

Multiple Agendas?: How Women's Reasons for Employment Exits Affect Their Return to Work

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Short Abstract

This paper examines how women's reasons for job exit, motherhood status, and education affect the probability and timing of their return to work. Women's exits have been studied widely, yet little is known about who returns to work. But returning to work likely has important consequences for the well-being of women and their families. Using data on 8,843 person-spells of non-employment lasting three months or more in the NLSY79, I find that most women who experience a spell of non-employment eventually return to work, but the timing varies. Women with any college are more likely to return to employment quickly than those with twelve years or less of completed education if they left via job displacement or other involuntary job loss, but they spend more time not employed if they left because of a new child. New mothers remain non-employed longer than other groups, regardless of reason for exit.

Introduction

Women's labor force participation has been studied extensively and in a variety of ways (e.g. Damaske 2011; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Nieuwenhuis, Need, and Van Der Kolk 2012). One understudied aspect of women's labor force participation is whether and after how long women return to the labor force after an earlier exit from it. In recent history, women have left for a variety of reasons and at a variety of life stages¹; some return to work after their exits, and others do not (or have yet to return). Yet transitions back to paid employment may become increasingly important for women's well-being given increased life expectancies and the increasing individualization of risk in U.S. labor market (e.g. declining job security, defined contribution pension plans instead of defined benefit) (Hacker 2006).

One body of research considers married, professional women who leave the labor force to care for their young children (e.g. Percheski 2008; Stone 2007); some of those women return to work after their children are in school or have left the house, but it is often difficult for them to attain jobs similar to the ones they left (e.g. Hewlett 2007; Lovejoy and Stone 2012). Other research considers women who experience job loss; some quickly return to work, while others leave the labor force entirely (Moore, Meiksins, and Root 2013; Swaim and Podgursky 1994). In both of these literatures, the emphasis is largely on leaving work, with far fewer studies on returning to work after a labor force exit. Several scholars (e.g. Aisenbrey and Fasang 2014; Damaske 2011) describe a substantial group of women whose labor force attachment is more fluid and includes one or more labor force exits and reentries, but such situations have largely been studied as trajectories or overall patterns, rather than examining the predictors of timing and duration of specific labor force exits.

Research Questions & Data

This paper examines how women's reasons for job exit affect the probability and timing of their return to work. While there have been many studies of women's exits, little is known about who returns or the consequences of taking time out of the workforce for a broad population of women. I draw on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979 Cohort (NLSY79) and consider the impact of a variety of reasons for job exit, including family reasons (e.g. caring for children and caring for adult relatives), job displacement (e.g. losing one's job because the company closed or through layoffs) and getting fired. Job exits are freely chosen by employees in some situations but beyond their control in others. Even "voluntary" exits are often the result of a structural mismatch between existing job conditions and employees' needs at a given life stage. The small amount of existing research on returning to work after employment exits to care for family members mainly discusses the difficulty of doing so and the career penalties associated with it (largely for married, professional women), while existing research on reemployment after job loss tends to focus on wage penalties.

The NLSY79 is well suited to answer questions about returning to work because it contains detailed employment histories over thirty years in length for women who remain in the sample through the 2010 data collection (the most recent data available). Given that it is designed as a labor force survey, it also includes extensive relevant, time-varying independent variables and controls, including education, marital status, and parental status. Preliminary results presented here use variables created from the beta employer history roster available with the January 2014 data release and thus examine

¹ Life stage is a combination of people's age and their positioning in their family and work career life courses. All of these are interrelated, so the phrase life stage refers to the combination of these influences.

time not employed; future analyses will use information from the labor force status weekly array to better examine time spent out of the labor force as compared to time spend unemployed. Results presented here were generated using a sample of 8,843 person-spells of time not employed (for three months or more) from 4,271 women from the 1979-2010 survey waves.

