"16 WEEKS IS A LOT OF TIME TO BE AWAY": A CONTEMPORARY
EXAMINATION OF MATERNITY LEAVE PERCEPTIONS & EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

ALLISON M. CHANDLER. "16 weeks is a lot of time to be away": A contemporary examination of maternity leave perceptions and experiences. (Under the direction of DR. LORIL GOSSETT)

In recent decades, women's presence in the workplace has increased from only a quarter of total American workers, to nearly half of all American workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). With an increasing number of women in the labor force, organizations found themselves grappling with questions over how to accommodate female employees in their workforce, particularly when their female workers became pregnant. Although the United States enacted policies aimed at protecting pregnant women in the workplace beginning the late 1970s, research in both previous and more current literature stated women continued to report negative experiences while pregnant in the workplace and after returning from their maternity leave. Given the more recent push for family friendly policies in American organizations and the maternity leave policies that followed, it is necessary to examine the experiences of women taking maternity leave in a contemporary context. Specifically, in a new era of maternity leave where companies are offering longer leaves than mandated, what are the experiences and perceptions of the women taking these longer leaves? This dissertation examines the experiences of women who have taken an extended maternity leave in the more contemporary era of leave, while utilizing a human capital lens to better understand their experiences and perceptions. Notably, the findings suggest women still experience difficulties utilizing their leave policies and still have negative experiences and/or emotions surrounding their return to the workplace. Further, while navigating their maternity leave policies, both women and organizations use human capital as a tool for

negotiating expectations. Practical, methodological, and theoretical implications are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Women's consistent presence in the workplace is recent, ever-changing, and at times controversial. Over seventy years ago in 1950, roughly 18 million women participated in the civilian workforce in the United States. Fast forward to 2020, nearly 76 million women were present in the United States labor force. Additionally, as women's labor force participation increased, their percentage of total workers in the United States increased as well. While women represented 29.6% of the workforce in 1950, that percentage grew to 47% in 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Thus, women's numbers in the overall workforce in the United States have not only grown, but their percentage representation in the labor force has grown as well. Over the last 60 years, representation of women in the workforce has generally grown at an exponential rate (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). With growing representation in the workforce, both organizations and female workers had to consistently re-evaluate how to successfully integrate career growth and the female experience. Issues such as pregnancy, which had not presented a challenge for organizations in the past, began to become more relevant as women's representation in the workforce increased. For example, how does an organization interact with a pregnant employee? How is a pregnant employee supposed to work? What does pregnancy mean for the woman's future with the organization? Throughout the years, organizations found themselves increasingly grappling with issues such as pregnancy in the workforce, which had not historically been a common occurrence companies had dealt with due to the overwhelming male presence in the workforce.

During their initial entrance into the workforce, women often found themselves with little protection should they become pregnant. In fact, the early assumption by employers and society was after a woman gave birth, she would leave the workforce to enter motherhood

(Zagorsky, 2017). However, as the expectation of leaving the workforce began to shift and women increasing wished to return to their careers following childbirth, a clash between company expectations and expecting mothers became apparent. While historically organizations could expect to 'deal' with a pregnant employee to the point that she left their organization, companies were not having to navigate how to incorporate, accommodate, and support expecting mothers. Initially, expectant mothers had very little job protection, or general protection, in the workforce. However, as female numbers in the workforce began to grow, the United States government enacted two laws that significantly impacted a pregnant worker's/new mother's rights in the workplace.

In 1978 the United States government passed the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA). The PDA was an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and worked to ban discrimination against a female based on pregnancy, the birth of a child, or any other medical issue that arose due to pregnancy or childbirth, essentially protecting the physical condition of pregnancy in the workplace (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2019). The PDA held relevancy upon its implementation in 1978, as the number of women in the workforce had grown to 43 million (versus 18 million just 28 years earlier) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). The PDA established that an employer was not allowed to treat a pregnant woman needing time away from the office any differently from someone in the organization needing time away from the office for a medical disability. While PDA made discrimination due to pregnancy and/or childbirth illegal, it did *not* provide any protection for a mother's time away from the workplace during and after childbirth.

Unlike the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) did contribute to the beginnings of maternity leave as the United States sees it today. Nearly

three decades after the PDA, FMLA was passed by the United States government in 1993. It is important to note that FMLA did not provide women with a standard maternity leave or a paid maternity leave, rather, it protected all workers for up to 12 weeks, unpaid of medical leave in a calendar year. FMLA protected a worker's employment with their organization during and after their leave by making it unlawful to terminate employment with an individual due to an extended medical leave within the confines of the medically necessary leave duration (Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, 2019). While FMLA applied to all employees eligible, it specifically applied to new mothers taking leave for childbirth and recovery after childbirth. A woman could file for FMLA for up to 12 weeks, protecting herself from termination by her organization, after the birth of her child. FMLA provided women a way to leave and re-enter the workplace, on paper, upon the birth of their child. Women seemed to recognize the applicability of FMLA upon the birth of a child, with the incidents of unpaid maternity leave in the United States jumping to 60% in 1993, from only 37% in 1991 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Together with PDA, FMLA worked to provide more protections and rights to expecting women, and new mothers, in the workplace. With PDA specifically addressing pregnancy and childbirth, and FMLA applying to recovery time after childbirth, women began to have more options when blending their career and motherhood.

With the passing of PDA and FMLA, a basic assumption would follow that pregnant women in the workforce experienced less stress and chaos surrounding their pregnancy and childbirth than women who were in the workforce prior to PDA and FMLA. However, while more modern female workers were certainly more protected than their predecessors from a legal standpoint, research demonstrated pregnant workers still faced significant challenges

when navigating pregnancy, maternity leave, and re-entry to the workplace following

childbirth.

For example, research showed that women often found after announcing their

pregnancy they faced negative attitudes from their boss and coworkers concerning their

commitment to their job (Byron & Roscigno, 2014). This research found managers started to

attribute any job-related mistakes or problems to the woman's pregnancy after it was

announced. Additionally, managers and coworkers frequently assumed at the conclusion of

her leave, the new mother would not be returning to her previous job, or the workplace as a

whole, similar to the older assumption of pregnant women mentioned previously. Other

research found that organizations were not necessarily prepared for adjusting their

organizational policies and programs to accommodate pregnant employees under the new

rules of the FMLA. Workplaces seldom developed formal, structured plans and/or resources

for managing their pregnant employees or the maternity leave process (Cowan & Bochantin,

2009). Therefore, while there were new policies in place at the federal level, pregnant women

still faced employment challenges that their non-pregnant female and male coworkers did

not.

Recent years in the United States have shown shifting political and social landscapes,

as well as shifting work expectations, leading to a call for revamped maternity leave policies

by proxy. In fact, in December of 2019, the US Government (the largest employer in the

United States) enacted a policy that ensure 12 weeks of *paid* parental leave for civilian

employees (Miller, 2020). While the US government chose to offer 12 weeks of paid

maternity leave to federal employees, other corporations have chosen to offer longer periods

of leave for new mothers. For example, beginning in 2020 Jim Beam offered 26 weeks of

paid parental leave for the primary caregiver (most often the mother) upon the birth of a new child. Sun Life, a large insurance firm, enacted a similar offer choosing to give birth mothers 24 weeks of paid leave after the birth of their child (Miller, 2020). Netflix gives parents as much leave as they would like, paid, within the child's first year of life, representing one of the most comprehensive policies (length and time) in the United States (Molla, 2018).

Beyond length of leave, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) reported data showing from 2008 to 2018, there was an increase of 8% in civilian workers reporting access to paid leave, from 9% to 17%. It is also important to note that while some organizations in the past have offered FMLA because they were legally obligated to, organizations offering extended leave beyond the 12 protected weeks of FMLA, as well as organizations offering paid leave, are giving these benefits by choice, not legal obligation - a stark contrast to policies women were utilizing in the past. Thus, in recent years there has been a shift in not only the length of time employees are offered upon the birth of a child, but also the level of pay they receive while they are on leave and the choice of the organization to offer these benefits was not forced by a legal statute. Although some organizations certainly implement extended maternity leave policies in an effort to attract top talent, organizations also often enact these policies to appear socially conscious, demonstrating a pressure from society at large to offer better maternity leave benefits (McGee, 2016). In discussion of these extended leaves, it should be noted that while this shift has occurred in some organizations, the shift is in no way wide-spread, and generally only impacts high level positions (not hourly, gig, or other part-time positions).

As organizations begin to offer longer maternity leave benefits to align with workers and societal expectations, the assumption would follow that these organizations would be

supportive of updating and expanding their maternity leave policies. Further, the assumption would follow that women would increasingly utilize maternity leave benefits and continue to grow their presence in the workforce overall. However, recent research revealed that the number of women taking maternity leave has not increased significantly since 1995. Therefore, while maternity leave has received increased social and political attention, the rate at which women take maternity leave has remained largely unchanged (MacMillan, 2017). Additionally, the percentage of women in the US workforce has plateaued in recent years, increasing by only .02% in from 2015 to 2020, as opposed to a more exponential growth in the early 21st century (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). The rates of women taking maternity leave and the percentage of representation in the United States workforce do not seem to align with the organizational shift towards more 'female friendly' and 'family friendly' policies. Specifically, if organizations are offering more generous leave policies that in the past, why aren't a higher percentage of women taking advantages of these policies? If policies such as paid maternity leave are being put in place to help keep women on their career trajectory, why have their labor force numbers plateaued as these policies are being enacted? This dissertation aims to address these general misalignments, by examining the experiences of women in the United States who take maternity leaves longer than 12 weeks. Specifically, this dissertation will highlight the experiences of the women who take leaves longer than 12 weeks to better comprehend how maternity leave is understood and experienced within contemporary US societal context.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Maternity Leave

Maternity leave has become more of talking point in contemporary society in the United States, as well as in more niche areas such as politics. In fact, 2016 was the first time in US history that a stance on maternity leave was provided by both major candidates for the Democratic and Republican parties, indicating its recent elevated importance in voters' minds (Sholer, 2016). While discussions surrounding maternity leave are becoming more common in our social and political discourse, organizational scholars have studied issues related to pregnancy in the workplace for many years. Below, I discuss some of the most relevant previous literature covering the experiences of maternity leave and maternity leave expectations. Specifically, I highlight the areas of current literature surrounding announcing pregnancy in the workplace, stigma and discrimination concerning pregnancy in the workplace, and re-entering the workplace following maternity leave.

Announcing Pregnancy

For many pregnant workers, the decision of how and when to announce their pregnancy to their manager and coworkers can be fraught with stress and anxiety (Jones, 2017). Despite the fact that a mother may want to share with her employer that she is pregnant to relieve the anxiety leading up to the disclosure, many women worry over when and how to tell their boss and their coworkers about their pregnancy. The disclosure of a pregnancy by the employee has been shown to be a pivotal moment for the pregnant worker's relationship with their supervisor - so much so, if the supervisor reacts with excitement to the news, the worker's perception of perceived supervisor support (PSS) can

increase - a measure that often stays stagnant (Little, Hinojosa, & Lynch, 2017). Beyond supervisor relationships, concealing a pregnancy has been shown to increase maternal stress and negatively affect maternal health; however, women have also noted their disclosure of their pregnancy as the turning point in the organization when they began to experience discrimination from managers and coworkers (Jones, 2017; Mäkelä, 2012). Due to the conflicting issues of wanting to disclose their pregnancy versus anticipating the negative backlash after their pregnancy is public knowledge, the time and manner in which to announce often creates stress for the soon to be mother as she navigates new terrain.

As alluded to above, after announcing pregnancy the pregnant worker often becomes the subject of workplace discrimination or stigmatization. In fact, the stigma surrounding pregnancy is so intense, often times any social benefit the mother received by announcing her pregnancy early can be erased over the course of the pregnancy in the workplace. That is, even if a mother reveals her pregnancy at an early point to her manager, as she approaches her leave, the stigma is so strong that her pregnancy is again viewed in a negative light (Jones, King, Gilrane, McCausland, Cortina & Grimm, 2016).

Beyond navigating announcing a pregnancy and the associated stigma with said announcement, pregnant women also found themselves having to navigate expectations with the bosses surrounding their pregnancy and leave after their announcement. Pregnant women have reported being unable to navigate negotiation with their bosses when it comes to pregnancy and maternity leave, leading to these women struggling to maintain their professional image in the face of their pregnancy (Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015). This struggle around expectations has been reflected not only in previous research surrounding women's experiences, but also in research looking at how managers perceive

pregnancy, in which managers report they expected pregnancy in the workplace to lead to poor performance, poor attendance, and ultimately the employee leaving the workplace for maternity leave and not returning (Byron & Roscigno, 2014).

Within this dissertation, women may have different experiences navigating their maternity leave with their managers, as they 'choose' to take a longer leave. Announcing and planning for leave has the potential to look very different for a woman who is leaving for five months versus a woman who is leaving for 12 weeks. The gap created in human capital (a person's knowledge, skills, and abilities they possess (Becker, 1975)), can be very different for a 12-week absence versus a five-month absence, therefore, following the conversation in which a woman announces she is pregnant, expectations of the woman may begin to shift as she starts planning for her departure from the workplace.

Stigma and Discrimination

As mentioned above, a pregnant woman in the workplace often faces not only stigma in the workplace surrounding her pregnancy, but also stigma associated with her pregnancy and rapidly changing body. Additionally, not only is the woman's body changing, but those changes are often associated with ill health, absenteeism, and overall disruption in the flow of the organization (Human Resources Management International Digest, 2016). While navigating relationships with coworkers and expectations surrounding pregnancy in the workplace and maternity leave, the pregnant worker must also balance changing attitudes and actions from her coworkers, managers, and organization as a whole. In fact, the stigma and discrimination a pregnant woman faces can begin even before she becomes pregnant. As discussed below, both discrimination and stigma play significant roles in a pregnant worker's experience.

One contributing factor to the stigma surrounding maternity leave is potentially the fact that, for work related purposes, pregnancy is considered to be a disability (Bochantin & Cowan, 2010; Buzzanell, Remke, Meisenbach, Liu, Lowers, & Conn, 2017; Cowan & Bochantin, 2009). Through labeling pregnancy as a disability, the pregnant worker is automatically set apart from those in the workplaces who do not 'have' disabilities. In fact, in recent literature, a woman's disclosure of pregnancy has been tied to overall stigma disclosure. That is, pregnant women take comparable steps to those similar to herself who carry other stigmas. Interestingly, pregnant women often choose between revealing their pregnancy, signaling their pregnancy, or concealing their pregnancy. When a woman reveals her pregnancy, she clearly announces she is pregnant to those at her organization. If she engages in signaling, the pregnant worker does not blatantly state that she is pregnant, but she does provide 'clues' and social ques that could lead to coworkers assuming or discovering she is pregnant. Lastly, if the worker chooses to conceal her pregnancy, she attempts to hide the pregnancy for as long as possible from those at her organization. The culture of the organization influences a woman's choice as to whether to reveals, conceals, or signals, which is similar to various other stigmas workers may face (Jones et al., 2016; Jones, 2017; Mäkelä, 2012).

