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Motherhood, Subjectivity, and Work

# Work re-entry following maternity leave for first-time mothers: An events, social identity and intersectional theories informed identity work framework

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## Abstract

Many first-time mothers experience significant identity issues on work re-entry following maternity leave, an important individual and life-related event. Work re-entry prompts significant identity tensions leading to identity work challenges and potential career changes. We address this significant life event and develop a subjective identity informed conceptual framework explaining its key components and outcomes. We propose that for first-time mothers, re-entry following maternity leave triggers a cognitive and subjective assessment of identity threat and opportunity leading to the use of multiple identity work strategies to address personal, role, and collective identities. We analyze the impacts of these reworked identities and identity work for career decision making and outcomes. We theoretically underpin our framework using event systems, a subjective perspective on social identity and intersectional theories and in doing so, propose future research questions and highlight implications for national policy and organizational practices.

**KEYWORDS**

career outcomes, events systems theory, identity threats and opportunities, intersectional theory, maternity leave, return to work, social identity theory

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The decision to re-enter work following maternity leave for the first-time mother[1] is challenging and represents a significant life event (Bakker et al., 2019). Re-entry is defined as the transition back to work following the birth of a child (Wiese & Ritter, 2012) leading to the need to manage new routines and roles that span multiple life domains (Little & Masterson, 2023). Returning to work following maternity leave is characterized as a transformative experience (Moffett, 2018), with Alstveit et al. (2011) describing this as a time when "first-time mothers readjust their lives in terms of the tensions between work and motherhood" (p. 2157). It is complicated by notions of the ideal worker, work devotion norms and similar schemas commonly found in many organizations (Padavic et al., 2020), resulting in an expectation that women will be constantly available with no other non-work-related demands on their time (Gabriel et al., 2023). In this paper our conceptualization of the first-time mother is female however consistent with an intersectional approach, we acknowledge the intersection of this role with multiple socio-cultural identities including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status which create unique challenges in the context of work re-entry (Garland McKinney and Meinersmann, 2023).

Given these intersectional complexities, evidence indicates that re-entry is a stressful time where first-time mothers have to navigate new routines and roles. The level of intensity will depend on the length of maternity leave, the increased occurrence of dual earning couples and a variety of individual, organizational, societal, and structural issues (Little & Masterson, 2023). Research on motherhood and work continues to grow (Davies et al., 2022; Hennekam et al., 2019; O'Brien & Liddy, 2021), however, there are significant gaps with respect to first-time mothers and the identity challenges and identity work that they experience on re-entry. Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern (1998) propose that "adjusting the motherhood mindset to the realities of working again is a major task" (p. 179), a time when a woman seeks to balance various identities and make decisions that are a good fit for her at that particular time. It is a time when the norms and expectations of the employment relationship can be greatly altered (Ladge et al., 2018; Zagefka et al., 2021) and is characterized by emotional exhaustion, identity conflict, and is a time when women may feel discriminated or side-lined (Gatrell, 2011; Mumford et al., 2023). Gendered cultural norms charge women with taking the lead responsibility for childcare and the family (Lewis et al., 2017), resulting in multiple intersectional complexities that shape first-time mother's identity work. This is compounded by post-feminist perspectives that idealize a woman who is perceived to be able to juggle motherhood and work seamlessly and effectively (Lewis et al., 2017).

We utilize event systems theory (Liu et al., 2023) to conceptualize re-entry as an individual level event that is a discrete and discontinuous happening that diverges from stable and routine features (Morgeson et al., 2015). Life-related events such as a first pregnancy may lead to cross domain identity transitions (Ladge et al., 2012), involving adapting an established work identity to integrate changes in non-work identity. We conceptualize identity following González Rey (2019), as a subjective production rather than something that is objective. Therefore, it is not a first-time mother's experiences that define her but rather how she makes sense of these experiences (Poole, 2020) and are configured in unconscious processes. Therefore, identity is "always provisional and contested" (Brown, 2015), temporary, context sensitive and focuses on an evolving set of constructions (Alvesson et al., 2008). There is never one core identity, but many subjectivities that form identity which are in a constant state of flux. Conflict in the context of multiple identities is a "container" that is filled with multiple subjectivities which are subject to constant change (Brah, 2005). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that people derive part of their identity from the groups to which they belong, and self-categorization theory argues that people are ascribed identity by specific social categories. The identity and identity work issues that arise in the context of the first-time mother returning to work are further complicated by intersectional issues, where identity is embedded within a multitude of systemic power dimensions (Netto et al., 2020). Both Rodriguez et al. (2016) and Netto et al. (2020) highlight the role of embedded subjectivities within systemic dimensions of power and the importance of structural processes.

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In this conceptual paper we integrate three theoretical perspectives—event systems, social identity, and intersectional theories to develop a conceptual framework mapping out the identity and identity work issues that first-time mothers experience on their return to work. In doing so we move beyond studies that have investigated specific aspects of pregnancy and motherhood, including identity theory (Hennekam et al., 2019), institutional theory (Jones & Floyd, 2024), organizational systems theory (Gatrell et al., 2023), conservation of resource theory, and sensemaking theory (Gabriel et al., 2023). We first propose that multiple conditions at individual, organizational, and societal level shape the first-time mother's cognitive assessments of identity opportunity or threats and the types of identity work undertaken during work re-entry (Hennekam et al., 2019; O'Hagan, 2018). We also propose that the assessment of identity opportunity and threat is proximally impacted by the cognitive assessment of the novelty, criticality, disruptiveness, favorability, and urgency of return to work. These assessments impact two dimensions of identity work—the types of identities that are worked upon and the identity work strategies used (Caza et al., 2018; Hennekam & Ladge, 2017). The final component of our framework proposes that identity work will lead to different career decision scenarios for first-time mothers.

