

# Conscious decisions, unconscious paths: Pregnancy and the importance of work for women in management

Author: Lindy Fursman

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4085>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Berkeley, CA: Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley, 2001

Use of this resource is governed by the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons "Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States" (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>)

**Conscious Decisions, Unconscious Paths:  
Pregnancy and the Importance of Work for  
Women in Management**

*Lindy Fursman\**  
*Working Paper No. 23*  
*April 2001*

\*Lindy Fursman is a Pre-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Working Families and a Ph.D. candidate in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Berkeley.

© 2001 Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley

## **Abstract**

Many authors contend that women who are employed in senior corporate and management positions have often had to work “like men” in order to succeed; that is, they have had to put career before family and other commitments. Pregnancy, however, confounds the image of the corporate manager as someone for whom family is sidelined, and complicates the notion of the unencumbered worker traditionally required by capitalism. This paper reports the initial results of a study that explores the experiences of pregnant women employed in senior and corporate positions. Interviews with a small group of managers indicate that for many women in these positions, work becomes less important during pregnancy, and that this is not always a conscious decision. For some women, this change in work/family priorities seemed to occur more unconsciously, while for others, putting family first required more conscious “identity labor.”

## **Introduction**

Young women today are urged to finish school, find a job, acquire skills, develop seniority, get tenure, make partner, work endless hours, and put children off until the very last minute. When and if they do give birth, they are expected to treat the event like an appendectomy, take a brief time-out for recuperation, then resume the truly important business of business. (Crittenden, 2001: 29)

Women who are employed in management and professional positions have often had to work extremely hard to achieve their level of success, and many have made significant sacrifices in their path to occupational achievement. Putting in 70 hours at the office every week has grown into an accepted part of achieving in the highest echelons of career attainment, and the corporate ladder has become a strict taskmaster, demanding single-minded determination.

This working paper explores women's feelings about work during pregnancy, focusing on their experiences in corporate, management, and professional positions. How do women, previously single-minded when it comes to their careers, feel about their work when pregnancy occurs and motherhood is imminent?

Interviews with a small group of women in management and professional careers indicate that, for many women in this situation, work becomes less important during pregnancy. For some, the change in priorities was a conscious choice and involved a deliberate effort to make motherhood as an identity come first, an effort I call "identity labor." For others, this shift in priorities seemed to happen more unconsciously during the course of their pregnancies, a change that many women did not expect or anticipate and one that thus left them feeling surprised. All of the women who experienced this unconscious change had encountered negative reactions or events at work related to their pregnant status, and thus I argue that for these women, the workplace in some ways undertook their identity labor for them. Regardless of whether this labor was undertaken personally, all of the women in the study strove to ensure a fit between their ideologies of motherhood and the place of work in their lives.

### **Pregnancy and the Workplace: Current Literature**

This paper examines women's work and family identities and how these change as women make the transition to becoming mothers. The literature informing this research links motherhood and work and examines how identities are shaped and reshaped during engagement with each of these arenas. Specifically, literature relevant to this project focuses on pregnancy and the work experiences of women during these nine months. However, although feminists have written prolifically about motherhood since the 1960's, specific examinations of pregnancy have played a smaller role, with few researchers examining the intertwining arenas of work and pregnancy identities.

Research about pregnancy has centered around four areas, two of which explore issues related to pregnancy and work. First, a substantial portion of pregnancy-related research has involved economic and legal analyses of the issues around employment during pregnancy, maternity leave, and maternity benefits. This work has examined such topics as the relationship between the timing of pregnancy and the amount of maternity leave taken and the average cost to the employer of such leave versus training a new employee (Berryman and Windridge, 1997; Dion, 1995; Felmlee, 1993; Glass and Fujimoto, 1995; Joesch, 1997). Among this collection of writings is the larger debate over the "equal versus different" status of women in the workplace, as well as writings about the legal classification of pregnancy as a disability (Vogel, 1990).

A second body of pregnancy-related literature has analyzed the impact of maternal employment during pregnancy and the postnatal period, focusing primarily on the positive or negative effects that pre- and postnatal employment has on the children of working mothers, from their birth weights to their subsequent sex role socialization (Walker and Montgomery, 1994; Willets-Bloom and Nock, 1994). However, the majority of this work has focused on women who work after their children are born, with those attending to antenatal employment remaining firmly based in medical analyses and outcomes. Few researchers have examined antenatal employment from the perspectives of pregnant working women themselves.

Two further areas of pregnancy-related research focus on exploring ways that conception, pregnancy, labor, and birthing processes could be demedicalized and become more woman centered,<sup>1</sup> and the social construction of pregnancy and womanhood.<sup>2</sup> Although neither of these

areas focuses on pregnancy and work in particular, research that explores how women and mothers are subject to, and subjects of, dominant discourses and institutions is relevant to this paper. Literature in this area “looks for the ways mothers have been imagined, projected, constructed, and controlled by the state, by science and literature, by the media and other authoritative sources” (Blum, 1999:10). Most of this work tends to consider pregnancy in its political and discursive contexts, rather than examining the everyday experiences of women who are pregnant, but a portion of this literature does include research on identity changes in pregnancy. For example, McMahon (1995:21) notes, “Children, as social objects of great cultural worth, carry the symbolic power to transform women’s identities.” Miller (1978) examines the processes by which “social pregnancy” develops and provides the basis for the interpretation of the accompanying physiological events.

A smaller portion of this body of identity-based research focuses on the identities of women who are becoming mothers and who work. This research seems to be firmly divided into two camps, one of which argues that impending motherhood “squeezes” work and other identities, the other of which contends that both work and motherhood identities can coexist side by side, without inherent conflict. Cowan and Cowan (2000) argue that, in addition to the physical changes of pregnancy, impending motherhood may bring a change in identity as a woman moves from seeing herself first and foremost as a career woman to seeing herself also as a mother. Although having a first baby involves changes in identity for both parents, this change is particularly pertinent for women and can affect their sense of self as a worker. Men add “father” to their identity pool, but preserve the other central parts of themselves. When women add “mother” to their sense of self, they squeeze their other identities, such as “worker” and “lover or partner” (ibid.) As “mother” begins to take up a bigger piece of the identity pie, there is less room for all other pieces, including the slice for “career woman.” Similarly, Bailey (1999) found that, for women who constructed employment as an opportunity for expression of the self, pregnancy operated as a potential challenge to their working identity.

In contrast, Anita Garey, in *Weaving Work and Motherhood* (1999), critiques the inability of current models of work and family to conceptualize the integration of women’s commitments to work and motherhood. She contends that the dominant cultural portrayal of work and family

for women in the U.S. unnecessarily places the two spheres as binary and oppositional and that, as such, “the more a woman is said to be oriented to her work, the less she is seen as oriented to her family” (p.6). Despite this portrayal, Garey argues there is nothing inherently conflictual in maintaining identities both as “parent” and as “worker” and that we need an integrated vision of the lives of women who are both workers and mothers – a vision she sees as a “unitary whole.”

However, Mary Blair-Loy (2001) notes that Garey’s work is confined to the work/family experiences of women employed in traditionally female dominated occupations, positions that do not necessarily involve the same kinds of commitments as those higher up the occupational ladder. Blair-Loy contends that such occupations often demand “virtually single-minded commitment” and that women who work in management and executive positions must still choose between the competing identities of worker and mother. Similarly, Crittenden (2001:28) notes that “faced with institutions that have no tolerance for anyone with family responsibilities, many mothers have taken the only available option – just say no.” Interestingly, Bailey’s findings of the competing identities of work and motherhood were particularly relevant for the women in her sample who were employed in predominantly female lines of employment, exactly the occupations of the women whom Garey interviewed (Bailey, 1999).