When looking closer at the overall culture of an organization, not only can the culture influence a woman's announcement of pregnancy, it can also influence her experience and anticipated stigma upon becoming pregnant. Examining the role of stigma as a woman's workplace experience, Fox and Quinn (2015) found a woman's experienced stigma influenced job satisfaction, psychological well-being, and turnover intentions. In the same article, Fox and Quinn (2015) found that women's anticipated stigma decreased when she

was in a supportive work-family culture and when she received workplace support during her pregnancy.

Beyond influencing a woman's experience in the workplace, stigma surrounding pregnancy can also influence a woman prior to her employment, during her interview with the potential employer. While discrimination against women is prohibited by law, assumptions about women abound during interviews. Often in interviews, there is an 'elephant in the room' regarding a woman's intent to become pregnant. That is, while the employer is not able to directly ask about a woman's intention to become pregnant, both the woman and the interviewer know the interviewer is wondering about her plans for pregnancy (Human Resources Management International Digest, 2016). Recent research has shown that women who are childless are rated as more desirable for hiring, promoting, and educating, within an organization (Trump-Steele et al., 2016). However, because an employer cannot ask about children or intent to have children, they are left to assume or guess as to a woman's intention to have children, which feeds gender stereotypes (Gloor, Li, Lim, & Feierabend, 2018).

Beyond stigma experienced, women can also face discrimination in the workplace based on pregnancy. Zagorsky (2017) noted that women who could become pregnant may face discrimination (even if they are not planning to become pregnant) due to the fact that if they were to become pregnant, their pregnancy could result in short staffing in their department, wage costs for the company, and medical costs that their company may have to absorb. It is no surprise then, that in the past when a woman would voluntarily leave her employment due to impending motherhood, she was replaced by a non-mother. Feeding this discrimination against mothers is the stereotype held by managers that pregnancy and

motherhood leads to poorer worker performance, lower worker competency, poor worker attendance, and the eventual exit of the employee from their workplace (Byron & Roscigno, 2014; Human Resource Management International Digest, 2016; Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). It is no surprise, then, that in a recent study, four out of five women labeled their disclosure of their pregnancy at their workplace as the turning point at which they began to experience discrimination within the workplace. According to these women, this discrimination took the form of negative comments from others in the organization about their changing bodies, problems with finances (specifically, bonuses), and denials of training (which in turn affected their human capital) (Mäkelä, 2012). This discrimination perhaps is no surprise, given that the pregnant body has been shown to represent the opposite of 'professional' body for a woman when in the workplace (Tretheway, 1999). Therefore, while stigma can certainly be experienced by pregnant women in the workplace (and those who may become pregnant), these women must often contend with discrimination as well. While this research discusses pregnancy and maternity leave from a human capital perspective, it is imperative to consider the implications of both stigma and discrimination.

Returning from Leave

After battling negative experiences in the workplace leading up to their leave, many pregnant workers may find their actual leave and return from leave to be taxing. Not only can their return be unexpected as their manager and coworkers may have expected them to not return, upon returning to work the new mother may face judgment from coworkers and supervisors for choosing the 'career and family track' over the 'mommy track' (Vandenhuevel, 1997). In fact, these two tracks become apparent when the woman is deciding to take leave from work upon the birth of her child. Research has shown that

women who take maternity leave are seen as prioritizing family over work and are assumed to be less competent than women who do not take maternity leave (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). Concerning women who decide not to re-enter the workforce, Sidle (2011) found that often, that decision was based on their income as it related to their husband's income. Specifically, how much income they were contributing to the household as compared to their spouse. Therefore, while some workers in an organization may believe a woman 'decided' not to return to work, this decision may be much more complex than believed, and may potentially not be what the woman would like to do. Interestingly, while women are typically penalized for taking time away from work, and for growing their family in general, men are often the recipients of a 'fatherhood premium' where they experience pay and promotional increases due to their children. Thus, the experience of women and men when growing their family and also concentrating on their career is very different from each other, both experience wise and organizationally. When completing work on parental leave in general, Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt (2010) suggest that for a woman to experience little stigma surrounding pregnancy and maternity leave, men must be offered the same amount of leave and new parent benefits as a female. While not the focus of this research, it is important to note the influence of general paternity leave programs (apart from more specific maternity leave programs) as these more universal benefit programs have the ability to influence acceptance of maternity leave benefits in the future.

Although taking maternity leave may be frowned upon by managers and coworkers, research has shown that of women who have coverage for maternity leave, 80% return to their pre-birth employer (Berger & Waldfogel, 2004). The high rate of return to work directly contradicts the assumption that a woman will use her maternity leave and then quit the

company; an assumption that can be damaging to any woman, even if she is not pregnant or planning to be pregnant. Additionally, these women often return to work due to the support they received while in the workplace prior to their leave, that is, the workplace environment experienced by these women does influence their return to work following the birth of their child (Fox & Quinn, 2015). Each of the participants for my research returned to their workplace after their leave. The vast majority of women returned full-time, while a small number returned part-time (either through a company benefits program or through negotiation).

For the purposes of this dissertation, a longer maternity leave (longer than the federally protected 12 weeks), may make a mother seem even less committed, less competent, and less of a productive worker. While these outcomes and assumptions have not been covered to date in the literature, this dissertation will uncover a mother's cognizance of these perceptions. Lastly, these women who choose to be away from the workplace longer create a longer gap in the workforce and create a longer loss of human capital for the organization and individual. One modern example of the impact of this loss can be seen in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). Years ago, BMGF became an exemplar of generous maternity leave in the United States, and the world, when they began to offer 52 weeks of paid maternity leave. However, four years after the program was implemented, the head of Human Resources for the organization announced the policy would be reduced to 26 weeks and a $20,000 stipend. Upon announcing this change, the head of Human Resources stated they were reducing the leave due to the negative impact a yearlong leave created at the organization. Citing difficulty with training and backfilling, and disruption overall at the organization, the foundation rolled back their policy to a much shorter, half year leave (Rice,

2019). Thus, the result of a longer maternity leave, and the lack of their worker for the duration of a year, proved too costly to the organization as a whole - ultimately leading to them reducing their leave policy.

Thus, there is a current clash over a more social movement to take longer maternity leaves, as seen in current political trends and calls for the US government and/or companies to take action and expand maternity leave benefits. While expecting mothers may feel supported generally to take a longer leave thanks to shifting social expectations, within organizations the societal approval often does not overlap with organizational approval. As longer maternity leave periods continue to garner social and political attention, it is essential that the experience of the mothers who take these longer leaves is understood.

Human Capital

Becker (1975) developed the concept of human capital to highlight the knowledge, skills, and abilities that exist within a person. Human capital and social capital (Putnam, 1995) have both been used to attach value to an individual based on measures other than those specified monetarily. For this reason, human capital has been in used in various studies to examine both the value that an employee may bring to the organization (Felicio, Cuoto, & Caiado, 2014), as well as how human capital moves with the individual (Edwards and Foley, 1998). Thus, when an individual leaves an organization, their human capital leaves with them. For this reason, human capital is the most appropriate lens to examine the reactions and experiences of a mother taking maternity leave upon giving birth to her child.

Human capital joined social capital as a way to measure a person's worth beyond their physical assets or income. While human capital refers to the knowledge and experience that lies within a person, social capital refers to the social networks a person possesses, and

the resources housed within those networks (Putnam, 1995). Research within organizations found that while both social and human capital were important to the individual and to organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors, it was human capital that determined organizational performance (Ellinger, Musgrove, Ellinger, Bachrach, Elmadag Bas, Wang, 2013; Felicio, Couto, & Caiado, 2014).

Previous research has drawn on the human capital literature to examine the way motherhood impacts female employees. When looking at the wages of mothers and non-mothers, Staff and Mortimer (2011) found that the differences in wages between the mothers and non-mothers could be completely explained by human capital acquisition. Staff and Mortimer (2011) discovered that the most disadvantageous use of time, when the individual was not accumulating any human capital, occurred right after a woman became a mother. This was a period of time when a woman would typically not be attending work or school, therefore not growing her human capital. Non-mothers, on the other hand, did not experience this gap. Similarly, Budig and Hodges (2010) reported that for high earning women, the 'motherhood penalty' they experienced was not necessarily compensation differences from non-mothers, but the loss of human capital. When comparing mothers to fathers, Olson (2013) found that human capital could help explain part of the wage gap between males and females. That is, the time off from work after a woman gave birth (and the loss of human capital associated with this time off) could help explain the wage gap as it was related to human capital. Thus, various researchers have examined capital and the ways in which it relates to organizational successes. While social capital has been shown to be important to the individual and company, research suggests it is human capital that drives organizational performance and influences an individual's organizational successes and promotions.

In his 1975 book, Human Capital, Becker discusses two types of training as they relate to human capital: general and specific. General training can be understood as the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a person possesses within themselves that would be valuable in any organization. For example, if an employee learned another language which could help them at their current organization, or any other. Specific training, on the other hand, is training that could only help the employee at their organization. An example of this training could be training an employee receives for a particular piece of machinery or computer program specific to their organization. For the purposes of this dissertation, either type of training leading to higher human capital would make a mother more valuable to the organization, and therefore create a larger gap when she leaves the organization for the period of her maternity leave. While a mother with a large amount of general training may be somewhat easy to either cover for or briefly replace during her leave, a mother with more specific training may represent more of an issue when addressing the labor gap created upon her absence. Due to the fact that human capital is housed within a person, there would be no way for the mother to 'leave it behind' when taking maternity leave (Becker, 1975).

In the context of this dissertation, human capital will serve as a guide to navigate and interpret the data. If a mother represents a loss to a company when she is absent for maternity leave, particularly if she is absent for an 'extended time' (in this context, more than a federally mandated absent leave), then she may be viewed more negatively for taking this 'indulgent' leave due to the fact that she is leaving the company with a large cognitive and labor gap than if she took the medically suggested leave. Viewing interactions between an organization and the mother as an economic balance sheet, by taking the leave provided by the company, she is essentially creating a 'debt' via the gap she creates in human capital.

Further, issues such as loss of human capital (while the mother is away) can be examined, as well as how human capital influences the overall experiences and perceptions of the women taking these longer leaves.

While there is research surrounding longer maternity leaves (those longer than 12 weeks), this research has been conducted in different countries from the United States (see Guertzgen & Hank, 2018; Langan, Sanders, & Agocs, 2017) and was not necessarily conducted due to the length of the leave. Within the United States, there has yet to be research examining the experience of women who take longer maternity leaves than the federally mandated leave. While current research surrounding maternity leave in the United States may include these women in their sample, there has yet to be a current study that restricts their sample to these longer leave takers and examines their specific experience.

By utilizing human capital as a perspective and lens, the results of the interviews will be better informed, and the codes that appear from the analysis may be able to be given some general context. Although the actual theory and research surrounding these 'indulgent' leave takers is sparse, the theorical platform of human capital will aid in guidance in both the earlier and latest areas of this research.

Research is needed to understand the experiences of the new mothers who take longer than the federally mandated maternity leave. While maternity leave literature is abundant in the United States, there is a lack of literature looking at mothers who take longer than average leaves (see Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Glass & Riley, 1998; Tucker, Grzywacz, Leng, Clinch, & Arcury, 2010; Zagorsky, 2017). Now that maternity leave itself is becoming more socially accepted as evidenced by current politics (Sholer, 2016), the negative views of leave takers may now shift, and be magnified for those that take beyond general medical

leave. The heightened scrutiny for these women could potentially be explained by the 'gap' they are leaving at their current workplace during the leave of absence after the birth of their child due to their human capital 'leaving' with them temporarily (Becker, 1975). Although societal attitudes and politics may be leaning towards a more generous maternity leave, this stance often clashes with that of the organization, which most likely views these extended maternity leaves as a longer loss of human capital with the mother's absence in the workplace. With a human capital lens, this dissertation will address the current gap in the literature by beginning to highlight the experiences of these maternity leave takers. With the goal of this dissertation in mind, and the knowledge of the current gap in literature on the experiences of these women, this dissertation will employ the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the experience of women in the United States who choose to take maternity leaves of over 12 weeks?

RQ2: How does human capital play a role in the experiences of these women in the workplace?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study included employed women in the United States that had taken extended maternity leave since 2016, a date restricting the age of the child to under five. Through restricting participants to women who have children under the age of five, the participant pool was limited to women with similar recall time periods, and also to women whose children still required more parental involvement concerning their schedule and supervision needs. When a child enters kindergarten, many of the tasks the parents once took on (feeding their child lunch, scheduling their child's day, figuring out childcare) are taken over by a formal school setting, changing the parenting needs in many situations. By limiting the age of the child referenced for the interview, participants could reflect on more recent years and recent issues they faced, as opposed to recalling circumstances from five or more years prior. The limitation of a child under five was partially drawn from my own experience with motherhood. Noticing a distinct shift in mothering tasks and priorities in my own experience between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, I made the decision to exclude participants based on the five-year mark. Acknowledging that the shift to kindergarten also brought a mindset shift from that of caretaker to scheduler as a mother, I believed women whose child had already made the transition to elementary school may not be as entrenched in their experiences from when their child was young. To ensure this assumption of mindset was not only applicable to my own experience, I purposefully completed an entire interview with a woman whose child had entered elementary school and was 6 and a half years old. Similar to my prediction, the participant had a harder time recalling experiences of her maternity leave as compared to other participants and found her recollections to be vague.

This interview helped to confirm my assumption the decision to exclude women whose children were over five was appropriate.

The women in this study all took maternity leave longer than the federally protected 12 weeks, mandated by FMLA. Any new mother, regardless of their number of previous children was included. For the purposes of this research, the length of the leave was the most important aspect of the leave, not the (potential) previous experience of taking maternity leave. Mothers taking beyond the 12-week FMLA leave is imperative to this study, therefore, any mother who did take maternity leave, but 12 weeks or less of leave was not included. Lastly, mothers who adopted a child or whose child was born via surrogate were not included, as this represents a different kind of entry into motherhood, in which a medical birth is not necessary. Various organizations choose to separate portions of maternity leave into 'medical leave' and 'parental leave', therefore, women who adopted children could potentially be in a different benefits track than new mothers who gave birth vaginally or by cesarean section. Additionally, women who are entering into motherhood via adoption or surrogacy do not experience the physical changes at work that can que peers to label a woman as pregnant, disabled, or a liability, so their social experience(s) and messaging had the potential to be different than physically pregnant employees.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via three methods. Initially, I generated a post on LinkedIn to recruit mothers virtually with the assumption that most mothers are on LinkedIn because they are employed (see Appendix E). I utilized two rounds of the maternity leave posts to ensure maximum visibility. I shared the posts 1 month apart, with each LinkedIn post receiving over 800 views in feed - the first post receiving 811 views and the second receiving

871. While the original posts were each shared on my personal LinkedIn page, other LinkedIn members often chose to like, repost, or share my original recruitment post, which heightened visibility on the platform. Specifically, the post was shared within a working moms forum by a participant, and multiple individuals (participants and non-participants) either chose to like or repost the research announcement on their own LinkedIn pages. Additionally, upon the posting of the original research announcement, I contacted peers and asked them to like or repost the announcement if possible. If LinkedIn members began to comment on the LinkedIn post concerning participation or general interest in the research project and/or maternity leave, I also engaged with them in the comments section to push conversation and visibility forward. When a LinkedIn member indicated they would like to participate in the study, a more in-depth conversation took place between myself and the potential participant in LinkedIn direct messaging and/or via email. LinkedIn was the only social media site used for recruitment of participants, as it is the only popular social networking site applicable and appropriate for the participant requirements.