Preliminary Results

Of the 6,283 women in the NLSY79 sample, 93 percent (5,873) experienced at least one period where they left a job, were not employed at any additional jobs, and started a subsequent job in the same or a later month while observed by the study; 39 percent make such a transition three or more times. I limit the analytic sample to the 4,271 women (68%) who experienced at least one period of non-employment lasting three months or longer after age 18 and have valid values for non-employment period start and end dates. Of those women, 24 percent experienced 2 periods of non-employment, 13 percent experienced 3 periods of non-employment, and 15 percent experienced 4 or more periods of non-employment. As shown in Table 1, these periods of non-employment vary substantially in length – the longest are almost the full length of time observed in the survey, although the median is around a year. The NLSY79 includes a variety of reasons for leaving last job, some of which I recategorize because of small sample sizes. The NLSY79 Other category includes cases where respondents said “some other reason”, while the Other Voluntary Reasons category is a combination of very sparsely populated other categorical responses from the NLSY79 data. For the preliminary analyses shown here, I present results from only the most common (the first six in Table 1) reasons for leaving last job.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>p10</i>	<i>p50</i>	<i>p90</i>	<i>Max</i>
Layoff/Job Eliminated/Workplace Closed	1548	1.82	3.05	0.25	0.25	0.75	4.42	28.00
End of Temporary or Seasonal Job	732	2.00	3.58	0.25	0.25	0.83	4.17	31.08
Fired	694	2.49	3.69	0.25	0.33	1.17	5.92	30.83
Government Program Ended	1475	1.69	2.94	0.25	0.25	0.83	3.75	31.75
Quit for Family Reasons (mostly child arrival)	709	3.04	3.95	0.25	0.33	1.50	7.83	30.92
Quit to Look for Another Job	1152	1.84	3.12	0.25	0.25	0.75	4.33	27.17
Quit to Take Another Job	179	1.23	2.21	0.25	0.33	0.67	2.33	19.83
Quit for Own Health Reason	107	2.84	3.11	0.25	0.42	1.50	8.00	16.42
Quit for School/Training	106	1.25	1.37	0.25	0.25	0.75	3.50	6.50
Other Voluntary Reasons	95	2.22	2.88	0.25	0.33	1.25	5.92	17.92
NLSY79 Other	561	3.11	3.87	0.25	0.33	1.42	7.75	24.17
None Specified	1485	2.06	3.30	0.25	0.33	1.00	5.00	31.50
<i>Total</i>	<i>8843</i>	<i>2.09</i>	<i>3.32</i>	<i>0.25</i>	<i>0.33</i>	<i>0.92</i>	<i>5.08</i>	<i>31.75</i>

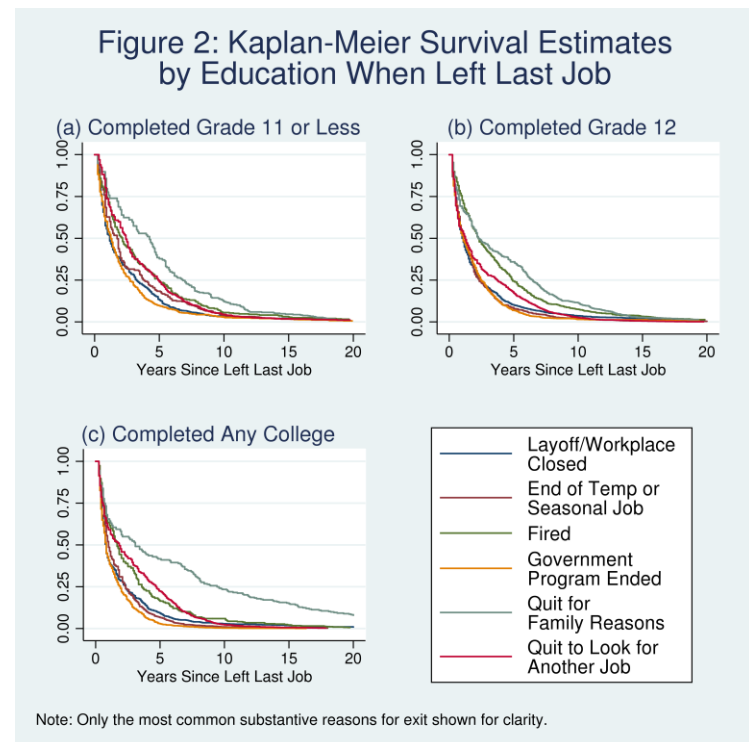
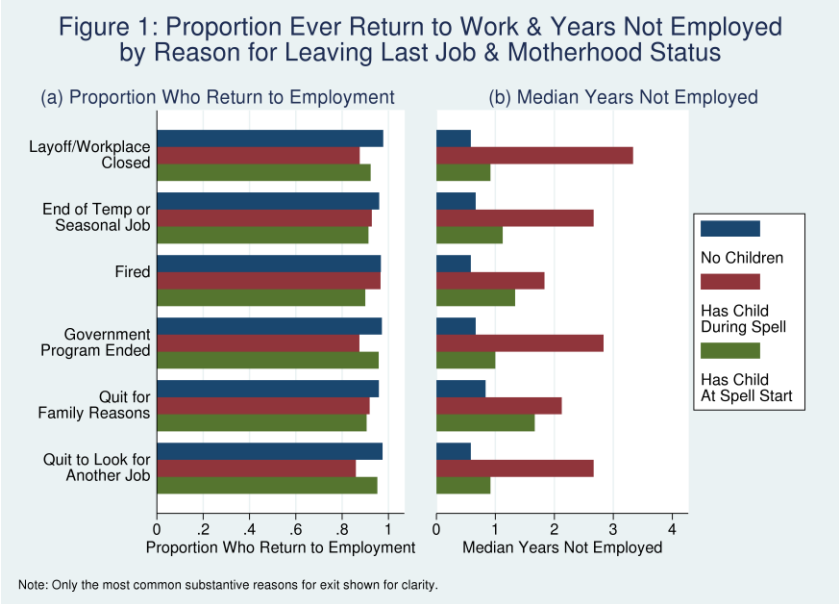
How do women’s reasons for job exit affect whether they return to employment? As Figure 1a illustrates, the vast majority of women who experience a period of non-employment lasting three months or longer eventually return to employment during the observation period, regardless of motherhood status or reason for leaving their last job. Some differences by motherhood status are apparent, in that women who have a child during their period of non-employment are less likely to return to work than women without children across all main reasons for job exit. Among women who left their previous job because of layoffs/workplace closure, the end of a government program, or who quit to look for another job, women who had a child at the start of their job exit were more likely to return than those who had children during the non-employment spell. Those reasons for job exit

