

HOW TO POSITIVELY MANAGE RETURN TO WORK AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE: POSITIVE SUPERVISOR BEHAVIORS TO PROMOTE WORKING MOTHERS' WELL-BEING

FRANCESCA CARLUCCIO
LUMSA UNIVERSITY OF ROMA

LAURA DAL CORSO
ALESSANDRA FALCO
UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA

ALESSANDRO DE CARLO
GIUSTINO FORTUNATO UNIVERSITY, BENEVENTO

Despite the significance of return to work (RTW) after maternity, evidence describing the specific supervisor behaviors desirable is lacking. This study attempts to contribute to the field by exploring the effects of positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave on well-being outcomes in working mothers (WMs). In particular, after the validation of a measure that assesses positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave, we explored whether these behaviors, together with workplace attachment anxiety, are associated with performance and remaining opportunities perceived by WMs, hypothesizing the mediation of work engagement. Data from Italian WMs were analyzed through structural equation modeling. Results confirmed the hypothesized factor structure of the measure and showed that positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave are directly and positively associated with performance. Moreover, positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave, as well as workplace attachment anxiety, are associated with performance and remaining opportunities via work engagement. Findings are relevant for two reasons. First, they contribute to providing a tool for supervisors to positively manage RTW after maternity leave. Second, they contribute to shedding light on the importance of being inclusive, proactive, and supportive in managing RTW after maternity leave, without neglecting WMs' personal factors. The practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Return to work after maternity leave; Positive supervisor behaviors; Work engagement; Performance; Remaining opportunities.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laura Dal Corso, Department FISPPA, Section of Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Via Venezia 14, 35131 Padova (PD), Italy. Email: dalcorso@unipd.it

Nowadays, working life is a fundamental way to highlight the different roles of working mothers (WMs) and to separate their identities from those of “mothers only” (Kuleshova, 2015). Return to work (RTW) after maternity leave is a common biographical transition in women's lives that could be a developmental challenge (Wiese & Heidemeier, 2012). Nevertheless, because maternity is often considered troublesome by employers in organizations, women often worry about announcing their pregnancy at work — or even postpone the choice of becoming mothers — because they have interiorized (more or less explicit) supervisors' and colleagues' messages about motherhood inappropriateness in the work context (Stumbitz et al., 2018).

Several mothers do not participate in the labor market and dedicate themselves to children's care and development. That choice may be a free and personal decision or may be based on issues related to work-life balance and (re)employment after childbirth (Save the Children, 2020). RTW after maternity leave can also be an economic need, given the different conditions between single-income families (to which 15.6% of children in absolute poverty belong) and double-income families (to which 5.5% of children in absolute poverty belong) (Save the Children, 2020). Mothers decide to re-enter the work force if the expected value of returning to the labor market is greater than the value of home time (Dagher et al., 2014). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), globally the motherhood pay gap is positively associated with the number of children. Another important factor is children's age: the younger the age, the greater the gap (ILO, 2015). Efficient regulations on work-life balance and policies aimed to prevent both the onset of the phenomenon and gender stereotypes can contain the seriousness of the issue. For example, the United Kingdom provides (re)training for women and men that would like to RTW after family care leave (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2019).

WMs have to divide their efforts between being a "good mother" (i.e., conforming to social norms and shared expectations) and being an efficient worker (i.e., showing competencies, effort, and commitment). When WMs return to work, they may deal with inadequacy feelings, not knowing if they will be able to face both job and family demands: reorganizing family life, settling in the new situation at the workplace, accommodating to possible new members in the team or to a new role (Greenberg et al., 2016). Gottenborg and colleagues (2018) interviewed WMs employed in hospital medicine, who reported some common challenges in their experience as new mothers: the lack of paid parental leave, physical difficulties (e.g., sleep deprivation), barriers to breastfeeding, loss of career opportunities, and colleagues' negative responses. All of these challenges affect career trajectory and well-being.

