity, she also described being concerned about the image others at work had of her as a mother, contrasting herself to a raven mother during the interview. For example, in one comment she constructed herself as a good mother as opposed to a raven mother by emphasising the attention she paid to her child when they were together:

So a raven mother ... I've always said that it's the quality and not the quantity that counts, and I stand by that. Because I think it's more valuable, to use the little time intensively with your child than to put the child in front of the TV or something like that for the whole day. (Lena)

Despite her involvement in full-time work, Lena's comments indicated that she maintained a child-centred view of parenting by constructing herself as the family breadwinner and her partner as being well suited to the primary caregiver role:

[My husband] does it as well as I do. He goes to the [baby-] groups like me; he knows everyone. He makes playdates with other mothers and other fathers to drink coffee and for the kids to play, and he does it with a lot of heart and soul. And that's why it's okay, the way it is. Sometimes I feel a bit sad or jealous for myself because of what I'm missing out on. But I am not a raven mother. (Lena)

Lena's comments reflected a note of self-sacrifice, in which her maternal identity was subordinated to her worker identity for the good of the family. The suggestion Lena seemed to make was that if she did not have to be the breadwinner, then she would be a better mother. However, she was clearly cognisant of the impression I was getting because she then clarified that she could not imagine herself as a stay-at-home mother:

I always struggle with the situation a bit. But then I think: Would I want to be home all day? No, I would not. (Lena)

As Lena's comments indicated, she was determined to remain focussed on her worker identity and she did so fairly consistently. However, Lena's comments revealed that she invested a lot of effort into subordinating her maternal identity. Furthermore, with the promotion she was promised being put on hold, Lena expressed a great deal of uncertainty about whether her identity strategy was the right choice for her.

4.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I presented the findings concerning identity strategies, identity work tactics, image management and constructing working mother selves. The data indicated that some returners constructed coherent understandings of themselves as working mothers, in which they described using an identity strategy to manage their maternal and worker identities. However, the analysis of their responses to situational identity triggers indicated that maintaining a consistent approach to dealing with the tensions between maternal and worker identities was not always possible. I described the identity work tactics that returners drew on to sustain their maternal and worker identities. Drawing on Kreiner et al.'s (2015) discussion of identity elasticity, I presented the identity work tactics as constricting or expanding returners' constructions of their maternal and worker identities.

5 FINDINGS: INDIVIDUAL FACTORS INFLUENCING IDENTITY WORK

5.1 Chapter introduction

Having presented the results of the analysis of the findings concerning identity strategies, identity work tactics, image management and constructing working mother selves in the preceding chapter, in this chapter I present the results regarding individual factors influencing returners' identity work related to their maternal and worker identities. While the preceding chapter focussed on how returners navigated the tensions between maternal and worker norms, this chapter demonstrates how the factors of length of parental leave taken, prior re-entry experience and perceived organizational work-life support, influenced returners' experiences of identity work upon re-entry. I begin by presenting the data concerning the influence of the length of parental leave on returners' identity work. I demonstrate that taking a shorter parental leave supported returners' claims to their worker identities through securing their pre-leave jobs, helping them remain visible to management and minimising the risk of skills obsolescence. However, I also provide evidence indicating that returners who took a shorter parental leave experienced difficulties claiming their maternal identities. I then report on the implications of being a first-time returner as compared to a 'repeat' returner (i.e. returning to work after a second or third child), demonstrating that although repeat returners benefited from learning from past re-entry situations, they were also vulnerable to the cumulative effects of multiple leaves on their worker identities. Finally, I present the findings concerning the influence of perceived organizational work-life support.

5.2 Length of parental leave

The German government's policy of paying couples for up to 14 months of parental leave, when both partners took at least two months of leave, encouraged returners to adopt one year as the norm for parental leave. Consequently, the majority of returners participating in this study opted to take at least one year of leave. Comparing the experiences of the 10 returners who took a shorter parental

leave to the 23 who took at least one year of leave, indicated that taking a shorter leave supported returners' efforts at reclaiming their worker identities by increasing the likelihood of returning to their pre-leave jobs, helping them remain visible to management and decreasing the risk of skills obsolescence. However, while taking a shorter leave was beneficial to their worker identities, returners who returned earlier than one year engaged in additional identity work related to their maternal identities because of violating good mothering norms. To demonstrate these results, I begin by contrasting the return to work experiences of returners who took six months or less parental leave with those of returners who took parental leaves of two or more years.

5.2.1 Contrasting re-entry experiences of short and long leave-takers

Returners who took a shorter parental leave demonstrated a keen desire to maintain their worker identities. However, taking a shorter parental leave challenged their maternal identities and did not equate with maintaining their worker identities as planned. In contrast, returners who took a longer parental leave did so to accommodate the responsibilities of their maternal roles and in the absence of a compelling work reason to return earlier. Long leave-takers had strong maternal identities upon return but struggled to be seen as capable workers in the eyes of their managers and colleagues.

To illustrate how the length of parental leave taken related to returners' identity work, I begin by contrasting the extremes of the parental leave spectrum. While the government subsidy motivated most returners to take parental leaves that were close to one year in duration, three returners: Caroline, Dagmar and Melanie, took leaves of six months or less and three returners: Anke, Gisela and Pia, took leaves of two or more years. The cut-offs of six months and two years are arbitrary for this comparison; however, examining the differences in the experiences of returners who took relatively 'short' leaves (i.e. short leave-takers) with the experiences of returners who took relatively 'long' leaves (i.e. long leave-takers) highlights how the length of parental leave related to returners' identity work.

Firstly, the two groups of returners differed on how they approached their decisions about the length of leave to take. When asked about how they decided on the length of leave they chose, the short leave-takers (i.e. Caroline, Dagmar and Melanie) gave responses that revealed the importance of maintaining their worker identities in their decisions to take a shorter leave than the typical year-long parental leave. For example, Caroline expressed her interest in keeping her plans for career advancement on track:

Because I am already at a stage in the [career] development process that I don't want to go backwards. So I thought six months is a good compromise between not having a break and not benefitting from my child at all and being away so long that I come back and can't remember what the projects are called and my colleagues have totally forgotten me and my bosses too. (Caroline, 6 months)

Caroline's statement reflected both fear that she would lose her standing with her colleagues and managers, but also concern that she might have difficulty stepping back into her work role if she were to stay away for too long.

Like Caroline, concerns about her worker identity also influenced Dagmar's decision to return to work quickly. Dagmar's parental leave length was determined by her negotiation to keep her pre-leave job:

And then, at the end of August, I had to say: I'm sorry: I'm pregnant. And then we said, "O.k., what do we do?" and then, "O.k., how long will you keep my job [open] for me?" And then I said, "O.k., then I'll be back in September." (Dagmar, 5 months)

While Caroline's and Dagmar's comments indicated that their career plans influenced their decisions about the length of leave to take, Melanie's decision was based on her role as the breadwinner within her family, which developed when her partner took parental leave following the birth of their first child:

If I stay home, [my husband] has no job - he wanted to study - then we would not have had any money. So we had to do exactly the same thing again, now with the second child, just to make ends meet, financially. (Melanie, 3 months)

In contrast to the short leave-takers' focus on their worker identities, the long leave-takers (i.e. Anke, Gisela and Pia), did not reference their worker identities in discussing their decisions about parental leave. For example, Gisela's uncertainties about her maternal role factored into her decision to take a two-year leave, following the example of her sister-in-law:

I didn't know how breastfeeding would go, how long people breastfeed, how long you should breastfeed, things like that. That was all new to me and so, like I said, I orientated myself to my sister-in-law a bit and she took two years and said you'll need the two years. (Gisela, 24 months)

In contrast to the short leave-takers, Gisela did not have the promise of a promotion or the responsibility of providing for her family to influence her decision about the length of leave to take. Therefore, in the absence of her own experience, her sister-in-law's example provided Gisela with an anchor for decision-making.

Anke's situation differed from Gisela's in that she had been studying while working and was concerned that continuing to work, while studying and having a new-born would mean not paying her daughter enough attention:

And I just told myself, it's important to me that [my daughter's] not neglected, especially at the beginning. That means, either I ignore my studies, or I have parental leave – my daughter and then just my studies on the weekend. Otherwise it would be just too much work. (Anke, 30 months)

While Gisela's and Anke's decisions were influenced by their uncertainty about managing their maternal responsibilities, Pia described having had a clear plan, which changed when she became pregnant while on parental leave with her first child:

I actually wanted to stay on parental leave for 1.5 years and then I wanted to work part-time. But that was just before the birth of my daughter and then I thought, no, because, I would have started and then only been there for three months. So I just extended parental

leave. And then we thought, I'll take parental leave again until my daughter is 1.5 years old. Because we thought, then she'll sleep well and then she's a bit older so that my husband can take care of her.
(Pia, 36 months)

As the returners' comments concerning their decisions about taking parental leave indicated, short leave-takers' comments revealed their motivation to protect their worker identities, while long leave-takers' comments lacked references to their worker identities. Furthermore, concerns related to their maternal identities factored into long leave-takers' decisions about parental leave length.

The analysis of the data concerning short and long leave-takers also indicated differences in how they kept in touch with their managers and colleagues during their parental leaves. Returners from both groups discussed having occasional social contact with their colleagues or managers. For example, Gisela maintained contact with her pre-leave manager to ascertain what her position would be upon re-entry:

I kept in touch with him by telephone, asking him questions and for information. I came in June and at the beginning of the year I contacted him by phone. And then he told me that I was getting a job in the area I'm in now and that my future supervisor would be so and so. And then I just contacted my new supervisor. (Gisela, 24 months)

As this quote illustrates, Gisela's contact with her manager was limited to determining what her position would be upon re-entry. Pia discussed starting out differently, having attempted to maintain periodic contact with her manager, but she described losing touch with work after deciding to extend her leave:

Roxanne: How was it during parental leave? Did you still have contact with your superiors or your team?

Pia: During the first few months, because I actually thought that I would come back after one and a half years. But when it was clear that I was pregnant again, then I called and said that I'm expecting another child and that I won't be coming back for at least another one and a half

years, it was a total of two years from then. And after that I only got in touch every now and then, so once a year. (Pia, 36 months)

As her planned re-entry date approached, however, Pia had no point of contact within her department. After receiving her future manager's name from HR, Pia tried, unsuccessfully, to set up a meeting with him:

And then I tried to call him to make an appointment, but he did not answer. I couldn't reach him. I spoke to the mailbox five or six times and asked for a call back. And at some point I called the department head, who was also new, which is why I did not call him immediately, and then he told me my manager had been on sick leave for 4 months and had not called back because of that. But I didn't know that. (Pia, 36 months)

Had Pia maintained contact with her colleagues or her former manager, she might have been informed of her new manager's illness. Furthermore, although I neglected to probe her feelings about not receiving a call back from her manager, Pia's comment about having left multiple phone messages without a return call and her statement, 'But I didn't know that' suggests that the situation is likely to have left her feeling uncertain about her place on his team.

While the long leave-takers contacted their managers or workgroups occasionally, both Dagmar and Caroline engaged in work content while on leave by discussing work topics and attending team meetings:

They invited me to a team retreat in late August. That was also the time when so much was happening at work and then I could hear everything all at once. (Caroline, 6 months)

Then I had the big project and one of my employees stepped in. In other words, I also had quite a lot of contact because she needed my input from time to time. (Dagmar, 5 months)

Unlike the long leave-takers, therefore, Caroline and Dagmar maintained their visibility within their workgroups while on leave by participating in job-relevant activities while on leave. Rather than simply maintaining social contact with their

colleagues and managers, which they also did, Caroline and Dagmar participated in work during their leaves, thereby maintaining their visibility as workers within their teams. In contrast to Caroline and Dagmar, however, Melanie did not have contact with her manager during her parental leave. Melanie compared her first return to work, in which her manager had been eager to confirm that Melanie's plans about returning to work hadn't changed, with her current return in which her manager didn't contact her at all:

[My manager] didn't get in touch with me during the second [leave].
That was really like I was on vacation. It was not really, I think, seen as parental leave. But just as a longer break. (Melanie, 3 months)

Melanie's comments about her parental leave not being viewed as such are interesting because they imply a taint to parental leave, which she was able to avoid by taking a shorter leave. Furthermore, the implication was that since her manager had already experienced how she combined working and mothering following her prior parental leave that keeping in touch during the short leave was unnecessary.

For the short leave-takers, engaging in work enabled them to maintain visibility as a worker during parental leave. In comparison, the long leave-takers maintained social contact, but did not engage in work tasks. A key concern for the long leave-takers was to determine their work roles upon re-entry, whereas the short leave-takers returned to their pre-leave jobs.

When the time came to return to work, the long leave-takers were ready to get back to work. Having spent at least two years being stay-at-home mothers, they described looking forward to returning to work. For example, Anke wrote in her notes, 'After two years' parental leave, I missed working life.' Like Anke, both Gisela and Pia commented on their desire to get back to work after parental leave:

It was stressful and exhausting, but of course also nice to have so much time for your child. I think that the first year it's important and it was good, but after two years I just had the feeling, it's over now, now

I have to get out again, now I have to go back [to work]. (Gisela, 24 months)

The three years were bad for me. Because I was always thinking, I want something more. So if you're always at home with your children, it is a beautiful time, but you're just not challenged at all. (Pia, 36 months)

Gisela's and Pia's gratefulness for the opportunity to spend time with their children was tempered by a yearning to reclaim their worker identities.

For the short leave-takers, returning to work was complicated by doubts related to their maternal identities. Caroline, for example, interpreted not getting a place in nursery as a challenge to her maternal identity:

We were shocked that we didn't have a place in nursery, although we signed up [for the state-run nursery system] in March. And then the lady on the phone was almost nasty. She said my expectations were too high, it's not that simple and I couldn't be a serious mother if I think I could get a place that easily. That's how I interpreted it, the way she said in her very harsh language: "No, there is no place." (Caroline, 6 months)

Caroline's comment, 'I couldn't be a serious mother' revealed that she had thought that the nursery administrator judged her to be a bad mother. While providing insight into the difficulty of arranging care for children under the age of one, Caroline's comment also indicated her vulnerability to criticism from others about her choice to return to work when she did.

Melanie also demonstrated vulnerability with regard to her maternal identity, although in her case, it was not in response to others' feedback, but rooted in her own desire to maintain closeness with her baby:

I tried to stop breastfeeding after three months. It didn't work. For me, mentally, it's – stopping breastfeeding is somehow this separation, the first separation from the child – this emotional separation. (Melanie, 3 months)

As demonstrated in this quote, Melanie struggled with the idea of separating from her baby and continued to breastfeed, despite encountering difficulties finding places to express and store breastmilk while at work.

Like the long leave-takers above, Dagmar voiced a craving for more mental stimulation during her parental leave:

Here and there I thought, "Why did you do this to yourself?" But meanwhile, I think it was a good decision. During the four months I was at home, I noticed that I was getting stir crazy at home and I thought o.k. I have to do something besides dada, dudu and mama - mama did not exist yet, but yeah. (Dagmar, 5 months)

As with the long leave-takers, being at home was not enough for Dagmar. However, her comment about asking herself 'Why did you do this to yourself?' indicated that she found re-entry difficult at times. When probed, Dagmar's comments revealed a mix of guilt for violating good mothering norms and self-doubt related to her worker identity:

Roxanne: And how was it right after you returned?

Dagmar: Strange. (laughs) Strange. Firstly, of course, the guilty conscience because you put your child in day nursery at five months, so you have that. And so many reacted really oddly, along the lines of: "How can you?" "Why?" and then there was also: "Can you manage?" "Can this really work?" Because suddenly, let's just say, my daughter doesn't sleep through the night, in other words, the nights are short.

Dagmar's comments reflected the dual pressures she felt subjected to – both to be a good mother (i.e. by not placing her child in the care of others at the age of five months) and to resume her prior pace of work, despite sleep deprivation.

Contrasting the readiness to return to work of long leave-takers with short leave-takers, therefore, indicated that long leave-takers benefitted from the influence of the passage of time on child development as their children were able to sleep through the night and had been weaned by the time returners re-entered work.

Furthermore, the long leave-takers had spent two years being full-time mothers to their children, resulting in a yearning to get back to work, without experiencing the vulnerability in their maternal identities that was evident in short leave-takers' descriptions about preparing to return to work.