We utilize events systems theory (Morgeson et al., 2015) to study the cognitive responses to a life event that is the focus of this paper (Akkermans et al., 2018). Social identity theory helps us to conceptualize identity opportunity and threat and identity work (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). We utilize intersectional theory to surface the structural factors that shape the cognitive assessment of identity threats and opportunities and shed light on the "structural contexts of power, privilege, and subordination" (Netto et al., 2020; p. 1022) within which first-time mother identity work is embedded. In utilizing these theories, we make the following contributions to the literature. First, we focus on first-time mothers returning to work and we theorize their identity issues and identity work in the context of both their cognitive assessment of return to work as a key life event and the role of intersectional factors in shaping these cognitions. This represents an important extension of the literature which to date has focused on return from maternity leave. Second, we extend the literature, to link identity work in the context of return to work for first-time mothers to career decision making. Third, we explicitly integrate an intersectional perspective to the analysis of return to work as a life event and reveal the impact of these intersectional factors on cognitive appraisal and how this works through to career decision making.

We structure our paper as follows. First, we set out the key theoretical ideas that provide the backdrop for our conceptual model. We then set out the key components of the conceptual model and generate propositions for future research. Finally, we highlight the policy and practice implications of our discussion.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Work re-entry and first-time mother: A life event

Event systems theory (Kulichyova et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023) conceptualizes events as multi-level phenomena that impact employee cognitions and emotions. At the individual level, one such set are life-related events which originate outside of the workplace domain but have significant spill-over effects for work and career outcomes (Liu et al., 2023). An additional conceptualization of an individual-level event concerns career related transitions (Cao & Hamori, 2022). Return to work for first-time mothers has significant novelty, criticality, and disruptiveness. For example, Stertz et al. (2017) suggest that having a baby, taking maternity leave, and then re-entering work results in significant changes, including the maternity leave itself, work-life balance issues, and future work return. In addition, Costantini et al. (2022) highlight that work re-entry results in very dramatic changes for women, which can be challenging and stressful and it is often viewed as a moment in life characterized by compromise and change. In the case of the first-time mother, it is also novel in that it is her first experience of returning to work following maternity leave (Matley, 2020). It involves a struggle to balance work and family demands and is a critical turning point in a first-time mother's life (Jaeckel et al., 2012; Millward, 2006) and results in tensions between first-time

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mothers and their work identities (Alstveit et al., 2011; Parcsi & Curtin, 2013). In the context of our process framework, we propose that first-time mothers' subjective assessment of the favorability—of work re-entry provides an additional layer of complexity in explaining perceptions of identity threats and opportunities to be worked upon, and identity work strategies. Therefore, identity emerges from "a subjective production through a process of internalization that is largely unconscious in nature" (Poole, 2020, p. 409). Our framework highlights a temporal dimension, and we conceptualize the process of cognitive assessment of threat and opportunity and corresponding identity work to be ongoing, highly dynamic and iterative.

## 2.2 | Identity, identity work, and intersectionality and first-time mother work re-entry

González Rey (2016) proposes that experiences can be perceived by individuals in different ways because" human subjective processes are never moved by one final cause and do not represent stable contents; they flow intime, integrate, and unfold in different forms during the same experience" (p. 311). This notion proposes that identity is a subjective sense of a totality of contractions and dichotomies and the production of internal subjective senses. This notion of identity brings to the fore psychological processes which lead to subjectivity[1] (Wetherell, 2008) and underscore the idea that a first time mother's relationship with her identity will vary depending on these subjective processes (Blackman, 2008).

An identity work perspective (Baldridge & Kulkarni, 2017; Hennekam, 2016) emphasizes agency and an intersectional perspective accounts for issues of structure and how identity work is embedded in a context characterized by systemic dimensions of power (Thatcher et al., 2023). Identity poses a fundamental question: "Who am I" (Ashforth et al., 2008) and the answer to this question is shaped by a multiplicity of factors, including roles and relationships (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016), membership of particular social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), and personal characteristics. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) proposed that identities are characterized by meanings that individuals will ascribe to themselves, in addition to those ascribed to that individual by role set members. Motherhood is a particularly powerful role identity (Tian & Chen, 2023) requiring a first-time mother to expand her self-identities to incorporate this new role, as a mother (Laney et al., 2015).

Research highlights how motherhood impacts perceptions of what it means to balance work and childcare. For example, Hochschild and Machung (2012) highlighted the dilemma of managing the "first shift" of work and the "second shift" of unpaid work involving childcare and mothering. Tian and Chen (2023) suggested that devotion to work is down to luck, whereas devotion to children is a matter of fate, while others have suggested that mothers will prioritize childcare and not vice versa (Edgley, 2021).

