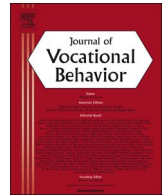


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When lesbians become mothers: Identity validation and the role of diversity climate

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of lesbian couples as they move through the different stages of pregnancy and re-enter the workforce after maternity leave. The study draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted at three points in time: middle and late pregnancy and after the return to work. The findings suggest that the transition to motherhood is a complex process for lesbian women and that this experience differs for the birth versus the non-birth mother depending on whether there is a positive or negative diversity climate in their workplace. Our analysis revealed that the birth mother is better equipped to ‘claim’ her maternal identity and feels ‘validated’ as she discloses her pregnancy, transitions to motherhood, and returns to work, whereas the non-birth mother experiences greater difficulty. We also found that the ability to disclose and feel validated as a new mother freely at work was tied to the level of ‘outness’ at work and thus, experiences differed depending on how the interviewees perceived the diversity climate in their organization.

1. Introduction

Despite the proliferation of women in professional and managerial roles, many barriers persist for working women. Such challenges often occur at the time women are beginning to start a family. Research suggests that co-workers and supervisors often perceive working mothers to be more family-focused and less committed to work, based on gendered assumptions and stereotypes that women tend to be more involved in family roles than men (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003; Crittenden, 2001; King, 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that the transition to motherhood can incite anxiety as women navigate their new identity as a mother alongside their workplace image (Hennekam, 2016; Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012; Little, Smith Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015).

What remains unclear in the current literature is whether all mothers face the same degree of maternal wall bias as it relates to pregnancy and motherhood or whether this experience is limited to heterosexual women. Indeed, the challenges of new mothers have become particularly salient with the rise of dual-career couples (Unger, Sonnentag, Niessen, & Kuonath, 2015), sparking interest in the transition to parenthood of working fathers (Humberd, Ladge, & Harrington, 2015). Such a focus has changed the nature of the conversation, calling attention to the unique experiences of men and the potential discrimination that fathers may experience (Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013). However, the focus on fathers has only amplified heteronormative assumptions of parenting (King, Huffman, & Peddie, 2013), limiting our understanding of the transition to parenthood experiences of same-sex couples (Sawyer, Thoroughgood, & Cleveland, 2015). To begin to fill this gap in the literature, the current research focuses on lesbian

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mothers and seeks to examine the nuanced and dynamic experiences of carrying multiple stigmatized identities.

As the workforce grows increasingly diverse, we need more research in order to understand how different groups navigate the workplace. Although organizations have historically dissuaded individuals from making their personal identities evident in the workplace, they are now increasingly encouraging employees to be their authentic selves, as firms have started to realize that this can lead to positive outcomes for the organization as well (Tatli, 2011). However, few studies have examined this complex process of integrating and managing the non-work aspects of work (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Ragins, 2008; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013) and scholars have argued for more research to better understand how individuals deal with an invisible stigmatized identity at work (Ragins, 2004). Stigmatized identities are those identities that may be devalued in a particular context and subject to stereotyping and discrimination (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Jones et al.'s (1984) foundational work on stigma theory points to two common dimensions of stigma – concealability and perceived controllability – that often influence whether and to what extent an individual will disclose his or her identity (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). The present study focuses on the experiences of a group of individuals who face a dual stigma – lesbian mothers.

Lesbian couples who are expecting children are a unique population for several reasons. First, lesbians may already hold a potentially stigmatized identity, given their sexual orientation. However, different from holding a more visible social stigma, lesbians can choose whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation to others. In the work context, this often very much depends on the degree to which they feel supported by their managers, peers and their organization more broadly (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez & King, 2008). When lesbian women make the transition to motherhood, they face an added stigma that cannot be concealed (pregnancy) and that has the potential to threaten the extent to which they are 'out' in terms of their concealable identity (lesbian). Second, pregnant lesbian women may be pressured into disclosing their sexual orientation when their pregnancy becomes visible. However, this experience may vary depending on which parent is the birth mother. Individuals with an invisible stigma always have a choice to disclose or conceal that identity, but such a decision is often self-confronting and double-edged to the extent that disclosing or refraining from disclosure may be detrimental to the individual and her relationship with others (Clair et al., 2005; Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009; Ragins, 2008). Lastly, lesbian women must reconcile and unite two competing, stigmatized identities, which, when combined, not only challenge heteronormative assumptions about what it means to be a mother, but also what it means to be a woman and a member of society. To claim their new identity as a mother, they have to determine how to "look the part" in ways that "characteristically evoked desired responses from others" (Swann, 1987, p. 1040).

Employing an inductive, qualitative research design, we conducted interviews with 28 lesbian women (14 couples), in middle and late pregnancy and after their return to work, in an effort to develop new theory about complex identity transitions for individuals facing a dual stigma. Our guiding research question was: How do lesbian women experience the transition to motherhood both during pregnancy and after their return to work? To address this primary research question, we conducted interviews with both the birth and non-birth mother at two points in time during pregnancy, and once following the return to work. Our findings indicate that lesbian women experience differences in the transition to motherhood depending on whether they are the birth or the non-birth mother. We found that the birth mother is better equipped to 'claim' her maternal identity and feels 'validated' as she discloses her pregnancy, transitions to motherhood, and returns to work, whereas the non-birth mother experiences greater difficulty. We also found that the ability to disclose and feel validated as a new mother freely at work was tied to being 'out' at work; thus, experiences differed depending on how the interviewees perceived the diversity climate in their organization, defined here as shared perceptions among individuals that their organization treats people fairly and integrates them in the work environment, regardless of background (Kaplan, Wiley, & Maertz, 2011).

This study contributes to the existing literature on disclosing stigma amid identity transitions and gender role theory in the following ways. First, we provide an in-depth examination of identity changes for lesbian couples as they transition to motherhood. Previous studies have considered identity transitions during pregnancy (Hennekam, 2016; Ladge et al., 2012; Little et al., 2015) and upon the return to the workforce (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015), whereas we extend this body of knowledge by exploring the dynamic nature of the transition process, particularly for individuals who already hold a potentially stigmatized identity. Additionally, scholars have tended to regard identity transitions as individual, singular events, rather than considering the interplay of multiple stigmatized identities as is the case for same-sex couples.

Second, our longitudinal methodology captures the changes and iterative nature of identity construction and transition. Most researchers conduct their studies at one point in time, ignoring the dynamic nature of identity as identities evolve over time (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Further, few studies capture the dyadic experiences of couples. Morgan, Ataie, Carder, and Hoffman (2013), for example, argue that dyadic interviews, of the type we conducted in our study, are most useful "when the researcher wants both social interaction and depth" (p. 1283).

Third, researchers now call for studies that pay more scholarly attention to the role of context and how it relates to important psychological processes, such as identity and stigma (Hennekam, 2016; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). This study answers this call by examining the role of perceived diversity climate and how it not only affects disclosure of personal identities at work, but also how one constructs, claims and gains validation of a new identity. We contribute to the literature not only by providing research on a unique subset of individuals, but also by examining the interaction between visible and invisible identities as mothers navigate varying organizational climates.

2. Theory informing the study

Two primary bodies of literature inform our study: gender role theory and managing multiple, stigmatized identities in the workplace. We applied this research by embedding role transitions literature in the context of becoming a mother and holding a

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