Discussing the initial weeks of being back at work, both Caroline and Melanie, whose partners were on parental leave while they were at work, indicated having difficulty separating from their children. Caroline's comments demonstrated a longing to be closer to her child that bordered on jealousy of her partner's relationship to their son:

And then I come back home, and my partner has started to get used to our child and knows when he needs to sleep. And I come and wake our child and he doesn't like that, which, of course, it's not good to wake a sleeping child. And then I realize, things aren't going great at work and, at home, I don't know my own child any more. (Caroline, 6 months)

Contrasting her own experience of having difficulty at both work and home with her partner's adjustment to his role as a full-time father, Caroline's comment reflected the displacement she felt during her immediate return to work. Eager to spend time with her son upon returning home from work, Caroline disregarded parenting norms 'of course, it's not good to wake a sleeping child' and her partner's wishes 'he doesn't like that,' demonstrating her struggle to meet her expectations of herself as a mother upon re-entry.

Melanie also struggled with maintaining her maternal identity upon returning to work. She described a situation in her notes in which it was clear to her that her partner, on parental leave, had usurped her [maternal] role as the primary caregiver:

My child had a pseudocroup attack and we had to go to the hospital at night for inhalation. My little one was obviously afraid of the steaming mask and clinging to his dad for help -- he didn't want to come to me - - his mother! The doctor was talking to me, since I'm the mother, and

looks confused when she sees [my son's] reaction. (Melanie, notes, 3 months)

Comparing herself to mothers who take a year of parental leave, Melanie attributed her 'early' return to work as the reason for not having the relationship she desired with her son.

In contrast to the short leave-takers, the long leave-takers did not indicate experiencing the initial return to work as a test of their maternal identities. The long leave-takers remained the primary caregivers for their children, despite returning to work. For example, Pia's partner deferred to her judgement concerning the children, despite being home with them while on parental leave:

My husband calls me then, with the screaming child in his arms, I didn't know what was going on, and then he says, "[Our daughter] fell off the sofa and now she's shaking." And then I think: What am I supposed to do? And then my husband says, "Do I have to go to the paediatrician now?" Then I say, "Yes of course." But it was really bad that you first, or that he asked me: What should I do now? But I'm not even there. (Pia, 36 months)

After being a stay-at-home mother for three years, Pia's partner clearly considered her the expert when it came to deciding what was best for their children. The situation Pia described demonstrated the way in which taking a longer leave solidified returners' roles as primary caregivers.

Rather than expressing concern about their maternal identities, as the short leave-takers did, long leave-takers demonstrated concern for reclaiming their worker identities upon returning to work. For example, Anke was concerned about how her colleagues would react to her having forgotten basic computer skills:

After two years, I forgot the simplest things from working life, for example: How do I set up our network printer? How did scanning or merging of the PDF files go again? E-mail signature? And I don't want anyone to notice any of these things, otherwise I'm afraid I won't be taken seriously. (Anke, notes, 30 months)

Anke's comment revealed her concern that her colleagues would not view her as a capable worker. Her exclusion from project work also contributed to her insecurity in her work role:

For example, alone in what [my manager] said: "In the beginning I see you only in the day-to-day business and later I think, you'll get ... knowing you, you'll get the projects again." OK. Why do they see me in the beginning only in daily business? Well, because I'm here again after parental leave. That's why I wasn't considered for the project that's starting now, for example. (Anke, 30 months)

Anke's comments illustrated the way that she struggled to be viewed as a capable worker by her colleagues and by her manager – a problem that was also evident in Gisela's and Pia's comments:

You just feel like you still have to prove yourself and you have to prove that, despite being a mother and your absence, you still possess some specialist knowledge and that it's not completely gone. And above all, that you're also motivated to achieve something at work. Unfortunately, it's still the case that you get the feeling that you're just not seen as a fully deployable employee. (Gisela, 24 months)

I'm just annoyed because I was, I had a very big job and a lot of responsibility and now I have such a tiny bit of a job and it's not even my expertise. (Pia, 36 months)

These comments from the long leave-takers, therefore, illustrated their struggle to reclaim their worker identities because of others' disbeliefs in their capability and motivation. Thus, the long leave-takers appeared to be immediately relegated to the mummy-track upon re-entry.

In contrast, the short leave-takers indicated that they were entrusted with important tasks directly upon re-entry. For example, Dagmar moderated her departmental meeting upon her return, 'my boss puts me on stage every year to do the moderation.' Similarly, Caroline and Melanie discussed playing a central role in their workgroups upon re-entry:

In the first week, so, the week was a short week because that Monday was a holiday. I came in on Tuesday and Wednesday my boss asks: "Next Monday we have an appointment with the Director," so, our top top manager: "I can't go, do you want to present the topic?" And I was ... then I ... "Of course," without knowing how much work was entailed. (Caroline, 6 months)

Since only my colleague (part-time and MUST leave on time at 3:30pm), the new boss (who can't take over yet) and I were there from our seven-member team, and the first committees were already starting in the following week, we had to take on [our colleagues'] tasks - Consequence: In the second week of work, despite my eight hours [per day], I already had accumulated a lot of overtime. (Melanie, notes, 3 months)

While short leave-takers' involvement in core workgroup tasks indicated that they were still considered capable employees, each short leave-taker also communicated an incident in which her career prospects appeared less certain than before her parental leave. The following quote from Caroline, for example, demonstrated her manager's assumption that she would not want to immediately pursue career advancement:

And then I just told [my manager] briefly, "Now I have 35 hours [per week], if there is the opportunity, then I would do 40 hours again and I would also like to continue this [talent] process, if you - so you, meaning you and your boss - still think so." And then, I think, he was surprised, because he had just said to the 35 hours, "Yes, but you know, when your child cuts teeth and bla bla, you can't plan it, maybe you'll be glad, if you have 35 hours." So, he assumed I'm pausing, so, taking a break, a break for this [talent round]. (Caroline)

As Caroline's comment indicated, upon re-entry, she had to overcome her manager's bias towards her as a new mother. Melanie also encountered bias in that her managers were unwilling to put her forward for promotion because she had been on parental leave:

I don't know right now if I'll get promoted because I have ... last year I was pregnant, and I was absent a lot. My two bosses said, "You were absent a lot, so we can't promote you now." I performed, I did everything ... but was absent a lot. And I was thinking: When was I absent? (Melanie, 3 months)

Melanie's questioning 'When was I absent?' and her subsequent recounting of the timeline leading up to her leave and return, indicated that her managers were counting her leave as 'absence'. Thus, her performance appraisal was not only based on the time when she worked, but also on the time she was on leave. Despite her relatively short leave, therefore, she was still penalised in the promotion process for taking parental leave.

While Caroline and Melanie remained intent upon furthering their careers within the organization and, therefore, overcoming the bias they had encountered, Dagmar's experience of having her favourite project taken away during her leave introduced uncertainty into her own ideas about her career progression:

Why are you doing this to yourself? How will that be? Will it be worse? She doesn't sleep at night. My daughter eats poorly too. And then you sit there and just think, so, why are you doing this? For what? Because the topics are not that exciting any more because the nice project was taken from me, then you have ... I have a 14-man team and these are the points when I say: For what? (Dagmar)

Taking stock of her current situation – the stress of managing a 14-person team and not sleeping through the night – Dagmar questions her own plans for pursuing career advancement, evident in her comment, 'Will it be worse?' However, as her self-questioning continued, her comments moved from doubts about pursuing career progression, to doubts about her role within the organization, implying that she was considering leaving the organization.

In summary, returners who chose to take shorter parental leaves to protect their worker identities experienced uncertainties in relation to their maternal identities upon re-entry. Furthermore, although returners who took shorter leaves were immediately involved in core work tasks upon re-entry, they also indicated that

their plans for career advancement were not as secure as before their leaves. In contrast, returners who chose a longer parental leave to accommodate their maternal roles struggled to reclaim their worker identities upon return. While there was no indication that long leave-takers experienced uncertainties concerning their maternal identities upon return, the work tasks they were given upon re-entry indicated that they had been side-lined from central work roles within the organization.

Contrasting the experiences of short and long leave-takers highlighted how the length of leave taken related to returners' experiences of maternal and worker identity work. In the following subsections, I demonstrate how the data from other returners also supported the themes of protecting worker identity, maintaining visibility as a worker, reclaiming worker identity and defending maternal identity.

5.2.2 Protecting worker identity through shorter leave duration

As with the short leave-takers above, some returners discussed taking shorter leaves to enable them to return to their pre-leave jobs or to maintain their talent status. For example, Lena discussed wanting to keep her job in conjunction with the length of leave she took:

This is a relatively demanding job that actually requires more than full time. And I told him back then, I'll come back after half a year, after roughly six months, and he said: If you do that then you'll come back to your job. And thank goodness it really worked out that way too.
(Lena, 7 months)

Lena's determination to return to her high-profile job influenced the length of leave she took. Although Babette was not able to return to her pre-leave job, she and her partner planned her re-entry so that she would be included in the talent evaluation rounds following her return to work:

And so we thought about what made sense, even for, it might sound a little bit, so I'll just say it, even for all those [talent evaluation programme] rounds that run like that, the whole evaluation rounds with

senior management. And that's why we said, ok, I'll do eight months.
(Babette, 8 months)

Babette's hesitation to tell me that her career goals had influenced the timing of her parental leave indicated her fear that I might judge her to be a 'bad' mother for allowing her worker identity to influence her decision about the length of leave she took.

Like the returners who were able to secure their work roles by taking shorter leaves, Julia was willing to return to work earlier than the typical year-long leave if it meant being able to keep her job. However, Julia's request to hold her job and turn it into a job-share upon her return was declined:

I had offered to come back earlier if I could keep my position and [job] share it. And that was rejected. (Julia, 14 months)

When management refused to allow Julia to keep her job, she decided to take a longer leave:

And then I said, well then ... so if I can't keep the job, I'll stay home for twelve months. (Julia, 14 months)

Julia's comments, along with the evidence from the other short leave-takers (above), indicated that the desire to protect their work roles and career plans influenced returners' decisions to take shorter leaves.

In contrast to the returners who took shorter leaves to protect their worker identities, those who took longer leaves did not describe having specific work-related goals to help shape their decisions. However, the analysis of the accounts of returners who took longer leaves indicated that doing so increased the possibility of having changes in the team or at the managerial level, which made reclaiming worker identities more difficult because returners then had to prove themselves within the workgroup. The longer the leave, the greater the likelihood that there would be staffing changes within the team. For example, despite returning to her pre-leave position, after 18 months of leave, Ute felt like one of the newest team members:

Ute: Everything is different! The topics are distributed differently, the colleagues are now ... some have already been there for a year and a half, some for a year. So, of course I'm still the newest, of course, but that's just relative ... so it's not a team with a lot of roots in the team, that's what I mean.

Roxanne: Do you feel that you have to prove yourself?

Ute: It depends, yes and no. Colleagues who are relatively new in the department, yes, colleagues that have been here for longer, no.
(Ute, 18 months)

Ute's response to my question about having to prove herself on the team indicated the additional challenge to returners' worker identities resulting from colleagues that were unfamiliar with their work.

In addition, some returners described returning to positions in which their former responsibilities had been assigned to others, making it difficult to reclaim their worker identities. For example, Emma felt as if she was starting over upon re-entry because her responsibilities had been assigned to others during her absence:

I was shocked, exactly as speechless as I am now. I am still annoyed about it because I really left as someone with good standing here in the team, also one of the most senior members, I was also at headquarters and within one of the divisions, and just had a good reputation everywhere and now I'm back and am being treated as an intern. (Emma, 12 months)

Emma's comment reflected the gap between her expectation of being able to reclaim her worker identity upon re-entry and the experience of returning to a group in which her former tasks had been reassigned to others. Despite having returned to her pre-leave job, Emma was faced with the task of having to carve out a role for herself upon returning to the team.

5.2.3 Maintaining visibility at work (Keeping in touch)

Maintaining contact with managers while on leave kept returners visible to management and helped them keep abreast of developments within the workgroup and the company. For example, in addition to talking regularly with her first-line supervisor and senior manager, Babette came into two team meetings and wrote a regular status update to her first-line supervisor during her eight-month leave. Similarly, Britta engaged regularly with the management team during her leave to keep herself visible to the organization despite being gone. Britta credited her efforts at keeping in touch during her leave with her securing a good position upon re-entry:

The topics fit very well! I have to say that. But I've also ... I've also contributed. Well, I kept very close contact during the time I was away. And I always positioned myself. (Britta, 10 months)

Britta's comments illustrated the way that she used keeping in touch during her 10-month leave to not only confirm her plans to return, but also to communicate where she wanted to be within the organization upon her re-entry.

While Babette's and Britta's comments indicated the effort they invested in keeping touch, examples from returners taking longer parental leaves indicated a tendency to lose touch as leave continued. For example, Marion discussed getting in touch with her workgroup about once a year by participating in team events:

I was invited to the Christmas party, to the departmental Christmas dinner, when everyone goes for a meal together. They called me and also included me in the planning. And otherwise, we hardly talked during the years [of parental leave]. At most the occasional email or something like that, but nothing more. (Marion, 18 months)

Like Marion, Emma also discussed losing touch with her manager and her workgroup during her parental leave:

I have to say, I had very little, which was really a bit sad because we were an extremely close team. We were all friends and also did quite

a bit together outside of work. But then I had to learn that you're out. You're really out. I did not think so, because I thought, no, we're close and so on. But you are really gone. On the other hand, I would not have had time. Sure my colleagues wrote to me a few times, but my boss only twice. Not the way HR intends it, that employees are kept in the loop about which projects are running, that didn't happen. (Emma, 12 months)

Thus, comparing the experiences of returners taking shorter leaves with those taking longer leaves indicated that the former had more frequent contact with their workgroups, possibly because they were eager to maintain their organizational status, as discussed in the subsection above.

5.2.4 Reclaiming worker identities upon re-entry

Upon returning to work, short leave-takers described being given opportunities to reclaim their worker identities through key projects and responsibilities. For instance, Ina was trusted to provide holiday coverage for her manager:

My boss had asked me if I would be her vacation cover for four weeks. That was my first job, when I was back. (Ina, 12 months)

Providing holiday cover for her manager gave Ina the chance to play a central role – both for upper management and her colleagues – immediately after her return. Similarly, directly after her return, Lena was asked to step in and run a trade show:

And then I was at the [trade show] because in a previous role I led the [trade show] and the person who was supposed to be in charge was not able to go. So I was there for my expertise. (Lena, 7 months)

Thus, the data collected from the short leave-takers indicated that they were given opportunities to regain visibility within their workgroups, by performing a key task, soon after returning to work.

In contrast, long leave-takers described encountering difficulties finding appropriate work roles. Heike's difficulties with her re-entry role prompted her to

find another job within the organization, which her manager would not immediately release her for:

Heike: I'm not getting the best jobs now.

Roxanne: What do you mean – content-wise?

Heike: From the content, yes. Very important to him, but not in my area of expertise, and, I've also told him, the content [of the project] is not that great either. And I find it difficult to believe that he won't release me sooner. (Heike, 18 months)

While Heike's solution to the lack of fit between her interests and her position was to change jobs, Petra described debating whether to sacrifice her four-day workweek to position herself for a new job to overcome her boredom:

I was really torn because, on the one hand, I was sitting there bored in my position and thought, it would be so nice, just to have something which interests me more and where I am challenged. (Petra, 14 months)

While both Heike and Petra expressed being in jobs they considered ill-suited to their skills and interests, both also worked part-time upon returning to work, indicating that their experiences could also be influenced by biases toward part-time workers.

5.2.5 Defending maternal identity

Despite the benefits associated with taking a shorter leave for returners' worker identities, doing so presented challenges for claiming their maternal identities. Returners who were perceived as returning to work too soon discussed how others had, or could possibly, call them raven mothers. Babette described a situation outside of work in which a father 'jokingly' referred to her as a raven mother:

Babette: And this weekend we were at the first birthday of one of the children from the antenatal group. [My son] is actually the youngest child and some are already in childcare. And then they asked how long

[my son] is in care. And then I said, full-time, and then one woman said, ohhh, so long, he is still so small. And one of the men said immediately, one of the fathers, ah, raven mother.