A second method used for recruitment was word of mouth. Similar to LinkedIn, using word of mouth recruitment allowed mothers to 'opt in' if they learned about the study and wanted to participate. For example, one individual who knew about the study opted to contact immediate members in her social circle via text, phone call, or in person to tell them about the study and ask if they wanted to participate. In this scenario, if a woman indicated she would like to participate, her information was passed along to me, and then I reached out to begin a conversation via her preferred method of conversation (phone call, text, or email).

Lastly, I used snowball sampling, as many working mothers have networks of other working mothers (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Mothers who were recruited via LinkedIn

and also by word of mouth were asked at the end of each interview if they knew any other women who would be interested in participating. If they knew of other mothers who potentially wanted to participate, they then passed on either an email containing information about the study to the other mother, or gave the other mother information about the study verbally to see if she would like to participate. Before personal contact for recruitment purposes, each participant indicated they would like to participate.

While there were various women who reached out or who were contacted from the LinkedIn posting, word of mouth, or snowball sampling, not every participant interested in participating fit the demographic. Further, in a few circumstances, initial conversations did not convert into participation due to lack of communication by the potential participant, or due to scheduling conflicts and cancellations. Specifically, one interview generated from LinkedIn was cancelled and unable to be rescheduled, I cancelled one interview generated from word of mouth due to the participant not meeting participation requirements (her leave did not exceed 12 weeks), two email interviews were sent and not returned (one follow-up email was sent, then communication was stopped from the principal researcher), and lastly, four initial conversations failed to convert to interviews due to lack of communication and response from the potential participant.

As a note, the recruitment for this study took place during COVID-19. While there could have been potential to recruit new mothers via in person strategies (for example, flyers at daycares, prenatal yoga studios, in person recruitment at events for preschoolers) I enacted a direct pivot to virtual recruitment for safety purposes. However, virtual recruitment did yield a diverse and thorough participant pool, so I feel confident the virtual recruitment process led to a strong group of participants.

Data Collection

Upon approval from the IRB at UNC Charlotte, in depth, semi-structed interviews were gathered from participants (Charmaz, 2002). While I created an interview guide based on the current literature on maternity leave, human capital, and current social context, participants were allowed to deviate from the interview guide should they have additional, relevant information during the interview. I edited and updated the interview guide at multiple time points, and created a shortened version of the final phone interview guide to create an email interview guide (Appendix B, Appendix C). The interview guides were altered based on self-reflective feedback and feedback from the first two participants. The feedback led to valuable, but minimal changes to the interview guide (for example, deletion of questions that led to redundant answers).

The interview guide was broken down into multiple parts and subjects applicable to the current research. To clarify the positionality of the participants, general demographic and work questions were asked at the beginning of the interview. For example, the participants were asked to provide their relationship status, race, age, child's (or children's) age, current industry, and current role within their company. To confirm women had some level of human capital, they were asked to describe their promotions at their company, if any, as well as salary increases, if applicable. Specifically, women were asked "*Have you received any promotions or demotions while at company X? If so, can you walk me through your progression at the company?*" and "*Compared to your salary when you began at Company X, has your current salary increased or decreased? If so, what is the percent increase/decrease between your starting salary and current salary?*" These questions were not selected from another interview guide, rather, I developed them based on my knowledge of human capital

and its indicators. Each of the questions taps into human capital without asking the women directly about human capital. Given that human capital consists of the knowledge, skills, and abilities within a person (Becker, 1975), and assuming knowledge, skills, and abilities within a company would lead to promotions and/or salary increases, each of these questions hints at human capital without using the phrase directly. My decision not to ask directly about human capital was a purposeful one, as I assumed many participants would either not know about the theory and indicators of human capital, or participants would not understand how to apply the theory to their personal circumstance.

Additional questions in the interview guide followed the same approach as the questions for human capital, asking about phenomena in the workplace indirectly. While I did not take questions for my interview guide directly from another interview guide already in the literature, my question development was informed by previous literature. For example, previous literature has shown there is a great deal of navigating maternity leave prior to the actual leave itself (Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015). Due to the knowledge that much of the experiences surrounding maternity leave take place prior to the leave, I developed interview questions to address this time period, such as "*Did you find the process leading up to your leave to be easy or difficult to navigate? Please explain and provide stories if possible.*" and "*What plans were made for your position, if any, for your leave?*" Through developing questions such as the ones regarding experiences leading up to the leave, the interview guide acknowledged and utilized the former maternity leave literature, without directly copying or imitating prior interview guides. As noted previously, the interview guides went through multiple iterations, both prior to the launch of data collection and during

the beginning stages of data collection. Thus, the final interview guides were informed by both the literature and participant feedback.

I documented the interviews via a digital recorder (upon the participant's approval) and also took notes while speaking with the participant. The interviews generally lasted between 40 minutes – 1 hour, depending on the interviewee's schedule and availability. I completed the majority of interviews via phone conversation; however, three interviews took place via email exchange at the request of the participant (see Appendix A). To ensure thoroughness of email interview exchanges, the participant first completed the interview guide by typing responses to questions. After the interview guide was returned, I would begin a follow-up email conversation (as needed) to clarify or expand on any responses. At the conclusion of each phone interview, the recording was transcribed, either by myself or a professional transcription service. I chose my transcription service based on user review, accuracy, and independent verification of transcribers completed by the company. Additionally, I had worked with the chosen transcription service in the past and was personally aware of the quality of transcripts and dependability of transcribers concerning timeline. Similar to recruitment and participant totals in other academic works surrounding maternity leave (i.e. Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell, Remke, Meisenbach, Liu, Bowers, & Conn, 2017; Cowan & Bochantin, 2009; Mäkelä, 2012), a total of 24 interviews were conducted over a period of 3 months, with 2 informal interviews being conducted after the initial round of interviews was complete.

During the interviews, great care was given to building rapport with the participants, especially due to the virtual nature of the interview. COVID presented challenges by barring in person interviews from taking place, therefore, I had to build all rapport over the phone or

via email thread. Rapport building, particularly for stigmatized populations, is important to establish trust in an interview (Tracy, 2013). As pregnancy is often a stigmatized status in an organization, rapport building was essential with the population. To build rapport with participants, I mentioned in nearly all interviews that I was a mother with a young child. Being aware that my participant group all had children under five, acknowledging the commonalities of life stages between myself and the participant often helped with rapport. I would find a convenient time in the interview to make mention of my youngest child, or recent pregnancy, alerting the participant to the fact that I wasn't an "outsider" trying to understand the experiences of a group to which I was not connected. Through sharing a small piece of my own experience as a mother or of pregnancy, I was able to demonstrate that "I get it" when it comes to pregnancy. Participants seemed to respond to this rapport building technique, often referring to my experience while discussing their own, or expressing surprise and cheer to know that I also had a young child. Through building rapport, participants were often able to discuss more personal or in-depth topics such as complicated pregnancy issues, birthing stories, post-partum feelings, spouse interactions, and pregnancy loss. Without the common bond of pregnancy, leave, and motherhood, participants' comfort level may not have been as high, resulting in more surface level data.

Similar to participant recruitment, it is important to note data collection occurred during COVID-19. While there is value in interviewing participants in person, due to safety concerns this was not possible during the data collection period. Although no participant was interviewed in person, I did take steps ensure that each participant in the group had a similar interviewing experience via phone or email. I made sure to emphasize rapport building virtually, as in-person connection was not possible.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews resulted in 410 pages of single space text. A total of 4 interviews were not transcribed. Two of the interviews conducted were not transcribed due to the participant not fitting the participation criteria. One participant's child was 6 years old (discussed above), while the second participant indicated during the interview she did not plan to return to the workforce upon the birth of her child. Although both interviews were conducted in their entirety, they served more so to validate my assumptions, not as applicable data to include in coding. The additional 2 interviews were not transcribed due to the more informal nature of the interviews. The two interviews not transcribed took place after coding was complete and served more as a check or validation of findings and researcher understanding of experience than original data. Therefore, a total of 22 interviews were coded and included in the final data set.

Upon transcription completion, the transcripts were uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative coding software. The coding process for my dissertation involved a version of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method. I reviewed each transcript multiple times throughout the coding process, frequently revisiting transcripts as codes were developed. Prior to coding, each participant was given a pseudonym to disconnect their name from their data. I chose the pseudonyms to avoid any redundancies or conflicts with other participants (for example, someone choosing a pseudonym which was the actual name of another participant). If the participant mentioned the name of her organization in the interview, I also gave the organization a pseudonym to avoid any company or organization being directly referenced in the data, potentially providing a link to a participant.

When coding for human capital I took an etic approach, as much of the coding was based on the existing theoretical literature surrounding human capital. For example, aware that salary increases are tied to human capital (Dyer, Schwab, & Theriault, 1976), whenever a participant mentioned a salary increase I coded the excerpt as evidence of human capital. While the coding process for human capital was largely etic, I also engaged in emic coding by allowing for organic codes concerning human capital to emerge. For example, the code *Human Capital as Justification* emerged as participants were discussing how coworkers and managers justified contacting them while on maternity leave.

Similar to human capital, coding for maternity leave experience was largely based on existing literature. For example, previous literature has often concentrated on experiences women had leading up to maternity leave and experiences women have returning from maternity leave (e.g., Costantini, Dickert, Sartori, & Ceschi, 2020). Therefore, I gave attention to the ways in which women described their experience before and after leave, leading to codes such as *Planning for Absence* and *Anticipating Re-Entry (Negative)*. I also allowed for emic-level coding within maternity leave experiences, acknowledging the current literature does not include all experiences. For example, the codes *Length Messaging (Friends)* and *Length Comparison* organically emerged when coding for participants' experience and understanding of the length of their leave. For this reason, the codes for maternity leave, as well as human capital, are the result of both emic and etic level coding. The coding for human capital and experiences during maternity leave were used to answer both research question one (experiences) and research question two (influence of human capital).

I used Johnson's (1999) markers of qualitative validity and rigor when collecting and coding the data for my dissertation. Specifically, I employed participant feedback and reflexivity when reviewing coding schemes and patterns. Before beginning the interviews with participants, I piloted the interview guide on myself to ensure the questions I was asking were appropriate and applicable. I also transcribed and coded my own interview to heighten reflexivity and better understand how my positionality as a recently pregnant woman potentially impacted my interview process, coding process, and understanding of the data. I also discussed my codes and findings with participants to examine if my interpretations were accurately reflecting their experiences. Additionally, I utilized negative case analysis when coding to ensure there were no experiences that directly refuted codes or conclusions. If I was able to find a negative case for a code, I took steps to examine the context of the experience that misaligned with the code to discover whether there was a reason for the refutation. For example, one participant stated they believed their maternity leave had a positive impact on their reputation as a worker, which went directly against the loss in human capital reported by others. However, upon further analysis I discovered her experience was so vastly different from the other participants (due to pregnancy loss, severe health complications, and newborn complications), her positive reputational shift was not surprising.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Human Capital

The role of human capital in the experiences of leave for the participants in my dissertation was very important. Specifically, I was interested in the role human capital took in the experiences of the women. Therefore, this portion of my findings cover the presence of human capital (both organizationally and perceptive), as well as the role human capital took in the experiences of leave.

Organizational Indicators of Human Capital

To begin this research through the lens of human capital, I first had to establish that the women in the study had human capital within their organization. To accomplish identifying human capital within the organization, I approached coding for human capital in two different ways. The first coding scheme for human capital included coding for human capital as it was demonstrated at the organization prior to the woman's leave. Specifically, women were asked to discuss any promotions and/or salary increase they had received while at their company. Given that human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities within an individual (general and job specific), it is reasonable to assume these knowledge, skills, and abilities contribute positively to job performance, which has been shown to be the most important factor in managerial salary increase decisions (Dyer, Schwab, & Theriault, 1976). Dyer, Schwab, and Theriault (1976) found training and experience (which also led to human capital acquisition) were also in the top five criteria that managers believe should be considered when determining salary increases for employees. Therefore, as salary and promotions have been linked to job performance and training/experience, salary and promotion were used as indicators to establish human capital. For example, when talking

with *Kathy (16w)*, she indicated over 2 years with her company she had received a promotion as well as two pay increases. Her current salary was now 20% higher than her starting salary. I coded this portion of *Kathy's (16w)* interview as evidence of human capital.

I also coded for human capital based on the participants' perceived level of human capital. As introduced by Becker (1975) human capital is represented by the knowledge, skills, and abilities that exist within a person; therefore, if a participant referenced their knowledge, skills, or ability in a way that demonstrated their perceived human capital value, the reference was coded as such. This code most frequently showed up when participants discussed planning for their leave or being contacted while on leave. For example, *Samantha (16w)*, an employee in the finance industry, referenced her value to her company (and therefore, a reference to her human capital) when discussing correspondence when she was on leave stating, "I still received text messages from time to time with, 'We don't know what to do. We really need help with this,' things like that." Therefore, human capital possession was coded for at both a more macro level (organizational markers) and a micro level (employee introspective assessment) to ensure women had human capital within their organization.

When conducting a negative cases analysis for human capital possession and acquisition, *Kelsey (15w)* stood out as a participant who did not indicate any promotions, salary increases, or references to her human capital. However, upon further inspection, *Kelsey (15w)* indicated she had only been with her company for 3 months when she found out she was pregnant. It is not likely she would have been able to strengthen or gain much human capital in the span of 3 months. With this in mind, I reviewed her interview for any indication she had little or no human capital and concluded her lack of promotion and/or

salary increase was due to her short tenure at the company, not a lack of human capital. I came to this conclusion based on the timeline, but also based on the fact that *Kelsey (15w)* was hired into a role that required a specific set of knowledge and skills in technology, so she had to have a certain level of general and specific knowledge to function in her job from the start.