Identities are both subjective and dynamic as illustrated in our framework and therefore, first-time mothers engage in identity work defined as "the cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revision or rejecting collective role, and personal self-meanings" (Caza et al., 2018; p. 895). Multiple subjective identities are at play in the context of first-time mothers, particularly at the point of work re-entry, and they are interconnected and interdependent (Musodza et al., 2023). Therefore, changes in subjective identity will result in opportunities to challenge, enhance, or alter the other-identity for self-benefit and alignment (Ladge et al., 2012). Central to identity work is agency and the assumption that individuals have the potential to influence others, gain acceptance and progress in their lives and careers. Identity work is essential for first-time mothers, because within the family she will have specific role identities including mother, carer, and partner, whereas in the work context she has specific role identities such as a leader, individual contributor, mentor, or technical specialist. In both domains there are multiple targets with which to form social identities ranging from the wider family, one's partner, children, workgroups, professions, and the organization.

The subjective assessment of identity opportunity and identity threat is central to our conceptualization of identity. Both are conceptualized as subjective appraisals of the experience of being a first-time mother makes in

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the context of work re-entry (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Subjective perceptions of identity opportunity exist where first-time mothers perceive work re-entry as a major opportunity for growth and development (Bataille & Vough, 2022). In contrast, identity threat focuses on the potential harm to the value, meaning and/or enactment of identities by the first-time mother. Both lead to identity work.

Intersectionality theory (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 2013) emphasizes how interlocking systems of marginalization result in unique forms of oppression and these have major implications in the context of our framework. Identity in the context of an intersectional perspective emphasizes that first-time mothers returning to work will derive a self-identity from multiple social identities that are attached to both social categories and the meanings attached to them (Corlett & Mavin, 2014). Intersectionality has expanded to include not only race, gender, and class but also sexuality, disability, religion, immigration status, and ability. These intersectional identities and their subjective interpretation by a first time mother (Stahl et al., 2021) shape lived experiences in an interactional rather than additive way and social categories are mutually constituting (Jackson-Best & Edwards, 2018). Intersectionality allows consideration of non-traditional forms of motherhood, such as lesbian biological mothers, trans mothers, mothers with disabilities, single mothers, and cisgender, heterosexual (cishet) individuals who decide to have a child outside the context of a romantic relationship (Bower-Brown et al., 2023).

Rodriguez et al. (2016) point to two strands of intersectionality, the first of which focuses on subjectivities and their interactions to explore inequalities and the second strand which is concerned with embedded subjectivities within "systemic dimensions of power" (Netto et al., 2020; p. 1023). This latter approach emphasizes the importance of understanding how agency and the potential for identity work are constrained by structure. For example, Thatcher et al. (2023) proposes that these power structures create societal level disadvantages for individuals with particular identities, as they trickle down and are perpetuated through work and life interactions. Therefore, we emphasize in our framework, multiple levels of intersectional context that are potential constraints or enablement impacting the agency-structure interface and leading to cognitive assessment of identity opportunity and threat.

## 2.3 | Our conceptual framework

We now turn to develop and explain our conceptual framework proposing that return to work constitutes an important identity implicating event (Figure 1).

### 2.3.1 | Work re-entry following maternity as an individual level event

Work re-entry impacts first-time mothers differently, depending on perceptual and subjective judgments of the novelty, disruptiveness and criticality of return to work (Morgeson et al., 2015). These are in turn shaped by multiple and multi-level intersectional factors. Event systems theory suggests that perceptions of return to work as an event will impact identity and behavior (Koopman et al., 2016). Work re-entry likely has significant urgency, in that the first-time mother must respond quickly to mitigate its negative consequences or capitalize on the positives that it creates. It will be perceived both as a novel (Hennekam et al., 2019) and a disruptive event, because it both impacts the first-time mother, other members of the family and their organizations (Little & Masterson, 2023). Previous research, for example, highlights the need to adopt new routines, in addition to changing roles within the household (Erfina et al., 2019; Spitzmueller and Matthews, 2016). Work re-entry will likely be perceived as a negative event due to the stress issues (Humberd et al., 2015), the potential for work-family conflict (Correll et al., 2007), the implications for the professional image of the mother and changed interpersonal relationships with co-workers (Ladge et al., 2015; Gabriel et al., 2023). In terms of timing, it has urgency, in that maternity leave is a relatively short period of time in some countries and the return to work will require urgent decision making around childcare and will trigger a significant revaluation of what types of work arrangements are desired on work re-entry