Roxanne: No, did he actually say that?

Babette: I think more, jokingly. So he said so, you raven mother, ha ha ha. But, of course, that hit me. (Babette, 8 months)

Although Babette's partner was also at the party, the man's disapproval for the child being in care too soon and for too many hours was levelled at Babette. While this exchange was couched in jest it was indicative of the disapproval returners faced when violating maternal norms, such as returning to work too soon.

The fear of being labelled a raven mother was not confined, however, to situations outside of work. Contrary to research indicating an expectation of devotion to work within the organization (Blair-Loy, 2003), some returners expressed concern about appearing too work-centred even within the organization. For example, Katrin faced disapproval because of her short parental leave and her decision to work 40 hours upon re-entry:

It was always these reactions when I said yes, I am working full-time again. "And your daughter?" I am not a raven mother. She is with her dad and he is super and everything is going great. So those reactions were always a bit difficult. (Katrin, 9 months)

Like Katrin, Lena also felt that people at work passed judgement on her for violating maternal norms. Lena expressed uncertainty about whether others at work would accept that her partner was assuming primary caregiving responsibilities:

We don't know any other daddy that does this. We know friends, but no one from the company who has done this so far. And that's why it's really frustrating, and you don't really know what people think of you, so whether they find it brave and somehow pretty progressive, or whether they think: God, what a raven mother. How can she? Nobody does that kind of thing. Sometimes I'm not sure. And I'm not sure no

matter who I'm talking with, whether it's a secretary from another department, or a department head. (Lena, 7 months)

Lena's comments illustrated her fear that organizational counterparts at any level within the organizational hierarchy could be critical of her decisions, indicating the potential of alienation for those that were perceived to be overly-work focussed.

In addition to the criticism short leave-takers received from others for nonconformity to maternal norms, some of the returners who took a shorter leave also revealed experiencing insecurities regarding their maternal identities. Short leave-takers, like Babette, expressed maternal self-doubt in reference to the maternal norms they violated:

My first days back were, in fact, such an emotional roller coaster, because you ask yourself, "Am I a good mother? Is it right to go back to work now? Am I damaging my child or is it actually good that his father is there so much?" (Babette, 8 months)

While Babette was able to resolve her self-doubt by focussing on the benefits of her partner's involvement in her son's daily life, Lena expressed her dismay at not meeting her own expectations for spending time with her daughter:

Sometimes I have too little time for her. Of course, I try to make up for it on the weekend, but that's not even enough for me. (Lena, 7 months)

Lena's comment 'that's not even enough for me' implied that in addition to falling short of her own expectations of herself as a mother, she was also not meeting her daughter's expectations.

5.3 Prior re-entry experience

Having critiqued the literature's focus on returners' first experiences with returning to work (see 2.4.8), in this subsection, I present the findings indicating how having prior experience of organizational re-entry following the birth of a child influenced returners' experiences during a subsequent return. In my exploratory study (see 3.4.2) I concluded that both first-time and repeat returners engaged in identity work related to their maternal and worker identities upon workplace re-

entry. In the preceding chapter, I extended the findings from the exploratory study to describe the identity work that both first-time and repeat returners engaged in. Examining the identity work returners engaged in indicated that first-time and repeat returners planned identity strategies, utilised identity work tactics, engaged in image maintenance and constructed working mother selves. However, the analysis of the data indicated that having more than one parental leave could present a greater threat to returners' worker identities. To illustrate this finding, I begin by demonstrating that a subsequent return to work could be just as disruptive to a returner's worker identity as a first return to work and that past experience had limited relevance in the absence of work-role continuity. I then discuss the way prior re-entry experiences influenced subsequent returns.

5.3.1 Work-role continuity

Consistent with assumptions reflected within the literature (e.g. Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) that becoming a mother for the first-time represents a greater disruption to returners' identities than having subsequent children, the first return to work was a returners' first experience of enacting maternal and worker identities in parallel. Although returners had constructed images of themselves as working mothers during pregnancy (Ladge et al., 2012), until they experienced the two roles in tandem, they had no way of knowing how they would feel in the situation:

I always told them, I'll come back after a year. And in retrospect, I would not do that again, because you really can't imagine how it is with a child. (Anne, first-time)

Similarly, Nora reflected on her first return to work and how things did not work out the way that she had imagined before having her first child:

Before I had a baby, I always said I'll definitely go back to work after a year and the kid will go to nursery four days a week and I wanted to return with 30 hours [per week]. But my child did not want to go to nursery when she was a year old. Even after five weeks she did not want to stay for even three seconds. So, we had to think of an alternative solution. I just couldn't understand people that wanted to

stay home that long. Certainly not for several years. Well, I still can't understand that. That's not for me. For me, I always thought the child goes to nursery and I go to work, that's it. I think that has changed. I think the time I spend with my child is also nice or worthwhile. (Nora, repeat)

Anne's and Nora's comments reflected the unpredictability of the maternal identity and, therefore, the feeling of disruption that came with having their first child. However, while a returner's first experience with combining maternal and worker roles was unsettling, the data indicated that subsequent returns to work could be just as disruptive to returners' worker identities. For example, Rebecca was surprised to find that her second return to work was as difficult as her first:

For this second return, I was pretty confident, I thought, I've already made the big step. There can't be any more big surprises. But this was another big one. There were a lot of changes in the team, in the team culture. We [the workgroup] grew a lot, so many new colleagues suddenly I didn't even know everyone by name and if you're only there three days a week, sometimes only two, then I don't have to tell you what it's like when you have hardly any contact with them. It has been quite different somehow and I will come back to the topic of integration afterwards, which is also such an important point, that is you simply, so I find it hard to integrate properly into the team. (Rebecca, repeat)

Rebecca's comments about feeling like an outsider, despite returning to the same job she had during pregnancy, demonstrated the way in which a lack of continuity within returners' workgroups could contribute to returners feeling out of place. Ute also described how changes in the team had left her feeling unsettled following her second return to work:

I found it a bit more difficult this time, especially because there are a lot of relatively young and inexperienced colleagues and I have missed a bit of collegiality. To put it bluntly, young people are ambitious, which is good, but their elbows are also relatively far out. I haven't experienced this because the team composition was different after the first return. (Ute, repeat)

In comparison, Nora, who emphasised the importance of her first return to work, above, returned to work with the same manager and colleagues with whom she had worked prior to taking leave. Therefore, in the absence of continuity within the work role, the experience gained from a prior return to work had limited relevance for reclaiming worker identities during a subsequent return to work.

5.3.2 Career trajectory

The data from two of the repeat returners indicated that returners' prior returns to work influenced their subsequent re-entry experiences. As discussed above, returners who experienced a mismatch between their skills and the jobs they returned to engaged the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic, opting to resume their career plans at a later date. However, accepting a less central role within the organization following her first leave, made it more difficult for Wendy to change jobs after her second leave. Wendy had managed a team before her first parental leave, but when she returned, she was assigned to a strategic function within her department, without a team. Planning to have another child, Wendy decided to remain in the job, despite feeling that it was not a good match for her:

I did that for two years and it was quite okay and then it was already clear that I'm going back on maternity leave and parental leave again. So, I did not look for anything else, but it was always clear that I did not, that it wasn't going to fully utilise my capabilities, because I'm not challenged in the project or through [leading] a team. (Wendy, repeat)

As Wendy's comments indicate, she had planned to find a more interesting job following her second parental leave. However, upon re-entry, Wendy returned to the same job, a job in which she felt 'parked'. Furthermore, Wendy expressed her concern about finding a more interesting job because of the time she had already spent side-lined from the core business of her department:

Unfortunately, I've been out of the project world for five years now. We've changed our entire way of working in projects during this time. We've had a big strategic breakthrough. I can't talk to anyone about anything, I don't have any personal experience of current project work.

I can talk about how it used to be or rely on what my colleagues say, but I can't share my own experience. And that's something that bothers me very much. (Wendy, repeat)

The identity work Wendy engaged in following her first parental leave, choosing to temporarily prioritise her maternal identity, contributed to her present difficulty finding a more interesting work role because she permitted herself to be sidelined.

In contrast to Wendy's experience, Natalie drew on her previous success in returning to work to reassure herself that she would be able to get her career back on track after a difficult second re-entry experience:

The first time was better. I wasn't recognised as a high talent then. I communicated immediately, "Listen, I'm coming back and I want to progress!" A year and a half later, I was on the high talent list. (Natalie, repeat, interview notes)

Despite having had her department restructured during her leave and returning without a clear understanding of her job responsibilities, or a clear path to the first-line managerial level (for which she was on the high talent list), Natalie expressed her vision that she would attain a position as a senior manager within five years. She attributed her positive career outlook in part to coming from a culture in which it was common to have domestic help care for children from the age of three months. However, she also considered her career to be on an upward trajectory:

My vision of the future is more positive. I think it has developed positively. When I came to Germany, I was already a team leader but then I had to take a step back. But now things are moving forward again. (Natalie, repeat, interview notes)

Natalie's comments, therefore, indicated that her past experience of returning to work and being recognised as having talent for the next level, contributed to her ability to construct a future in which she attained another promotion.

The comments within this subsection illustrate the way in which returners' plans to have another child were associated with their identity work – through the acceptance of marginalisation or the attempt to push for the next level, depending upon how they assessed their career prospects.

In this section, therefore, I have presented the data concerning the differences between a first return to work and a subsequent return to work. I demonstrated that, for some returners, a subsequent return to work was just as disruptive to their worker identities as a first return. Furthermore, I showed that delays in promotion, which both first-time and repeat returners encountered, had a cumulative impact on repeat returners' efforts to reclaim their worker identities. Finally, I demonstrated that returners' plans to have another child were related to their identity work in response to organizational cues about their career prospects.

I now shift attention to the results concerning how the length of parental leave influenced returners' identity work.

5.4 Perceived organizational work-life support

Consistent with prior research (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015), the data indicated that returners' perceptions of cultural and structural work-life support influenced their identity work by prompting questions concerning their ability to perform both roles, or by assuaging their fears.

5.4.1 Cultural support

Experiencing cultural support from managers and colleagues inspired returners with a feeling of validation for their worker identities. Returners relayed stories demonstrating that receiving positive feedback about the way they were working encouraged them, as is evident in Babette's comments:

The fact that my team leader is very impressed with how I do things, how I do my job, and gives me a lot of very positive feedback is, of course, motivation for me. (Babette)

Returners monitored their colleagues' and managers' reactions for hints of support. For example, Caroline expressed feeling positive about a senior manager remembering her name after her sixth month of leave.

However, echoing critical accounts within the literature (e.g. Ashcraft, 1999; Dick, 2006; Gatrell, 2007a; Peus and Traut-Mattausch, 2008), several returners within this study indicated that they encountered bias which resulted in the postponement of promotion. Pia relayed a situation that took place during her pregnancy, which she perceived as contributing to her stalled advancement within the organization. In this situation, Pia described her department head's decision to take Pia off the high talent list, justifying the action as being in Pia's best interest:

It was just communicated in passing, "Right I took that out, because otherwise you would have to go straight to the Assessment Centre when you come back." That's what my old department head said. (Pia, first-time)

Although Pia had originally accepted being removed from the high talent list by assuring herself that she would be recognised as a high talent upon re-entry, her comments indicated that she was beginning to accept her marginalisation as the price for having her children:

I spent three years being upset about this, I still get upset sometimes, rarely now, but sometimes. Meanwhile I don't care, because my kids are more important to me at the moment. It's the price for my kids, they're worth it to me but I found it mean anyway because they gave me that idiotic reasoning. It's just that when I was pregnant, at some point I thought I'm not arguing any more, I'll get it back when I come back. It doesn't matter. (Pia, first-time)

Pia's comments reflected how traumatic the experience she had was to her in that, even after her three-year leave, she still hadn't completely come to terms with what happened. Similarly, Ute described being passed over for a promised promotion during her first pregnancy:

I saw that the job was posted and I mentioned it to him and he said: It would have been your job, but ... and looked at my stomach. And then I realized that this is not going to happen now. Yeah, it's ... so I digested it, it was a big damper for me, but I digested it, I thought: O.k., that's just the way it is now. (Ute, repeat)

Ute's choice of the word 'digested' indicated that it took time for her to accept being passed over for a promotion because of her pregnancy. However, her repetition of the word 'now' – 'this is not going to happen *now*' and 'that's just the way it is *now*' – indicated that she remained hopeful about receiving a promotion in the future.

In addition to encountering bias during pregnancy, some returners also experienced bias upon workplace re-entry. For example, Lara maintained her place on the high talent list throughout her pregnancy and leave and had been promised that she would attend a management seminar that was a prerequisite for her promotion upon re-entry. Despite assurances that she would attend the next seminar, when she attempted to register, she was told that the seminar was full. Lara surmised that she had not received a place on the seminar because of her parental leave:

Right that was such a situation, the first time I felt, it definitely has something to do with the fact that I was not there, or that I was not present. "Oh, if we have to exclude people, then more likely those who have a child or are on parental leave." I don't know. It's my interpretation. But that's what I think, no idea if that's true, but that's my feeling. That was at the beginning. That was in August. And for all these reasons, I've had it. I'm looking to see if I can go somewhere else. (Lara, first)

Although Lara remained on the high talent list, her inability to attend the seminar required for her next promotion indicated the way in which returners described encountering bias that contributed to delays in their career advancement.

5.4.2 Structural support

ManCo offered a range of HR initiatives to support professional and managerial employees with their management of nonwork commitments, such as telework, time-in-lieu and part-time work arrangements (e.g. reduced working hours and job-sharing). During the data collection period, ManCo modified its telework policy to make it more accessible to employees by making telework available to everyone, except in extreme cases, such as those requiring special equipment. Returners found telework particularly helpful because it helped them avoid wasting time they could be spending at work or with their children on commuting. One returner indicated that had it not been for the option of telework, she would not have returned to work when she did:

[Telework] is such a luxury, I must say. Compared to friends or acquaintances I know that don't have the opportunity. They have to either go back full-time, with really way more hours, and drive to the office or they just stay at home and earn nothing. And so I really found this a super compromise. (Anne)

As Anne's comment demonstrated, structural supports such as flexible work arrangements facilitated returners in organizing and managing their scheduling challenges.

Despite the availability of such HR initiatives, returners' accounts of ManCo's talent management process indicated structural bias within the system that negatively impacted on their chances for promotion. To be promoted from the IC level to the first-line manager level within ManCo, employees had first to be nominated for the high talent list by their immediate manager and then confirmed by the senior managers within the department. Nominations were submitted at the end of the year and discussed with senior managers at the start of the following year. In addition, there were progressive stages of talent, beginning with 'promising talent' and ending with 'ready'. Once an IC was recognised as a high talent, she had to be confirmed as such every year by her line manager until she attained the 'ready' status and could proceed to the assessment centre. During the assessment centre, multiple candidates were simultaneously

evaluated by a panel of ManCo managers concerning their ability to lead a team. Passing the assessment centre was a prerequisite for any first-line managerial position.

Some returners considered ManCo's promotion process when planning their parental leaves. For example, Babette and her partner planned their leaves to maximise Babette's chances for promotion:

And so we thought about what made sense, even for, it might sound a little bit, so I'll just say it, even for all those [talent management] rounds that run like that, the whole evaluation rounds with senior management. (Babette, first-time)

Babette and her partner timed her leave so that she would re-enter work with enough time in the calendar year to be nominated as a talent at year-end. However, Babette's approach was not common, with more returners having expressed their disappointment at either not being recognised as a high talent due to absence during the year, or not having their high talent status reconfirmed. Melanie's example was more typical of how returners described their experience of the talent management process in relation to their parental leaves. Her comment is also indicative of the way in which returners were penalised for taking leave:

Last year, I only missed two and a half months and they're telling me they can't give me a promotion or anything. No performance points because I was not there enough. And by the end of this year, I'll have actually worked maybe only five or six months. Because I had parental leave and maternity leave and holidays, there's not much left. So, basically, I shouldn't have worked so hard this year because I won't get anything again this year. So, in that respect, it's two lost career years. (Melanie, repeat)

Because Melanie took a relatively short leave (three months), she equated the time she lost in conjunction with her leave as two years. Like Melanie, Tanja also described not receiving a promotion, which she thought was overdue.