Perceived Loss of Human Capital Rewards

I also coded human capital from a loss perspective. As noted above, human capital is highly tied to job performance, and in turn salary and promotion within organizations. For this reason, the participants were asked to either give an account of, or speculate as to, how their absence from the workplace impacted their salary, promotional ability, and/or their performance reviews. Assuming each of these is tied to human capital, a negative impact on one or all of these indicators could imply a negative impact of leave on the participants' overall rewards tied to their human capital. *Jennifer (31w)*, who works in the consulting industry, spoke about how her time away from the office during maternity leave led to her being passed up for promotion in her company:

> …they stated, "Had you have worked a year here, this would be a very
> different conversation. We would be talking about compensation. We would
> be talking about [promotion]." And so it was very, they made it very clear that
> it was due to me taking [maternity leave] that I was not receiving any sort of
> change in my status of use at the company.
> *Jennifer (31w)*

I coded *Jennifer's (31w)* discussion of loss of rewards as evidence as such. In *Jennifer's (31w)* case, she was concerned about loss of status acquisition as she worked her way up in her company ranks.

While *Jennifer (31w)* discussed a clearer denial of organizational rewards, *Samantha (16w)* discussed her fear of losing human capital while on leave. When participants discussed a fear of losing status tied to human capital, I coded their discussion as evidence of human capital, acknowledging that if they were afraid of losing status, they perceived they had rewards due to human capital at some level. When discussing keeping up with her peers, *Samantha (16w)* spoke about the impact leave would have on her trajectory:

> …you obviously don't want to be left behind your peers just because you
> chose to expand your family. That's difficult to endure, but at the same time
> it's a choice you make going in that, that's something you're going to
> potentially have to deal with. It's not something you can't catch up on at some
> point, but it's a little bit harder to jump back in knowing that you might come
> back and all of your peers are now advancing and they're treating you a little
> bit differently in that sense.
> *Samantha (16w)*

Samantha's (16w) concern revolves around not staying on track with her peers, as they acquire human capital and rewards tied to human capital while she does not. While *Samantha (16w)* didn't necessarily have human capital taken away, the loss of rewards acquisition against coworkers was highlighted during her leave and upon her return.

When reviewing the transcripts, the discussion around loss of rewards or status tied to human capital, or fear of human capital loss, was not universal. However, no participant

stated they believed their absence from the workplace would enhance or positively affect their level of human capital/rewards tied to human capital in their organization. In reflecting upon my own experience post-childbirth, I found participants concerns surrounding a pause on human capital acquisition, especially when compared to peers, resonated with me. Although I was aware I would not 'lose' human capital when I was on leave, I was acutely aware I was diverting from the track the other members of my cohort were on and would therefore return (most likely) behind my cohort members. Similar to *Samantha (16w)*, I considered this pause of acquisition well worth family expansion, but like some of the participants, it did cross my mind while I was away from the organization.

Human Capital as Leverage

During discussion around maternity leave and the actual policies versus what women received in their organization, I found that for some women, they followed their leave policy 'by the book', while for others the navigation required them to structure a leave for themselves or negotiate for a better leave within their organization. The fact that these women were able to design their own leave or negotiate for a better leave speaks to both their self-perceived level of human capital within the organization, and their actual human capital within the organization. An individual with little or no human capital would most likely not attempt, or be successful in, requiring a leave be put in place for them, or asking that the leave which is currently in place be expanded for them. In these cases, it was the woman's human capital that most likely played a large part in their leave policy navigating, in that their human capital gave them currency to use in negotiation surrounding leave.

Joanne (13.5w), who works as an attorney, was in a firm that had a leave policy in place. She described the official policy (filing for FMLA, with a partial amount of the leave

paid) then went on to explain that she negotiated a better leave for herself than the company standard. In discussing her leave, *Joanne (13.5w)* even acknowledged that she knew she was valuable to her company going into the negotiation.

> I'm the only person that's taken more than 12 weeks and then they've paid people for portions of that 12 weeks. I negotiated a longer leave and to be paid for more of it…I knew at the time that I was a really valued contributor, and I know what I wanted and what it would take to make me happy from maternity leave, so I just asked for it.
>
> *Joanne (13.5w)*

Joanne (13.5w) went on to say that while she did not get everything she asked for, she did receive a good portion of her requests, including a longer leave and also nearly double the paid time as other mothers in the company. *Martha (30w)*, who works in higher education, was also able to get a more substantial leave than others in her organization, based on her negotiation upon finding out she was pregnant. Although she did not state her perceived level of human capital as frankly as *Joanne (13.5w)*, *Martha (30w)* did allude to her value at her organization, by discussing the fact that her boss, upon learning *Martha (30w)* was requesting to meet with her, was "terrified" that *Martha (30w)* was quitting. When negotiating her leave, *Martha (30w)* noted that "no one" in the company had gotten more than 12 weeks, but *Martha (30w)* was able to get more than 12 weeks and also negotiated initially coming back part-time.

> When I approached my boss, I said, "Due [this month], and I would like to come back part-time, at [part-time] hours" Which is the minimum amount of hours we can do at our organization. "I would like to take the minimum

FMLA, 12 weeks, plus an additional month." Which is, per our policy, the

maximum you can take without losing your benefits.

Martha (30w)

The confidence shown by *Joanne (13.5w)* and *Martha (30w)* speaks to their level of human

capital within their organization. Due to the value they held, they were both able to negotiate

leaves that more substantial, both time wise and financially, than what the other employees

within the company received. For these women, their human capital worked to enhance their

leave policies through giving them the confidence to negotiate the policy itself.

Not every participant used their human capital as leverage in their leave negotiation

process, in fact this phenomenon speaks more to a select group of participants who were

comfortable using their human capital as a tool during the leave process. In instances where

women did not leverage their human capital, they most commonly abided by the current

maternity leave policy their company had in place and did not push for more. No women

stated she believed her human capital negatively affected her leave negotiations or benefits

during leave.

Human Capital as Justification

When discussing the experience during leave with the participants, I found many of

the women were contacted while they were away from the office regarding business

questions or opportunities. Often when women were contacted on leave, their human capital

was used as reasoning for this contact. In multiple circumstances, the rationale was given that

no one else at the company knew what to do, or no one else had the answer to a specific

question, so it was necessary to reach out to the woman. *Amber (13w)*, who works in Human

Resources, acknowledged this fact when discussing being contacted while on leave. When I

asked if she was contacted by other workers, she stated she was because, "some of the staff has questions only I could answer." *Samantha (16w)* shared a similar experience when coworkers contacted her claiming they did not know how to complete certain aspects of her work.

> I was heavily encouraged to still support in my role, even when I was on unpaid leave. Obviously, they can't request that you work for them, but they were much worse [than my new company] about, I was still connected to all the systems, I still received emails to my phone, I still received text messages from time to time with, "We don't know what to do. We really need help with this," things like that.
>
> *Samantha (16w)*

For participants like *Samantha (16w)* and *Amber (13w)*, it was their specific knowledge or abilities that led to them being contacted while on leave. Therefore, their human capital had a direct influence on their leave experience, by preventing them from fully disconnecting due to their importance to, or specific knowledge pertaining to, the organization.

Julie (16w), a marketing executive, completed an entire interview process while on maternity leave. Although the company had rules in place that employees on maternity leave were not able to be contacted, *Julie's (16w)* direct manager stated *Julie (16w)* would not be able to wait until the end of her leave to interview for a new role - if she wanted to advance out of the role she left, she would have to interview while on maternity leave. *Julie's (16w)* direct management told *Julie (16w)* to keep the interview process a secret, since it went against policy, but *Julie (16w)* was very aware that if she did not partake in the interview process during her leave, she would not get her desired promotion. Therefore, without

breaking maternity leave policy *Julie's (16w)* human capital rewards would have taken a direct hit through denial of promotion. Though *Julie's (16w)* experience was more apparent, *Meredith (14w)* had a similar experience during leave to that of *Julie (16w)*. *Meredith's (14w)* boss reached out to her in the last few weeks of her leave to ask if *Meredith (14w)* would be able to have a meeting about changing project teams. Although *Meredith (14w)* was still on leave, the change would come as soon as she returned to the workplace, so if she wanted this change, she needed to take the meeting.

In the instances of contact discussed above, the women were contacted, with human capital being used as the justification behind the contact. There were questions only the women could answer, no one else had their knowledge set, if they wanted a promotion then they had to interview while on leave. As some participants used human capital as a tool in negotiation, human capital was used as a tool by organizational members to break leave protocol and contact women while they were away. While a majority of the participants indicated they were contacted while on leave for business purposes, a small number of women also stated they were contacted for non-business related (non-human capital) reasons. In these instances, the participants generally said they were contacted by coworkers who were asking about their health, the health of their baby, or simply asking the participant if there was anything they needed.

Experience: Length

The participants in this study were not only chosen due to the fact that they took maternity leave within their organization, but also because the maternity leave they took exceeded the federally mandated 12 weeks. In fact, the length of leave the women took was the main qualifier for their participation in this study. As noted in research question one, the

time away from the office was of particular interest, especially because it was (in many circumstances) longer than the leave many new mothers in the United States are afforded. As I spoke with the participants for my dissertation, understanding how they experienced their leave was a priority. Much conversation revolved around whether or not the women conceptualized their leave as 'long', where they were getting the messages about their leave from, and their personal feelings about the length of their leave.

Perceived 'Long' Leave

While the marker for inclusion in this study was a leave over the mandated 12 weeks offered by FMLA, it was unclear as to whether the women in the study believed their leave was 'long.' While their leave may have been over the FMLA threshold, it was important to understand if the women understood their leave as long or extended. Therefore, to classify the leave lengths as 'long' for the purposes of this dissertation, it was necessary to examine whether the women in the study also understood their leaves as long. If the women had not understood their lengths as longer than the standard, it would call into question the basic assumption that something about longer leaves in the United States is different than other shorter leaves, and therefore worth being examined separately. If the women's maternity leave lengths were perceived as similar to all other maternity leaves, then the previous literature and findings for general maternity leave would most likely apply or relate to theirs.

The majority of the women in this study understood their lengths as long. Although not directly asked, women often gave clues as to their perception of leave length while discussing other aspects of their leave. *Linda (26w)*, for example, referenced the longer length of her leave multiple times throughout her interview. During discussing plans for her leave, *Linda (26w)* referenced her leave as "such a long amount of time," an "extended

period of time," and noted others were "impressed that [she] was able to take that much time off." Further, when discussing potential impact of leave on human capital, *Linda (26w)* stated "I will say that given the amount of time off we are given, I do think that there tends to then be a delay in subsequent promotion, and I saw that myself and then also with other people." As seen in *Linda's (26w)* interview, she was aware that, whatever her reference point, her leave was 'long'.

Julie (16w) also understood her length as a long amount of time, when asked about how she was treated upon her return to the workplace she discussed the challenges of returning after a lot of organizational changes had taken place, making note that "I was gone for 16 weeks, so that's a sizeable amount of time." *Julie (16w)* then went on to describe her leave policy at her company as "generous." *Kathy (16w)* also discussed the long length of her leave as she was discussing returning to the workplace. When talking about staying up to pace with her organization, *Kathy (16w)* stated "I didn't want to feel like I was falling behind and 16 weeks is a lot of time to be gone," acknowledging that, in her mind, 16 weeks was a long time to be away from the organization. Other participants followed the same patterns as *Julie (16w)* and *Kathy (16w)*, again describing their leaves as long, generous, and unique.

Although many participants described their leave as long, I found the feeling was not universal. During some interviews, women did not indicate whether they perceived their length as long or short. However, in the case of *Amber (13w)*, she stated that her leave was 'good but too short', reporting the opposite of most participants. When reviewing her transcript to assess why she did not align, and actually negated, the findings in other interviews, I found *Amber (13w)* wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, but it was not a financially viable option. Therefore, it was not surprising that *Amber (13w)* felt her leave was

too short as she stated, "…had it not been for financial reasons I'd stay home with my kids." It is likely for working mothers like *Amber (13w)* who wish to stay home full-time, there is no amount of maternity length they would consider long, or long enough.

Messages Surrounding Leave Length

While many participants who discussed their leaves a long or extended, the origin of those messages and/or signals differed between women. There were some women who considered their leaves long when they compared themselves to other mothers in their friend or family group, while other women got direct messages from family, friends, or coworkers about the length of their leave and the extent to which they should appreciate the benefit. For women, the messaging about how to perceive their leave and benefit from their company came not only from the policy itself, but also from those in their social and professional circles.

Upon her return to the workplace, *Blair (14w)* was reminded of her extended time away from the office by her coworkers. After discussing the relief on the part of her coworkers expressing that the general sentiment among them was "Whew. So happy you're back," due to covering her workload, *Blair (14w)* went on to discuss comments made by other coworkers surrounding the length of her leave. Stating there were "definitely comments here and there" *Blair (14w)* summed up her coworker's general comments as "Whew! We're so glad you're back. 14 weeks is a long time. We felt it." She then went on to say coworkers also referred to her extended time away from the office as a vacation, which she quickly corrected, reminding them the time away was a benefit. *Samantha (16w)* received similar messaging from coworkers pertaining to her planned leave. When discussing her leave with her coworkers prior to the birth of her child, *Samantha (16w)* noted there were a lot of

comments about the time she was planning to take, such as "Oh, are you sure you want to take that long?" Additionally, *Samantha (16w)* mentioned comments made by coworkers implying she would be back before her planned leave had ended, with coworkers stating "You'll be dying to come back. I'm sure we'll see you before [the end of your leave]."

Linda *(26w)* received a similar message to that of *Samantha (16w)*, with peers commenting "Oh that long of leave, you'll be dying to go back." In addition, *Linda (26w)* stated that peers were "impressed that [she] was able to take that much time off" when discussing her maternity leave, and that other women who had already taken leaves during earlier periods wished they could have taken the length of time *Linda (26w)* was given. *Martha (30w)* was also met with a direct statement about her time out of the office for maternity leave. When discussing the length of her leave with coworkers, *Martha (30w)* found herself fielding comments such as "I've never heard of anyone getting more than 12 weeks," implying *Martha (30w)* was receiving a benefit that was special and unlike the general benefit given to others in the company.

Lastly, *Julie (16w)* and *Stephanie (16w)* received the messages concerning the length of their leave from friends and family, *Julie (16w)* stating, "I was told that a million times by my parents and friends outside of [my company], just because most companies don't have 16 weeks paid fully." *Stephanie (16w)* recalled a conversation with her father, during which her father said 'I can't believe you got 16 weeks to sit around and eat Bon Bons'. For both *Julie (16w)* and *Stephanie (16w)*, their leave length messaging came from family more so than coworkers.