### **Pregnancy and Women in Management**

Pregnancy, and women’s capacity for reproduction in general, has historically been used to exclude women from the capitalist workplace, if not in actual practice, then at least ideologically.<sup>3</sup> The basis of this exclusion has, in part, rested on two interrelated characteristics of the capitalist workplace – that it was separated from the private sphere, and that it required a certain type of worker, one who was unencumbered by bodily needs (Blum, 1999). Despite changes to the capitalist workplace, such as the move away from production industries to service industries (eg. finance,) advanced capitalism still demands “needless” workers similar to those sought after during industrialization.

Nevertheless, middle-class women have entered the workforce in large numbers. Presently, the vast majority of women, including those with young children, are employed in paying jobs. Hochschild (1997:198) notes that although “in the early part of the century it was

considered unfortunate that a woman had to work, it is now thought surprising when she doesn't."

With the flood of women into the workplace, a small but increasing number of women have entered upper-echelon professional, managerial, and corporate positions (Gutek, 1993). Several theorists contend that women have accessed senior management positions by conforming to rationalized "male" norms in the workplace and to standards that sideline family commitments so they do not interfere with work.<sup>4</sup> Women participating in Hochschild's (1997) study of work and family recognized the need to construct the "career-before-family" image that fit with this male norm, stating:

Women on a career track make a conscious effort to tell the men they work with "I am not a mother and wife, I am a colleague." (p.87)

It upset me that I had to tell my boss my personal problem. Now I know that in his mind I'm a "mom" not an engineer. (p.101)

Such statements highlight the oppositional nature of work and family identities, if not for the individual women concerned, then certainly for their bosses and colleagues. Similarly, Pattison and colleagues' (1997) research on pregnancy and employment showed the incompatibility of work and family identities in the minds of co-workers and employers as women who had previously been portrayed as competent managers were recast as "mothers" whose work performance was less effective when they were pregnant.

Pregnancy contradicts a number of the ideologies upholding the corporate workplace. Not only does it provide a visible reminder of multiple roles outside the workplace and threaten to undermine the masculine norm of career-before-all-else; it also compromises the ideal of "separate spheres," particularly because pregnancy is both "sex" and "family," both of which were traditionally deemed inappropriate for the public nature of capitalist work (Pattison et al., 1997). Rothman (1994:146) notes that "in every pregnant woman [there is] a walking contradiction to the segmentation of our lives... In pregnancy, the private self, the sexual, familial self, announces itself wherever we go." Furthermore, women who are pregnant do not fit the mold of "unencumbered worker" because they occasionally exhibit bodily needs that cannot be mechanically routinized, such as morning sickness or a need for frequent meals or rest. In



addition, the discourses depicting pregnant women as overly emotional and irrational, commonly used to “disqualify them from stepping ‘objectively’ and ‘dispassionately’ into the public sphere and engaging in ‘public affairs’” (Longhurst, 1997:34), place pregnant professionals in the corporate workplace in a contradictory position.

Pregnancy is an intensely gendering event that acts as an extremely visible “primary status,” signaling gender and sexuality in a manner that is hard to ignore. As a result, the capitalist workplace’s attempts to treat women managers as “surrogate men” (Bailey, 1999) become problematic when a woman is pregnant and is visibly and obviously “not male”. Consequently, the public/private, rational/emotional divides are re-exposed, leaving pregnant professionals and their employers and employees in an ambiguous position.

### **Research Methods**

This paper focuses on the experiences of pregnant women employed in corporate, management, and professional positions. Garey (1999) notes that the majority of women in the workforce today do not hold such positions, but I chose this somewhat elite group for a number of reasons. First, it is these occupations that demand the most from their incumbents, male or female, in the form of extremely long hours, high pressure and stress, and responsibilities. Thus, pregnancy can threaten the availability of women for these tasks, complicating the routine of work. Second, it is in these occupations that women have had to be most “like men,” and thus pregnancy introduces a new and often unexpected element, both to their own priorities and to the workplace. For some reason, it is perhaps more surprising when a senior executive becomes pregnant than when her secretary does, perhaps because of assumptions that “career women” have already chosen to forgo family in order to advance occupationally. Third, it is women in these positions who often hold the power to offer flexible hours, work/family policies and leave to their staff. I wanted to see how pregnancy played out in their own situations. Finally, as Blair-Loy (2001) notes, it is cultural models of white, middle-class professionals that play a dominant role in shaping cultural expectations around both work and family generally.

In order to study the experiences of women in management and professional positions during pregnancy, I began by obtaining the assistance of 25 obstetricians and midwives in the

greater San Francisco area, all of whom agreed to include an information sheet about the study in the packets that are given to all pregnant women early on in their prenatal care. The information sheet outlined the study and what participation involved and asked women who were employed in corporate, management, or professional positions to contact me. I expanded my recruitment tactics to include other sites frequented by pregnant women by posting flyers about the study at prenatal yoga and exercise classes, birth centers, baby shops, and sites of prenatal and childbirth preparation classes. Additionally, I placed ads in the local parenting newspapers and on an electronic notice board aimed at parents.

From these sources, I recruited 20 women for the study. All worked in management or professional positions, all were at least five months pregnant at the time of the interview, and 12 of the 20 were pregnant with their first child. All but one were interviewed either at their homes or workplaces, with each interview lasting between one and two hours.<sup>5</sup> This working paper focuses on the experiences of the 12 women who were pregnant with their first child.

### **Pregnancy and the Lessening Importance of Work**

Most of the women I interviewed began our discussion reiterating traditional workplace values. They told me how important work was to them and described how hard they had had to work to get where they were. Cognizant of the male norm of “career comes first,” many detailed extremely long hours in the office and outlined the impact these hours had on the amount of time they spent with their partners, many of whom were also working more than 60 hours a week. Lynn, an attorney who handled up to 100 trials at any one time, noted that she had worked a full day two out of the last four weekends, while Barbara, marketing director for a large software company, noted that her husband also worked long hours and this made it somewhat easier for her to conform to the ‘work first’ standard:

It was by no means a 9 to 5 job. I was lucky if I was out of there before 10 p.m. My boss would usually walk me out when he was leaving, only because he didn’t want me to be a female walking to my car alone. So I usually worked from about 9:30 a.m. to about 10 at night, very rarely took lunch. My husband is a workaholic, so I wasn’t expected to be home and making dinner or any of those domestic things. It was like “whatever.” So in that way, it wasn’t hard for me.

Although Lynn and Barbara may initially appear to be extreme cases, an examination of the national Current Population Survey data for 2000 indicates that more than 30% of women employed in managerial and professional specialties work more than 40 hours per week, with 18% working an average of 49 or more hours.<sup>6</sup>

It wasn't until I asked my respondents whether being pregnant had affected the way they felt about work that I received any indication of the emergence of new priorities or identities. However, when faced with this question, the majority of women responded passionately and at length that work was just not as important now that they were expecting a baby. A common theme was the changing of priorities, which saw work fall second to the pregnancy and imminent arrival of their first child.