Furthermore, her example demonstrated the potential cumulative impact of multiple parental leaves:

I want a promotion. I started at ManCo in 2010 and got pregnant in 2013, relatively quickly and I never got much further. The first years I was just naïve and let them hold me back. I've gotten [performance] points, which gives you more money, but I'm just missing the big jump.
(Tanja, repeat)

At the time of our interview, Tanja had been with ManCo for over six years and despite receiving performance bonuses, she had not received a promotion. Her use of the word 'naïve' reflected her feeling of having been taken advantage of by the company. Concurrently, her example illustrated how taking two parental leaves (each one year in duration) contributed to her exclusion from the promotion process.

However, how returners responded to the experience of bias upon returning to work was also related to their plans to have another child, as discussed in the following sub-section.

5.4.3 Planning another child

The analysis of the data demonstrated a bidirectional relationship between returners' plans to have another child and their identity work in response to organizational cues about their career prospects. Some returners discussed how their plans to have another child influenced their expectations of themselves as workers. These returners viewed their plans to have another child as being at odds with career progression and discussed accepting marginalisation as a worker. For example, Gisela's comments indicated that she accepted a lack of career advancement as a consequence of being a mother and limiting the hours she was able to spend at work:

I am also realistic and, regrettably, have to say that I'm a mother now and I'm not done with my family planning yet, either. If I have another child, then comes another break and then I will be able to work even less after parental leave, because with two children, the oldest goes to

school and then I'll have even less time. That's why I have no ambitions. Simply because I also don't think I have a chance. That's unfortunately how it is. (Gisela, first-time)

Gisela's comment indicated that she accepted marginalisation as a worker because she thought that she would not be promoted given her anticipated career break and further reduction in working hours following the birth of a second child. Like Gisela, Anne thought her plans to have another child clashed with aspirations for career advancement, although she did not view her reduced working hours as an issue:

But the way everything fits now I could imagine – assuming I wouldn't want to have a second child now – but that I would go back to being fully focussed on career, I believe that my boss would support me. I feel like you could do that within the company now. I think even part-time. (Anne, first-time)

While Gisela's and Anne's comments indicated that they were willing to accept marginalisation as workers because of their plans to have another child, some returners viewed their plans to have another child as an impetus to strive for career advancement as quickly as possible. Returners with plans to have another child, who viewed their career plans as being on track, regarded the time until their next pregnancy as their 'window' for promotion:

So, if I want to have a second child, I have this three-year window to make it to the next level. Then it's closed again for three, maybe two years. With two children in my opinion the chance is a bit ... either it works now or it does not work out. (Dagmar, first-time)

While Dagmar seemed focussed on attaining her next promotion before having another child, Babette indicated that although she wanted to be promoted before becoming pregnant again that she would not delay her plans to do so:

I wouldn't stop my family planning for it now. If I don't get "Ready" this year, I won't wait three or four years to get it and delay family planning and risk not having more children. (Babette, first-time)

Despite evaluating her chances of promotion positively, Babette was unwilling to sacrifice her plans to expand her family in favour of securing her next promotion.

Returners' plans to have another child not only influenced their identity work in relation to their worker identities, for some returners, who struggled to reclaim their worker identities upon re-entry, having another child served as an escape. A small number of returners reasoned that fighting marginalisation as a worker would not be worth the investment of their time and energy and indicated a shift to segmentation identity strategy:

I always used to say that you have to power through and work hard, but at some point, I came to the point where I said: If the company cannot manage to give me a reasonable scope of work, then I am now too tired to keep knocking and asking: What may I work on and with whom? Communicate properly, give me an office and so on. So, I'm saying now that I'm probably going to have a second child anyway, I don't know, so we haven't detailed out when and how, but certainly not more than two or three years. So now I think this is probably the second focus right now. (Gabriele, first-time)

Gabriele's comments demonstrated how returners, frustrated with a mismatch between their skills and the jobs they returned to, related their acceptance of their work situation to their plans to have another child. Similarly, Lara, who had discussed not being placed in the management seminar (above) described the mental calculation she made in conjunction with her plans to have another child:

It's just a question of my life plan, for me. Should I start right now and show everyone what I can do again, do a great job and in three years I've made it to where I've achieved a good standing again and then go out again because a sibling is on the way? Or should I just get through this and start then at the end of 30 again. At the moment, we're opting for the latter. I'm doing the job now, and hopefully I won't be doing it for much longer, then I want, between us, then I'm out again. (Lara, first-time)

Importantly, as discussed in the preceding chapter, returners who discussed using the segmentation identity strategy temporarily assumed that they would resume career advancement after returning from their next leave.

5.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings indicating how the duration of parental leave, experience from re-entering work after prior parental leaves and perceived organizational work-life support, influenced returners' efforts to reclaim their worker identities upon workplace re-entry. I described how taking less than one year of parental leave facilitated returners' efforts at reclaiming their worker identities by helping them maintain their organizational status, sustain their visibility as workers and minimise their risk of skills obsolescence. The data revealed that taking a shorter parental leave, while facilitating returners' claiming of worker identities, created challenges for the maternal identities. In contrast, returners who took a longer parental leave struggled to reclaim their worker identities but had fewer issues related to their maternal identities.

I demonstrated how having more than one return to work within the same organization, although beneficial in preparing returners for what to expect, created additional obstacles to career advancement through the cumulative impact of delayed promotions and time off the career track. Furthermore, I described how identity work tactics returners engaged during prior returns to work influenced constructions of working mother selves in the present.

Finally, the analysis of the data concerning perceived organizational work-life support indicated that a lack of cultural and structural support presented returners with hurdles upon re-entry and prompted them to focus on their maternal identities. In contrast, the perception of organizational work-life support, helped returners feel validation for their maternal and worker identities and encouraged them to pursue career advancement.

5.6 Summary of findings and a conceptual framework

Figure 5-1 A conceptual framework of returners' identity work presents the findings from this chapter, in addition to those of the previous chapter, as a

conceptual framework describing returners' identity work. The framework illustrates how dialectic identity work tactics, constructions of working mother selves, identity strategies and image management comprise different elements of returners' identity work. Furthermore, the diagram illustrates the influence of length of leave, prior re-entry experience and perceived organizational work-life support on returners' engagement in identity work. Finally, as illustrated by the concentric circles, the individual factors influencing identity work and the different aspects of returners' identity work are influenced by maternal and worker norms. This framework will be discussed further in the following chapter.

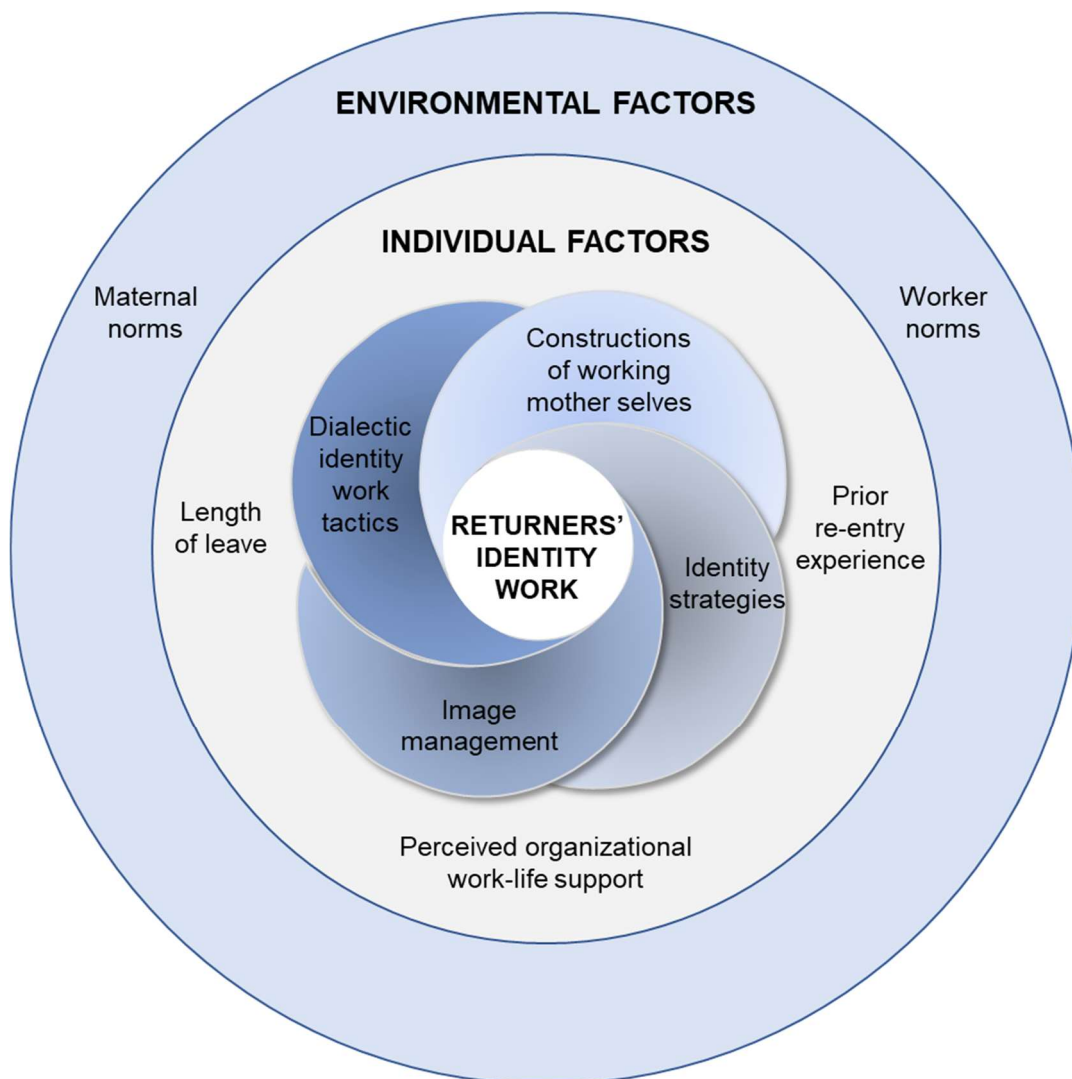


Figure 5-1 A conceptual framework of returners' identity work

6 DISCUSSION & CONTRIBUTIONS

6.1 Chapter introduction

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the study's findings, presented in detail in the two preceding chapters. I then discuss the different elements of returners' identity work presented within the conceptual framework – identity strategies, dialectic identity work tactics, image management and constructions of working mother selves – in relation to the literature regarding returners' maternal and worker identity work. I also discuss how prior re-entry experience and length of parental leave, in addition to perceived organizational work-life support influenced returners' identity work. I then turn to the implications of this study for the literature, work practice and policy. Finally, I reflect on the study's limitations before closing with my recommendations for future research.

6.2 Summary of the key findings

The aim of this study was to explore how returners engaged in identity work related to their maternal and worker identities. The results of the thematic analysis of the data are illustrated in the conceptual framework of returners' identity work in the preceding chapter and repeated in Figure 6-1 below.

Influenced by competing maternal and worker norms, the salience of returners' maternal and worker identities increased, at times, prompting them to question their identities as workers and as mothers. Length of parental leave, prior re-entry experience and perceived organizational work-life support were individual factors that influenced returners' engagement in identity work. Shaped by their constructions of themselves as working mothers, returners responded to challenges to their maternal and worker identities by engaging in image management to gain validation from others for their enactment of maternal and worker identities and in dialectic identity work tactics to maintain both identities in a state of tension. Returners also developed identity strategies based on their visions of themselves as working mothers and the working mother image they sought to project. Although identity strategies were related to the dialectic identity

work tactics returners engaged in, there was not a direct correspondence between them.

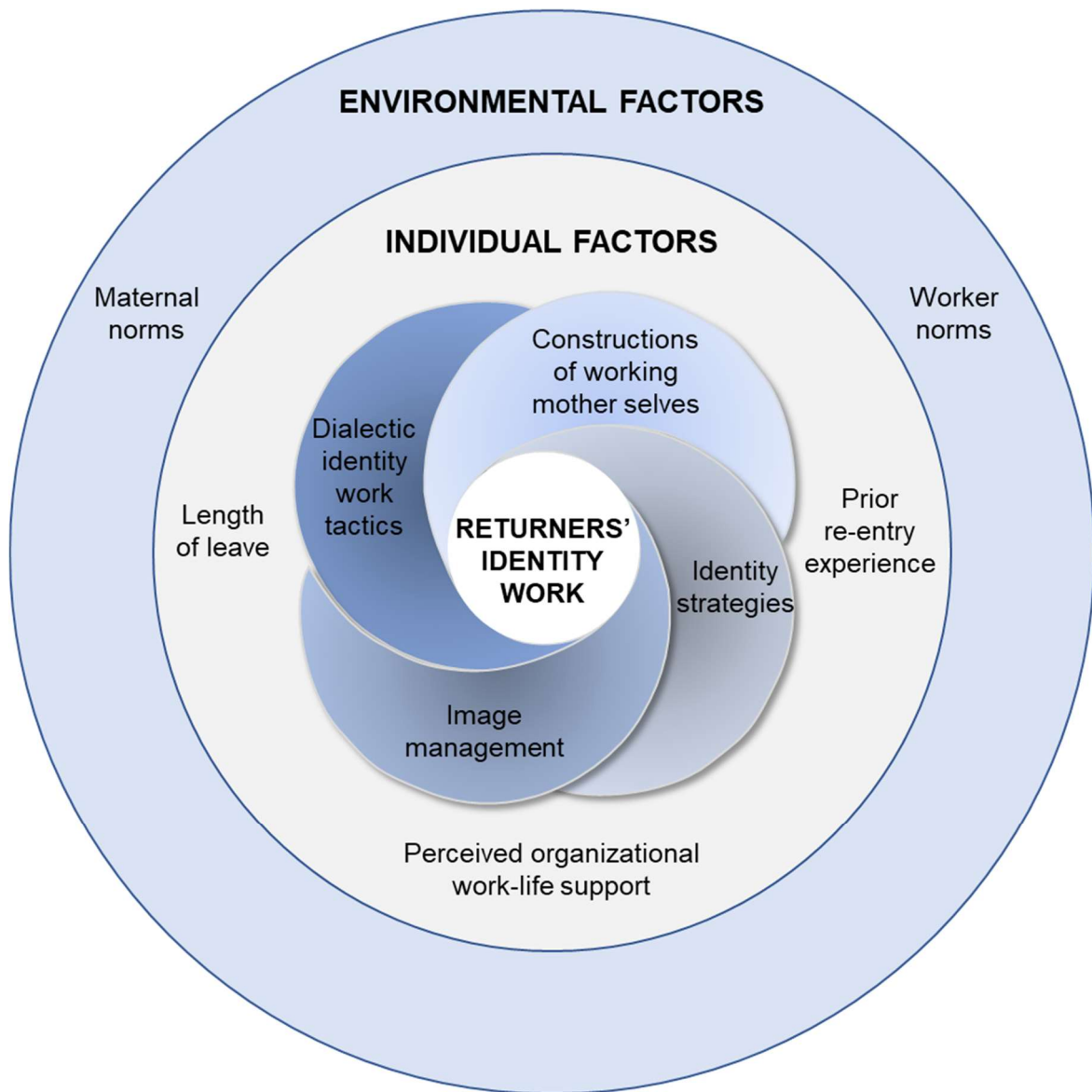


Figure 6-1 A conceptual framework of returners' identity work

6.3 Returners' identity work

This study found that returners' maternal and worker identity work upon organizational re-entry was inconsistent – showing signs of shifting priorities, compromise and allowances for unmet expectations. The study revealed dialectic identity work tactics underlying returners' maternal and worker identity work, enabling them to sustain both identities in a state of unresolved tension. In addition, returners also discussed utilising identity strategies, engaging in image management and constructing working mother selves to claim their maternal and worker identities. The following subsections relate these findings to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity development.

6.3.1 Identity strategies and dialectic identity work tactics

Strong societal expectations for mothers of young children in Germany and an equally strong image of ideal workers within ManCo combined to create unresolvable tensions between returners' maternal and worker identities upon organizational re-entry following parental leave. Although tensions between maternal and worker norms have been identified within the literature (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Herman et al., 2013; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press), studies have suggested that returners are able to manage these tensions by selecting a single identity strategy. Consistent with prior research and without prompting, returners discussed utilising the identity strategies of prioritisation (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press) or segmentation (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press) to deal with tensions between their maternal and worker identities. However, the results of this study demonstrate that even when returners claimed to utilise an identity strategy, they seldom adhered to it.