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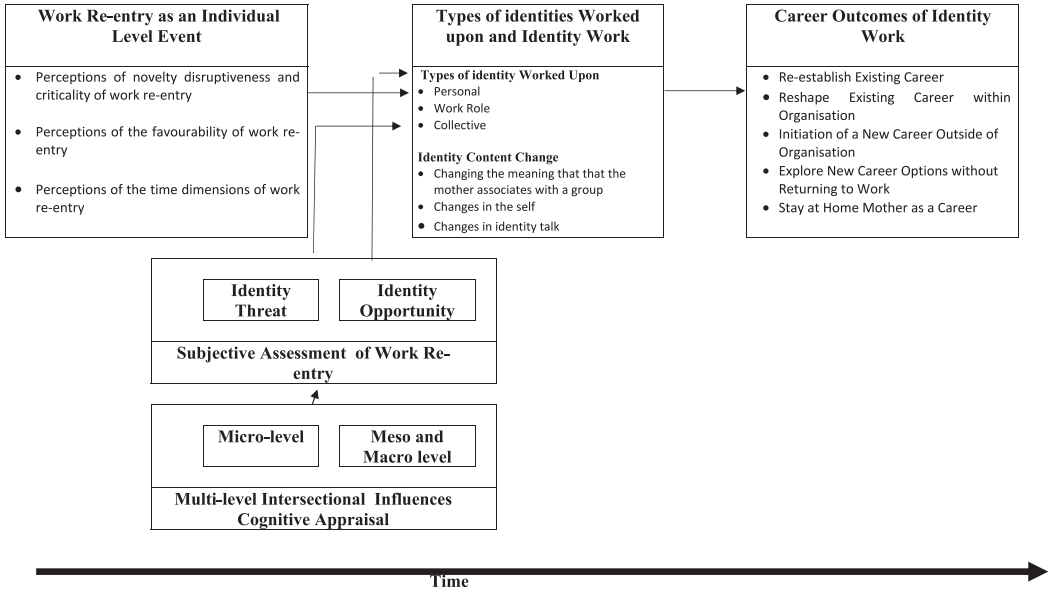


**FIGURE 1** Conceptualizing work entry following maternity leave for the first-time mother as an identity work process.

(Ladge & Little, 2019). These event dimensions require significant identity adaptation and change across multiple life domains (Crawford et al., 2019).

**Proposition 1** *First-time mothers' perceptions and subjective judgments concerning work re-entry following maternity leave as an individual level event will lead to significant identity change and adaptation across multiple life domains.*

### 2.3.2 | Multi-level influences on first-time mothers' appraisal of identity threats and opportunities

Our framework highlights the central role of a first-time mother's subjective appraisal of identity opportunity and threat, initiated in the context of the work re-entry decision. Consistent with an intersectional approach (Hennekam et al., 2019; Mehra et al., 2023) this subjective appraisal of identity opportunity or threat is impacted by, and shaped by, many factors at macro, meso, and micro levels. Important macro-level factors include social norms, cultural values and maternity legislation regimes. For example, Ruitenberg (2014) highlighted that social norms dictate that women, following birth, will reduce the amount of time they work. Cultural norms can also play a key role in the decision-making processes of the first-time mother, concerning whether to return to work or not. For example, in Asian countries, cultural norms operate to communicate that the woman should become a full-time mother (Christiansen et al., 2019). Most fundamental of all, at a societal level, there is the continued expectation that a working mother will simultaneously manage a job, raise children and maintain a home. At a societal level, it is still very much the case of "managing it all."

This divide is reflected in thinking around who is responsible for caretaking versus financial providing (Gerson, 2002). For example, in the case of black women, the traditional cultural schema is family devotion and stay-at-home motherhood (Dean et al., 2013). O'Hagan (2014) highlighted that culturally, many women re-enter work and essentially take a second shift because they are expected to retain responsibility for childcare and domestic duties. Countries differ in their maternity leave regimes, with some countries having legal provision for paid

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maternity leave, while in others, it remains unpaid (O'Hagan, 2014). The length of the maternity leave will impact evaluation and cognitive assessment, with shorter duration maternity leave elevating perceptions of disruptiveness and favorability of work re-entry (Jones & Floyd, 2024).

At the meso level, relevant factors include maternity leave supports provided by organizations (Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023; Kossek, Perrigino, et al., 2023), the culture, and climate of the organization (Hennekam et al., 2019), the implementation of work-life policies, and practices (O'Hagan, 2014), manager supports and the availability and quality of part-time work (Netto et al., 2020). Role models are important in helping first-time mothers to learn how to balance work and childcare (Sealy & Singh, 2010) and are an important source of information, encouragement, support, and anchoring to first-time mothers' work re-entry (Hennekam, 2016). However, family-friendly workplaces may be counter-productive and result in women being put on a mommy track with fewer development opportunities (Gatrell, 2007).

Micro-level factors include the career aspirations of the first-time mother with gendered assumptions around careers (Sheerin & Garavan, 2022), the career support available to the first-time mother, and assumptions around women, single mothers, lesbian mothers, and trans mothers. In the case of career aspirations, Gatrell and Cooper (2016) highlighted that mothers who select flexible work arrangements are viewed as less work and career oriented. Finally, Bröckel (2018) highlighted the importance of partner social support in helping first-time mothers to re-enter the labor market, however, in the case of single first-time mothers such support will not be available.

**Proposition 2** *First-time mothers' subjective assessment of identity opportunity and threat in the context of work re-entry following maternity leave is shaped by multiple macro-meso and micro level intersectional influences.*

### 2.3.3 | Subjective appraisal of identity opportunity and threat of return to work

The third component of our framework focuses on the subjective appraisal of identity opportunity and threat by the first-time mother. González Rey (2016) emphasizes that this subjective appraisal is central to whether a first-time mother views work re-entry as positive or negative, which in turn impacts identity work. This occurs because negative experiences can be perceived by first time mothers in a positive way even if they are objectively taken to be negative. Therefore, where a first-time mother perceives identity threat, she will anticipate negative outcomes, thus resulting in an activation of what Markus and Nurius (1986) describe as *feared possible self*. For example, research on work re-entry highlights fears such as the existence of insensitive work environments (Maxwell et al., 2019), the possibility of truncated, broken and nonlinear career paths post-maternity (Ahmad, 2017), the lack of family supportive organizational policies (Costantini et al., 2022), and negative informal cultural values around maternity leave (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). In addition, the need to negotiate leave arrangements, and return to work (Glass & Fodor, 2018) fears may result in cognitions that a first-time mother could become potentially unemployed, marginalized, and have a lower status post on work re-entry. She may also have feelings of guilt, linked with the need to resume a professional career, fear of losing out on a previous role or of being demoted (Stertz et al., 2017), or to being invisible when it comes to progression and promotion opportunities.