What is particularly interesting about this finding is that the women interviewed clearly fall into three groups regarding this change in identity: those for whom the lessening of work importance "just happened," often coming as a surprise to them; those who made a conscious decision that work should come second and thus, although not surprised by the change in priorities, had to work to fit their ideas about their careers with their ideologies of motherhood; and a small group for whom the importance of work did not seem to change.

In addition to the changes of identity that seemed to occur for many of the women, I also identified three paths that seem to represent the subsequent work strategies of the women interviewed. These include continuing as normal, cutting back work involvement in the form of fewer hours and/or less responsibility and/or stress, and getting completely out of work, either by giving it up altogether or by putting it on hold with the plan of working sometime in the future.

Figure 1 illustrates the different work/identity scenarios for the pregnant professional women I interviewed, with examples of the cases discussed in detail in the following sections. Each woman interviewed can be plotted on this figure, showing how subtle shifts in identity relate to behavior and intended behavior for each.

**Figure 1: Identity and Work Involvement**

<b>Identity changes ® Work Involvement -</b>	<b>Unconscious shift to motherhood as primary</b>	<b>Conscious work to motherhood as primary</b>	<b>No change in work identity as primary</b>
<b>No change in work involvement</b>	-	Eve	Dina
<b>Cutting back : - total hours - hours in office - stress - responsibility</b>	Lisa	Laura	-
<b>Getting out of the workplace</b>	Barbara	Jenny	-

The fact that the majority of women in the study experienced a decline in the importance of work during their pregnancies could, it might be argued, be used to support traditional gender roles and ideologies. However, this conclusion can only be drawn if the data and this finding are viewed superficially and out of context. It is important to examine both the behavior and motivations of the women interviewed, and to consider not only the interaction between gender and work identities, but also the constructed and negotiated nature of identity.

### **Unconscious Paths: The Surprise of Declining Work Importance**

Lisa is a 30-year-old accounts manager at a large non profit organization. Employed in her current position for 2 years, she had advanced through the organization quickly, rising to management level within a few months of her initial hire. She worked an average of 50 hours a week. Her position was one in which “waves of pressure” alternated with more flexible periods.

Describing herself as someone for whom work had been the number one priority, Lisa noted that she had always strived to advance occupationally:

When it comes to work, I have always been a perfectionist. I started working when I was 14. I was actually in a restaurant. They didn't know how young I was. I was a manager at 15, and they still didn't know how young I was. And it's always been like that. I've always just, work has been sort of my priority, and I, no matter if I'm the best worker there, I still do something to improve, to just, to be even more whatever, more efficient or more dedicated or something. And I am a perfectionist... I was always willing to do more work, and I always had to go, I had to be promoted, had to be in a bigger, more responsible position.

Lisa and her husband, Alex, had decided to have a baby about a year after they married. However, her first pregnancy had miscarried six weeks into the first trimester, and so they were delighted when Lisa passed the symbolic three-month marker the second time around. Lisa was due to deliver her baby about three weeks after I interviewed her.

When I asked Lisa whether being pregnant had made any difference to the way she felt about her work, she stated, with a hint of surprise in her voice, that work had become less important in the face of her upcoming motherhood:

Um...well, now, you're asking me now [laughs], um, it used to be much more important to me. Now it's hard to say because it's always been very important to me in the past. I've been accused of being a workaholic and overly responsible and all sorts of things that are supposed to be good, and I still take work very seriously. But my life, you know, my family, my husband, my child, is much more important to me now than my life outside work used to be. I used to sort of just do work and then whatever I could fit in otherwise I would do, and now, um, now I'm not willing to sacrifice that much about my home, you know, I'd rather sacrifice work. Um, especially with the coming baby, and it's really hard to even take work that seriously, you know [laughs]? I think just the whole thing about realizing that it's not as important to me as it was, um, and I really, it's not just because of financial reasons. Like I really think that other things are important to me, like family, you know. I think that that other stuff is important, and knowing that I'm not sacrificing, you know self-sacrificing. Like, for example, like sometimes in the past at work, I've just given everything, and now, now I've obviously changed, especially since I got pregnant. I mean, I don't want to be in the rat race. I don't want the tough job. I don't want to take it home. Yeah, work is important because it supports my life, you know, the things that make my life do-able, but it's not my life anymore.

Lisa further noted that her work had suffered in terms of her ability to concentrate on the task at hand.

*Lisa:* I'm really excited about being pregnant, but I am finding it harder to take work seriously at this point, you know? Somehow I've always been very work (oriented) and very focused on everything that needs to be done, and I'm so spacey right now. There's so much going on, and I'm sitting at my desk [she mimics looking off into space]...

*Lindy:* Babies names...?

*Lisa:* Yeah [laughs], exactly. How to do the (baby's) room, yeah [laughing].

Lisa had not anticipated that being pregnant would bring about this change in her identity:

Growing up, it's funny, I always thought, "I'd never stay home and take care of kids. When I have kids, my husband will take off part-time and I'll take off part-time." Or I was just very certain that I was going to be this career woman. And then you get these, and then, reality sets in, you know? What was I thinking? I don't care about work! I want to be home with this child. It's getting so close to having the baby I just feel like I never want to go back. So my ideas have changed a lot.

I also asked Lisa whether she thought having a child would impact on her work in the future, and her answer was in sharp contrast to her description of her previous career strivings:

I think if it does, it would be on my end, you know, because I'm not willing to do, make the sacrifices it takes to get another position, you know? My child will be my priority, and I may have to take more sick days than I do now, to take care of stuff. So I think my priorities will just, in the past my priority has always been, sort of, you know, advancement and stuff at work and stuff. And I, in fact, if it works out financially, I would like, even if I had to keep working, I would take a lower position, just with less responsibility and part-time or something.

Lisa's story thus traces a dramatic shift from career aspirations that involved constant advancement to a new prioritization of her work identity that led her to desire a position with less responsibility. She was somewhat surprised by the shift, noting that it was in stark contrast to the way she had always anticipated she would feel, but that she was happy and excited by the changes that were imminent. It was not that work had become unimportant to her; to the contrary, she states, somewhat ambivalently, that she "still take[s] work very seriously." However, it was clear that what used to be her first priority had been moved to a definite second place.

Lisa experienced a shift in her identity, moving from the career woman who constantly sought advancement to someone who wanted to be, first and foremost, a mother. Lisa's work involvement strategy reflects this shift as she attempted to cut back her hours, her time in the office, and her responsibilities. Her plans for maternity leave and future employment were to take three months off work, then return at 70% of her original time, working in the office for three half-days a week and telecommuting from home two days a week to make up her hours. However, she said that her husband, a computer programmer, was working to complete a higher job certification that would afford a different job with an increased salary, thus allowing her to reduce her hours even further.

By contrast, Barbara's plans did not rely on a change in her husband's work situation. Married for a little more than a year to an extremely well paid attorney, Barbara (whom I quoted earlier talking about her long hours) worked as a marketing director for a large software company. Managing a staff of between 10 and 12 people at any one time, she described her job as "insanely busy" and said it required spending an average of 70 hours a week at the office in order to stay on top of things.