Instead, returners' accounts of identity triggers indicated incoherence in their responses to these situations, contradicting the idea of being able to resolve tensions between maternal and worker identities with a single identity strategy. For example, in contrast to studies that group women according to the extent to

which they conform to the ideal worker (Herman et al., 2013) or good mothering norms (Hattery, 2001), this study demonstrated that returners shifted their positions in relation to these norms – upholding good mothering and ideal worker norms while also questioning them.

Considering the results in the light of recent theorising concerning equipollent identity work (Purchase et al., 2018) suggests that the strong maternal and worker norms within this study's context contributed to inconsistencies in returners' maternal and worker identity work. Purchase et al. (2018) describe equipollent identity work as resulting when individuals are faced with two strong and competing sets of norms. The idea of individuals negotiating between two strong sets of norms also corresponds to the neutralisation identity strategy (Johnston and Swanson, 2006; 2007; Raskin, 2006; Ladge and Little, in press) in which returners sought to meet ideals for mothers and for workers but felt incapable of achieving either. However, Johnston and Swanson (2007) do not elaborate on how returners utilising this identity strategy maintained both identities in this neutral state. Ladge and Little (in press) propose that returners may maintain a 'confused work-family identity' when they are unable to resolve asymmetries between how others view them as working mothers and their maternal and worker identities, suggesting that returners utilise a segmentation identity strategy to sustain the confused identity state.

Purchase et al. (2018) describe identity work tactics related to equipollent identity work; however, the study's emphasis on the visible signs of (non)conformity to Sikh religious norms of appearance in Thai business culture offer limited applicability of these identity work tactics to the case of returners. Furthermore, the researchers neglect to explain how individuals sustain both identities despite the incoherence they experience.

Drawing upon Johnston and Swanson's (2007) discussion of maternal and worker identities as dialectic and Kreiner et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of identity elasticity, I frame the six identity work tactics returners utilised to sustain their maternal and worker identities as dialectic identity work tactics (see 4.3). In so doing, I also answer Kreiner et al.'s (2015) call for the application of identity

elasticity to individual identity. Kreiner et al. (2015) define identity elasticity as, 'the tensions that simultaneously stretch, while holding together, social constructions of identity,' conceptualising organizational identity as a process in which organizational members' competing views simultaneously support the expansion and constriction of the organization's identity. Similarly, the returners in this study engaged in expanding and constricting identity work tactics to maintain their maternal and worker identities in a state of tension, veering in the direction of their espoused identity strategies, rather than following a consistent course.

Constricting identity work tactics supported constructions of maternal and worker identities as oppositional by defending norms, permitting shortcomings without resolving identity conflicts and accepting marginalisation of one or both identities. The defending norms identity work tactic parallels discussions of conformity to ideal worker (e.g. Herman et al., 2013) and good mothering norms (e.g. Hattery, 2001) apparent in the extant literature. However, I conceptualise defending norms not as a consistent approach to dealing with tensions between maternal and worker identities, but as an identity work tactic characterised by returners invoking social constructions of good mothers and ideal workers to explain behaviour, such as the returner who conformed to good mothering norms by reducing her working hours despite earning more than her partner, or the returner who drew on ideal worker norms to justify a hiring manager's decision not to invite her for a job interview out of concern that she might miss work too frequently. Furthermore, in contrast to prior research, which has discussed the issue of conformity in relation to either norms for the maternal or the worker identity, I conceptualise the defending norms identity work tactic in relation to both, highlighting that conformity to either norm while maintaining both identities is problematic.

The permitting shortcomings identity work tactic has not been discussed within the literature concerning working mothers' maternal and worker identities. While Johnston and Swanson (2007) commented that some of the full-time employed mothers in their study engaged in a 'neutralization' strategy, they described these

women as 'ricocheting' between maternal and worker identities. In contrast, the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic served as a mechanism through which returners were able to repeatedly fall short of their expectations of themselves as mothers or as workers, while still maintaining those expectations. Identity research indicates that when an individual's behaviour conflicts with her ideals for the relevant identity, she is likely to change her expectations of herself for the identity (Burke and Stets, 2009; Pratt et al., 2006). However, the permitting shortcomings identity work tactic was utilised by both first-time and repeat returners, suggesting that the identity work tactic may be used over a prolonged period of time to sustain returners' expectations of themselves as mothers and as workers, despite behavioural inconsistencies.

Like the women who used the 'cul de sac' identity strategy in Herman et al.'s (2013) study, returners who used the accepting marginalisation identity work tactic indicated that they thought that unfavourable revisions of their worker identities were a trade-off for their engagement in the maternal role. However, as discussed above, the decision to consistently subordinate one identity in relation to the other is indicative of the prioritisation identity strategy. Furthermore, in contrast to Herman et al.'s (2013) study, I found that returners accepted marginalisation not only of their worker identities, but also of their maternal identities. Importantly, the data indicated that returners did not exclusively accept marginalisation, rather that they deemed some situations as warranting the identity work tactic while refusing marginalisation in other situations.

In addition to utilising constricting identity work tactics, which narrowed their constructions of maternal and worker identities and complicated their engagement in maternal and worker roles, returners also drew upon expanding identity work tactics. Through contesting norms, refusing marginalisation and reframing maternal and worker identities, returners supported the expansion of their maternal and worker identities, facilitating their engagement in both roles.

By contesting norms, returners opened up possibilities for constructing maternal and worker identities in new ways, which stretched the limitations set by existing norms. For example, Wendy questioned management's assumptions about the

necessity of working full-time to lead a team, arguing that her availability with a part-time work schedule was comparable to her colleague's, who spent half of each month in Asia, while his team was in Germany. This identity work tactic, therefore, comprises one element of Herman et al.'s (2013) discussion of the 'breaking the mould' identity strategy in which working mothers challenged ideal worker norms. However, although the majority of returners in this study employed the contesting norms identity work tactic to question ideal worker norms because of their implications for marginalising returners' worker identities, consistent with prior research (Christopher, 2012; Hattery, 2001), a small minority also contested norms related to motherhood by questioning childcare practices that were unfavourable to mothers who worked more than 20 hours per week.

Confronted by cues from others that being a working mother compromised their maternal or worker identities, returners engaged the refusing marginalisation identity work tactic to push for better treatment. This identity work tactic, therefore, corresponds to the other part of Herman et al.'s (2013) discussion of 'breaking the mould', in that returners not only contested (above) ideal worker norms, but they also fought for better positioning within the organization by refusing marginalisation.

Finally, a returner's ability to revise the meanings of her maternal and worker identities to make it possible to be both a good worker and a good mother simultaneously is an important part of constructing a positive self-view as a working mother (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006) and was evident in returners' identity work. Drawing on the reframing identity work tactic, returners were able to construct their involvement in work as positive for their maternal role by observing the socialisation benefits to their children of being in childcare or having a happier mother, for example. Returners also constructed their engagement in their maternal role as beneficial for the organization citing, for example, their improved 'soft skills' and increased efficiency. While the literature suggests that reframing might be used to 'resolve' tensions between maternal and worker identities (Johnston and Swanson, 2007), the evidence from

this study indicates that it is a tool that returners use to maintain both identities, but not one that removes the tensions between them.

This conceptualisation of dialectic identity work tactics, therefore, develops the existing literature by demonstrating that the formulation of an identity strategy to manage maternal and worker identities following parental leave does not conclude returners' identity work with regard to these identities. In this regard, therefore, the findings of this study indicate that the 'identity adjustment tactics' Ladge and Greenberg (2015) describe (i.e. choosing to prioritise or revise maternal and worker identities) what may be a first step in formulating an identity strategy that is then supported by dialectic identity work tactics.

In addition, the findings of this study indicate that both first-time and repeat returners (i.e. women who have taken more than one parental leave) engage in dialectic identity work. However, much of the extant research concerning women's experiences of returning to work after parental leave has focussed on the experiences of first-time returners, based on the assumption that becoming a mother for the first time is more disruptive to a woman's sense of self (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006; Morgan and King, 2012). The findings of this study, therefore, demonstrate that returners' maternal and worker identity work is ongoing as they strive to be both good mothers and good workers. Furthermore, the finding that repeat returners engage in dialectic identity work suggests that developing an identity strategy as a working mother is a recurring process, rather than the one-time event suggested within Ladge and Greenberg's (2015) model of returners' resocialisation.

6.3.2 Image management

The analysis of the data demonstrates that returners engaged in image management practices to shape how others saw them as mothers and as workers. Accounts of the difficulty for pregnant employees and returners to conform to professional standards of appearance within the literature indicate the importance of projecting a professional image to women's worker identity claims (Gatrell, 2013; Haynes, 2008a; Little et al., 2015). Returners in this study, like

those in the literature, displayed concern for how others within the organization viewed them and exerted effort to influence others' perceptions of them.

However, although research suggests that appearing to conform to ideal worker norms is likely to be the best strategy for career advancement (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009), participants of this study talked of a paradoxical concern that others within the organization would disapprove of them for appearing too work focussed. This finding, consistent with Vinkenburg et al.'s (2012) conclusion that mothers who have the opportunity to work part-time but choose not to do so are viewed unfavourably by others, suggests that returners may be encouraged to appear less work-focussed to conform with good mothering norms. By attempting to appear less work-focussed, however, returners may also be unwittingly confirming stereotypes of working mothers as being less career committed.

These findings are likely to be the result of the strong maternal norms operating within the study's context. As discussed within the section concerning the German national context, the existence of the term raven mother, non-existent within the English language, underscores the social pressure returners encountered to be, or to appear that they were, the primary carers for their children. In this way, returners, concerned about being labelled raven mothers, may downplay their work-orientated behaviour and, thus, risk being overlooked for promotions.

The effort returners invested in appearing to be good mothers and ideal workers is consistent with Ladge and Little's (in press) conceptual study indicating that working parents monitor and work to resolve discrepancies between their identities as working parents and their 'work-family image' (i.e. a reflection of others' perceptions of their 'competence' in their roles as a parent and a worker). Furthermore, the results of this study support Ladge and Little's (in press) suggestion that returners engage in identity work when they perceive asymmetries between their 'work-family image' and their maternal and worker identities.

6.3.3 Constructing working mother selves

The results of this study confirm Haynes' (2008b) finding that returners construct future visions of themselves as both workers and mothers. Although Ladge et al. (2012) described how pregnant employees produced images of their possible selves as working mothers, in their subsequent study concerning returners, Ladge and Greenberg (2015) focussed solely on returners' visions of 'future work selves.' While the latter study's omission may have been motivated by its concern with returners' career attitudes and behaviour, the coexistence of maternal and worker identities in returners' visions of themselves in the future is an important factor in considering why returners modify their career behaviour. Consistent with Haynes' (2008b) conclusion that returners construct visions of themselves as working mothers, the results of this study indicate that being able to imagine a future in which maternal and worker identities are compatible and meet returners' ideals for each identity, is an important motivator for maintaining both identities.

6.4 Individual factors influencing identity work

This study identified three individual factors influencing returners' identity work: length of parental leave, prior re-entry experience and perceived organizational work-life support. I discuss these findings in greater detail in the following subsections.

6.4.1 Length of parental leave

The analysis of the data demonstrated that the length of parental leave taken influenced returners' maternal and worker identity work in that shorter parental leaves were associated with greater ease in reclaiming worker identities, but more difficulty in claiming maternal identities. In contrast, longer parental leaves had the opposite influence on maternal and worker identities, with returners experiencing more difficulty reclaiming worker identities and greater ease claiming maternal identities after long parental leaves.

The extant literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identities following parental leave has drawn on US-based (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Johnston

and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) or UK-based returners (e.g. Haynes, 2008b; Millward, 2006), both having limited access to parental leave in comparison to returners in Germany. The US provides a 12-week unpaid medical leave for employees who work at a location with at least 50 employees, resulting in some returners having to negotiate with their employers to take parental leave at all. In addition, Millward's (2006) study was conducted before the UK parental leave provision increased from 26 weeks to 52 weeks in 2007, a change which Haynes' (2008b) participants may have experienced, although the length of parental leave taken is not specified within the paper. Given that the extant literature has been based on the experiences of returners who took comparable lengths of parental leave, the implications of taking a longer parental leave on returners' identity work are absent from the literature. Therefore, I will now discuss the study's findings in relation to studies that have explored the impact of different lengths of parental leave on returners' experiences of returning to work.

Returners who took shorter leaves (i.e. six months or less) discussed having been given key work responsibilities upon re-entry, indicating that their managers viewed them as valuable workers and that they were able to reclaim their worker identities following parental leave. However, since returners who took shorter leaves often did so to protect their work roles and career prospects, these returners were also likely to have been highly regarded by management before going on leave. Furthermore, despite being entrusted with key assignments upon re-entry, returners who took shorter leaves still encountered bias in the form of work role revisions and being overlooked for promotion following parental leave. As a result, this study supports quantitative research indicating that while longer leaves can be destabilising for women's careers, shorter leaves do not improve returners' career prospects (Aisenbrey et al., 2009).

Interestingly, returners who took six months or less of parental leave struggled to claim their maternal identities upon workplace re-entry. This is consistent with research by Wiese and Ritter (2012), indicating that women who take shorter leaves are more likely to express regrets with regard to returning to work or working hours. Furthermore, Wiese and Ritter (2012) suggest that returners'

regrets may be explained by a lack of self-confidence in the maternal role, a view supported by Ladge, Humberd and Eddleston (2017). Consistent with these studies, the data indicated that a lack of confidence in their abilities as mothers contributed to returners who took a shorter parental leave having trouble claiming their identities as mothers; however, the data also showed that concerns about violating social norms were also a factor.

Returners who took shorter leaves made references to the term raven mother in conjunction with their comments about having doubts about the timing of their returns to work and described situations in which they had to defend their decisions about the length of leave they took to others. Prior research has shown that women who choose not to reduce their working hours to accommodate their maternal role, despite having the opportunity to do so, are viewed unfavourably by others (Vinkenburg et al., 2012). The results of this study, therefore, extend Vinkenburg et al.'s (2012) findings by indicating that taking a shorter parental leave than the norm is also viewed unfavourably by others within the workplace and can contribute to bias against returners and challenge returners' efforts at claiming their maternal identities.

In contrast to the returners who took shorter parental leaves, those who took longer leaves did not raise the issue of insecurities with their maternal identities in the interviews. This finding is consistent with research indicating that returners who take longer leaves have fewer regrets about returning to work (Wiese and Ritter, 2012). Instead, one returner, who took a longer leave, described having difficulty distancing herself from the primary caregiver role after she returned to full-time work, despite her partner being on parental leave. This finding supports the perspective that lengthy parental leaves reinforce traditional gender roles (Mandel and Semyonov, 2005).

Returners who took longer parental leaves also experienced greater difficulty reclaiming their worker identities. Taking a longer leave increased the chances of returners experiencing changes in work roles or staffing that would negatively impact on their efforts at reclaiming their worker identities, which has been observed as costly for employers (Fitzenberger et al., 2016). These findings are

consistent with research indicating the adverse effects of longer parental leaves on returners' wages (Gangl and Ziefle, 2009) and promotions (Mandel and Semyonov, 2005).

Importantly, the findings of this study revealed differences in returners' maternal and worker identity work based on the length of parental leave they took. To date, studies examining maternal and worker identities following parental leave have not considered how the time a woman is away from work might influence her efforts at (re)claiming her maternal and worker identities. This gap within the literature stems from the predominance of studies drawing on UK-based (e.g. Haynes, 2008b; Millward, 2006) and US-based (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) samples of returners. By focussing on the experiences of returners in a context in which they have access to up to three years' parental leave, this study extends prior research by demonstrating that the length of parental leave taken influences returners' identity work upon workplace re-entry.

6.4.2 Prior re-entry experience

Consistent with the extant literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006), the findings indicated that becoming a mother for the first time was disruptive to a woman's sense of self; however, the results also indicated that being a repeat returner presented a greater challenge to returners' efforts at reclaiming their worker identities, an aspect that has been overlooked by current research into returners' identity work. Although studies examining returners' maternal and worker identity work have contained mixed samples of first-time and repeat returners (e.g. Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Herman et al., 2013) no study, to my knowledge, has addressed the implications of prior re-entry experience on returners' identity work.