While some women got direct messages from their coworkers and family about the length of their leave (and the fact that it was, indeed, a 'long' leave), others regarded their

leave as long based on comparisons to people they knew. *Brooke (16w)* was in a group of friends who all had babies around the same time. When comparing her organization's leave policy of that to her friends, *Brooke (16w)* commented:

> I had a number of friends that gave birth around the same time, there are four of us that gave birth within three weeks of each other…and I had by far the most generous maternity leave. Some of them had just six weeks, some had eight. I think maybe one had 12. I remember when each one of them went back thinking oh, I would not be ready now.
>
> *Brooke (16w)*

Jennifer (31w) expressed a similar feeling when discussing her leave length and watching other women she knew returning to the workplace:

> I just felt, I had seen so many women go back to work three months after having a baby and they just weren't ready and they were dealing with a lot of postpartum, your baby blues, over actual depression and I wanted to make sure that I gave myself enough time to really bond with my [kids].
>
> *Jennifer (31w)*

Meredith (14w) found herself comparing her leave to that of her friends at various milestones in the leave weeks. When discussing passing the 6-, 8-, 10-, and 12-week markers of her own leave, *Meredith (14w)* commented, "I have friends that have went back at six, eight, 10, 12 weeks, so at all those milestones I was thinking, 'What if I had to be back at work?'" Additionally, *Joanne (13.5w)*, when discussing her leave, commented on women who did not get the "blessing and privilege" like she did, referencing her maternity leave:

…it makes me really sad that other people do not have access to that because I

feel like it was critical to my experience as a new mom. It gave me time to

take care of myself, it gave me time to recover physically, it gave me a lot of...

I don't know. It was an enormous resource and source of support for me, and I

just wish that everyone had the same.

Joanne (13.5w)

By comparing their leave lengths to other women they knew (who had lesser leaves), the

women began to understand their leaves a long and often generous.

While not every participant stated she received messaging about how long her leave

was, no participant reporting messaging that her leave was not long. That is, no participant

reported having a friend or family member tell them their leave was short or inadequate.

When reading through the transcripts concerning messaging, I found I could personally relate

to the women receiving messaging about their leave length. During my leave, I consistently

had family and working female friends tell me how lucky I was to be able to take a couple

months away from the program. In some cases, I took a longer amount of time away from my

organization than working mothers I knew received with their leave policies, in these cases,

my friends would highlight how grateful I should be that I received an extended leave.

Overall Feelings Towards Leave

Many of the women in the study regarded their leaves in an overall positive way.

When asked to fill in the blank 'Overall my maternity was…' responses were generally

positive, with responses such as "great" *(Maci, 16w)* and "perfect" *(Lauren, 18w).* However,

when pushed to describe their 'ideal' maternity leave, or when asked to theoretically expand

upon the leave they were given (if they believed it could be improved), the women often

discussed a maternity leave program that was longer or provided more benefits (such as returning to the office part time once official maternity leave had ended).

When speaking with *Blair (14w)*, an advertising executive, although she had a valuable experience while on maternity leave and was overall grateful for the time her company gave her, she indicated she would have liked more time, referencing someone she knew:

> I mean, everyone would, I think, love to have more leave on the upfront. [Someone I know] live[s] in [another country], and she gets up to a year off, which just seems incredible…she [also] gets six weeks off before the baby is born. So, I actually thought that was a really beautiful thing is when you're dealing with the end of pregnancy and you're two to four weeks out, six weeks out, offer a leave that starts before the baby is born.
>
> *Blair (14w)*

Akin to women who referenced others when discussing the length of their leave, *Blair (14w)* found herself referencing a peer's leave when discussing what she would like to see happen in the United States. *Miranda (18w)* echoed the sentiment for a year off from work upon the leave of her child, stating "I think that it would be wonderful. I would love to take a whole year off."

While *Blair (14w)* and *Miranda (18w)* concentrated on a longer leave length, other participants wished to extend their maternity leave by expanding on the benefit associated with the leave and the return to the workplace. *Lauren (18w)* discussed her wish for a more flexible federal policy for maternity leave. Currently, to be able to take advantage of the full 12 weeks of FMLA a woman has to be at a company for a minimum of a year. Therefore, if

the company a woman is at does not have a leave program, and she has also not been at the company a year upon the birth of her child, she has no access to leave of any kind, or, it is completely up to the company as to what type of leave to offer. *Lauren (18w)* expressed dismay that issues such as length of time at a company or benefits offered by a company at certain point in employment even come into the discussion about maternity leave. To *Lauren (18w)*, the conversation between a couple to get pregnant should only involve whether or not they (personally) are ready to have a child. Overall, *Lauren (18w)* wished for a more open policy nationwide so couples' conception plans would not revolve around federal or company policies.

As *Lauren (18w)* discussed issues surrounding federal policy, *Martha (30w)* discussed the difficulty of navigating childcare policies upon the return to the workplace. *Martha (30w)* stated that although she had no specific ideas for how a company could help a new parent address childcare issues, she did think it was worth companies looking into, as the added issue of finding good childcare presented a "hard stressor" as she was navigating her return to the workplace. Organizationally, *Monica (12w)* expressed the hope that companies would begin to encourage mothers to actually take their leave. *Monica (12w)* mentioned that while having children in the workplace, or in general, is somewhat common, talking about maternity leave and/or the discrimination that surrounds maternity leave in some instances is still very much "taboo." *Monica (12w)* went on the discuss that while maternity leave in general is important, it would also be a positive move in the future to allow for flexibility in maternity leave, based on differing experiences and pregnancy and birth.

For many women in the study, although they did generally perceive their maternity leaves to be long, or at least longer than their peers in many cases, when prompted to discuss how the leaves could be improved, the women nearly always had ideas. Therefore, although they generally enjoyed the length of their leave, and perceived it as generous, they were not blind to the fact that the policies had room for improvement – either in length or benefits. An exception to this feeling was *Meredith (14w)*, who stated she could not think of any way to improve her organization's current maternity leave program. However, *Meredith's (14w)* maternity leave experience was unique from the other participants, in that she found out she was pregnant less than a week after starting her new job but was still allowed to utilize full maternity leave benefits. Additionally, when discussing her current maternity leave policy *Meredith (14w)* noted, "I came from a place where it was not this robust" so by comparison, her current maternity leave policy was much more generous and appreciated.

Experience: Pre-Leave

Much of my conversation with participants revolved around their experiences in the office prior to their leave. While previous literature has concentrated on experience surrounding announcing leave or discrimination faced in the workplace prior to leave (i.e. Mäkelä, 2012), my discussion centered around actions taken and expected during their time leading up to leave. Although I did discuss announcing pregnancy and discrimination faced during pregnancy, I found the discussion centered on actions taken leading up to pregnancy to be particularly relevant to my dissertation.

Navigating Policy Alone

While most companies in the study provided women with lengthier leaves or allowed women to take leaves that exceeded the 12 weeks protected by FMLA, in many cases the

more gracious policy and the process of utilizing it, did not align. *Julie (16w)* seemed to echo this thought when discussing the maternity leave policy at her company:

> Navigating maternity leave at [my company] was challenging, and it was an independent exercise. [The maternity leave policy] wasn't a priority. They may have checked the boxes by making it available. They're doing what they have to do to appear politically correct.
>
> *Julie (16w)*

In *Julie's (16w)* experience, she was left to navigate the policy alone, as the company provided the policy itself, but none of the support to make use of the policy clear or easy. *Julie (16w)* further described her navigation of the policy by saying "…it wasn't a warm and fuzzy hand-holding experience. It was a lot of figuring out the policies on my own." In fact, while trying to navigate the maternity leave policy alone, *Julie (16w)* missed out on a portion of financial support due to missing a deadline in the maternity leave filing process. Although *Julie (16w)* was offered sixteen weeks of leave by her company, the more gracious policy did not align with the ease of utilizing it – putting *Julie (16w)* into the position of having to figure out the policy, timeline, and requirements of the leave herself. Up until her due date, *Julie (16w)* found herself "forc[ing]" people in Human Resources to help her when needed.

Like *Julie (16w)*, many of the participants reported navigating their leave policy either entirely or predominately alone, creating more stress for them in the weeks leading up to their leave. In fact, when asked to describe navigating maternity leave, multiple responses described the navigation as negative, including descriptions such as "an absolute disaster, unmitigated disaster" *(Monica, 12w)*, "bumpy" *(Sarah, 16w)*, "difficult" *(Courtney, 15w)*,

"non-existent [and] challenging" *(Jennifer, 31w)*, "tricky" *(Joanne, 13.5w)*, and "overly complicated" *(Linda, 26w)*.

   Brooke (16w) discussed navigating her leave policy as a solo effort. Besides being given a checklist by her company, *Brooke (16w)* worked through the process of filing for leave alone, both within her company and with her state. When discussing the various steps she took, *Brooke (16w)* highlighted her lone journey, "Then beyond [the checklist], there's wasn't a main contact person. We had to call the state and deal with them…fill out their forms and get their approvals and everything like that." *Brooke (16w)* went on to acknowledge that her maternity leave was complicated, due in large part to dealing with the state in addition to her company. *Brooke (16w)* was not the only participant to work with both the state and their organization to fulfill their leave requirements. In various states, the state government offers paid leave to residents, which companies often require women to file for while also filing for leave within the company. That is, the company has the woman file for leave with the state to see how much money the state will cover for her leave, then the company pays the balance left by the state to cover her salary while she is out of the office. For participants who worked with both the state and the organization, the attention to detail and timeline was crucial.

   Interestingly, while many of the organizations the participants mentioned offered leave policies beyond that of FMLA, participants not only discussed navigating the maternity leave policy alone, but also having to "dig" for the policy to even begin the process of filing. *Kathy (16w)*, who worked in a marketing role, discussed how to she had to actively search for the policy itself, until she eventually reached out to someone because she couldn't find information for how to begin utilizing the program.

I looked everywhere on our employee book documents and could not find

anything about the policy…so I had to actively reach out to our benefits

manager, which wasn't a big deal but it kind of would have been nice to be

able to get my head wrapped around it before kinda talking to somebody…

Kathy (16w)

Kathy (16w) went on to express that after she contacted someone about the policy, they gave

her helpful information about the process, but that information was not readily available

when *Kathy (16w)* was seeking information. *Miranda (18w)*, an attorney, echoed *Kathy's*

(16w) sentiments by stating that although her company had a maternity leave policy, the

information for the policy itself was not discussed as part of her recruitment or onboarding

process. When *Miranda (18w)* became pregnant, she had to ask a coworker about the leave

program and acknowledged that the program was essentially set up to where if someone

needed it, they had to find it.

 Rebecca (20w) shared a similar experience with her leave process to that of *Kathy*

(16w) and *Miranda (18w)*, as she found herself seeking out information about her company's

leave program. Aware that her pregnancy was going to be more complicated than the average

pregnancy, *Rebecca (20w)* began looking for the policy as she knew navigating the process

was going to be difficult. Due to her unique circumstances, *Rebecca (20w)* found herself

communicating with multiple internal and external stakeholders to ensure she was using her

leave appropriately and described the program as "needlessly complex." Additionally,

Rebecca (20w) noted that navigating her leave policy was majority her responsibly and was

"definitely more than I wanted." Dealing with navigating the leave policies, discussing

legalities with internal and external agencies, and aligning her company's policy with state

law was particularly excruciating for *Rebecca (20w)*, as it all took place on top of her complicated pregnancy.

Comparably to *Rebecca (20w)*, *Lauren (18w)* had to navigate her policy in unusual circumstances. *Lauren (18w)* also had a complicated pregnancy along with a timeline issue which affected her use of the company policy. Upon realizing she would be giving birth prior to being at the company for a full year (a requirement for using FMLA), *Lauren (18w)* had to figure out how to use the benefits she did have access to within her company to fill the gap between the birth of her child and when her FMLA would become available. *Lauren (18w)* navigated the process herself, aligning her current benefits with the timeline for FMLA, and among other comments, described the process as "creative." *Amber (13w)*, who works in technology, shared in *Lauren's (18w)* experience, attempting to figure out (along with her company) how to classify her leave when she had not been with the company a year, and therefore did not yet have access to maternity leave benefits. *Amber (13w)* found herself being questioned by her company about what kind of leave she needed, basically designating her as the person to figure out the legal nuances of her leave and employee classification.

Not every participant reported navigating their leave alone, or as a negative experience. *Meredith (14w)* said navigating her policy was 'easy' because she had a very supportive boss and Human Resources department. *Maci (16w)* also reported navigating her leave as 'easy' due to the fact that her boss made the process very easy and streamlined. In the case of *Meredith (14w)* and *Maci (16w)*, the main factor in their leave navigation being an easy experience was their manager or boss. It is possible that their experience would not be reflected in the experience of another employee at their organization who had a different

manager. For *Meredith (14w)* and *Maci (16w)*, it was actually their positive relationship with manager/boss who made the navigation easy, not the organization or logistics itself.

Planning Prior to Leave

Given that human capital is housed within an individual, it is understood that human capital travels with the individual (Becker, 1975). For this reason, when women exit the workplace for maternity leave, it is reasonable to assume that their human capital leaves with them, creating a knowledge and skill gap to fill in their absence. The participants in this study were absent from the workplace at a minimum of 13 weeks and a maximum of 8.5 months. Therefore, the 'gap' in human capital created by their absence had to be planned for a longer duration than if their companies did not have leave policies in place that allowed for their extended absence. Interestingly, although the majority of these women had companies that sanctioned their extended absence from the office after giving birth, the ownness of preparing for that absence was completely on the woman leaving. In many of these cases, the organization offered the benefit of the longer leave to the woman, without the backup of processes put in place to help navigate her transition out of the workplace. Therefore, the women were left to figure out how to fill their human capital gap prior to their exiting the workplace. Had the women in the study had little to no human capital, planning for their leave would most likely not have been as extensive or thorough as expressed during interviews.

Participants often found themselves doing most of the planning and execution for their absence, with minimal help from their manager. For example, *Meredith (14w)*, whose company offered a leave policy of over 3 months, found herself doing nearly all of her leave preparation with little input from her boss. While *Meredith's (14w)* boss was in charge of

letting individuals know the general plan for her absence (letting them know their workload would increase during their coworker's leave), it was *Meredith (14w)* herself who navigated managing meetings concerning her projects, introducing her clients to the coworker who would be taking over in her absence, and ensuring everyone was up to speed on her projects and deliverables before she had her child. If her boss was involved at all beyond the initial announcement, it was so *Meredith (14w)* could give her boss a status update on the hand-off process. Therefore, if there was any issue in the transition of *Meredith (14w)* into her leave period, it would be *Meredith's (14w)* fault for not adequately preparing the workplace for her departure. *Linda (26w)*, who works in E-commerce, referenced the lack of organizational planning as a frequent stressor for parents in her organization as well, noting that there is no structure in place for managers when it comes to planning for a maternity leave in their department.

> …the only kind of downside that I see of having this great policy for women
> at our company, or actually for parents because [men] also get six weeks, is
> that that's a long time for a team to go without someone, and there's not a clear
> process for managers of how to deal with it, so it becomes very manager
> specific to decide that.
>
> *Linda (26w)*

In many cases, planning for an absence, as alluded to above, meant women choosing who would take over their workload while they were out of the office. The task of dispersing the workload among coworkers had the potential to breed resentment among peers, as they often took these additional work duties on top of their current job duties for the duration of the mother's leave. *Brooke (16w)*, who works in Finance, detailed her process of making a

spreadsheet of all her work then scheduling group and individual meetings to ensure her work was handled appropriately.