perhaps capture more motivated employees, while the other three reasons shown (end of temporary or seasonal job, fired, or quit for family reasons) may include women who were less attached to their jobs in the first place.

How do women's reasons for job exit affect the time before they return to employment? As shown in

Figure 1b, the median time women spend not employed is very different by motherhood

status, and to a lesser extent, reason for exit. (Figure 1b shows the median instead of the mean to limit the influence of outliers, but the pattern is similar when graphing the mean.) Women without children largely return to work in under a year, while women who have children while not employed, *regardless of why they left their job originally*, tend to remain not employed for two years or more. This provides



new, quantitative evidence for women potentially recalibrating their job attachment after the birth of a child, regardless of their original reason for job exit; this also echoes some of the patterns described qualitatively by Damaske (2011).

Prior research also suggests that time not employed would vary by educational attainment. Accordingly, Figure 2 shows “survival” in non-employment by reason for job exit; when the curves approach zero, almost all respondents have become re-employed (figures are truncated at 20 years for clarity, but the tails extend to over thirty years). Across all three education levels (measured roughly at the start of the job exit spell), the curve with the longest time not employed is

the women who left their job for family reasons (mainly the arrival of a new child), but the length of the tail varies greatly by education. The curves are fairly similar until five years after leaving the last job; at that time, around 40 percent of women who left their last job due to the arrival of a new child and spent at least 3 months not employed were still not employed. Women who have completed any college by

the start of the job exit spell tend to remain not employed for a much longer time; almost a quarter of them remain not employed by ten years after leaving their last job, despite their greater human capital. These college educated women likely have higher earning husbands that can support their decision to stay home longer, yet their greater human capital helps them return to work more quickly after job displacement.

The survival curves for women who experienced the types of involuntary job loss often categorized as job displacement (layoff/workplace closed, end of temporary or seasonal job, government program ended) show the shortest time to re-employment across education groups, although those with higher education tend to be re-employed more quickly. This is reflected in coefficients from Cox models as well; women who left their last job because a government program ended were more likely to be reemployed quickly across all education groups than those who left due to layoffs or workplace closure. Women with at least 12 years of completed schooling were also more likely to be reemployed quickly after the end of a temporary or seasonal job. Survival curves for women who were fired or who quit to look for another job were in between the other two groupings, and track each other fairly closely. However, Cox model coefficients for motherhood status and change tend to be larger in magnitude and are consistently statistically significant across education groups as compared to the coefficients for reason for job exit. In addition, I find some support for the existence of a group of women with intermittent labor force attachment. For all education groupings, coefficients from Cox models show that women in their second spell of non-employment lasting three months or more are less likely to return to employment quickly as compared to those in their first spell, but women in their third, fourth, or subsequent spell of non-employment have a much greater hazard of returning to employment than women in their first spell, although the magnitude of these effects vary by education.

Summary and Next Steps

This paper examines how women's reasons for leaving their last job affect whether they return to work and the duration of their exit. As would be expected given the high overall labor force participation rates of women during this time period, most women who spend three months or more not employed eventually return to work, although the timing of their reentry and the duration of their exit from employment vary greatly. This paper focuses on periods of non-employment lasting three months or more because it reflects a greater disruption to women's employment histories and avoids categorizing planned short periods of non-employment between jobs in the same way as longer exits. Preliminary results show a wide variation in timing of re-employment by reason for leaving last job, with differences by motherhood status and timing as well as by educational attainment. Further analyses will refine these results based on a better categorization of time spent unemployed as compared to out of the labor force, better categorize educational attainment and time spent in school even after labor force entry, and further examine the potential effects of demographic transitions in women's lives. These results will provide relevant information on the existing state of reemployment in the U.S., so that future policy changes may best address existing challenges.

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