In the case of identity opportunity, a first-time mother's subjective appraisal is underpinned by hope, the opportunity to think about career goals and priorities, and the potential to take on new work and non-work opportunities (Snyder, 1995). Anteby (2008) suggested that the emphasis on opportunities is driven by striving toward desired identities which focus on a first-time mother's sense of self in her and others' eyes. Factors shaping positive subjective appraisal include increased work recognition post-maternity (Parcsi & Curtin, 2013), reaffirmation of roles as mothers and employees (Millward, 2006), the ability to participate in multiple roles effectively (Carlson et al., 2009), changed gender role attitudes within the family (Stertz et al., 2017) and opportunities to do different things and become financially independent.

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**Proposition 3** *First-time mothers will differ in their subjective appraisal of work entry following maternity, with some perceiving it as an identity threat and others as identity opportunity.*

### 2.3.4 | Identity work content changes and identity work strategies

Our conceptual framework proposes that identity work is focused on two dimensions: the types of identities worked upon and the use of different identity work strategies.

When it comes to ***the types of identities worked upon,*** we focus on personal, role, and collective identities (Caza et al., 2018). Personal identities are conceptualized as the most elementary type of identity where the first-time mother will draw on her constellation of unique experiences and life/career to date (Owens et al., 2010). In the case of the first-time mother, her personal identity may be adjusted or changed, and these adaptations may take different forms. Ladge et al. (2012) found that managerial women added the desired identity, mother, to their identity set on return from maternity leave. However, a first-time mother may hide the fact that they have returned from maternity leave in order not to feel stigmatized or disadvantaged as a result of taking time off to have a baby. In addition, it could involve avoiding the mention of a child, or never using the existence of a child as a reason for having to leave work or be unavailable for certain events.

There may also be **changes to work role identity** and in particular, relational identities, or one's self-understanding in relation to others (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). A first-time mother on work re-entry may feel that her status post-maternity is lower than was previously the case within the organization. Therefore, she will search for ways to move out of this identity, take on a higher status identity, and view motherhood as a higher status identity (Costantini et al., 2020). Alternatively, she may view work re-entry as an opportunity to advance her career in a new direction and seize the opportunity to move to a new desired identity. This could take several forms, including a new job role, a move to another part of the organization as a growth opportunity, or a desire to have flexibility and work on a different type of contractual arrangement. She may also actively search for new possible future selves (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), including experimentation and trial and error, exploration of new roles or ways of working that allow greater flexibility and work life balance (Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023; Kossek, Perrigino, et al., 2023). Costantini et al. (2022) highlighted that women on returning to work frequently felt that they were not supported, particularly where they occupied a management position. They also experienced difficulties reintegrating into their team and had, in some cases, to change their department. First-time mothers may also engage in trial-and-error processes, with additional identities such as entrepreneur or contractor (Huppatz, 2018; Huppatz et al., 2019). A first-time mother may use maternity leave as an opportunity to reassess her life and work goals, and seek new adventures, however, this process of adding is not without stress and challenges (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Third, there may be changes to a first-time mother's collective identities where she may reconstruct work related meanings around the organization in which she works, and she may target occupational or professional identities as part of this change process. For example, she may be less likely to search for new meanings in the organization and look elsewhere for a less threatening meaning. Ashforth et al. (2008) suggested that where individuals face some sort of stigma or taint, they are likely to fall back on their professional context and values to articulate an unthreatened meaning. Bataille and Vough (2022) suggested that identity context change may involve taking on a professional identity because a first-time mother no longer feels valued by the organization, and she feels detached from the organization and wishes to avoid it altogether. For example, Maxwell et al. (2019) found that women returning to work had to compensate through extra work and pressure.

**Proposition 4** *The subjective assessment of identity threat or opportunity following work re-entry will result in changes in personal, work role, and collective identities.*

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Our framework points to the use of different *types of identity work* used by first-time mothers on return to work in response to their subjective assessments of the experiences of return to work following maternity leave. Our first identity work strategy, consistent with social identity theory involves changing the meanings that they associate with a group (Caza et al., 2018) and this will involve work to attach or distance themselves relative to the organization, or that of motherhood. For example, Pratt (2000) highlighted the possibility that first-time mothers will use affinity or emulation identity work. The former is focused on recognizing compatibility between themselves and the organization, whereas the latter involves the incorporation of organizational characteristics into their self-understandings. In contrast, a first-time mother may decide that her role within the organization is tainted in some way because she is now a mother, therefore she cannot be as committed to the organization and the role (Grandy & Mavin, 2012; Kreiner et al., 2006).