However, during her pregnancy, Barbara came to feel that work was no longer as important to her as it had been, and when the opportunity arose during a restructuring, she requested redundancy. Part-time work was not an option for her because she felt she couldn't achieve her career goals, such as a director or vice president position, working limited hours. Instead, she decided to take a break from work altogether, with the idea of beginning consulting work once her baby was a year old. Barbara's work involvement strategy can be thought of as "getting out," rather than "cutting back." Like Lisa, Barbara was surprised at her feelings and noted that her plans had not turned out the way she had anticipated.

*Barbara:* I don't want to be away from (my baby) for that long, and I never thought I would say this. I just, I thought I would go back to work, and it would, you know, be hard. But I didn't think I would just not want to. I always swore I'd work.

*Lindy:* So pregnancy has changed the way you feel about work?

*Barbara:* Absolutely. Absolutely. It's like, why go deal with this when I can have the baby all day long? Um, you know, why go deal with politics? I'll have the baby, you know, and that's not political at all. Um, and there are

definitely things that are hard about it. There will be depressing times, lonely, um.... but I don't want to miss his crawling, I don't want to miss him eating, I, you know, I don't want to miss any of that stuff, and I never thought I'd feel this way.

Despite the differences in their work involvement, both the stories of these two women tell of a move of priorities, with “mother” replacing “career woman” as the primary identity. Both women reduced their work commitments (Barbara by leaving altogether on a temporary basis), echoing the findings of economist Ann Crittenden (2001:28), who contends that there has been a

“quiet exodus of highly trained women from corporations and the leading professional firms... Not that mothers are dropping out of the labor force... But they are not necessarily working at the careers for which they have been trained, or at the most challenging levels of those careers, or at the salaries that their training would normally command.”

This shift in priorities was not a deliberate choice for Lisa and Barbara and other women in the study, but something that seemed to happen unconsciously during the course of their pregnancies, a change that many women did not expect or anticipate. It was not that either woman was unaware or unconscious of the change after it had happened, but rather that the change had happened without any conscious or deliberate thought on their parts. Both women felt some astonishment at the change in priorities, evident in their comments that “It’s funny” and “I never thought I would feel this way.” Their surprise at this change, however, may make sense when we consider the decision-making process around getting pregnant. When women plan to get pregnant (as all but one of the women in this study did), they make this decision in non-pregnant bodies and thus may underestimate the primary place pregnancy may take in their minds and the subsequent effect it may have on their commitment to work. This is not to say that work did not remain an important part of these women’s lives and identities, but rather that both felt that work would no longer come before all else as it had in the past. Although work did not become unimportant to Lisa or Barbara, what is interesting is how the primary priority of the baby seemed to influence their future work strategies. As Crittenden (2001) notes, shorter hours are usually not an option if a woman in management desires to maintain the same position or



level of responsibility.<sup>7</sup> This was highlighted by Barbara, who noted: (Y)ou certainly can't be a director or a vice president or anything like that, working part-time." Thus, the second place of work resulted in work changes that perhaps are not truly indicative of the importance work might hold for both women in an ideal world. If such positions could be maintained on a part-time basis, perhaps both Lisa and Barbara would choose work with the same responsibilities, differing only in the number of hours required, in order to maintain a work commitment that better matched how important work remained to them.

Because of the change in their priorities, both Lisa and Barbara were able to conform to the cultural ideal of a "good mother" – one who puts her family before her career – with relative ease. Garey (1999:11) highlights this ideal, noting that the term "working mother" points to the cultural norms that place "mother" as primary:

The very construction of the term "working mother" points our attention in particular directions: "mother" is a noun, and "working" modifies "mother." We do not say "mothering worker," which conjures up an image of a nurturant employee; nor do we say "mother worker," which sounds more like a job category for nannies. Clearly, when one goes from being a "working woman" to being a "working mother," it is "mother" that, linguistically, stands for the essential self.

Garey further argues that women construct their actions as mothers in relation to a set of cultural norms associated with the social position of "mother." Even though women respond to these norms in varying ways, the strong cultural expectations for how someone who occupies the position of "mother" is supposed to feel and act has an impact on how each individual locates herself in relation to these expectations. For Lisa and Barbara, the shift in their priorities happened somewhat "naturally," and thus there appeared to be no conflict between their desires to mother and to work.

### **Conscious Choices: Working to Put Motherhood First**

Unlike Lisa and Barbara, a number of women in the study had made a conscious decision that work and family could not – and should not – be of equal priority. As a result, these women had actively decided to reduce the importance that work had to them. This is in contrast to Lisa and Barbara, for whom this happened without any conscious evaluation or analysis – they simply

felt differently about work as their pregnancies progressed, then took steps to align their work situation with their priorities. However, for several women in the study, this unconscious shift did not happen, and thus they undertook this reprioritization in a more deliberate fashion.

What is particularly interesting about the cases where women made this deliberate decision is the work they had to do to make motherhood come first in their priorities or, rather, to make their priorities align with their ideologies of “good mothering.” I call this work “identity labor.” Identity labor involves the work that women do to match their identities and priorities to a particular ideology, in this case, an ideology that defines the good mother as one who cares for her children herself and at home, at least until they are a year old.

Jenny, 35, was an executive in a medium-sized human relations firm. Working relatively fewer hours than other women in the study, she described her job as stressful, mainly due to the pressure to please external clients and the nature of working with people, who, by definition, were sometimes unpredictable. She had been married for a little over a year when she became pregnant for the first time.

Like Lisa and Barbara, Jenny felt that work had become less important to her since she had been pregnant:

It’s so funny because I think before, probably before a couple of weeks ago, I would have said it was much more important than I’m beginning to feel like it is now, because I’ve got so many other things on my mind... I started really showing, and all of a sudden I went, “Oh my god, I’m pregnant” and, um, started thinking about you know, what schools are they going to go to, you know, is the child going to go to, and how involved am I going to be in their life and do I want to be working full-time. And you start rethinking all of these things that you just thought that you had already settled in your mind.

Despite initially indicating surprise at her changing priorities, Jenny, unlike Lisa and Barbara, indicated that she was having to work at her change in priorities and that, for her, work and family were in conflict. Stating that having a child would greatly affect her future options for work, she noted “You know, women talk about having it all, but I just don’t think it’s possible.” When I asked her whether she was bothered by her perception that children may limit her future options with regard to work, Jenny talked about the identity labor she needed to do:

I guess in a way it does (bother me). I don't think it's fair, but I think I have to put those feelings aside because this child is the most important thing and should be the most important thing. And for me, it is, and I need to, just put, I think I'm going to have to put some feelings aside... And I do think it's true that when you're old and gray, and maybe on your deathbed, you're not going to say, "I should have spent more time at the office." And I do take that to heart too.

Jenny's story indicates a level of deliberate self-analysis not evident in either Lisa's or Barbara's stories. Rather than just feeling like she didn't want to work at the same pace, Jenny went through a decision-making process that involved a conscious examination of whether or not to work and of the degree to which she wanted to be involved in her child's life. Furthermore, it involved deliberate self-reflection, included an evaluation encompassing the child's first five years – this more than four months before the child was born – and the role she wanted to play during that time. In addition, her statements indicate that she is attempting to align her conflicting priorities and identities to an external value schema or ideology, one in which her child *should* be the number one priority. Jenny does not say "my feelings have changed," but rather notes "I ... *have* to put some feelings aside."

In addition to examining whether to work and her involvement in her child's life, Jenny also made conscious decisions based on how she wanted her pregnancy experience to be. At the time of her interview, Jenny had just decided to leave the company and to eventually do some part-time consulting work on her own. As such, her work involvement strategy can be seen as "getting out" rather than "cutting back." This decision came as a result of her shift in priorities as she put her pregnancy ahead of her work.

