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Why Do(n't) they leave?: Motherhood and women's job mobility

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ABSTRACT

Although the relationship between motherhood and women's labor market exits has received a great deal of popular and empirical attention in recent years, far less is known about the relationship between motherhood and women's job changes. In this paper, I use panel data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979) (NLSY79) and Cox regression models to examine how motherhood influences the types of job changes and employment exits women make and how this varies by racial-ethnic group. I find preschool-age children are largely immobilizing for white women, as they discourage these women from making the types of voluntary job changes that are often associated with wage growth. No such effects were found for Black or Hispanic women.

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1. Introduction

Combining childrearing and paid employment is a challenge for many women. The seeming incongruence of these two activities has been at the center of much academic and popular debate in recent years (Belkin, 2003; Blair-Loy, 2003; Damaske, 2011; Stone, 2007; Williams, 2000). Central to this debate is the concern that many mothers are both pulled away from, and pushed out of, the labor market, or that they move into less time-intensive (and often lower-paying) jobs. The existing literature on women's job separations reflects this concern, as implicit, in much of this work is the idea that the incompatibility of paid work and family life is the key motivation for women's job separations (Stone, 2007; Williams, 2000). In this context, job separations among mothers are largely framed as negative events, at least in terms of their effects on earnings.

Lost in these discussions is the fact that job separations that result in movement among employers can oftentimes be *beneficial* to wage growth. Sociologists and economists have long been interested in the effects of job changes on wages and the resulting inequalities between and among workers. Much of this literature has focused on differences between men and women, and among workers of different racial-ethnic groups (Alon and Tienda, 2005; Fuller, 2008; Keith and McWilliams, 1997; Kronberg, 2013, 2014; Manning and Swaffield, 2005; Oettinger, 1996; Wilson and Maume, 2014). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how job changes vary *among* women, especially with regards to their motherhood status, and how these differences might create earnings disparities. (For exceptions, see Fuller (2008) who examined how the wage outcomes of job mobility vary by parental status, and Looze (2014) who examined how the wage outcomes of job mobility vary by both motherhood status and education.)

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This lack of attention is surprising given the well-documented motherhood wage penalty (Budig and England, 2001; Waldfogel, 1997). The prevailing assumption that mothers' job separations are primarily motivated by their attempts to balance the often competing demands of family and employment may account for this absence, as such separations might be rendered a "special case" irrelevant to the broader discussion of job mobility. Yet this assumption clouds our understanding of the varied ways motherhood might shape women's job mobility and resulting wages. In addition, given differences in job mobility patterns among women of different racial-ethnic groups (Alon and Tienda, 2005), as well as differences in the size of the motherhood wage penalty by race-ethnicity (Budig and England, 2001; Glauber, 2007; Waldfogel, 1997), it is important to understand whether and how the effects of motherhood on women's job mobility vary by race-ethnicity. Following McCall (2005), I take an intercategory approach to understanding the relationships of inequality among different social groups by placing these relationships at the center of my analysis.

In this paper, I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979) (NLSY79) and Cox regression models to examine how motherhood influences women's job changes and employment exits. I contribute to the debate about the difficulties of combining motherhood and employment by examining not only the circumstances under which women change jobs and leave the labor market, but also the circumstances under which they do not. I broaden the literature on job mobility by examining how motherhood influences the different kinds of job changes and labor market exits women make. In my analysis, I distinguish among three types of job separations: family-related, voluntary, and involuntary. I further examine how the impact of motherhood on these various types of job changes and employment exits varies by race-ethnicity.

2. Background

The relationship between motherhood and women's labor force participation has long been of interest to scholars. Much of the empirical work on this issue to date has focused on the effects of pregnancy and young children on women's exits from the labor market (Budig, 2003; Desai and Waite, 1991; Reid and Padavic, 2005; Taniguchi and Rosenfeld, 2002). By and large, these studies have found a positive relationship between both pregnancy and young children and women's labor market exits. This relationship appears to have weakened over time however, as Budig (2003) finds no relationship between pregnancy and women's labor market exits, in contrast to earlier work (Felmlee, 1993). This relationship also varies among racial-ethnic groups. For example, Taniguchi and Rosenfeld (2002) found preschool-age children encourage labor market exits among Black women but not white or Hispanic women.

Given the central role work experience plays in determining women's wages and contributing to the motherhood wage penalty (Budig and England, 2001), it is clear that understanding the relationship between motherhood and employment exits is important. Yet, oftentimes workers leave one job to begin another, rather than leave the labor market entirely. Little is known about how children influence women's job changes. A couple of older studies that have considered this produced mixed results. Using years 1970–1980 of the Young Women's Panel of the National Longitudinal Survey and logistic regression models, Glass (1988) found that the presence of a preschool-age child encouraged job stability among pregnant women by increasing the odds they would remain their job. She found no significant differences in the effects of children on women's job changes by racial-ethnic group. Felmlee (1995) used the same survey as Glass, but limited her sample only to white women and the years 1968–1973. She found preschool-age children increase women's hazard of changing jobs, but these changes were often into part-time work.

The disparate findings of these studies are likely due in part to the different samples these scholars used and the different statistical analyses they applied. Yet it is also likely that some of the discrepancies can be attributed to the fact that both studies conflated the different reasons for changing jobs. It is likely that motherhood encourages some types of job changes and discourages others. If these distinctions are not made, it is difficult to discern how motherhood is really shaping women's job mobility and what this might mean for women's wages.

2.1. Why women change jobs and exit employment

Job separations are often classified as either involuntary or voluntary (Fuller, 2008; Keith and McWilliams, 1997; Kronberg, 2013, 2014). Involuntary separations are generally understood to be those initiated by the employer, such as when downsizing or restructuring within a firm results in workers being laid off, or malfeasance or incompetence on the part of a worker results in being fired. Voluntary separations are generally understood to be those initiated by the worker, such as when an individual leaves a job because of undesirable conditions or because they found another job that offers better pay or greater opportunities. When data allow, voluntary separations are often further broken down into those that are "family-related" (i.e., separations due to pregnancy, child care responsibilities, relocating for a spouse's job, etc.) and those that are presumably not directly related to family (i.e., leaving to take another job that might further one's career). Throughout this paper, I refer to each of these types of separations as family-related, voluntary, and involuntary.

These distinctions are not entirely clear, of course. Damaske (2011) argues that many women explain their decisions surrounding work as being for their families when oftentimes there are other, non-family reasons influencing their decisions. Similarly, Stone (2007) and Williams (2000) find that oftentimes when women report leaving a job for family-related reasons, the separation is due not solely to the demands of their family but to the incompatibility of particular workplaces and family

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