A few studies have commented on differences between first-time and repeat returners, suggesting that repeat returners may have an advantage over first-time returners because they know what to expect upon organizational re-entry (Liu and Buzzanell, 2004) and that repeat returners may be more likely to create niche

roles for themselves at work (Gatrell, 2013), which would make it easier for them to reclaim or to adapt their worker identities upon re-entry. However, contradicting the view that repeat returners may have less difficulty returning to work, Wiese and Heidemeier (2012) observed in their study that mothers with more than one child had more difficulty readjusting to work following parental leave. The results of this study indicated qualified support for the view that repeat returners may be able to better position themselves within the organization because of their prior experience of returning to work.

Importantly, however, although repeat returners benefitted from having already experienced combining maternal and worker identities, staffing changes or organizational restructuring impacting on work teams and job content during a returner's leave resulted in some repeat returners experiencing their subsequent leave as being as disruptive as their first (e.g. see Rebecca's example 5.3.1). The findings of this study, therefore, highlighted the importance of continuity in returners' work roles for them to benefit from their prior re-entry experiences.

Both first-time and repeat returners experienced stalled career momentum in conjunction with parental leave. In addition to the interruption caused by the parental leave itself, some returners encountered bias during pregnancy or upon returning to work that prevented them from advancing (Ashcraft, 1999; Dick, 2006; Gatrell, 2007a; Peus and Traut-Mattausch, 2008). These findings are consistent with quantitative research conducted by Valcour and Ladge (2008) indicating that having fewer children is positively related to objective career success for women. However, the qualitative experience of multiple returns to work on returners' maternal and worker identities has previously gone unexamined. The results of this study indicated that the cumulative impact of taking more than one parental leave complicated repeat returners' efforts to re-establish themselves as valuable workers, due in part, to cumulative time away from work, consistent with the human capital depreciation explanation (Mincer and Polachek, 1974).

However, the results of this study also indicated a relationship between perceived organizational work-life support (see 6.4.3) and returners' efforts to reclaim their

worker identities following a first parental leave. Furthermore, a few of the repeat returners referenced their previous experience of returning to work after parental leave in conjunction with their expectations for the current return to work. This finding, consistent with research indicating that past identities influence present identities (Markus and Nurius, 1986), demonstrates the influence of a first return to work on a subsequent return to work. This result supports quantitative research highlighting the importance of the first re-entry experience for returners' careers (Sørensen, 1983). Furthermore, this finding provides a contributing explanation for Aisenbrey et al.'s (2009, p.596) observation that, 'climbing the career ladder seems to be harder for women with more than one child,' as it suggests that a decision to focus on one's maternal identity following a first return to work could set the tone for subsequent returns.

6.4.3 Perceived organizational work-life support

Supporting prior research conducted by Ladge and Greenberg (2015), this study established a relationship between returners' perceptions of organizational work-life support and the identity work they engaged in. However, the results of this study add nuance to this finding by indicating that perceived organizational work-life support following a first parental leave also influenced returners' plans to have additional children.

Following a first return to work, returners who received organizational cues indicating validation of their worker identities (e.g. being placed on the high talent list or being assigned important projects) viewed themselves as having a limited 'window' of time to attain advancement before having subsequent children. These returners indicated their desire to strive to attain a better job or to pursue their next promotion before becoming pregnant again. In contrast, returners who interpreted organizational cues as unsupportive of their career plans discussed shifting their resources to their maternal identities or accelerating their plans to have another child.

The results of this study, therefore, demonstrate that returners' encounters with bias and their perceptions of limited potential for career advancement contribute to revising their expectations of themselves as workers and re-evaluating their

career plans. This finding helps to explain why Gangl and Ziefle (2009) observe a residual wage gap for German returners, even after controlling for human capital depreciation, which the researchers suggest could result from employers' statistical discrimination against mothers.

6.5 A conceptual framework of returners' identity work

The conceptual framework of returners' identity work pictured above (Figure 6-1) depicts the different elements of identity work described within this study and their influencing factors.

Returners engaged in identity work in response to situations in which their maternal and worker identities became salient to them. Underlying identity heightening situations were societal expectations of good mothers and the organization's expectations for ideal workers, which served as implicit standards to which returners' behaviour was compared.

Furthermore, the framework indicates that returners' engagement in identity work was influenced by three individual factors. Firstly, the length of parental leave taken influenced returners' efforts to claim both maternal and worker identities – with shorter leaves supporting returners' claims to valued worker identities and challenging their claims to maternal identity. Secondly, returners' experience of prior returns from parental leave could facilitate their efforts to reclaim their worker identities upon re-entry when there was continuity between the work roles they had during pregnancy and upon re-entry. In addition, consistent with research on possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), a returners' ability to reclaim her worker identity following a prior return influenced her beliefs about reclaiming her worker identity following a subsequent return, thus supporting her worker identity claims. Thirdly, the study confirmed research (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) indicating that returners' perceptions of organizational work-life support influenced the identity triggers returners encountered and how they reacted to them. In addition, analysis of the data indicated that the perception of a lack of organizational work-life support encouraged returners to focus on their maternal identities, at least for the short-term.

The framework is built on the notion that identity is an ongoing process. Through identity negotiation (Swann, 1987) individuals strive, through their interactions, to convince others of how they see themselves. As such, while returners may decide to approach tensions between their maternal and worker identities by selecting an identity strategy, such as prioritisation (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press) or segmentation (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press), these identity strategies may set the tone for the dialectic identity work tactics returners draw on, but they are neither set in stone, nor do they ensure consistency in returners' responses to identity triggers. Following an initial process of socialisation, identity work continues (Kreiner et al., 2006) and, similarly, following returners' resocialisation into the organization (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015), returners continue to engage dialectic identity work tactics to sustain their maternal and worker identities.

Despite the inconsistencies between returners' identity strategies and the dialectic identity work tactics they draw upon, forming and verbalising an identity strategy enables returners to think of themselves in coherent terms. However, maintaining maternal and worker identities, given competing norms for both identities, complicates returners' efforts to think of themselves, and to appear to others, as both good mothers and ideal workers. As in other situations requiring identity work, returners negotiate between the ideal (i.e. being the kind of mother or worker they aspire to be) and their perceptions of how they are performing in both roles (Kreiner and Sheep, 2009; Ladge and Little, in press).

However, because of the competing norms returners encountered concerning maternal and worker identities, the identity work they engaged in was not limited to creating an optimally distinctive identity (Kreiner et al., 2006) in relation to one social identity (i.e. maternal or worker); rather it involved situational trade-offs between the two identities. Returners, therefore, engaged in dialectic identity work tactics, as discussed above, to sustain their maternal and worker identities in a state of continuous tension.

6.6 Contribution to knowledge

The critical review of the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work following parental leave indicated that the extant literature was limited by an assumption that returners' maternal and worker identities were relatively stable following a first transition to becoming a working mother. In addition, the predominance of studies drawing on UK- and US-based samples of returners raised questions about the applicability of these studies to women in Germany, a context in which women have access to up to three years of job-protected leave and in which good mothering norms encourage women to stay at home and to personally care for their young children. To address these limitations within the literature, this study set out to answer the research question: *How do women engage in maternal and worker identity work upon returning to work after parental leave?*

In response to this question, three aspects of returners' identity work have been highlighted within this study, which represent contributions to the extant literature. Firstly, this study makes a distinction between returners' identity strategies and dialectic identity work tactics, revealing inconsistencies between returners' espoused identity strategies and the dialectic identity work tactics they drew upon. Secondly, this study extends and deepens previous discussions of identity work through elaboration of the dialectic identity work tactics. Thirdly, this study applies the concept of identity elasticity (Kreiner et al., 2015) to individual-level identity to explain how returners are able to fall short of, but still maintain, their expectations of themselves as mothers and as workers.

In addition to the primary contributions concerning returners' identity work, this study also makes three secondary contributions by confirming returners' maternal and worker identity work in the German context and identifying parental leave length and prior re-entry experience as influencing factors to returners' identity work.

6.6.1 Distinguishing between returners' identity strategies and dialectic identity work tactics

The first contribution this study makes to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work following parental leave is to make a distinction between returners' espoused identity strategies and their use of dialectic identity work tactics. The extant research has suggested that returners utilise an identity strategy, or a consistent approach, to managing tensions between their maternal and worker identities (e.g. Christopher, 2012; Hattery, 2001; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). This study extends prior research (e.g. Christopher, 2012; Hattery, 2001; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) by demonstrating that returners draw on a range of dialectic identity work tactics, rather than adopting a single approach to dealing with tensions between their maternal and worker identities.

Supporting previous research, some returners claimed to utilise a prioritisation (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Ladge and Little, in press) or a segmentation (Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Little, in press) identity strategy. However, this study revealed inconsistencies between returners' espoused identity strategies and their use of dialectic identity work tactics. This study, therefore, extends prior research (e.g. Christopher, 2012; Hattery, 2001; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) by demonstrating that while returners may discuss having an identity strategy, in practice, returners' responses to identity triggers are not as consistent as they describe.

6.6.2 Elaborating dialectic identity work tactics

A second contribution of this study to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work is the elaboration of the dialectic identity work tactics. I identified six dialectic identity work tactics based on my analysis of the data generated for this study, which bare a resemblance to the approaches to managing tensions between maternal and worker identities within the extant literature. The identification of the first dialectic identity work tactic, defending

norms, supports prior research that indicates that returners conform to good mothering (Hattery, 2001) and ideal worker (Herman et al., 2013) norms as they navigate their maternal and worker identities following parental leave. This study extends Hattery's (2001) and Herman et al.'s (2013) conceptualisation of conformity, however, by demonstrating that returners exhibit conformity to both good mothering and ideal worker norms in their enactment of their maternal and worker identities, rather than consistently conforming to one set of norms.

The second dialectic identity work tactic identified was permitting shortcomings – characterised by returners allowing themselves to behave in ways that did not meet their expectations of themselves as mothers or workers. The identification of the permitting shortcomings dialectic identity work tactic supports Haynes' (2008b) observation that returners seek compromises between their maternal and worker identities. Furthermore, this study's definition of permitting shortcomings as a dialectic identity work tactic also extends Johnston and Swanson's (2007) discussion of the 'neutralization' identity strategy and Ladge and Little's (in press) discussion of the 'confused work-family identity,' by providing a mechanism by which returners maintain both identities, despite behaving in ways that are not always consistent with their expectations of themselves for those identities. In contrast to Johnston and Swanson's (2007) use of the term 'ricochet,' which suggests randomness in returners' identity responses, this study revealed that returners kept a mental tally and shifted priorities or sought compromises between their maternal and worker identities to maintain both.

Returners engaging the third dialectic identity work tactic, accepting marginalisation, allowed constructions of their maternal or worker identities that did not meet their expectations of themselves for the relevant identity. This study, therefore, confirms Herman et al.'s (2013) finding that some returners accept marginalisation at work because of their status as mothers – an approach the researchers associated with the 'mummy track'. This study also extends Herman et al.'s (2013) discussion of accepting marginalisation by demonstrating that returners accept marginalisation not only with regard to their worker identities

because of their status as mothers, but they also accept marginalisation of their maternal identities because of their status as workers. However, as this study has demonstrated, returners may accept marginalisation of one of their identities in a situation and then contest such marginalisation in another.

The fourth dialectic identity work tactic identified, contesting norms, involved returners challenging the *status quo* through their questioning of norms related to good mothers and ideal workers. Through the definition of the contesting norms dialectic identity work tactic, this study supports Herman et al.'s (2013) observation that working mothers may challenge ideal worker norms through their nonconformance to them while remaining intent upon furthering their careers. This study also supports prior research indicating that working mothers may challenge good mothering norms (Christopher, 2012; Hattery, 2001). Extending prior research (Christopher, 2012; Hattery, 2001; Herman et al., 2013), this study indicated that returners position themselves in relation to both sets of norms and, therefore, that they may draw upon the contesting norms dialectic identity work tactic in relation to either or both sets of norms.

The fifth dialectic identity work tactic discussed within this study was that of reframing, an identity work tactic that appears in many studies of returners' identity work (e.g. Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006). While some authors have focussed on reframing what it means to be a good mother because of one's engagement in work (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012), this study supports prior research (Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006) indicating that returners reframe their expectations of themselves as both mothers and workers to sustain the two identities. Furthermore, extending studies that present reframing as an identity strategy (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015), this study supports Haynes' (2008b) discussion of reframing as an identity work tactic that is used in combination with other identity work tactics.

The sixth, and final, dialect identity work tactic identified within this study was refusing marginalisation, which referred to returners' efforts to resist unfavourable constructions of their maternal or worker identities by others. Although returners' refusal of marginalisation is implicit in Herman et al.'s (2013) discussion of the 'breaking the mould' identity strategy, in which working mothers contested ideal worker norms while maintaining their career ambitions, the authors did not discuss the resilience returners who pursue career advancement while rejecting ideal worker norms exhibit. This study, therefore, develops Herman et al.'s (2013) discussion of 'breaking the mould' by highlighting the importance of refusing marginalisation as a worker when not conforming to ideal worker norms. Similarly, returners' refusal of marginalisation with respect to their maternal identities, despite nonconformance to good mothering norms, is implicit but not articulated within studies that consider the struggle returners experience with regard to their maternal identities upon returning to work after parental leave (e.g. Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015). This study, therefore, extends the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work by highlighting the importance of refusing marginalisation as mothers and as workers in maintaining both identities.

6.6.3 Applying Kreiner et al.'s (2015) identity elasticity

The third contribution of this study is the application of Kreiner et al.'s (2015) discussion of identity elasticity to individual identity. Drawing on recent conceptualisations of identity work under conditions of competing norms (Kreiner et al., 2015; Purchase et al., 2018), I extend Haynes' (2008b) characterisation of returners' engagement in identity work and Johnston and Swanson's (2007) discussion of maternal and worker identities as dialectic, by describing the dialectic identity work tactics returners draw upon as they endeavour to sustain their maternal and worker identities in a state of continuous tension.

Within the identity work literature, Purchase et al. (2018) describe equipollent identity work, revealing the incoherence of identity work aimed at fulfilling competing expectations for two identities. This study confirms Purchase et al.'s

(2018) conceptualisation of equipollent identity work, demonstrating inconsistencies in returners' identity work as they strive to meet their expectations for themselves as mothers and as workers. However, in describing equipollent identity work, Purchase et al. (2018) propose identity work tactics aimed at negotiating visible markers of non(conformity), which were not discussed by the returners in this study. This study did find support for the 'reconciling' identity work tactic (part of the reframing dialectic identity work tactic in this study) discussed by Purchase et al. (2018) as the attempt to reduce tensions between identities by adapting one or both identities so that there is more agreement between them.

One limitation of Purchase et al.'s (2018) discussion of equipollent identity work is that it fails to explain how individuals maintain identities, given inconsistencies in their identity work. Prior research suggests that individuals adapt their identities to bring them into alignment with their behaviour (Pratt et al., 2006). As such, it would be expected that returners would bring their expectations of themselves as workers and as mothers into alignment with the way they were enacting the roles. However, the finding that repeat returners within this study engaged in dialectic identity work tactics suggests that returners are able to maintain their expectations of themselves as workers and as mothers without behaving consistently with those expectations. To address this issue, I extend Kreiner et al.'s (2015) concept of identity elasticity to individual identity. Kreiner et al. (2015) conceptualise identity elasticity as holding organizational identity together despite individual members' competing perspectives. Applying the concept of elasticity to the dialectic identity work tactics returners engage in, I conceptualise the dialectic identity work tactics as complementary with one set expanding maternal and worker identities while the other set contracts them. In doing so, I extend Kreiner et al.'s (2015) discussion of identity elasticity to individual identity and extend Purchase et al.'s (2018) discussion of equipollent identity work to account for the maintenance of identities, despite inconsistencies in identity work.

6.6.4 Secondary contributions

In addition to the three primary contributions described above, this study offers three secondary contributions to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work, as described in the following subsections.