> I made a big spreadsheet of all the things that I was currently, like inside work, work that was coming up. I think we probably had a meeting about that massive list, and kind of divvying up work. Then further individual meetings with people to talk more specifically about the actual projects and what needed to be done.
>
> *Brooke (16w)*

Brooke (16w) further acknowledged in the interview that her manager took a "figure it out" approach to her leave, thus giving *Brooke (16w)* the ultimate responsibility to navigate the process both logistically and socially.

Courtney (15w), a nurse, also acknowledged the heavier workload on her peers, noting that her leave meant "others taking more responsibility" for her duties during her absence. While *Samantha (16w)*, who works in the Finance sector, confirmed her extended absence from the workplace was difficult for her department because the department lacked the personnel to successfully transfer her work to others without burden. Interestingly, although each of the women discussed thus far was afforded a longer maternity leave than federally mandated, in nearly every scenario their company did not provide any support for the woman themselves or their manager concerning how to handle their workload while they were on leave. *Jennifer (31w)* expressed her frustration after she charted a course for expecting mothers to pass off their workload upon their absence from the workplace, but her company refused to put her process in place for future mothers. When discussing her planning process and the ability to create a policy out of her experience, *Jennifer (31w)*

expressed her frustration that, "there was no process put in place. I could handle it but what I felt was a lack of or a disregard for planning is that they didn't take that and put it into a policy or plan that could be used for future." *Jennifer (31w)* later confessed that she could have pushed to turn her process into a policy, but she was aware that workload would fall on her and she wasn't willing to take on the project of creating the policy on top of her daily workload.

An exception to the organization taking a hands-off approach to planning for leave are situations in which there was a temporary worker (or workers) hired to fill the vacancy left by the mother. In these scenarios, organizations were willing to pay for workers to come into the mother's position to carry her workload until her return to the workplace. However, it should be noted that even when the woman's direct boss or organization gave their permission for a temporary worker to be hired, it was most frequently the woman's job to recruit, hire, and train the temporary worker. *Linda (26w)* spoke about the difference in her maternity leave experience when her company did, and did not, allow her department the funds to get a temporary worker for her position.

> …the first time around, I did have some added stress in that regard because
> my managers plan was to just disseminate my work among my coworkers,
> and I didn't think that was the right move because of how long I was going to
> be out, that felt like just undue burden on them. Maybe if it was a couple
> months, or three months, something like that, that would seem reasonable, but
> it was such a long amount of time, that seemed like a lot of work for an
> extended period of time. Fortunately for me, I actually had a change of

manager weeks before I went on leave and the first thing she did was find a replacement.

Linda (26w)

Linda (26w) later went on to discuss how she was responsible for all documentation and coordination for the temporary hire, but the process was less stress regardless. *Linda's (26w)* story was similar to that of *Martha (30w)*, an administrator in higher education, who convinced her boss to have a temporary worker hired to take her place, then owned the entire process of hiring and onboarding that individual before her child was born. *Martha (30w)* described her suggestion for a temporary worker as part of her "package of information" she gave her boss when announcing her pregnancy. *Martha (30w)* detailed the work that went in to hiring a temporary worker for her position:

> I wrote the job description, got it posted through HR, managed the entire hiring process, hired and trained [them]. Luckily we had two weeks together, before I ended up going out…It was a pretty tight process, down at the end there.

Martha (30w)

In most cases, the individual going on maternity leave was able to be covered by one temporary worker; however, that exception to this pattern was *Piper (14w)*, who works in the legal field. When *Piper (14w)* was preparing to go on maternity leave, the human capital gap she was creating was so vast (both workload and specific knowledge wise) her department agreed to hire multiple temporary workers to take over her clients and workload. *Piper (14w)* acknowledge this was most likely due to her specific knowledge for her branch of law, as well as her high level of productivity within her organization.

While most participants discussed either dispersing their workload or the hiring of a temporary worker as something that was stressful or chaotic, *Blair (14w)* stated she did not feel any guilt or anxiety over handing over her workload to her coworkers while she was away from the office. Additionally, *Blair (14w)* did not express any concern for her job getting done while she was away from the office. Her process was more streamlined than the other participants. *Blair's (14w)* experience highlighted the fact that the more negative or chaotic experience surrounding planning was not a complete fit for each participant. However, upon further conversation, *Blair (14w)* did acknowledge this could be due to the fact that she had been taking over workloads for other mothers in her workplace, with them all taking turns while each other were out, creating somewhat of a trade scenario.

> It was their willingness to do [my work] that I didn't think made me feel like feeling any guilt. Maybe part of that is a lot of them are women and they've been taking maternity leaves where I've been tipping in to help them take their leave. So, I don't know if maybe that's part of not feeling a guilt towards it.
>
> *Blair (14w)*

Blair's (14w) working situation was unique, in that women in her department had an informal trading system in place to cover maternity leave. Given this unique scenario, it is not surprising that *Blair's (14w)* experience of planning for leave did not align with the other participants.

As women who hold substantial levels of human capital prepare to exit their workplace for maternity leave, it appears the burden of planning for their absence most often falls on the women themselves. While an organization may offer more 'substantial' leaves to the employees working there, within this participant group it was obvious that the various

organizations generally did not provide guidance on how to transition workloads prior to departure. In nearly every interview, the participant indicated it was their duty to figure out how to manage their workload while they were away from the office, whether that meant figuring out how to disperse the workload among coworkers or forcing them to advocate for financial capital to cover a temporary worker for their position. Interestingly, although these women went to great lengths to ensure their workload was properly covered during their leave, many of them also reported being contacted on leave for work related purposes. A contradiction to their thoughtful planning to cover their workload, and to the idea of 'leave' itself.

Experience: During Leave

Similar to experiences prior to leave, during my interviews I discussed the time away from the workplace while women were on leave. Given that the participants in my interviews had children that were under 5 years of age, the time they took away from the office should have been readily accessible for recall given that not much time had passed at the time of the interview.

Being Contacted while on Leave

Participants in this study, as noted above, had access to maternity leaves longer than the federally protected, unpaid 12 weeks of FMLA. These women had companies that generally offered longer leaves that were often paid, and the women were typically encouraged to engage in their longer leave periods either verbally or socially. However, while the companies sanctioned their time away from the office, the participants frequently reported being called while on leave and having to answer work questions or perform work tasks. This contact running contradictory to the overall concept of leave and the child

bonding time touted by the companies. It is important to note that the business contacts discussed below are distinct from personal contact from people at work for non-work-related reasons. That is, if a participant indicated they were contacted from someone at work, but only to check in on the individual, ask about the baby, or likewise, those contacts were not coded as business contacts.

Maci (16w), an attorney, stated she received a few text messages during her leave asking work related questions such as "Hey, what am I supposed to do with this?" which she could respond to quickly. *Blair (14w)* also reported instances of being contacted while on leave to answer questions that she readily had the knowledge for, that others would have to search for. Although she stated she was contacted for business purposes, *Blair (14w)* did make it a point to mention it was 'rare'. *Brooke (16w)* also reported having her manager reach out to her a couple of times "asking for something" but the contact only came from her manager, as opposed to *Maci (16w)* whose contact came from coworkers.

Acknowledging the capital of the individuals who wanted to talk with her while on leave, *Martha (30w)* made time for organizational discussions with her boss's boss while on leave, but stated others told her she should not be communicating with people at the organization while on leave. "I had a couple of calls with my boss's boss about some stuff, where he said, "Do you have an hour sometime this week, that I could catch you?" I did always make time for it. Though some might argue that you shouldn't do that while you're on leave, but I did." *Martha (30w)* did not protest the communication while on leave and left herself open to organizational communications. As noted in the findings above concerning human capital as justification, *Meredith (14w)* also made time for meeting with her boss while on leave to discuss organizational issues and changes. While *Meredith (14w)* and

Martha (30w) took steps to sustain their human capital while on leave, *Julie (16w)*, by participating in an interview process while on leave as discussed in the human capital findings above, took steps to acquire human capital rewards during leave.

Although some participants, like *Martha (30w)*, accepted their contact while on leave, other participants found the contact frustrating, or chose to take control over the contact in their own way. For example, *Jennifer's (31w)* discussion about contact while she was on leave was a part of her initial pregnancy announcement and leave conversation. *Jennifer (31w)* considered it a fact that she would be contacted while she was out on maternity leave, and therefore took control of the situation by laying out expectations for contact from her employer.

> …we negotiated is that I would not log on to anything on a computer. I would
>
> also not check email. So if there was anything that they needed to talk to me
>
> about…they could do it via a phone call or a text message…
>
> *Jennifer (31w)*

Akin to *Jennifer's (31w)* approach to being contacted on leave, *Piper (14w)* took the lead in managing communication from her workplace. In talking about being contacted while on leave, *Piper (14w)* admitted that she became frustrated when she received work related questions while she was on leave with her newborn. Acknowledging the questions would most likely not stop, *Piper (14w)* set up a question flow chart, in which members of her company with questions had to go to a coworker of her choosing. If *Piper's (14w)* coworker could not answer the question for *Piper (14w)*, it was only then that the coworker would reach out to *Piper (14w)* directly. While this did not stop questions coming from her organization, *Piper (14w)* took ownership over the process by outlining how the questions

would reach her. In these circumstances, the women knew they would be repeatedly

contacted for work related issues and questions, and therefore chose to take control of the

flow of questions by either setting the standard for how they would communicate, or to

whom they would communicate.

Concerning contact while on leave, the discrepancy between what maternity leave is

supposed to be (as stated in most policies) and how maternity leave is experienced by the

participants in this study was apparent when talking with *Rebecca (20w)*. As *Rebecca (20w)*

was discussing her ideal leave policy, she stated the following:

> I think that people should have like a year of paid time. Then within that year,
>
> [benefits] should be kind of graduated so that you have three or four months
>
> where you're totally like unreachable by your company and then kind of
>
> taking a phased approach…
>
> *Rebecca (20w)*

The irony of the statement above, of course, is that most maternity leave policies claim the

time away from the office is pure leave, when the woman is not required to do any work or

be available; however, *Rebecca's (20w)* experience of leave was so vastly different from

what is often put forth in policy, her ideal maternity leave description included an aspect of

leave that is (on paper) already put in place. Similarly, *Sarah (16w)*, who worked in finance,

made a surprising statement when discussing being contacted while on leave, highlighting

the difference for these women between the contact formalities often outlined in policies

versus the contact experienced. When discussing managers and coworker contacting her via

phone about various organizational issues and/or questions, she made note that "they were

very accommodating with the baby's sleeping schedule and stuff like that" – to her, this was

the benefit. Although she was being contacted when she was on leave, the company was thoughtful enough to contact her around her newborn's schedule.

Unlike many of the other participants, *Linda (26w)* reported she was not contacted while she was on leave. When reading through *Linda's (26w)* interview to better understand why her experience varied so greatly from that of the other participants, I realized the approach to covering her workload while she was out was unique. *Linda's (26w)* boss allowed her to have a temporary replacement while she was out of the office on leave, and her replacement not only worked at the same organization, but also had a good relationship with *Linda's (26w)* boss. In this case, *Linda's (26w)* replacement most likely knew how to handle any issues that arose while *Linda (26w)* was absent. Further, if *Linda's (26w)* replacement did not know the answer to a question or how to handle an organizational issue, the replacement most likely felt comfortable taking the question or issue to *Linda's (26w)* boss (rather than contacting *Linda (26w)*) due to their already established, positive relationship.

Experience: Returning from Leave

As their maternity leave would come to a close, my participants began to plan for their re-entry into the workplace. While their experience prior to leave and during leave had come to a close, their re-entry into the workplace was a whole different process to work through. While some participants found this transition easy, others reported difficulties in navigating re-entry.

Anticipating Re-Entry

When discussing re-entering the workplace with my participants, we often talked about how they were feeling the day before they were going to return to work. When

prompted, the participants described their emotions surrounding their return as well as any feelings they had towards work or family. The vast majority of women reported negative emotions when discussing returning to work after leave, with verbiage such as "anxiousness" *(Amber, 13w)*, "dread" *(Courtney, 15w)*, and "nervous" *(Julie, 16w)*. The participants went on to describe why they believed they had these emotions, or where they believed the emotions were coming from. *Miranda (18w)* expressed concern over navigating pumping in the workplace as her primary thought the day before returning to work, stating "I was really worried about pumping while at work…". *Rebecca (20w)* also expressed concern over figuring out where to pump and how to store her milk when discussing feelings surrounding returning to the office, "…it felt unnatural just trying to figure out how to pump and where to go…I just didn't really know what to expect at all. And I was, that made me anxious."

While *Rebecca (20w)* and *Miranda (18w)* expressed concerns over the logistics of pumping as their main source of anxiety when returning to work, other participants stated their thoughts surrounding their return to the office were taken up with anxiety over leaving their child. When asked about how she was feeling the day before returning to work, *Linda (26w)* summed up her thoughts with "I really didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave my baby at all." *Blair (14w)* reported similar angst:

> I was really worried about emotionally how sad it was going to make me to leave my daughter. Leading up to coming back, I think it was the last maybe .... probably three to four weeks is when it started to hit me. I was really nervous about going back that it was just going to feel really, really challenging to leave the house and leave her every day. So, that was really just the negative thing crossing my mind is I don't

know how this is going to feel. I don't know how I'm going to react.

Blair (14w)

Kathy (16w) also reported the main subject of her thoughts surrounding return to work were about her child. When asked about her feelings the day before her return, *Kathy (16w)* stated, "…it was absolutely, the majority of [my thoughts were] on the baby, and being super anxious about [my baby] going to daycare. I was way more anxious about daycare than starting work." *Kathy's (16w)* admission that the majority of concern prior to returning to the workplace had to do with leaving her child seemed to resonate with the majority of participants, with women primarily reported their anxiety concerned leaving their child more so than returning to work prior to re-entry.

Although the majority of participants described negative emotions when anticipating re-entry into the workplace, an exception was *Brooke (16w)*. When asked about how she was feeling the day before going back to work, *Brooke (16w)* stated that she "couldn't wait." When examining *Brooke's (16w)* interview to understand why her feelings about returning to work may have differed so vastly from other participants, it appeared *Brooke's (16w)* anticipation for returning to workplace may have been related to the difficulty of her baby:

I needed a break from him so badly. Not only did he not sleep, but he also has a set of lungs on him and was just pissed all the time. I needed a break and it literally felt like a vacation when I went back to work. It was wonderful.

Brooke (16w)

Brooke (16w) went on to say that while she had a small level of anxiety because her child was hesitant to take a bottle, she was primarily looking forward to returning to work. Given

Brooke's (16w) unique situation with her child's temperament, it isn't surprising that she anticipated her return to work with relief, rather than dread.

Catch-Up

Although many of my participants were contacted while on leave, or worked while on leave, the majority of them reported having to do some type of catch-up during their first days back to the office. *Amber (13w)* reported she spent much of her first day "…getting caught up on everything" while *Blair (14w)* reported her first day was "catch-up for sure" and asking folks in her organization if everything worked well, or even better, while she was away. *Joanne (13.5w)* also reported catching-up on her first day back, stating that her day was filled with "getting organized, getting the status of everything, coming up with my to-do list, [and] taking back certain files." Upon her return, *Kelsey (15w)* had to re-take a training due to her extended time away from the workplace, while *Meredith (14w)* began by sifting through "hundreds of emails."