*Jenny:* I just felt like I was getting way too upset about things, um, as things were happening. Yeah, if somebody was upset with me, or somebody yells at me because I've called them and they don't want to talk, I would feel so terrible, and I'm just like, god, you know, this is my first child. I don't want to go through my pregnancy upset all the time. And so I took a step back, so I have an office set up in there, and I'll just work from home in a while.

*Lindy:* So the decision is directly related to your pregnancy?

*Jenny:* Absolutely, yeah, absolutely.

Jenny's identity labor highlights the presence of cultural ideologies that continue to stress that motherhood should take precedence over career for women. Garey (1999:44) contends that,

for women who work and derive satisfaction from their working selves, the task then becomes one of reconciling positive feelings about being a worker with cultural expectations about what it means to be a good mother. This task may be further exacerbated for women – like Jenny - who are employed in professional and management positions and who have had to work extremely hard to achieve their levels of success and, as such, may have more of their identity tied into their worker role. Jenny’s efforts at reconciliation were evident in the identity labor in which she engaged in order to align her priorities to her ideas about motherhood.

Laura, a 30-year-old Operations Manager in a small tech firm, was also engaging in identity labor in an attempt to match her priorities and identity to an ideology of motherhood. Married to Barry, a musician, for two and a half years, Laura usually worked about 50 hours a week. In her position for almost four years, Laura described herself as driven, noting that her job involved much high-pressure work.

Like the other women in the study, Laura noted that work had become less important since she had been pregnant:

Certainly, it becomes clear that my priorities have shifted some, that now I have the baby and that’s way more important. Whereas before I might, I might’ve put in more hours, or done a little extra or worked harder, or you know, now I’ll be more inclined to, well, you know, I’ve got to go this afternoon and take my kid to the doctor... I want to stress out less about work because I don’t want it to take my energy. I don’t want it to bring any negative emotion to me now, whereas before I was more tolerant of that.

Like Jenny, and unlike Lisa and Barbara, Laura’s reprioritization was the product of conscious work, rather than a change that had just happened without her having to give much thought to it:

Yeah (work has) definitely, it has become less important and I’ve, but I’ve had to work at that. Like I’ve had to say, you know, don’t forget, you know, this is not, the baby’s going to be so much more important. Certainly, after the baby comes, I’ll forget I ever had a job.

As such, the lessening of the importance of work was not something that “just happened” for Laura, as it had been for Lisa and Barbara, but rather was something that Laura had to strive to achieve.

Laura planned to take six months of maternity leave, three of which would be unpaid. She then wanted to take a further six months at half-time and, when her baby was a year old, to return to a new position she planned to create for herself, which would involve less responsibility and allow greater flexibility and shorter hours. Thus, Laura was “cutting back.”

Other women I spoke to also alluded to the need for identity labor, and their struggle to align their work and family priorities. Although she had experienced no earlier fertility problems or miscarriages, Leah, a 33-year-old partner in a law firm, had scaled back her work to part-time when she became pregnant because she felt the stress of her job could affect her chances carrying the baby to term. She noted:

Work has become less important, and I've now made this deliberate choice to make it pretty unimportant. I mean, I'm going to really barely be working compared to raising children. I have no idea how that's going to feel [laughs].

Similarly, Eve, a 35-year-old corporate lawyer, also worked to align her priorities, noting that it was not just the present that required identity labor, but also the future:

I think (the future is) going to be really hard because, I don't know, I mean, I think your priorities have to change, obviously.

Like Jenny, Eve does not say that “your priorities change” when you have a child, rather that “your priorities *have* to change,” indicating the identity work she feels she has to undertake.

Eve's case is an interesting one because she was one of the few women engaging in active identity labor, but also maintaining an unchanged work involvement strategy. This meant that she struggled to align her own priorities with her ideologies of motherhood. Eve described her own upbringing as one she wanted to model. Eve's mother had not worked outside the home, and Eve had enjoyed the activities that her mother's time had allowed the family to undertake:

I'd like to have the same sorts of qualities that she had in terms of nurturing and caring and she was very good about like developing, reading with us, and developing interests and taking us to art museums. And she was very cultural, and I'd like to emulate all that.

However, Eve also maintained that her full-time salary was so necessary that any cut in her hours was impossible. She was taking a short maternity leave, then planning to resume her original responsibilities.

*Eve:* I'll be home for ten weeks...because we get six weeks and then I have four weeks of vacation. And then I have to go back because that's all I have paid, and so, so I'll be going back when the baby's not even three months old.

*Lindy:* But you're thinking that you'll go back full-time?

*Eve:* Yeah, definitely. I definitely can't afford not to... My co-worker asked me would I come back after, and I said yes definitely. I can't afford not to.

Eve thought she was going to require a full-time nanny from the time her baby was ten weeks old, because the services of most child care centers covered only the hours between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., while her work schedule saw her leaving the house at 7a.m. and returning after 6p.m. When I asked Eve how she planned to align her child-rearing ideals with her work, her response indicated that she had not yet resolved her struggle to align her conflicting work and family priorities.

*Lindy:* So in terms of reading and art museums and all that type of thing, how do you think that will fit with your plans for work?

*Eve:* I know, I don't know. I mean, I feel like you just have to fit it in where you can fit it in, you know? But it's too bad because, especially being in the Bay Area, there are so many opportunities for all those kind of things. But, you know, it's going to be on weekends. Yeah, I think that's going to be really hard.

Eve repeatedly asserted that she could not afford to cut back her hours for financial reasons, yet when I asked her about her household income, she indicated that her income was between \$175,000 and \$199,999 per annum. Thus, despite the identity labor she was engaging in to align her priorities with her ideology of motherhood, Eve seemed to be using financial reasons to resist her own – and cultural – ideals of motherhood. Eve's case was, however, unusual because she was the only woman I interviewed who appeared to have experienced a decline in the importance of work as a priority with no subsequent alteration in her work strategy.

### **Keeping Pace: The Primary Importance of Work**

Only two of the women I interviewed had not experienced any change in their work identity or priorities. Lynn, an attorney working for the county, was balancing a full caseload of 40 trials and four appeals at the time I interviewed her. She was six months pregnant, and despite 16 weeks of “24-hour-a-day morning sickness,” bloody noses, and back aches, she had maintained this caseload throughout her pregnancy.

Lynn’s full caseload meant that she usually worked much more than 40 hours a week, and she noted that she had spent a full weekend day in the office two out of the last four weekends. However, she found her work challenging and rewarding, so putting in these hours was not a problem for Lynn, who noted that she often felt overworked because she volunteered for extra responsibilities over and above her cases.

When I asked Lynn if work was important to her, she talked about how much satisfaction she got from her job and how much of an integral part of her life it was. Thus, she did not seem to have experienced the same identity shift as other women in the study:

A certain amount of my identity is tied up in my work. I haven’t ever seriously considered quitting my job to be home. Economically, it doesn’t make sense, and for my personality, I’m not sure it makes sense. It’s a hard thing to think about, but I’ve given it a lot of thought. I’m not sure that I have the personality for being a stay-at-home mom. I’m not sure I could do it full-time.

Lynn was planning a short maternity leave, after which her partner was intending to stay at home with their new baby.