6.6.4.1 Confirming returners' identity work in the German national context

This study contributes to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work by confirming returners' engagement in identity work, regardless of the length of parental leave taken. As discussed above, drawing on samples of UK- and US-based returners, the extant literature has not examined returners' maternal and worker identity work in the German national context – a context in which returners have access to up to three years' parental leave. Therefore, this study extends current understandings of returners' maternal and worker identity work by addressing this gap within the literature and confirming research indicating that upon returning to work, women engage in identity work to reassert themselves as valued employees, while also trying to be good mothers (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006), regardless of the length of parental leave they take.

6.6.4.2 Revealing the influence of length of parental leave on returners' identity work

This study makes an additional contribution to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work by demonstrating that, although returners continue to engage in identity work to sustain both identities, as the length of parental leave increases, the balance of returners' identity work shifts from concerns about claiming maternal identity (short parental leave) to concerns about claiming worker identity (long parental leave). The extant literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identities following parental leave has drawn on US-based (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015) or UK-based returners (e.g. Haynes, 2008b; Millward, 2006), both having limited access to parental leave in comparison to returners in Germany. Because of the predominance of studies conducted with UK-based and US-based samples of returners (i.e. countries in which women have access

to one year, or less, of parental leave), the extant literature has not considered how variability in the length of parental leave might influence returners' identity work. This study, therefore, extends prior research (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006), which has drawn on samples of women with access to one year or less of parental leave as discussed above, by revealing the influence of the length of parental leave on returners' maternal and worker identity work.

6.6.4.3 Demonstrating the influence of prior re-entry experience on returners' identity work

This study makes a final contribution to the literature concerning returners' maternal and worker identity work by identifying prior re-entry experience as an influencing factor to returners' identity work. While one group of studies examining returners' identity work has focussed exclusively on first-time mothers (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006), the other has included mothers with more than one child without commenting on differences between them (e.g. Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007). The former group's focus on first-time returners (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006) reflects the assumption that the first return to work is the most disruptive to a returners' sense of self. The latter group of studies (e.g. Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Herman et al., 2013; Johnston and Swanson, 2007), in contrast, explores how working mothers position themselves in practice and, therefore, assumes that working mothers, regardless of the number of children they have, contend with the same tensions between good mothering and ideal worker norms. This study supports the latter group in that it demonstrates that first-time and repeat returners both engage in identity work following parental leave.

This study extends previous research focussing on first-time returners (e.g. Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006) by highlighting the complexity of the relationship between the experience gained from a first return to work and returners' identity work following a subsequent

parental leave. In support of previous research (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006), this study confirms that prior re-entry experience can facilitate returners' claims to maternal and worker identities upon organizational re-entry following parental leave because returners who have experienced returning to work know what to expect and have an idea of how they will enact their maternal and worker identities. Extending previous research (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006), this study demonstrates that prior success or failure at reclaiming a worker identity influences returners' subsequent identity work by shaping returners' expectations regarding their worker identities. This study also extends previous research (Hattery, 2001; Haynes, 2008b; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006) by demonstrating that when returners' work roles or counterparts (i.e. manager; team) change, returners' prior re-entry experience has limited applicability.

6.7 Implications for work practice and policy

The results of this study demonstrate that returners' understandings of themselves as working mothers are unstable and that they are vulnerable to feedback from the organization indicating support, or bias, towards them. Sensitivity training for colleagues and managers could help increase support for working mothers. Furthermore, this study indicates that managers need to use caution in making judgements about returners' identity priorities, allowing for the influence of situational constraints on returners' actions. As such, organizations might also consider ways to lessen the tension between work and mothering norms (e.g. accommodating breastfeeding; designing part-time positions that keep returners on track for career advancement). In addition, this study revealed that some returners may temporarily devote less attention to their worker identities with the intention of resuming their career advancement plans in the future. Therefore, organizations should evaluate their promotion practices to determine how to accommodate such tactics.

The study's findings concerning repeat returners suggest that a returner's ability to reclaim her worker identity following a prior re-entry shapes her expectations

for a subsequent return. Furthermore, returners who felt that their work roles did not fit their skills or that their career prospects were limited upon re-entry looked for different jobs within the organization or focussed on their maternal identities. Taken together, these findings indicate the importance of ensuring that returners are given opportunities to re-establish their worker identities quickly following parental leave. Organizations could help address this issue by encouraging returners to periodically engage with work content during parental leave. The results of this study indicate that returners' involvement in the content of work (as opposed to maintaining social ties) can help returners maintain their visibility as valued employees and can also help them keep abreast of new developments, such as new processes or regulations impacting on their work.

In a similar vein, I recommend that managers develop onboarding plans for returners following parental leave to ensure that they feel welcome and have the tools they need to do their work, including additional training, if necessary.

This study demonstrates that the length of parental leave returners take influences their maternal and worker identities. Taking a parental leave of less than six months was associated with returners experiencing greater difficulty claiming their maternal identities. In contrast, taking a longer leave, such as two to three years, was associated with returners experiencing greater difficulty reclaiming their worker identities. These findings demonstrate the need for national governments to consider working women's maternal and worker identities in their development of parental leave policies. With regard to the study context, German parental leave policy currently encourages returners to take at least one year of parental leave, resulting in a potential hurdle to returners' efforts at claiming their maternal and worker identities. Firstly, returners who do not take at least one year of leave may feel compelled to defend their decisions to do so to avoid being perceived as 'bad' mothers. Secondly, returners who take longer leaves have difficulty re-establishing themselves as valued workers. Based on these findings, I recommend that Germany considers reducing the amount of parental leave available to couples, while incentivising parents to take equal

amounts of leave, to encourage fathers to be equally involved in childcare and to reduce bias against female employees.

In contrast to the recommendations for Germany, however, the results of this study suggest that returners who take parental leaves shorter than six months in duration (as is the case for most US women) are likely to have trouble claiming their maternal identities. As a result, they may question the decision to return to work at all. Therefore, I recommend that national parental leave policies ensure at least six months' job-protected parental leave for all employees.

Finally, returners can influence their own efforts at reclaiming their worker identities by limiting their parental leaves and periodically engaging with work content while on leave by asking to attend departmental or team meetings.

6.8 Limitations

This examination of returners' maternal and worker identity work upon organizational re-entry following parental leave has provided insights into how returners respond to identity triggers and identified factors that influence their responses. Notwithstanding these benefits, the study was not without limitations.

With few studies examining the return to work following parental leave conducted outside of the UK and the US, I sought to generate thick descriptions of returners' experiences of identity work within a context in which returners had access to longer parental leaves. One limitation of the study design I chose was that I conducted data collection within one context. However, due to the exploratory nature of this study, the sampling strategy was not designed to be representative, but to generate new insights into returners' experiences. The research setting – a national context in which mothers of young children are encouraged to stay at home and an organizational context that is male dominated – contributed to constructing the dialectic between maternal and worker identities. While this setting brought dialectic identity work tactics to the foreground, it also suggests that further examination of returners' identity work is needed in contexts in which norms influencing work and motherhood are less extreme.

In addition, while the proportion of part-time workers in the sample reflected the percentage of mothers working part-time within the national context, bias towards part-time workers is likely to impact on returners' worker identity claims upon re-entry, while the ability to reduce working hours could facilitate returners' maternal identity claims. Therefore, having a large number of part-time workers in the study may limit the application of these findings to contexts in which full-time work is more common among working mothers.

Finally, the cross-sectional research design I implemented did not allow me to ascertain how returners' identity work may have evolved over time. Although my sampling strategy enabled me to collect data from returners who had just returned and those who had already been back at work for a few months, I was unable to examine patterns of change or consistency in identity work at the individual-level over an extended period of time.

6.9 Future research directions

The proposed framework of returners' identity work suggests several possible directions for future research.

Firstly, the identity work perspective informing this research could be applied to examine returners' re-entry experiences in other contexts, particularly those with varying regulatory frameworks or maternal and worker norms to further elaborate the proposed conceptual framework. Future applications of the identity work perspective to returners' re-entry experiences might also incorporate a longitudinal design to examine identity work over an extended period of time.

Secondly, the results of this study highlight the vulnerability of returners' worker identities to organizational cues concerning career advancement potential. Future research could, therefore, explore the relationship between organizational cues and returners' career advancement following the return to work.

Finally, the results of this study suggested that returners' involvement in work content while on parental leave could help them reclaim their worker identities upon re-entry. Additional research could be undertaken to examine how

returners' engagement with work while on parental leave influences their experience of work upon re-entry (e.g. work relationships, career opportunities).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Data extraction table

Study	Theory	Competing norms	Sample	Identity triggers	Identity strategies	Influencing factors
Barzilay, 2012	Examination of term 'decency' in wage and hour regulation	--	Legislation, US	--	--	National policy
Buzzanell et al. 2005	Sensemaking Weick, 1992	'Reframed the good mother image into a good working mother role' (p.261)	11 US women in managerial roles. First- or second return to work	--	re-framed the good mother image into a good working mother role (p.266)	--
Christopher, 2012	Doing gender, West and Zimmerman, 2002	'how they navigate the "intensive mother" and "ideal worker" ideologies and construct their own accounts of good mothering' (p.73)	40 employed mothers from US and Canada. First- or second-time, at least one child under 5. Diverse: race, marital status, income, PT&FT, some on leave	Asked about ideal caregiving situation	Reframing "extensive mothering" as a way mothers respond to the cultural constructions of the ideal mother and worker and reframe how employment fits into notions of good mothering in their lives (p.74)	--
Dambrin and Lambert, 2008	Critical – Haynes, 2007a,b,	--	24 auditors; men, women, with and without children	--	--	Organizational practices sanction motherhood
Duxbury et al., 1992	Work-family conflict, Kahn et al., 1964	Interrole conflict	504 questionnaires to mothers and fathers within 19 companies	--	--	After-hours telework, gender and working hours impact role overload and spill-over
Garey, 1999	Symbolic interactionism, Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1979; Mead, 1962	Yes (discusses 'good worker' rather than ideal worker)	37 mothers; hospital workers, US (27-60 years old)	Symbols of motherhood: Maternal visibility, being there, family time, doing things	Distancing from 'career'; distributing motives over time (segmentation over day or lifetime); Mothers as good providers (reconciling)	Resources (i.e. income, class, education, occupation, job security, marital

Study	Theory	Competing norms	Sample	Identity triggers	Identity strategies	Influencing factors
				Being a worker creates 'conflicting vocabularies of motive'		status, support from family etc.)
Glass and Fodor, 2011	Motherhood penalties, Budig and England, 2001 Stereotyping, Correll, Bernard and Paik, 2007	--	33 interviews, executives responsible for hiring professionals in Hungarian finance sector between 2004 and 2008	--	--	'Employers' recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices contribute to the growing maternal gap in employment' (p.6)
Hattery, 2001	Ideology, Therborn, 1980	Good mothering ideology (no mention of ideal worker)	30 mothers (10 FT, 10 PT and 10 stay-at-home) with children under 6, US	Decisions about work	conformist (at home); nonconformist (work); pragmatist (part-time or temporary worker), innovator (restructure work to avoid paid childcare)	Motherhood ideology; Structural factors, Human capital factors; economic need; beliefs about childcare
Haynes, 2006	Narratives of the self, McNay, 2000	'...extremes of identity, of devoted mother and successful accountant...' (p. 411)	Autobiography	Sitting for an exam while pregnant; revising and taking an exam after difficult birth; working full-time; children's illnesses; telework	--	Cultural expectations of accounting and motherhood
Haynes, 2008a	Embodiment, Dale, 2001; Physical capital, Bourdieu, 1984	Embodiment in accounting context	15 accountants; 14 mothers	Maintaining professional image	--	Gendered accounting norms
Haynes, 2008b	Identity work – Craib, 1998; Jenkins, 1996	'...different social identities of accountant and mother' (p.620)	5 accountants, 1 child, recent return from parental leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exit assumptions ▪ Organizational bias towards mothers ▪ Worker self-doubt ▪ Maternal self-doubt 	<p>redefine their anticipated future identity as working professional mothers</p> <p>reconciling 'a process of compromise and increasing self-awareness, as she reflexively revised her previous expectations</p>	Social, institutional and cultural factors

Study	Theory	Competing norms	Sample	Identity triggers	Identity strategies	Influencing factors
					of both professional work and motherhood in the light of the reality of experience' p.637	
Herman, Lewis and Humbert, 2013	Doing motherhood, Morgen, 1999	Yes	1-4 children, Aged 1-teens; SET professionals in energy companies in FR, IT, NL	'No longer one of the boys' – maternity leave and reduced working hours	Assimilation (conform to ideal worker practices); cul de sac (mummy track); breaking the mould (challenge existing practices and norms while maintaining high career aspirations); lying low (a period of slowing down, putting their careers on the back burner, to be retrieved later)	National context, corporate culture
Hoobler (2007)	SIT (Tajfel, 1978)	Yes	Conceptual	Bringing children to, or near, work	--	Family friendly policies
Johnston and Swanson, 2004	Discursive analysis, Wetherell and Potter, 1988	Yes	98 mothers of one or more children under 5, US	Constructions of stay at home vs. part-time and full-time working mothers	Stay at home mothers construct good mothering to exclude employed mothers; employed mothers view mothering and working as a continuum rather than a binary	Perceived lack of cultural support
Johnston and Swanson, 2006	Discursive analysis	Yes	95 mothers with children 1-5 yrs.; at-home, part-time and full-time	--	Reframing : at-home accessible; part-time quality communication; full-time empowering children p.517	Maternal work status
Johnston and Swanson, 2007	Dialectical; Bakhtin, 1981; Discursive psychology; Wetherell, 2001; 'We analyzed mothers' narratives for... arguments and	Yes	98 at-home, part-time and full-time employed mothers of one or more pre-school children from the Midwestern United States	--	Selection (choosing one identity over the other); separation (drawing clear boundaries between identities); neutralization (trying to satisfy both identities, perception of never fully satisfying either);	Cultural expectations

Study	Theory	Competing norms	Sample	Identity triggers	Identity strategies	Influencing factors
	metaphors that are used recurrently in discourse to construct meanings' (p.450)				reframing (constructing an integrated worker–mother identity or redefining worker or mother identities so that they are no longer in tension)	
King, 2008	Social role theory, Katz and Kahn, 1978	--	93 assistant- and associate-level professors who had children	--	--	Stereotypes
Ladge and Greenberg, 2015	Re-socialisation; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Daly, 1992; SIT: Tajfel and Turner, 1979	Yes	40 first-time mothers, 8 to 12-week leave (except 2 women took 6 months), Massachusetts, USA, all but one worked full-time	Uncertainties related to maternal and worker identities	'identity adjustment tactics': revising one's self-concept (revising worker identity), creating identity priorities	Perceived organizational work-life support
Ladge and Little, in press	Internal identity asymmetry, Meister et al., 2014	Yes	Conceptual	Work-family image and work-family identity asymmetries	Prioritise one identity over the other (resolve the asymmetry); Confused – internal contradictions of the self (maintain asymmetry); Integrated – values both (positive distinctiveness)	Influence choice of impression management: Boundary management preferences, vicarious learning
McGannon et al., 2012	Cultural Sport Psychology, Rybe, Schinke and Tenenbaum, 2010	Yes	March 2008-October 2010 Runner's World (RW) issues	--	--	Media representations: Paula Radcliffe's elite athlete identity being downplayed within the RW texts, with athletic accomplishments positioned as less fulfilling until one becomes a mother (p.824).