Our second identity work strategy gives prominence to changes in the self, to align with the role and/or changes in work expectations. This will involve work by the first-time mother to define herself by a new role, to change the perceptions of work colleagues as to what should now be expected of them as a working mother. For example, Ibarra (1999) highlighted the important concept of provisional selves, where first-time mothers draw on their own and other's perceptions about a role when adapting to a new role.

Our third identity work strategy consistent with a narrative approach to identity focuses on how a first-time mother engages in *changes in identity talk*, or the way she expresses the identity and the frequency of expression. Identity talk is a form of discursive articulation where language becomes a part of one's identity (Jones & Clifton, 2018; Steffan, 2021). Therefore, first-time mothers will utilize stories that connect who they once were to who they are now, and who they wish to become (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This type of identity work involves an ongoing process of "writing one's autobiography" and one that is constantly "in progress" (Beech et al., 2012). It may take the form of public expressions of who they are through stories about their education, parenting experiences, or stories about other roles outside of the organization.

**Proposition 5** *Based on their subjective assessment of the identity opportunity and threat involved in the experience of returning to work following maternity leave, first-time mothers may use identity work strategies including changing the meaning that they associate with a group, changes in self and changes in identity talk.*

### 2.3.5 | Career outcomes of identity work by women on return to work

Our conceptual framework proposes important career outcomes arising from changes in identity content and identity work strategies. The first outcome involves *reestablishment of existing career;* however, this can be particularly challenging for a first-time mother as she re-enters the organization post-maternity (Davies et al., 2022; Huppatz et al., 2019; Mumford et al., 2023). Given contextual and economic factors, the first-time mother may have few other options and it may be particularly important for a first-time mother who will likely be at an early career stage where career progression will be particularly salient. The complexities experienced will depend on societal expectations, the organization, the nature of the work, the contractual arrangements, and changes in the organization during the period of maternity leave, in addition to the supports and flexibility shown by the organization. For example, the operation of organizational influence is manifest in Christopher's (2012) concept of "extensive mothering," where a mother is able to integrate work and motherhood through delegating care work to others and working fewer hours. Daniel Barnes (2016) proposed the term "strategic mothering" to explain societal impacts concerning how Black mothers opt out of the workplace in an effort to challenge negative stereotypes associated with Black families.

A second career outcome is focused on reshaping *the existing career within the organization*. Identity work may result in a first-time mother seeking out new career opportunities within the existing organization which are a better fit with desired future selves, and which provide an opportunity to establish a new identity. This option will

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likely be associated with opportunity focused identity work that will crystallize the sense of the desired future content of their identity. It may also arise in the case of identity threat and be a necessity to fewer hours to cope with the expense of child minding, or where the first-time mother is single and does not have family support to help with childcare.

A third career outcome is focused on initiating *a new career outside of the organization* in response to identity work, focused on avoiding threats, or capitalizing on opportunities. In this case of identity threat a first-time mother may conclude that the current organization is not a good place to which she should return. She may perceive that her new identity as a mother is stigmatized and therefore, she will be at a disadvantage in terms of her career. Alternatively, in response to opportunity appraisal and corresponding identity work, a first-time mother may consider a new role as an exciting way to move toward a desired self. A new career in another organization will allow her to try out new and untested skills, to seek experiences that involve novelty and surprises and to try out new identities (Ibarra, 1999). This new career may also involve different types of work not attached to a specific organization and aimed at trying out new identities. This option may be a consideration by factors such as the job opportunities available, skill gaps preventing mobility, difficulties relocating due to the requirement for family support to mind the child and issues related to discrimination and other disparities (Lynch, 2008).

A fourth career outcome is focused on the *exploration of new career options without returning to work*. This is a holding option and represents a response to identity work focused on threats or opportunities. In the case of identity threat, a first-time mother may make the decision that she does not wish to return to her prior organization yet is concerned to maintain her identity and find an organization where she can better balance her motherhood and work identities. This may take time to achieve in terms of job search and she may therefore be prepared to continue, or extend her period of maternity leave. Alternatively, in the context of identity opportunity work she is focused on new horizons that meet a desired identity and the current organization is not able to provide them. This career option may be curtailed or enhanced by income issues, ethnicity, availability of job opportunities, whether the first-time mother has partners' support and skill levels.

Finally, largely due to perceived identity threat a woman may decide for now to ***be a stay-at-home mother***. Consistent with broad notions of a career, we conceptualize the stay-at-home option as a career. Tian and Chen (2023) for example, highlighted that mothers who opt out of the labor market prefer a home-centered lifestyle (Gauthier et al., 2016), however this option is influenced by the cultural and gendered organizational structures. In the case of this option, a first-time mother is subtracting a work identity, or alternatively, replacing a work identity with an identity as a mother. She is therefore decreasing the salience of a threatening identity in the case of work and instead will draw on a non-threatening identity, that of motherhood (Deaux, 1991). This option may not be a free choice for a first-time mother.