Dina had also not experienced any shift in her priorities or identity. A 45-year-old doctor working in a busy clinic run by the city, Dina described her work as extremely rewarding and enjoyed the relationships she had formed with the people she worked with and the patients she treated, many of whom have been coming to her for the 11 years she has held this position. Because she had fertility treatment, and in part due to her profession, everyone in her workplace knew she was trying to get pregnant, and her colleagues were thrilled for her when she actually conceived.

Since she had become pregnant, Dina’s work life had not changed at all. Seven months pregnant at the time of the interview, she continued to work her normal hours, including a

strenuous 13-hour day, where she saw patients at three different clinics, each one lasting for four hours.

Dina appeared to fit the idea of the “unencumbered worker” described by Linda Blum (1999: 58), who notes that capitalism requires workers who are free of physical needs, whether those be from muscle fatigue or disabilities, or from pregnancy or engorged breasts. In her interview, Dina discussed how her partner, Simon, thought he would take care of her during her third trimester, taking time off work to do so. Dina asked him why his time off would be necessary, given that she was not intending to make any changes to her own work schedule. Her response to people who felt she should cut back during her pregnancy was that her job really just consisted of sitting in a chair and listening to people talk, and thus her work was not strenuous. When morning sickness had her throwing up at work, Dina would excuse herself, rush to the bathroom, then continue patient consultations, noting, “It is easy to be sick in my job because people are constantly throwing up. There is a greater acceptance of bodily functions.” Dina continued to ride her bike to work despite the horror of her colleagues, although since her pregnancy, she refrained from carrying her bike up the two flights of stairs to her office.

When asked about her future plans, Dina said she would return to full-time work when her baby was three months old. At that time, she was considering applying for a promotion to become the director of the clinic. Thus, rather than cutting back her commitment to work, Dina continued to give primacy to this part of her identity.

Conforming to a masculine ideal of what a worker should be, both Dina and Lynn are examples of women for whom pregnancy has not entailed a reduction of the importance of work in their lives. Instead, they both strove to ensure that their pregnancies did not impede their work performances to any great extent, and they both continued to promote “business as usual.”

### **Additional Considerations**

Two further questions need to be asked. First, we need to consider other factors that may have contributed to the general decrease in work importance for most of the women in the study. Although the cultural pressures already discussed clearly play a role in this reprioritization, factors such as resources, the bodily nature of pregnancy, and the reaction of co-workers to the



pregnancy need to be considered. Second, the question of why the groups differed needs to be addressed. Despite the apparently unconscious nature of the reprioritization of work for the first group of women, experiences in the workplace had an important impact.

### **The Effect of Resources, Bodies, and Workplaces**

In addition to the cultural norms that place motherhood as the number one priority, it is also necessary to examine other factors that may reduce the importance of work to women who are pregnant.

Financial considerations are one factor which could influence how important work is to any individual. When two salaries are perceived as necessary to maintain a standard of living, then work may be viewed as more important than when a family considers itself able to stay afloat on only one income. This, however, is a highly subjective factor: Eve, the corporate lawyer who was struggling to align her feelings about motherhood with her wishes for future employment, stated that there was no way she could afford to cut back her hours even a little despite a household income in the \$175,000 – \$199,999 range, while Lisa, who appeared to have reprioritized her work without any conscious labor on her part, had drastically cut her hours despite an initial household income of around \$80,000. Thus, income needs to be considered as a factor influencing the importance of work – both in terms of how necessary dual incomes are perceived to be and also from the view that income can act as a means to resist normative ideals of motherhood. As noted, this was the feeling I had about Eve – that despite the identity labor she was engaging in to align her priorities with her ideology of motherhood, her repeated assertions that she could not afford to cut back her hours for financial reasons provided her with a way to resist conforming to her own – and cultural – ideals of motherhood. There seemed to be little relation between level of income and whether each woman engaged in identity labor to align her priorities to her feelings about motherhood or experienced this change more “unconsciously” – each group contained women on extremely high and on lower salaries. However, women engaging in identity labor were more likely to cite financial resources as related to their work plans, whatever those were.

Another resource available to some women and not others was child care provided by other family members. This factor was particularly relevant in the case of Lynn, whose work involvement strategy had not changed, reflecting the primacy of her work identity. Lynn's husband was planning to stay at home with their new baby, thus allowing Lynn to continue to work at full steam. This was not an option for many of the women interviewed; thus, this factor needs to be considered when weighing the importance of women's work strategies against their identities or priorities. Women who have other family members available to take care of their children have a culturally acceptable alternative to their own care, and thus a tool that may allow them to continue to place work as primary.

A second factor important in the consideration of work experiences during pregnancy is the embodied nature of pregnancy. Regardless of whether or not her income changes, pregnancy alters a woman's body. The embodied nature of pregnancy is such that, for many women, pregnancy and impending motherhood seem to become primary – a change that many women did not expect. As noted, this surprise is not entirely remarkable. When women plan to get pregnant, they make this decision in non-pregnant bodies and thus may not anticipate the effect it will have on their thoughts and their ability to work. For instance, a number of women interviewed recounted how hard it was to concentrate on work when their baby was moving. Rachel, a lawyer, clearly described this difficulty:

I feel like I'm more spacey and I'm less able to focus... I feel like I really have to try to make a real extra effort to focus and buckle down, especially when I'm sitting there and the baby is kicking, and I'm trying to type or talk to somebody on the telephone. You feel you've got this real physical thing going on, and it's completely, I mean, it's private and undeniable, but yet, you know, you're supposed to be focusing totally on something else.

Rachel's experiences illustrate how the embodied nature of pregnancy may make it difficult for women to keep work and pregnancy separate and to maintain "the segmentation of (their) lives" (Rothman, 1994:146). Furthermore, Rachel's comment that "you're *supposed* to be focusing totally on something else" highlights the pressure for pregnant women to maintain the appearance of the "unencumbered worker" that the capitalist workplace demands (Blum, 1999).

Interestingly, the way each woman attempted to align her priorities with her ideology appeared to be independent from any of the physical discomforts of pregnancy. The degree to which a woman experienced morning sickness or tiredness did not seem to have any relation to whether she needed to engage in identity labor, with some women in both groups experiencing minimal symptoms and others enduring daily vomiting and nosebleeds.

Finally, it is necessary to consider whether changes that occur in the workplace during pregnancy have an impact on the importance of work to any individual woman. Shifts in relations with co-workers or in assignments may result in a disillusionment with work and thus add to the decline in the importance of work within a woman's set of priorities. Of course, such shifts do not occur only during pregnancy, but may be related to decreasing work satisfaction in anyone's career. However, pregnancy brings with it changes of a certain type. A number of women interviewed described how their workplace had changed since they became pregnant, particularly with regard to the loss of their own professional status. Pregnancy appeared to have a "humanizing" effect, removing their standing as competent professionals and replacing it with an image of someone who was interested only in discussing baby names and ultrasound results. Barbara noted :

People who had never come up to me before started talking to me, and they'd talk to me about pregnancy. Suddenly pregnancy, that was all anybody would talk to me about. Different people talked to me that had never talked to me before. Never talked to me about work. Only about pregnancy. People that otherwise I think would have been afraid of me talked to me because I suddenly, I guess I became one of them. Which was, that was probably the most interesting thing, is...yeah, I guess more junior level people that, more junior people who I think would have been scared to talk to me would come talk to me about pregnancy. So it was very weird. I became this pregnant person instead of Barbara, senior manager, suit, kind of person. I became the pregnant woman. People don't talk to me about politics anymore.