Study	Theory	Competing norms	Sample	Identity triggers	Identity strategies	Influencing factors
Millward, 2006	Phenomenology, Giorgi, 1995; symbolic Interactionism, Denzin, 1995; hermeneutics, Bernstein, 1983; IPA, Smith, 1996	Yes	8 first-time mothers, 26-week leave, UK	On return, the key issue for women was to re-establish a viable employee identity despite guilt about their maternal responsibilities, perceptions of colleagues' implicit doubts about their continued job or organizational commitment, altered actual job responsibilities and the practicalities of juggling the new reality of work and family life (p.324)	Reconciling - The effort to reconcile work with motherhood was aided not only by financial (i.e. cannot afford to stay at home) and career-based (e.g. skill depletion) justifications but also by developing alternative 'good mother' scripts emphasizing the developmental benefits to their children afforded by the child-care experience (e.g. mixing with other children) (p.324)	Role models
Raz and Tzruya, 2018	Doing gender, Butler, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 1987 and Intersectionality, Crenshaw, 1991	No – family always comes first to Haredi (i.e. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish) women	Mixed methods: interviews w/42 Haredi women, Israel	Exploitation at the segregated hub (p.371); Pressure to join mixed events	Prioritization of maternal identity; Defining boundaries to remain Haredi (p.372)	Cultural norms
Trussell, 2015	Work-family conflict, Greenhaus and Powell, 2006	Yes	Autoethnographic, Canada	Biological & tenure clocks, physical demands of birth	Re-scripting and impression management	Friendships
Turner and Norwood, 2013	Socio-semiotic framework, Strauss, 1993	Yes	15 returners, still breastfeeding, US	Breastfeeding after returning to work	breastfeeding part of good mothering; bounded motherhood - hiding breastfeeding at work; unbounded motherhood – asking for accommodations for breastfeeding and embodying a good working mother identity	Organizational norms; embodiment

Appendix B Exploratory study interview guide

Briefing

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. As you know I am conducting this research as part of my PhD. I'm interested to know more about how professionals experience the return to work following maternity leave. I've prepared some questions to guide our discussion, but I am mainly interested in understanding your thoughts about how being a mother might impact the way you think about yourself in the context of work.

With your permission, I will be recording this conversation so that I can listen to it again, to aid my memory and also to check my interpretation.

Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

1. Can you tell me about your current role?
(Kannst Du deine aktuelle Rolle bzw. Deinen Job beschreiben)
2. Considering your recent maternity leave,
(Sprechen wir über deine letzte Mutterschaftszeit, ...)
 - a. How much time did you take off?
(Wie lange warst Du in Mutterzeit)
 - i. What were the factors you considered in this decision?
(Was waren die Gründe für deine Entscheidung?)
 - b. How have you kept in touch with your employer during your leave?
(Wie bist Du mit deinem Arbeitgeber in Kontakt geblieben)
 - c. Was this your first child? If no:
(War dies dein erstes Kind, falls nicht)
 - i. Have you taken maternity leave with this employer previously?
(Hattest Du beim gleichen Arbeitgeber vorher auch Mutterzeit genommen)
 - ii. How did your past experience of maternity leave prepare you for this return to work?
(Wie hat dich diese vorherige Erfahrung auf den jetzigen Wiedereinstieg vorbereitet)
3. What was it like being on maternity leave?
(Wie war es für Dich in der Mutterzeit)
4. What aspects of being a mother are most important to you?
(Welche Aspekte sind für Dich am wichtigsten am Mutter sein)
5. Tell me about your experience on your initial return to work -- what was it like?
(Erzähl mir von deinen Erfahrungen bei deiner Rückkehr zu Arbeit – wie war es für Dich)
6. How has coming back to work been different from what you expected while you were still pregnant with your new baby?
(Inwieweit war deine Rückkehr anders als du es erwartet hattest?)
7. How has your job changed since you've returned, if at all?
(Hat sich dein Job verändert seit du zurückgekommen bist)
 - a. Working hours
(Arbeitszeiten)

- b. Content
(Inhalt)
 - c. Reporting structure
(Berichtsstrukturen)
8. How has becoming a mother changed your understanding of yourself as a professional?
(Wie hat dich das "Mutter werden" in deinem Beruf verändert)
 9. What, if any, challenges or 'dilemmas' have you faced since returning to work?
(Welchen Herausforderungen oder Dilemmas bist Du seit deiner Rückkehr zur Arbeit begegnet)
 - a. Can you tell me about a specific incident/experience involving such an individual dilemma/challenge?
(Kannst Du mir ein besonders Erlebnis erzählen in denen Du eine solche Herausforderung/Dilemma erlebt hast)
 - b. What did you do to resolve the dilemma/challenge?
(Wie hast Du dieses gemeistert)
 10. How have others at work responded to you since you've been back from maternity leave?
(Wie haben Kollegen auf Dich reagiert seitdem Du wieder da bist)
 11. Thinking toward the future, how do you see yourself progressing within the company?
(Wie siehst Du deine weitere Entwicklung mit deinem aktuellen Arbeitgeber)
 - a. Is this different from what you imagined for yourself before your pregnancy?
(Unterscheidet sich dies von deinem Zukunftsbild vor der Schwangerschaft – was sind die Hauptgründe)

Check demographics

Age:

Number of children:

Child(ren)'s age(s):

Occupation/Title:

Length of time in this role:

Length of employment with this company:

Direct reports:

Manager (does he/she have children)?

Working hours per week:

Partner's working hours per week:

I don't have any additional questions. Is there anything else that you would like to bring up before we finish the interview?

Appendix C Recruitment letter



„Erfahrungen von Frauen nach Ihrer Rückkehr aus der Mutterschaft in das Berufsleben“

Entgegen nationaler und unternehmensinternen Regelungen zur Unterstützung von Frauen auf Ihrem Berufs- oder Karrierepfad scheint es bislang nicht gelungen zu sein, das Mutter werden für talentierte Frauen nicht in einen Karriereknick enden zu lassen. Während manche Frauen Ihre Karriere nach der Geburt ihrer Kinder weiter fortsetzen, scheinen andere Karrieren zu stagnieren, andere Frauen wiederum ziehen sich freiwillig vom Karrierepfad zurück.

Diese Studie ist Teil meiner Doktorarbeit an der Universität Cranfield. Ziel ist es, die Entscheidungen und Erfahrungen von Frauen unmittelbar nach Ihrer Rückkehr ins Berufsleben näher zu erforschen – dabei steht sowohl die Mutterrolle als auch die Rolle als Mitarbeiterin im Fokus.

Ich suche daher nach Frauen, die vor maximal 3 Monaten von der Mutterschafts- oder Elternzeit wieder in das Berufsleben eingetreten sind.

Zu Beginn der Studie werden alle Teilnehmer gebeten, für ca. 4 Wochen Ereignisse und Vorkommnisse aus dem Arbeitsleben zu dokumentieren (Stichworte 2 bis 3 Mal pro Woche), die Ihre Rolle als Mutter direkt oder im Zusammenhang mit Ihrer Rolle im Unternehmen betreffen

Im Anschluss werden in einem Interview die Erfahrungen während der Rückkehrphase auf Basis Ihrer Notizen besprochen

Fragen im Interview fokussieren auf Ihre Entscheidungen während der Rückkehr ins Berufsleben aber auch auf die Entscheidungsfindung. Des Weiteren werden Rollenveränderungen im Beruf und im Unternehmen und Herausforderungen bei der Rückkehr näher betrachtet. Außerdem werden wir darüber sprechen, wie Sie Ihre persönliche Zukunft einschätzen.

Während die Interviews streng vertraulich sind, wird eine anonymisierte Zusammenfassung über Kernerkenntnisse der Studie an alle interessierten Teilnehmer und das kooperierende Unternehmen versandt. Ziel der Studie ist es, die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Herausforderungen bei einem Wiedereinstieg nach der Mutterzeit und die benötigte Unterstützung zu lenken. Ihre Teilnahme ist freiwillig und unterstützt diese Ziele.

Anforderungen an die Teilnehmer

- Rückkehr in das Berufsleben nach der Mutterschafts- oder Elternzeit zwischen Juli – Dezember 2016
- Fünf Jahre Arbeitserfahrung
- Minimal 20 Arbeitsstunden pro Woche
- Sachbearbeiterin/Führungskraft (mit oder ohne direkte Mitarbeiter)
- Letzter Mutterschaftspause aufgrund von Einzelkind (keine Mehrlingsgeburt)

Geheimhaltung

Alle Interviews sind streng vertraulich und Aufzeichnungen werden den Arbeitgebern nicht zur Verfügung gestellt. Lediglich meine Betreuer an der Universität Cranfield und ich selbst haben Zugriff auf die Aufzeichnungen und Aufnahmen. Namen und andere Details werden geändert, um die Anonymität der Teilnehmer sicher zu stellen. Gleichmaßen verbleiben die Arbeitgeber anonym und werden allgemeingültig referenziert (beispielsweise als Automobilhersteller). Eine Zusammenfassung über Kernkenntnisse werden interessierten Teilnehmern sowie dem Unternehmen zur Verfügung gestellt. Das Forschungsprojekt wurde durch den Ethik Ausschuss der Universität Cranfield genehmigt.

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Doktorand:

Nach meinem Master in Research Methods an der Universität von Cranfield, strebe ich nun meinen Dokortitel im Management an. Dazu untersuche ich die Entwicklung der „beruflichen Persönlichkeit“ von Frauen nach der Geburt eines Kindes. Neben meinem Fokus auf die Doktorarbeit habe ich ein Stipendium der Universität Cranfield und arbeite in Zuge dessen an verschiedenen Projekten, die sich mit Frauen in leitenden Führungspositionen, Unternehmenswerten und flexibler Arbeit beschäftigen. Meine Arbeit habe ich an akademischen Konferenzen in England und Spanien vorgestellt. Vor meiner Zeit in Cranfield habe ich 10 Jahre im Business Development in der Automobilindustrie mit Aufgaben in den USA, Deutschland, China und Frankreich gearbeitet. Außerdem habe ich einen Master of Business Administration (MBA) der Thunderbird, School of Global Management (Phönix, USA) und ein Coaching Zertifikat der Universität Cambridge (UK). Geboren und aufgewachsen bin ich in der Umgebung von Washington, DC (USA). Englisch ist meine Muttersprache, Deutsch spreche ich fließend.

Research supervisor:

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Appendix D Main study interview guide

INTERVIEWLEITFADEN ZUR STUDIE:

„Erfahrungen von Frauen nach Ihrer Rückkehr aus der Mutterschaft in das Berufsleben“

Hallo und Danke, dass Sie an der Studie teilnehmen und sich die Zeit für das Interview einrichten konnten.

Mein Name ist Roxanne Kutzer und ich führe gerade im Zusammenhang mit meiner Doktorarbeit an der Cranfield University (UK) eine Studie durch. In dieser Studie untersuche ich die Erfahrungen von Frauen nach Ihrer Rückkehr aus der Mutterschaft in das Berufsleben.

Ich habe für unser Interview einen Leitfaden vorbereitet und interessiere mich vor allem für **Ihre** Erfahrungen, um einerseits mehr darüber zu erfahren, wie Sie sich selbst im Arbeitskontext sehen, aber auch andererseits – und das ist genauso wichtig für die Studie – wie sie sich als Mutter sehen.

Zustimmung zur Aufnahme des Interviews, Verschwiegenheitserklärung

- 1) Vielleicht können Sie damit beginnen zu erzählen, wie es für Sie ist, Mutter zu sein. *Maybe you could start by telling me about what it's like for you being a mother.*
- 2) Wie war es für Sie in Mutterschaftszeit zu gehen bzw. zu sein (Stichwörter: Mutter sein, Überraschungen, Herausforderungen, Freuden, Vermissen des Jobs, Verbindung zur Arbeit aufrechterhalten, Besuche auf der Arbeit, ...) *How was it to go on leave? (Prompts: being a mother, surprises, challenges, joys, missing work, staying connected with work,...)*
- 3) Erzählen Sie mir von Ihrer Planung zur und den Entscheidungen, die Sie vor Ihrer letzten Mutterzeit getroffen haben (Stichwörter: Länge der Mutterzeit, Kontakt mit dem Arbeitgeber während dieser Zeit, geteilte Elternzeit, weitere Kinder, Kinderbetreuung, ...) *Tell me about how you planned your most recent maternity leave. (Prompts: length of leave, keeping in touch, shared parental leave, other children, childcare,...)*
- 4) Welche Art der Hilfe benötigten Sie von anderen, um sie auf die Rückkehr aus der Mutterzeit vorzubereiten? (Stichwörter: Ehepartner, Vorgesetzter, Kinderbetreuung – **WICHTIG**: Darauf achten, sowohl

Arbeit als auch **zu Hause** wird angesprochen!) *What support did you need from others in returning to work? (Prompts: Partner, Supervisor, Childcare – Important: discuss work and home)*

- 5) Erzählen Sie mir von Ihren Erfahrungen unmittelbar nach Ihrer Rückkehr ins Berufsleben – wie haben Sie diese empfunden? (Stichwörter: gleiche Stelle, Einarbeitung) *Tell me about the immediate return to work – how was that for you? (Prompts: same position, initial training)*
- 6) War der Wiedereinstieg anders als Sie es sich vorgestellt haben? (Stichwörter: während der Mutterzeit, während der Schwangerschaft und während des Wiedereinstiegs?) *Was returning to work different than what you expected? (Prompts: during pregnancy, during leave, during re-entry)*
- 7) Hat sich bzw. Wie hat sich Ihr Job geändert, seitdem Sie in den Beruf zurückgekehrt sind? (Stichwörter: Rolle, Beziehungen mit Kollegen, Arbeitszeiten, Mobiles Arbeiten, ...) *Has your job changed since you've returned to work and, if so, how? (Prompts: role, relationships with colleagues, working hours, telework,...)*
- 8) Wie hat das Mutter werden Ihr Selbstverständnis als Berufstätige verändert? *How has becoming a mother changed your understanding of yourself as a professional?*
- 9) Denken Sie an die Notizen, die Sie gemacht haben. Können Sie mir eine Erfahrung nennen, die für Sie als Mutter besonders einschneidend war. (Stichwörter: Gefühle, Gedanken, Antworten, Ergebnisse) *Thinking about the notes you've taken, can you tell me about a situation that was particularly important to you as a mother? (Prompts: feelings, thoughts, responses, outcomes)*
- 10) Gibt es weitere Einträge in Ihren Notizen bezüglich "Mutter sein" (**auf Balance zwischen positiven und negativen Beispielen achten**) *Do you have other examples from your notes related to being a mother? (pay attention to positive and negative examples)*
- 11) Denken Sie an die Notizen, die Sie gemacht haben. Können Sie mir eine Erfahrung nennen, die für Sie als Mitarbeiterin besonders einschneidend war. (Stichwörter: Gefühle, Gedanken, Antworten, Ergebnisse) *Thinking about the notes you've taken, can you tell me about a situation that was particularly important to you as a worker? (Prompts: feelings, thoughts, responses, outcomes)*

12) Gibt es weitere Einträge in Ihren Notizen bezüglich "Mitarbeiterin sein"
(**auf Balance zwischen positiven und negativen Beispielen achten**)
Do you have other examples from your notes related to being a worker?
(pay attention to positive and negative examples)

13) Denken Sie an Ihre Zukunft: Wo sehen Sie Ihren Werdegang und Ihre Zukunft in Ihrem Unternehmen? Ist diese anders als Sie diese vor Ihrer Schwangerschaft gesehen haben? *Thinking about the future, how do you see yourself developing in the company? (Follow up: Is this different from how you imagined it before your pregnancy?)*

Angaben zur Studienteilnehmerin: (Check demographics)

Alter:

Geburtsort:

Beruf/Titel:

Datum des Wiedereinstiegs:

Anzahl Kinder:

Alter der Kinder beim Wiedereinstieg:

Berufsjahre im aktuellen Job:

Beschäftigungsjahre im aktuellen Unternehmen:

Anzahl direkt berichtender Mitarbeiter:

Vorgesetzter (hat dieser/diese eigene Kinder?)

Wöchentliche Arbeitszeit:

Wöchentliche Arbeitszeit des Partners:

Ich habe keine weiteren Fragen. Haben Sie noch weitere Fragen und möchten Sie noch etwas anmerken, bevor wir das Interview beenden?

Appendix E Dissemination of research

Peer reviewed conference papers

- Kutzer, R. (2013) 'Organizational influence on identity work during pregnancy', British Academy of Management, Liverpool.
- Kutzer, R. and Anderson, D. (2015) 'Professional identity development following the return to work after maternity leave', International Conference of Work and Family, Barcelona.
- Kutzer, R., Anderson, D. and Vinnicombe, S. (2018) 'The influence of organizational support on returners' identity work', Presenter symposium: Re-entry and beyond: The varied transitions of becoming and being a working mother, 78th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Chicago.

Grant application

- Nuffield foundation, 'Supporting women's continued labour market participation following second maternity leave', 07/2015

Doctoral colloquia

- British Academy of Management Conference, 09/2013
- Cranfield School of Management, 02/2016
- Cranfield School of Management, 06/2016
- Academy of Management Annual Meeting, 08/2017