**Proposition 6** *The outcomes of identity work by a first-time mother to address identity threat and opportunity arising from work re-entry can lead to a multiplicity of career outcomes.*

## 3 | DISCUSSION

Work re-entry following maternity leave for the first-time mother is a major individual level event characterized by novelty, criticality, and disruption. Consistent with our subjective notion of identity, it can be perceived as positive or negative and have significant urgency for the first-time mother (Liu et al., 2023). It is an event that will trigger significant cognitive appraisal of identity threat and opportunity (Bataille & Vough, 2022), and this occurs in a multilevel context of significant intersectional complexity. This paper contributes to the literature on first-time mothers and work re-entry following maternity leave by proposing and specifying how a major life event can lead to significant subjective appraisal of identity opportunity and threat, leading to different forms of identity work

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and given this subjectivity first-time mothers with respond in very different ways to the event of returning to work. We give a specific focus to the career decisions that flow from these subjective processes. A fundamental component of our proposed framework is the notion of subjective senses and subjectivity and the idea that identity is inherently psychological and it emerges from a subjective production through a process of internalization which is unconscious in nature (González Rey, 2016). Consistent with our theorizing, this subjective appraisal is impacted proximally by perceptions of event characteristics and underpinned by a multiplicity of macro, meso, and micro factors informed by intersectional theory. We specify two dimensions of identity work, one focused on the identities that need to be worked upon and the second focused on the types of identity strategies used by first-time mothers. We theorize that the cognitive assessment of identity opportunity and threat requires that personal, work roles, and collective identities are adapted or changed. The framework identifies three types of identity work used by first-time mothers focused on changes in meaning that they associate with a group, changes in self, and changes in identity talk (Caza et al., 2018; Netto et al., 2020).

We advance understanding of identity threat and opportunity in the context of work re-entry for a first-time mother following maternity leave in a number of ways. First, we integrate intersectional theory to explain first-time mother subjective appraisal of identity threat and opportunity. In particular, our framework emphasizes structural processes at macro, meso, and micro levels that intersect with each other to impact the types of identity work and career outcomes and are processed and interpreted by the first time mother (Hennekam et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al.,. 2016). We therefore illustrate that first-time mothers' subjectivities related to identity are embedded within systemic dimensions of structure and power that constrain or enable their agency, as she re-enters work following maternity leave and in doing so, we respond to calls by Rodriguez et al. (2016) to better understand these multi-level influences.

Second, we incorporate events systems theory to conceptualize work re-entry following maternity leave for the first-time mother as a significant individual level event that operates in a near or proximal way to impact assessment of identity threat and opportunity. We highlight that how the first-time mother subjectively assesses the criticality, novelty, and disruptiveness of the event, its urgency and favorability will trigger a process of assessment of identity threat and opportunity which then leads to identity work (Cao & Hamori, 2022; Kulichyova et al., 2022).

Third, we illuminate the dimensions of identity work that arise from the subjective assessment of identity threat and opportunity by first-time mothers returning to work from maternity leave. In particular, we specify that the first-time mother will work on multiple identities and that she will use identity work focused on changes in the meaning that she associates with a group, changes in self and changes in identity talk (Caza et al., 2018). We then link these different dimensions of identity work to career outcomes for the first-time mother. In doing so, we emphasize that a first-time mother will hold multiple identities that impact each other (Caza et al., 2018) and work re-entry represents a critical juncture, where identity change will take place, thus impacting relationships between identities. We specify several career outcomes, highlighting the spectrum of career options open to the first-time mother. We also conceptualize that this identity work is dynamic and temporal.

## 3.1 | Implications for theory and future research

Our conceptual framework suggests important avenues for future research in respect of return to work for first-time mothers and potentially those who have had more than one child. Given that our conceptual framework suggests a time dimension and that identity is highly subjective, temporal, and dynamic (Seppälä et al., 2022; Tian & Chen, 2023) we emphasize the need to understand our conceptual framework from both subjective and temporal perspectives. Table 1 summarizes important questions in respect of the conceptual framework. The first area of theorizing and research is to better understand how return to work operates as a major individual level event. How do subjective perceptions of criticality, disruptiveness, and novelty, in addition to urgency and favorability, impact

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**TABLE 1** Future research questions to illuminate our conceptual farmwork.

| Dimension of our conceptual framework | Future research questions |
|---|---|
| Proposition 1: Dimensions of events: Novelty, disruptiveness, criticality, favorability and time | • What is the relative importance of the subjective assessment of event characteristics of return to work that are most salient in shaping the first time mother appraisal of identity threats and opportunities for first-time mothers?<br>• How does the salience of the subjective assessment of these event characteristics differ for second-and third-time mothers for example?<br>• What are the impacts of event characteristics and return to work for the subjective assessment of multiple identities?<br>• How does the salience of the subjective assessment of these event characteristics change over time? |
| Proposition 2: Role of multilevel factors shaping cognitive appraisal of identity threat and opportunity | • What role do individual characteristics such as a partner support, single mother status and career aspirations play in a first-time mother's subjective appraisal of identity threat and opportunity?<br>• What role do meso level factors such as supervisor support, family-friendly policies, flexibility policies, organization culture and climate in shaping subjective assessment of identity threat and opportunity<br>• What role do macro level factors such as national cultural differences, stigma, cultural values, gendered assumptions in national culture and national legislative regimes for maternity leave play in the subjective assessment of identity threat and opportunity? |
| Proposition 3: Cognitive processing of identity threats and opportunities | • How does the subjective assessment of multiple identities impact the types of identity work undertaken by first-time mothers and those with more than one child?<br>• Do first-time mothers and other mothers use a subjective identity hierarchy to decide which identities are important at a particular time in the return-to-work context?<br>• What are the temporal dynamics of subjective assessment for first-time and other mothers?<br>• In what ways may identity threats become opportunities and vice versa?<br>• How do the characteristics of present and future identities impact subjective perceptions of opportunities and threats? What role do subjective assessments of past identities play in this context? |
| Proposition 4/5: Types of identity work | • What factors influence the types of identity work that first-time undertakings respond to identity opportunities and threats?<br>• Which identities are most significantly worked upon?<br>• To what extent is there an identity hierarchy and what role does it play in the use of existence-focused identity strategies?<br>• Is the use of existence focused identity strategies a function of time? |