Cultural norms and shared expectations still shape negative beliefs about women, their careers, and their private life, giving rise to myths that negatively influence WMs choices (Falco et al., 2008). Motherhood myths discredit nontraditional motherhood models, by portraying WMs as neglecting their caregiving responsibilities; motherhood myths do not help support WMs in pursuing their career objectives (Verriers & Vala, 2018). From an organizational perspective, women who choose to have a child are perceived as less serious, performant, and trustworthy (Stumbitz et al., 2018). Moreover, WMs realize that opportunities for professional development and work achievements decrease (Greer & Botsford Morgan, 2016; Trump-Steele et al., 2016). Another important aspect of WMs' social context is their perception of significant others' expectations (Ponomartchouk & Bouchard, 2015): if they believe that women should be the primary caregiver, WMs' advancement in organizational contexts will be more difficult (Socratous et al., 2015).

A key figure is the supervisor: on one hand, even though WMs have similar levels of dedication to work as fathers, supervisors evaluate them as less committed than male colleagues (Greer & Botsford Morgan, 2016). On the other, positive supervisor behaviors limit the negative impact of mothers' cognitive beliefs based on social expectations (Dal Corso et al., 2020). Organizations and supervisors can support both pregnant women and WMs, starting from the de-stigmatization of pregnancy and the WM's figure. This prevents what some authors called "the motherhood penalty" (i.e., less significant work assignments, fewer work hours, and lower pay; Correll et al., 2007), that pushes mothers toward the informal economy and occasional or part-time jobs (Hulcombe et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2020).

This study aims to contribute to the development of a tool by providing psychometric evidence for a shortened version of a measure to manage RTW after long-term leave, adapted to the specific context of RTW after maternity leave. We validate the measure to shed light on the extent to which positive supervisor behaviors may help to manage this critical moment: we wish to examine how the specific behaviors

identified are associated with WMs' well-being, in terms of work engagement, performance, and remaining opportunities. Moreover, we endeavor to explore the role that personal factors in forming and nurturing work relationships, in terms of workplace attachment styles (Leiter et al., 2015), have in affecting the outcomes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our study draws on two complementary and widely used theoretical frameworks: the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001;) and the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). The JD-R model is particularly useful to analyze organizational characteristics: it is a comprehensive model that considers both positive and negative foci. It is wide, because it includes all the relevant job features, by dividing them into job demands (job aspects associated with physiological and psychological costs) and job resources (job aspects useful for goal achievement and stimulating employees' growth and development). It is flexible and applicable to every kind of organization. Finally, it is a helpful tool to communicate easily with stakeholders. Job demands and job resources give rise to a health impairment stress process and a motivational process, respectively, that, in turn, cause negative or positive outcomes.

Given that JD-R is a descriptive model that describes the relationships among various variables, additional explanatory frameworks are needed to specify why these relationships occur (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). The complementary model is the COR theory, which states that people are motivated to gain, maintain, and protect their available resources. These resources are fundamental because they allow people to achieve their objectives. If these resources decrease, or if they are not equal to the efforts made, stress will be perceived. In addition, the COR theory assumes that individuals invest the resources available to gain additional ones, giving rise to a resource gain spiral. In fact, those who have more resources are more capable to gain new ones, whereas those who have fewer resources are more exposed to their loss. When life demands (e.g., longer work hours, less childcare availability) excessively drain WMs' resources, stress will result. On the contrary, resources (e.g., supervisor support) are associated with better adjustment.

RTW AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE

RTW is a constantly evolving process that begins before leaving, when the employee takes into consideration the idea of becoming a mother. During pregnancy and with childbirth, RTW issues become more concrete and entail important decisions. When away on leave, some WMs keep in touch with their supervisor and colleagues, also to prepare their actual RTW. RTW does not end with the first days back to work but when WMs perceive (and are perceived) as completely re-integrated into the organizational life (Grether & Wiese, 2016). RTW failure would have negative consequences for both WMs and organizations: the former would be forced to renounce both job satisfaction and earnings, the latter would deal with turnover costs (Coulson, Skouteris, & Dissanayake, 2012).