Speaking to their level of involvement with their company during leave, both *Martha (30w)* and *Samantha (16w)* reported they did not need to do any catch-up work, because it was like they never left their job. *Martha (30w)* stated that she was able to "dive in" on her first day because she "had mostly been caught up on emails" and "been pretty plugged in" during her maternity leave. *Samantha's (16w)* experience mirrored that of *Martha's (30w)*, with *Samantha (16w)* describing her transition back into her role as, "It was like I never left, so it was just pick back up." While many of the participants were contacted while on leave, it was apparent that *Martha (30w)* and *Samantha's (16w)* level of contact was greater than that of other participants, while led to a different experience when transitioning back into the workplace.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

The findings in my dissertation speak to practical, theoretical, and methodological implications. Below, I expand upon the overarching implications for each of these three realms, discuss limitations, and areas for future research based on my findings.

Practical Implications

My study examined the experiences of women who took maternity leave in a contemporary context and highlighted the fact that challenges utilizing maternity leave persist. Previous studies have often spoken to the struggles pregnant women face in the workplace, whether they be stigma and discrimination, poor policy and/or benefits, or social ostracism (i.e. Tretheway, 1999; Byron & Roscigno, 2014; Zagorsky, 2017). However, the vast majority of these studies were conducted at a time when there was not a strong push for maternity leave policies in the United States, and when women did not comprise as much of the workforce as they do today. When previous studies were conducted, maternity leave was generally still dependent upon FMLA and additional benefits (such as full pay while on leave) were not abundant. As there has been a recent shift in societal expectations surrounding maternity leave, as well as a shift in the number of companies offering a more generous maternity leave policy, it would reason that many of the issues pregnant women face would have disappeared in the light of a newer, updated social context. However, my study has shown that women in the modern workplace do still face struggles and workplace issues when utilizing their leave. Although there is no longer a push for basic rights, in organizations where the woman is offered a generous leave policy, problems still abound.

Participants in my study frequently spoke to chaos and stress when utilizing their maternity leave policy. What became apparent is that the organizations they work for would

typically roll-out a refreshed maternity leave policy but give no support to the women who intended to use the policy, their coworkers, or their managers. My participants discussed having to locate the policy themselves, having to navigate the logistics of filing for leave themselves, and having to plan for the leaves often by themselves. The autonomy and siloed experiences of these women led to one off experiences, where the women found themselves negotiating their leave plans directly with their managers and coworkers. Additionally, it was clear in many of the participant's experiences that their managers also had little support or direction, as the managers frequently delegated all tasks of planning for maternity leave to the woman. While my participants may not have experienced the same leave issues as women discussed in previous literature, they did speak to new struggles that have arisen with the implementation of 'updated' policies.

As organizations begin to roll-out maternity leave policies, particularly policies that are longer than the standard or status quo, the company should take great care in providing support for the woman utilizing the policy, her manager, and her coworkers. While offering an extended leave policy may be seen as a benefit or something generous by the company, by providing no support to use the policy, the company opens the door for confusion, stress, and the overall message that the policy is not a priority. While there have been great strides in maternity leave since the implantation of PDA and FMLA, women who utilize maternity leave still face challenges in the workplace when experiencing and utilizing maternity leave policy.

Thus far, the research surrounding maternity leave has concreted little on the length of leave and leave perception. Rather, the current maternity leave literature generally focuses on the experiences of women announcing pregnancy, experiencing pregnant, and returning

from leave (i.e. Mäkelä, 2012). As noted in research question one, for my dissertation I wanted to understand how women understood and experienced their extended leaves. As noted above in the findings, women frequently described their leave as long or generous. However, to my surprise the women did not come to understand their leaves as long and/or generous based on a federal mandate or standard (for example, "My leave is longer than 12 weeks, so it is generous" or "My leave is paid and FMLA doesn't require that, so it is generous"), they came to understand their leaves as generous based on comparisons in their social circles. That is, my participants' understanding of their leaves were based on the leaves offered and taken by their friends and family. This finding should be acknowledged by organizations for two reasons. First, organizations must understand their leave policies are being understood as long and/or generous based on other organization's benefits offerings, not their expansion over and above a federal mandate. For example, Company A can offer 20 weeks of fully paid leave (8 weeks over FMLA and paid, which is not required by FMLA); however, if a woman at Company A has friends who are receiving leaves of 24 weeks, fully paid, she may not consider her leave to be generous or long. Therefore, when implementing maternity leave policies, companies must take initiative to gather benchmarking data to ensure their refreshed leave policy is on par and competitive with other companies in their area or industry. Second, organizations must understand perception of maternity leave policy is a moving target. It is probable that a maternity leave policy put in place initially will need to be updated or refreshed regularly to ensure the policy is up to date and competitive. If a company begins by offering 20 weeks of fully paid leave, and within a year their competitors are offering 24 weeks of fully paid leave, the company must be willing to update their policy accordingly, or risk losing high valued workers to industry or area competitors. If a company

rolls out a policy that is not contextually generous or long, the company risks losing any recruitment or retention benefits associated with the policy, as it is likely the policy would not be perceived favorably in comparison.

Theoretical Implications

The main theory utilized in this dissertation is human capital (Becker, 1975). I used human capital as a lens to examine the experiences of the mothers taking extended maternity leave. The current literature surrounding human capital generally discusses human capital as something an individual has or doesn't have (like a dummy variable), or current literature focuses on evidence that someone has human capital, how they accrue human capital, or on the outcomes of having human capital (i.e. Staff & Mortimer, 2011; Ellinger, Ellinger, Backrach, & Wang, 2013; Felicio, Cuoto, & Caiado, 2014). However, what is less flushed out in the current literature concerning human capital is how it can be utilized in interactions; how human capital can become a resource instead of a demographic variable. Women in my study discussed not only having human capital, but using their human capital in negotiations as a tool. Specifically, women who perceived they had high human capital felt comfortable using said capital to negotiate longer maternity leaves than their organization offered, or better paid maternity leave. Knowing they had value within their company, the women used their human capital as a negotiating tool.

The women in my study also disclosed their organizations used their human capital as a tool as well, as justification for contacting them while they were on leave. The majority of the women in my study reported being contacted while they were on their maternity leave. When being contacted, in most cases women's human capital was used as justification for the contact itself. That is, the managers or coworkers who were contacting the women said they

were doing so because the women had knowledge or information that no one else had and therefore the only option was to contact the woman. While the women may have used their human capital as a tool in negotiations prior to leave, the organization often used human capital as a justification for reaching out to them on leave which ultimately barred them from being able to completely disconnect from the workplace. Unlike what has been discussed in previous literature, human capital presented itself as a tool used by individuals, rather than a stagnant trait people possess.

The unique way in which human capital presented itself in my study not only speaks to my second research question - there are also implications beyond my dissertation for the study of human capital and for researchers utilizing human capital in their work. That is, researchers should consider this mindful utilization and fluid state of human capital when examining their work and consider how human capital intertwines with their findings and implications beyond its presence or absence.

Methodological Implications

Many of the studies in the current maternity leave literature stream concentrate on women announcing pregnancy in the workplace and returning from leave – generally focusing on pre and post leave experiences (i.e. Byron & Roscigno, 2014; Jones, 2017). However, in my study I found some of the most salient experiences surrounding maternity leave took place during the leave itself. Women describing being contacted on leave spoke heavily to their leave experience, as many of them were not able to truly disconnect from their workplace due to sporadic contact. For my study, examining the time during leave was important and enlightening. Current literature seems to treat time on leave as a 'black out period' when nothing really happens with the women who take leave, because that is when

they are out of the office, but my research would suggest time during leave needs to be studied as well as their interconnectedness and experience with the organization is ongoing during their time away.

As part of the requirement for participant recruitment for my dissertation, women were asked that their youngest child, or the child they took extended maternity leave with, be under 5 years old. Although the maternity leave literature is vast, few research studies restrict their population based on the age of the woman's child (and thus, the recency of maternity leave). This requirement was included in recruitment for two reasons. First, by limiting the age of the child, the level of recall employed by participants was tightly clustered. That is, all women were recalling events that took place less than 6 years prior. Second, by limiting the child's age to 5, the mother still had more control of the child's schedule, she had not made the transition to elementary school with her child, or was only beginning to make the transition, so the experiences with her child as a 'young' child were still recent. This perspective is particularly relevant for maternity leave studies, as it keeps the recall period in a time when the mother is still in young child parenting mode, rather than when she has shifted to parenting an older child (thus main responsibilities and priorities have shifted). Reflecting upon my own experience, I found the jump from pre-Kindergarten to Kindergarten to represent a large shift in parenting, which I also assumed to be true for the women in my study.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this dissertation served to answer my main research questions, there were three limitations that emerged. First, due to the restriction on children's ages I put in place for participants, the participant's experiences were very recent. For this reason, this study does

not speak to long term consequences of leave, or in some cases, more immediate consequences of leave. While I was able to have participants speculate as to how the leave would impact their career, they could only guess, rather than report, due to the recent nature of return. Second, I did not include women in the study who took less than 12 weeks of maternity leave. For this reason, I did not compare how the women in this study differed (if at all) from their colleagues who did not take more than 12 weeks of maternity leave. Lastly, I chose not question my participants about the culture of their company or their overall feelings towards their job. For this reason, my findings do not speak to how organizational culture or satisfaction with the job can influence a woman's choice about the time she takes away for leave, or her experiences in the workplace pre and post leave.

Future research in the area of maternity leave should examine the experiences of women working in developed nations with federally governed maternity leave policies. Various participants used other developed nations as a benchmark for where American maternity leave policies should lean, however, future research should examine the extent to which the findings in this study apply to the women's' experiences with their maternity leave in other nations. Specifically, is there better infrastructure put in place surrounding the maternity leave policies? Are these women contacted while on their leaves for work related purposes? How to the women experience and understand the length of their maternity leave? Through examining these questions, future research can highlight the differences and similarities between American and other developed nation's leave programs, which are often compared to one another due to vast differences.

Alluded to in a limitation above, future research should also examine the experiences of women who take shorter leaves than 12 weeks, as compared to the women who take

longer leaves than 12 weeks. This dissertation assumes there is a difference in experience of the women who take a longer leave than 12 weeks, but this assumption is not tested for this particular research project. Examining similarities of experiences in women who take longer versus shorter leaves may not only highlight the varying challenges faced by each, but comparison research may also help to inform company policy as organizations navigate shifting employee and societal norms.

Future research should additionally utilize a gender equality lens when examining the implementation and experience surrounding maternity leave in organizations. Organizations must take careful steps to ensure they are not putting the ownness of gender equality, via maternity leave program navigation and implementation, onto female employees. Specifically, in my research I found some organizations 'gave' the women maternity leave, but it was up to the women to figure out how to navigate the policy itself and how to successfully implement the policy. Future researchers should further examine how the structure and implementation of these policies is furthering, or sustaining, gender inequality in the workplace and what steps can be taken to neutralize this negative effect.

Lastly, future research should examine the experiences of women who take maternity leave longitudinally. Through a longitudinal examination, researchers could better understand the experience of women pre, during, and after leave. Specifically, researchers could better understand how, or if, maternity leave impacts women's careers long term. Longitudinal research would allow academics and practitioners to understand the experience of leave over time, which could in turn affect policy and procedures concerning maternity leave.

Conclusion

I completed this dissertation to understand the experiences of women who take longer maternity leaves than the federally mandated 12 weeks offered by FMLA. Further, I used a human capital lens to better examine and understand the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Through speaking with women about their experiences surrounding extended maternity leave, a view of extended maternity leave was ultimately given that blurred lined of expectations and realities. As the United States continues to push forward for more generous maternity leaves, organizations must take care and caution in implementing leave policies, as the policies impact not only the woman using the policy, but also her coworkers and manager. Through a purposeful, calculated, and informed process, organizations can work towards implementing maternity leave policies that are beneficial for the mother and her work group alike.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Data Summary					
Pseudonym	**Age**	**Race**	**Industry**	**Leave Length**	**Interview Method**
Amber	27	White	Education	13 Weeks	Email
Blair	33	White	Advertising	14 Weeks	Phone
Brooke	32	Multiracial	Finance	16 Weeks	Phone
Courtney	26	White	Healthcare	15 Weeks	Email
Jennifer	36	White	Consulting	31 Weeks	Phone
Joanne	35	White	Legal	13.5 Weeks	Phone
Julie	33	White	Marketing	16 Weeks	Phone
Kathy	31	White	Marketing	16 Weeks	Phone
Kelsey	35	White	Technology	15 Weeks	Email
Lauren	38	White	Infrastructure	18 Weeks	Phone
Linda	33	White	E-commerce	26 Weeks	Phone
Maci	33	White	Legal	16 Weeks	Phone
Martha	38	Multiracial	Higher Education	30 Weeks	Phone
Meredith	38	White	Advertising	14 Weeks	Phone
Miranda	34	White	Legal	18 Weeks	Phone
Monica	35	Hispanic	Legal	12 Weeks*	Phone
Nancy	34	White	Legal	22 Weeks	Phone
Piper	39	Black	Legal	14 Weeks	Phone
Rebecca	42	White	Advertising	20 Weeks	Phone
Samantha	29	White	Finance	16 Weeks	Phone
Sarah	35	White	Finance	16 Weeks	Phone
Stephanie	30	White	Finance	16 Weeks	Phone

*Although Monica returned to the office at 12 weeks, she was limited part-time and working few hours, her return being more symbolic than work related.

APPENDIX B: TELEPHONE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am very interested in hearing your experiences surrounding maternity leave at your organization and learning more about your pregnancy. Just as an overview, we will start off with some basic demographic questions, then move to questions about your company. After that, we will talk about your experience while you were pregnant while at your company and wrap up with some overall reflections and thoughts. If that sounds good to you, we will go ahead and get started. And remember, if at any time you feel uncomfortable during our conversation you are free to end the interview, no questions asked.

Demographic Questions/Basic Information

Do you mind if I begin recording?

- What is your relationship status? (i.e. married, separated, single, divorced, cohabiting)

- How many children do you have?

    o What are your children's ages?

- What is your age?

- What race do you identify with?

- How old were you when you found out you were having your most recent child? (If more than one)

- How old were you when you gave birth to your most recent child?

    o How long had you been at Company X when you were pregnant?

    o If applicable: Were you at company X for your previous pregnancy(ies)?

- Are you still with this company?

- What was (is) your job title with Company X?

  o Can you please tell me a little bit about what your job entails?

  o Have you received any promotions or demotions while at company X? If so, can you walk me through your progression at the company?

- Compared to your salary when you began at Company X, has your current salary increased or decreased? If so, what is the percent increase/decrease between your starting salary and current salary? When did this change (these changes) in salary take place?