This demotion of professionalism and the attribution of a new identity happened even when the woman concerned struggled to reinstate "normal conversation" and took steps to compensate any perceived loss of professionalism. Jenny noted:

It became a focus. It became something else to talk about, even in the times when I just didn't want to talk about it. It's neat in a way because you feel like there IS

this little village, and everyone's excited about the pregnant lady. But then I was the pregnant lady, and I sort of like turned from (Jenny) into the pregnant lady in the office.

Colleagues and bosses appeared to feel that pregnancy required the attribution of a new identity that automatically included a loss of commitment to work, regardless of the evidence. This attribution may lead to a downward spiral – colleagues and bosses act as if the woman is no longer a competent professional and structure her work accordingly, leading to a loss of commitment by the woman, who no longer finds the challenges and successes that her work once afforded at a time when she is already struggling to align her pregnancy with her career priorities. Gerson (1985) notes a similar phenomenon, contending that women are more likely to embrace motherhood as the optimal option when their career is not satisfying. Miller (1978) provides a different theoretical clue, describing the stage of “social pregnancy.” She notes that physiological events have no meaning until actors choose to ascribe meaning to them (p. 187) and that it is the interpretation of the physical cues, rather than the cues themselves, that becomes all-important. Pregnancy thus may have little impact in the workplace until co-workers and managers choose to ascribe meaning to it, redefining a woman as forgetful and scatter-brained, then structuring her responsibilities accordingly.

Although they are beyond the scope of this paper, other factors may also impact on how important work is during pregnancy. These include the wishes of husbands and partners, future child care options (family and nonfamily), and the pregnant woman's own childhood experiences of being mothered.

### **The Effect of Workplace Experiences**

The majority of women interviewed experienced a reprioritization of work, but two groups of women came to this shift by different means, one more deliberate than the other, and a third group experienced no change in priorities. Thus, it is important to look at how the experiences of the groups differed. One factor stands out clearly – all of the women in the first group, for whom work just became less important without any conscious analysis on their parts, had experienced negative workplace encounters that they felt related directly to their pregnancies.

Barbara began her interview describing how important professionalism was to her. She had enjoyed excellent working relationships with her boss and colleagues, a factor she listed as a priority when considering aspects of work that were important to her. She felt she was successfully meeting the challenges of a position known for its difficulties; thus, when during her second year with the company her annual review came up, she fully expected a promotion. However, her boss told her that although she had “out-performed” her performance objectives and had scored the highest possible score on the review criteria, her promotion would not be awarded for another three months, due to “political reasons.” Three months later, and two months after announcing her pregnancy, Barbara was told that she would not be receiving the promotion she had been promised at her review, despite previous reports that all the paperwork for the promotion had been filed and it was simply a matter of the time it took to process the details.

Barbara attributes the denial of the promised promotion to her pregnancy, in part because of the loss of power that accompanied her new status:

I knew I could have gotten it if I wasn't pregnant because I could have pulled the trump card and left. I had other offers, so I could have left. Being pregnant, I couldn't leave. So I knew that I could not pull that trump card, and they knew it too. They knew they weren't going to lose me by not giving me the promotion.

She noted that people treated her as if she were less of a professional, and that her pregnancy seemed to throw her status as a “career woman” into question.

Barbara described how at this time, work started to become less and less important. As a result, she cut back her hours and began to work two days at home, an option that was written into her contract but that she had not previously utilized. Her boss, despite initial enthusiasm about her pregnancy, was not pleased with her new arrangements and retaliated, sending her emails about her absence at meetings he had scheduled without notice during days when she was at home and questioning the number of doctors appointments she was attending. As time progressed, he became more and more difficult about her absences.

When the company underwent restructuring, Barbara, who was at this point sick of dealing with her boss, requested redundancy, and at the time of the interview, she was not in

contact with the company and had no intentions to return to full-time work. Interestingly, Barbara did not connect her lessened interest in work to the denied promotion and subsequent resistance and deteriorating relationship with her boss, but attributed it solely to her pregnancy and her feelings about motherhood.

Lisa had also experienced a negative reaction to her pregnancy. She had told her boss about it when she was three months pregnant, but decided to wait until she was “extremely pregnant” at five months before telling anyone else at work, “so that they couldn’t have any kind of attitude” about it. However, her boss pushed her to tell others and eventually had her announce her news in a manager’s meeting.

Lisa first noticed her boss’s reaction to her situation when an error in an important piece of work was mistakenly attributed to her:

There was one spreadsheet that came through my door. It was sent to me and I was asked to confirm like three pieces of information on it and send it back. And she [the CEO of the company] said that the spreadsheet was set up correctly. So I did that, and then I passed all this information on to the CEO, but it turned out that the cells were not set up correctly; they were apparently, they weren’t way off, but (they were wrong). Um, so I had to go and clean that up, and like a month later my boss was like “You know, it’s very strange how you’ve been making all of these mistakes, that I asked somebody who had a baby if they made mistakes when they were pregnant.” And I was like, “Excuse me?” And I was really offended, I think, because I have sort of a perfectionist part of me coming through work, and I’ve never really made a mistake. So for her to say that, and I really felt like I wasn’t in the wrong, I was like uggh, it really kind of hit me in the stomach. And I...I tried to explain to her that, I don’t like to act defensive, so I didn’t really want to defend myself. I tried to explain to her the situation, that it hadn’t really come to me and everything, and she was like “Oh I see, yeah, but well in the past you, I mean, if you worked on it, you would have double checked it.” And I was like “No, not when (the CEO) says that everything is set up.” So that was kind of a bummer.

Lisa felt that the attribution of this mistake to her was very unfair and that the error would have occurred regardless of her pregnancy status. However, it was clear to her that she had been blamed because she was pregnant and because, in her director’s mind, pregnant women make mistakes.

Lisa's situation was one where her boss seemed to decide that she was less committed to her work. Lisa felt that her boss had substituted her ideas of Lisa as a competent professional for an image mirroring stereotypes of pregnant women, which made Lisa unhappy : "I don't want to be getting any special treatment." As a result, despite – and perhaps because of – her own decreasing interest in work, Lisa tried to be especially conscientious in her work, in part to avoid the attribution of any other errors in the work of the department. She noted that her extra care was somewhat compensatory: "I do kind of feel like I have to make up for the fact that I'm pregnant." She also tried to stay as focused as possible and not give in to the shift in her status that her manager seemed to think necessary.

However, the importance of work to Lisa decreased to the extent that she cut her hours dramatically and, with her husband, was planning ways to stop altogether. Like Barbara, Lisa did not attribute any of this reprioritization to her experiences with her boss, but solely to her pregnancy and impending motherhood.

These two stories, and those of the other women in this group, highlight how complicated decisions about work and motherhood are. The experiences of Lisa and Barbara support the work of Gerson (1985), who argues that full-time motherhood appears in a more favorable light to women who experience negative encounters in the workplace or are denied advancements they see as due.