(Continues)

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**TABLE 1** (Continued)

| Dimension of our conceptual framework | Future research questions |
|---|---|
| | • When are content-focused identity work strategies most frequently used by first-time mothers and other mothers?<br>• What are the individual and contextual factors that influence the use of existence/content focused identify work strategies for first-time and other mothers?<br>• How do first-time and other mothers use content focused rather than existence focused identity work strategies?<br>• What is the consequence of unsuccessful existence identity work in the context of opportunities? |
| Proposition 6: Identity threats and opportunities and career outcomes | • What are the linkages between subjective assessment of identity threats and opportunities and specific career outcomes?<br>• How is the use of different identity work strategies linked to career outcomes?<br>• How do career outcomes of identity work change over time? Do they have particular temporal dynamics?<br>• What role do intersectional factors play in how these options are available or feasible? |

the appraisal of threats and opportunities undertaken by a first-time and other mothers? Does the impact of these event characteristics change over time, or as the mother has more children?

The second area concerns the role of intersectional factors, including age, nationality, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability and their impact on the cognitive assessment of identity threat and opportunity. What roles do contextual factors play, such as national culture, country, organization, and institutional arrangements for maternity leave and pay, play in the assessment of identity threat and opportunity? How do intersectional factors and perceptions of the return-to-work event interact with each other? For example, how do LGBTQ + new mothers navigate their way through the work re-entry phase? What are the unique challenges for neurodivergent new mothers in addition to single, divorced, and widowed mothers? Intersectional dimensions of the return to work for first time mothers can be investigated using focus groups, document analysis interviews, and observation because these methods can provide insights into the complex web of factors, structures, and relationships that shape a first-time mothers identities, threats, opportunities, and career decision making.

Third, we have scope to understand the subjective processes that underpin the assessment of identity threat and opportunity, the identities that are worked upon and the types of identity work strategies used. What are the psychological processes that explain what first time mothers ascribe to the event of returning to work? Do these subjectivities change over time? How are the subjective assessments of threat and opportunity linked to identity work strategies? What is the situation where particular identity work strategies are not successful? Finally, we need to understand the linkages between the use of different identity work strategies and career outcomes. How stable or changeable are these career outcomes? Are there temporal dimensions explaining these career outcomes? To address these subjective dimensions of identity and identity work make significant demands of researchers and will require multiple data collection approaches including interviews, write reflections, the use of visual strategies, and digital technology. They will also need to be addressed using longitudinal designs that capture the temporal dimension of the event of returning to work, changing subjectivities and the dynamic and historical nature of experiences and identity.

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### 3.2 | Implications for policy and practice

Work re-entry following maternity leave for the first-time mother is a complex and challenging individual level event with major implications for the cognitive assessment of identity threat and opportunity, and identity work. Our conceptual framework and in particular, the structural dimensions have important implications for national policy around maternity leave and return to work legislation, and for organizational practices implemented to support return to work by first-time mothers and mothers on their subsequent child. First, at a policy level, national institutional arrangements around paid maternity leave and return to work can be supportive of first-time and other mothers' identity work challenges, by providing a strong legislative framework that seeks to balance both the mother and work identities. At an organizational level there is much that can be done to support mothers' return to work from maternity leave (Houston & Marks, 2003). First-time mothers may be better able to reconcile conflicting identities where organizations provide flexible work arrangements on return from maternity leave, including reduced hours, part-time work, work-from-home home options to balance their work and family responsibilities. At a meso level there is potential to address work culture issues around parenting and enhancing the visibility of parenthood in the workplace through awareness programs and the provision of training for supervisors to develop new mindsets around their role in supervising women who return to work. There is scope to provide supports in the form of coaching to first-time mothers to help them to adjust their lives to deal with the tensions between work and being a mother. At a micro level, organizations should be aware of unconscious barriers or obstacles for working mothers. These include, for example, the timing of senior management meetings in the afternoon, which mitigate against mothers who wish to avail of part-time morning work from attending. Equally, meetings which over run and eat into the early evening can place working mothers in a difficult position if they have to excuse themselves and are viewed as being less committed as a result of having to collect children. Without intending to, these subtle barriers are often in place in organizations and unless challenged will persist. Organizations need to be conscious of the existence of such hidden barriers and consider the potential impact on working mothers.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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## ENDNOTE

[1] A note on language: Throughout this manuscript, we use gendered language (e.g., "Women," "mother" "she") and gender inclusive language ("people" "persons") interchangeably with the acknowledgment that not all people who give birth are women. The terms that are used in this paper are intended to be inclusive of the birthing persons, including cis, trans, queer, non-binary and gender-diverse individuals.

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