Okay great, now that we have talked through general demographic and company information, I'd like to talk to you about your company a bit more in depth.

- Does Company X offer a maternity leave program (beyond the 12 weeks offered by FMLA)?

  o If YES:

    ▪ Can you please tell me about the leave program?

      - Paid?

      - Length of leave offered?

      - Tiered leave based on tenure?

    ▪ How long has the policy been in place?

    ▪ Was there push back initially from non-parents?

      - If YES: Why do you think that occurred?

- Do expecting mothers frequently take the entire leave time offered?

- How did you find out about the maternity leave program (i.e. during onboarding, company poster, or word of mouth)?

- Who is in charge of the maternity leave program?

- Who is your main contact leading up to your maternity leave and during your maternity leave?

- When you first learned about the program, what did you think about the leave offered?

- What does HR do to promote/inform people of the program? What do supervisors do?

- If NO:

  - Why do you think Company X does not have a maternity leave program?

  - When you first learned Company X did not offer a leave program, what were your thoughts?

  - Have you discussed with other coworkers, or heard other coworkers discussing the lack of a leave program?

    - If YES, what stories have you heard? What is said about the lack of policies?

  - Have you ever considered leaving Company X due to the lack of a leave program?

Now we are going to move on to discussing your experience at Company X during your

pregnancy, leading up to your leave, and returning after your leave.

- Please complete the sentence: Navigating maternity leave at Company X was

  _____.

- Please tell me about your most recent maternity leave.

  o Length?

  o Paid?

- What made you decide to take longer than 12 weeks?

  o Was the decision to take longer than 12 weeks a difficult one? Why or why

    not? Who made it difficult? Who made it easier? Do you have a person who

    advocates for these types of situations at your place of work?

  o Can you please elaborate on that?

- Did you consider taking a shorter leave?

  o Why or why not?

- At what point in your pregnancy did you announce you were pregnant?

  o Why did you decide to announce at that point in your pregnancy?

- When you announced your leave, who did you talk to first?

  o Why that person?

  o What was your manager's reaction?

  o What were your coworker's reactions?

- Did you ever formally announce the duration of your leave?

  o If YES: What was the reaction by your manager? Coworkers?

- o If NO: Why did you decide to keep the duration of your leave private from individuals at your organization?

- Did you find the process leading up to your leave to be easy or difficult to navigate? Please explain and provide stories if possible.

- Did your job duties change at all during your pregnancy?

  - o If YES, why? What was the reason the provided to you? And, was this after your doctor provided documentation that you are unsafe to work manual labor and instead, need to do light work or was it just decided whenever.

- Do you feel you were treated differently after announcing your pregnancy and planning leave at your organization?

  - o If YES: How so?

  - o If NO: Have you seen women at your organization be treated differently after announcing their impeding leave?

- What plans were made for your position, if any, for your leave?

Now we are going to discuss your actual leave, and retuning to work after your leave.

- o Did you enjoy your maternity leave?

- o Were you pleased with the amount of time you took off? Why or why not?

- o If you have another child, do you think you would apply for leave again?

- o What was the biggest influencer in the amount of time you chose to take away from work?

- o Did you think about work while on leave?

- o If YES: What did you think about?

- o If NO: Why do you believe you were able to disconnect from your organization during your leave?

- o What were your thoughts concerning your return to work?

  - o How were you feeling the day before you went back to work?

- o Please tell me about your first day back to work after returning from leave.

- o When you returned to work, what was the reaction of your manager? Coworkers?

- o Did either your manager or coworker(s) comment on your time away from the workplace?

  - o If YES: What did they say? What was your reaction?

  - o If NO: Why do you believe no one commented on the length of your absence?

- o How do you believe your maternity leave impacted your reputation as a worker (if at all)?

- o Did you 'miss' anything while on leave? For example, when you came back were there any company updates, trainings, etc. you missed?

  - o If yes: How do you think missing that update/training/etc impacted you as a worker?

- o Upon returning to work, did you feel you had to catch up? If so, how?

  - o Do you feel that you were/will be passed over for promotions?

  - o Do you feel that your salary was/will be negatively affected?

  - o Do you feel that your performance evaluations were/will be negatively affected?

Thank you. Now, we are going to talk about overall feelings and reactions to your maternity leave.

- o What would you tell an expecting mother at Company X pertaining to maternity leave?

- o If you had another child, would you do anything differently?

- o Please complete the sentence: Overall, my maternity leave was

  _____.

  - o Can you please elaborate on that?

WRAP UP

- o Is there anything we haven't discussed today that you would like for me to know?

- o If I were to email you, would you be willing to send my contact information to other new mothers you know?

Thank you so much for your time! Your experiences and perspectives are invaluable.

APPENDIX C: EMAIL INTERVIEW GUIDE

<u>Demographic Questions/Basic Information</u>

- What is your relationship status? (i.e. married, separated, single, divorced, cohabiting)

- How many children do you have?

    o What are your children's ages?

- What is your age?

- What race do you identify with?

- How old were you when you found out you were having your most recent child? (If more than one)

- How old were you when you gave birth to your most recent child?

    o How long had you been at Company X when you were pregnant?

    o If applicable: Were you at company X for your previous pregnancy(ies)?

- Are you still with this company?

- What industry is Company X in?

- What was (is) your job title with Company X?

    o Can you please tell me a little bit about what your job entails?

    o Have you received any promotions or demotions while at company X? If so, can you walk me through your progression at the company?

- Compared to your salary when you began at Company X, has your current salary increased or decreased (or, had your ending salary increased or decreased if you have since left the company)? If so, what is the percent increase/decrease between your

starting salary and current salary? When did this change (these changes) in salary take place?

Maternity Leave Questions

- Please describe the maternity leave policy at Company X. For example, is there a leave offered beyond the FMLA 12 weeks? Is there any portion of paid leave offered? Etc.

- Please complete the sentence: Navigating maternity leave at Company X was _____.

- Please tell me about your most recent maternity leave. (Length? Paid?)

- What made you decide to take longer than 12 weeks?

  o Was the decision to take longer than 12 weeks a difficult one? Why or why not?

- Did you consider taking a shorter leave?

  o Why or why not?

- At what point in your pregnancy did you announce you were pregnant?

  o Why did you decide to announce at that point in your pregnancy?

- When you announced your leave, who did you talk to first?

  o Why that person?

  o What was your manager's reaction?

  o What were your coworker's reactions?

- Did you ever formally announce the duration of your leave?

- o If YES: What was the reaction by your manager? Coworkers?

- o If NO: Why did you decide to keep the duration of your leave private from individuals at your organization?

- Did you find the process leading up to your leave to be easy or difficult to navigate? Please explain and provide stories if possible.

- Did your job duties change at all during your pregnancy?

  - o If YES, why? What was the reason the provided to you? And, was this after your doctor provided documentation that you are unsafe to work manual labor and instead, need to do light work or was it just decided whenever.

- Do you feel you were treated differently after announcing your pregnancy and planning leave at your organization?

  - o If YES: How so?

  - o If NO: Have you seen women at your organization be treated differently after announcing their impeding leave?

- What plans were made for your position, if any, for your leave?

- Did you enjoy your maternity leave?

- Were you pleased with the amount of time you took off? Why or why not?

- Did you think about work while on leave?

  - o If YES: What did you think about?

  - o If NO: Why do you believe you were able to disconnect from your organization during your leave?

- Were you contacted at all while on leave? (for business purposes)

- What were your thoughts concerning your return to work?

- Please tell me about your first day back to work after returning from leave.

- When you returned to work, what was the reaction of your manager? Coworkers?

- Did either your manager or coworker(s) comment on your time away from the workplace?

  - If YES: What did they say? What was your reaction?

  - If NO: Why do you believe no one commented on the length of your absence?

- How do you believe your maternity leave impacted your reputation as a worker (if at all)?

  - Do you feel that you were/will be passed over for promotions?

  - Do you feel that your salary was/will be negatively affected?

  - Do you feel that your performance evaluations were/will be negatively affected?

- Please complete the sentence: Overall, my maternity leave was _____.

- Is there anything we haven't covered that you would like for me to know?

ADDENDIX D: VERBAL CONSENT FORM

VERBAL CONSENT FORM: Extended Maternity Leave through a Human Capital Lens: A Grounded Theory Approach

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we begin the interview, I would like to go over a verbal consent document; please let me know at any point if you have any questions. At the conclusion of the consent document if you no longer wish to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw. Additionally, at any point during the interview if you wish to stop the interview, you have every right to do so. Participation in this study in completely voluntary.

- The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of women who take maternity leave of 12-16 weeks or longer upon the birth of their child
- Participation in this study involves taking part in an interview, which is estimated to last 1-2 hours, although specific duration is determined by the interviewee
- We advise you to not mention your name, manager's or coworker's names, your company's name, or names of other companies during the interview. We suggest this to further heighten anonymity. Before we begin the interview, I will ask you to create a pseudonym to use throughout the interview.
- We do not foresee any significant risks by participating in this interview. Some questions may make you feel a bit uncomfortable if the question brings up negative memories or experiences. In this case, please know you are able to skip any question you do not to wish to answer.
- For questions about this research, you may contact myself, Allison Chandler at amcmil14@uncc.edu (the same email we have used to communicate prior), or my direct supervising faculty, Dr. Loril Gossett at lgosset1@uncc.edu or 704-687-0763. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the myself or Dr. Gossett, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Do you have any questions concerning the consent document?

APPENDIX E: LINKEDIN POSTINGS

Initial LinkedIn Posting

Allison Chandler, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate | Consultant | Analyst | Policy Researcher
7mo •

Are you interested in contributing to research for my dissertation?

If so, do you meet the following criteria? 1) A female with a child under the age of 5, who at the time of pregnancy was working full-time for an organization 2) Upon the birth of your child, took 16 or more weeks of maternity leave.
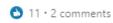
If you answered 'Yes!' to the two questions above and are interested in participating, please reach out to me - I would appreciate the opportunity to talk further with you about my study.

If you know of folks in your network who meet these criteria and may be interested in participating, please feel free to forward this information!

This research is for my dissertation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; my academic advisor is Dr. Loril Gossett. If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about the study, please contact me via LinkedIn or email (amcmil14@uncc.edu) or
Dr. Gossett via email (lgosset1@uncc.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and attention!

👍 11 • 2 comments

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↗ Share   ✈ Send

📊 811 views of your post in the feed

Follow-up LinkedIn Posting

Allison Chandler, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate | Consultant | Analyst | Policy Researcher
6mo • 🌐

Hi, working moms!

Upon the birth of your child, did you take more than 12 weeks of maternity leave? Is your child under 5? If so, I would love the opportunity to speak with you for my dissertation research. Please reach out to me via LinkedIn or email (amcmil14@uncc.edu) to learn more about the study and participation.

Also, if you know of folks in your network who meet these criteria and may be interested in participating, please feel free to forward this information!

Thank you in advance for your time and attention!

This research is for my dissertation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; my academic advisor is Dr. Loril Gossett. If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about the study, please contact me via LinkedIn or email (amcmil14@uncc.edu) or Dr. Gossett via email (lgosset1@uncc.edu).

👍 19 • 8 comments

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↗ Share   ✈ Send

📊 871 views of your post in the feed

APPENDIX F: MASTER CODING CHART

Master Code	Definition	Exemplar	Number of Interviews in which Code is Present*
Human Capital			
Demonstrated Value	The woman has received promotions, salary increases, or other organizational indicators of human capital while at her company	"I started out as a[n] Adviser and then I was promoted to Manager, and then to Director. So, two promotions. No demotions." *(Sarah, 16w)*	18 (82%)
Acknowledgement of Own Human Capital	The woman acknowledges her own human capital in conversation	"I knew at the time that I was a really valued contributor, and I know what I wanted and what it would take to make me happy…" *(Joanne, 13.5w)*	4 (18%)
Anxiety of Human Capital Loss	The participant reports that she is concerned about losing her human capital at some level	"I was just anticipating, 'Hopefully I haven't lost it all. Surely I can still jump right back in, but it's a new client and new people to learn and things like that.'" *(Meredith, 14w)*	5 (23%)
Human Capital as Justification	Human capital was given as the reason by the organization or member of her organization for contact during leave	"…some of the staff had questions only I could answer…" *(Amber, 13w)*	11 (50%)
Human Capital as Leverage	The woman acknowledged she leveraged her own human capital in maternity leave negotiations	"I negotiated a longer leave and to be paid for more of it…" *(Joanne, 13.5w)*	4 (18%)

Experience of Leave			
Acknowledgement of Time	The participant verbally states that her leave was long, or indicates she feels her leave was long	"…I think mostly because I didn't want to feel like I was falling behind and 16 weeks is a lot of time to be gone." *(Kathy, 16w)*	14 (64%)
Length Messaging (Friends)	The woman received messages about how long her leave was from her friends/peers	"Whew! We're so glad you're back. 14 weeks is a long time. We felt it." *(Blair, 14w)*	10 (46%)
Length Messaging (Family)	The woman received messaging about how long her leave was from family members	"I can't believe you got 16 weeks to sit around and eat Bon Bons." *(Stephanie, 16w)*	3 (14%)
Length Comparison	The participant reports comparing her leave to the leave of others in her social network	"…there are four of us that gave birth within three weeks of each other…and I had by far the most generous maternity leave." *(Brooke, 16w)*	14 (64%)
Overall Feelings Towards Leave (positive)	The participant reported her feelings towards her leave as positive overall	"Perfect, [my leave] was great." *(Lauren, 18w)*	17 (77%)
Experience Pre-Leave			
Navigating Policy Alone	The participant reports figuring out how to access and/or use her maternity leave policy primarily alone	"…it wasn't a warm and fuzzy hand-holding experience. It was a lot of me figuring out the policies on my own." *(Julie, 16w)*	9 (41%)
Navigation Description	Participant's response to fill in the blank: *Navigating maternity leave was…*	"Overly complicated." *(Linda, 26w)*	19 (86%)

Planning for Absence	The woman discusses handling the planning for her absence from the workplace	"I wrote the job description, got it posted through HR, managed the entire hiring process, hired and trained [my replacement]." *(Martha, 30w)*	12 (55%)
Experience During Leave			
Contacted while on Leave	The participant reports being contacted while away from the workplace and on maternity leave	"I didn't completely go off the grid. I checked in, I went in a couple times. Went in for meetings." *(Lauren, 18w)*	17 (77%)
Experience Returning from Leave			
Anticipating re-entry (negative)	Women discussed the emotions around their return to the workplace with negative verbiage or feelings	"Just a lot of anxiety, a lot of guilt." *(Samantha, 16w)*	12 (55%)
Catching-up	Women discussed their activities upon return to work as largely catching up on what had been missed and how they navigated their re-entry and getting caught up on work	"I need[ed] to get all of my [intranet] access back and…a few meetings with managers and coworkers." *(Brooke, 16w)*	9 (41%)

*Percentage below number indicates the percentage of total interviews in which the code is present.