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to determine how much of the decrease in work importance of this group is the result of cultural pressures and ideologies of motherhood and how much is attributable to the effects of negative workplace experiences. However, the fact that the majority of women interviewed experienced a reduction in how important work was to them, combined with the distinguishing factor of negative experiences among women whose reprioritization appeared more "unconscious," suggests that all the women interviewed aligned their priorities and identities with the dominant ideologies of motherhood. However, one group had an extra push, which meant they did not have to engage in such a conscious and deliberate decision-making process. Negative work experiences in themselves made work less important for women in the first group, and thus identity labor was not needed in order to ensure a fit

between identity, priorities, and the normative ideologies of motherhood. It was as if the workplace had engaged in the identity work for them.

It is interesting to speculate why the stories of Lynn and Dina, who experienced no change in their work identities or priorities, stood out as different among this sample of women. One possible explanation for their different path is that both women, at 45 and 40, were somewhat older than the others in the study and so perhaps their work identities were more firmly entrenched.

### **Conclusion**

Although this working paper reports only the initial results of interviews with a small group of pregnant women in management and professional careers, the stories they told indicate that, for most of this group, work became less important during pregnancy. It is important to note that work did not become unimportant for these women, but rather, for many women for whom work had been a primary identity, this first priority moved to a definite second place.

Changes in priorities seemed to happen unconsciously for a number of women, a shift that many who had previously been “career driven” described as surprising and unanticipated. This change allowed their priorities to fit nicely with the normative view of motherhood. All of the women for whom this unexpected change occurred had experienced some kind of negative experience associated with their pregnancy at work, although most did not ascribe their changed identity to this event. For others, this re-prioritization involved conscious identity labor in an effort to make motherhood the primary identity and thus sustain the fit between priorities, identities and ideologies of motherhood. And for two women, pregnancy brought no changes in identity, with work remaining primary. Regardless of whether an identity shift occurred or whether identity labor was required to make the shift, all of the women in the study strove to ensure a fit between their ideologies of motherhood and the place of work in their lives.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Corea, 1985; Hadd, 1991; Martin, 1987; Oakley, 1980; and Rothman, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the social construction of pregnancy and womanhood, see Bower, 1991; Luker, 1984; Petchesky, 1984; Sbisá, 1996; Talbot et al, 1996; and Thomson, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Theorists note that the ideal of stay-at-home mother and wife has been achievable only by white middle- and upper-class women; working-class women and women of color have always worked outside the home (Segura, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> This applies to professional and managerial jobs. So-called “pink-collar” and service work remain the appropriate domain for women as women, with family responsibilities and lower career aspirations. However, a number of authors have noted that such jobs are in many ways *more* inflexible and thus less suited to coping with family demands (Bailey, 1999; Blum, 1999; Boyd et al., 1991; Hochschild, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> One woman who contacted me was not interviewed, due to illness.

<sup>6</sup> Unpublished data from the 2000 Current Population Survey. Provided by K. Kosanovich, Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>7</sup> This finding is supported by the CPS data, which indicate that, in the year 2000, less than 3% of women employed in executive and managerial positions were able to maintain their positions working fewer than 15 hours a week. Only 11% of women in these occupations worked 29 or fewer hours each week, compared with 22% of women in all occupations.

## References

- Bailey, L. 1999. "Refracted Selves? A Study of Changes in Self-Identity in the Transition to Motherhood." *Sociology* 33(2) : 335-352.
- Berryman, J. C. and K. C. Windridge. 1997. "Maternal Age and Employment in Pregnancy and after Childbirth." *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 15(3-4): 287-302.
- Blair-Loy, M. 2001. "Work Devotion: A Cultural Schema Shaping Career Commitment among Female Executives." Paper presented at the BJS conference, Seductions, Pressures, Identities, and Transformations: Perspectives on Work. Berkeley, March 2001.
- Blum, L. M. 1999. *At the Breast: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bower, L. C. 1991. "'Mother' in Law: Conceptions of Mother and the Maternal in Feminism and Feminist Legal Theory." *Differences* 3(1): 20-38.
- Boyd, M., M. Mulvihill and J. Myles. 1991. "Gender, Power and Postindustrialism." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 28(4) : 407-436.
- Corea, G. 1985. *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cowan, C.P. and P.A. Cowan. 2000. *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Crittenden, A. 2001. *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Dion, K. K. 1995. "Delayed Parenthood and Women's Expectations about the Transition to Parenthood." *International Journal of Behavioural Development* 18(2): 315-333.
- Felmlee, D. H. 1993. "The Dynamic Interdependence of Women's Employment and Fertility." *Social Science Research* 22(4): 333-360.
- Garey, A. 1999. *Weaving Work and Motherhood*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gerson, K. 1985. *Hard Choices*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Glass, J. and T. Fujimoto 1995. "Employer Characteristics and the Provision of Family Responsive Policies." *Work and Occupations* 22(4): 380-411.
- Gutek, B. A. 1993. "Changing the Status of Women in Management." *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 42(4): 301-311.
- Hadd, W. 1991. "A Womb with a View: Women as Mothers and the Discourse of the Body." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 36: 165-175.
- Hochschild, A. R. 1997. *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Joesch, J. 1997. "Paid Leave and the Timing of Women's Employment Before and After Birth." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59(4): 1008-1021.
- Longhurst, R. 1997. "Going Nuts: Re-presenting Pregnant Women." *New Zealand Geographer* 53(2): 34-39.
- Luker, K. 1984. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Martin, E. 1987. *The Woman in the Body*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McMahon, M. 1995. *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-transformation in Women's Lives*. New York: Guilford Press.

- Miller, R.S. 1978. "The Social Construction and Reconstruction of Physiological Events: Acquiring the Pregnancy Identity." *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 1: 181-204.
- Oakley, A. 1980. *Women Confined: Towards a Sociology of Childbirth*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Pattison, H, H. Gross and C. Cast. 1997. "Pregnancy and Employment: The Perceptions and Beliefs of Fellow Workers." *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* : Aug/Nov: 303-313.
- Petchesky, R. 1984. *Abortion and Women's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom*. New York: Longman.
- Rothman, B. K. 1982. *In Labor : Women and Power in the Birthplace*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Rothman, B. K. 1994. Beyond Mothers and Fathers : Ideology in a Patriarchal Society. in *Mothering : Ideology, Experience and Agency*, edited by E. N. Glenn, G. Chang and L. R. Forcey. New York: Routledge.
- Sbisa, M. 1996. "The Feminine Subject and Female Body in Discourse about Childbirth." *European Journal of Womens Studies* 3(4): 363-376.
- Segura, D. A. 1994. Working at Motherhood: Chicana and Mexican Immigrant Mothers and Employment. in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, edited by E. N. Glenn, G. Chang and L. R. Forcey. New York: Routledge.
- Talbot, J., et al. 1996. "Affirmation and Resistance of Dominant Discourses: The Rhetorical Construction of Pregnancy." *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 6(3): 225-251.
- Thomson, M. 1996. "Employing the Body: The Reproductive Body and Employment Exclusion." *Social and Legal Studies* 5(2): 243-267.
- Vogel, L. 1990. "Debating Difference: Feminism, Pregnancy and the Workplace." *Feminist Studies* 16(1): 9-32.
- Walker, L. O. and E. Montgomery 1994. "Maternal Identity and Role Attainment: Long-Term Relations to Children's Development." *Nursing Research* 43(2): 105-110.
- Willems-Bloom, M. C. and S. L. Nock 1994. "The Influence of Maternal Employment on Gender Role Attitudes of Men and Women." *Sex Roles* 30(5-6): 371.