The better WMs plan their RTW, the easier it will be for the organization to manage their maternity leave (Grether & Wiese, 2016). WMs who plan more while away on leave and perceive greater support from their organizations are more likely to return to work after maternity leave (Coulson et al., 2012). The amount of supervisor support perceived by WMs affects their use of the flexible work options available: if WMs perceive that their supervisor is informally communicating that the use of flexible work options is

not supported, they may have qualms about using the benefit despite it being available (Kossek & Buzanell, 2018; Shanmugam & Agarwal, 2019).

National regulations play a key role in an efficient RTW, as well (Nielsen et al., 2018): in particular, WMs who can take advantage of paid maternity leave show greater levels of mental and physical health, and lower levels of post-partum depressive symptoms (Van Niel et al., 2020). Paid maternity leave influences the length of the leave itself (Broadway et al., 2020). The duration of maternity leave is also associated with the qualification level: the lower the level, the shorter the absence (Fedor & Toldi, 2017). Several factors influence “when” going back: child and mother mental and physical health status, economic issues, presence of structures that facilitate work-life balance. Juengst and colleagues (2019) analyzed physician mothers’ RTW experiences and found that the majority of them felt that leave time was insufficient. Moreover, even if many mothers perceived support from colleagues, they also recalled negative RTW experiences associated with lack of facilities for breastfeeding (which in itself involves possible fears of being unprofessional; Burns & Triandafilidis, 2019), lack of childcare opportunity, and discrimination.

SUPERVISOR AND RTW AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE

Strong evidence highlights the importance of positive supervisor behaviors in promoting employees’ well-being (Barbieri et al., 2014; He et al., 2019; Shin & Hur, 2020;), for instance in terms of workplace spirituality, commitment, job and life satisfaction, and performance (Baek et al., 2019; De Carlo, Dal Corso et al., 2020; Khan, 2010; Rana & Javed, 2019; Wang et al., 2014; Wong & Laschinger, 2013). Supervisors that show prudence, temperance, humanity, courage, justice are positively associated with employees’ positive affect and job satisfaction, and negatively associated with negative affect (Hendriks et al., 2020).

Supervisor support is one of the most important facilitators of RTW (Ansoleaga et al., 2015; Janssen et al., 2003; Jetha et al., 2018; Kärkkäinen et al., 2018; Rydström et al., 2017), because supervisors provide feedback and assign tasks and duties (Wiese & Heidemeier, 2012). The joint coping of supervisor and long-absent employee is a critical success factor of RTW (Yagil et al., 2019). Supervisors that effectively manage RTW affect both the duration of the absence and the economic fallout for the organization (Schreuder et al., 2013). Nevertheless, RTW management is no simple matter: sometimes, supervisors may face the dilemma of balancing ethical and managerial principles, such as keeping staffing budgets (Stochkendahl et al., 2015). Supervisor support perceived by WMs is associated with several outcomes, such as burnout, post-natal depression, work-family conflict, performance, commitment, and job satisfaction (Bruk-Lee et al., 2016).

What matters is that supervisors have adequate personal characteristics and competencies to manage this critical phase: they should be empathetic, patient, and honest, also aware of the employee’s perspective. They should know RTW processes and procedures regarding RTW. They should be trained on how to plan RTW, how to communicate effectively with the returned employee, and how to manage RTW impact on team and colleagues. Moreover, they should count on organizational support, as well (Johnston et al., 2015). Yarker and colleagues (2010) highlighted the central role of communication and support from and between occupational health, line managers, and colleagues, which can influence the RTW experience. Employees on long-term absence appreciate contact from supervisors because they perceive it as a kind of support: Buys and colleagues (2019) stated that the majority of participants having contact with supervisors during their absence were pleased with the amount of contact and discussed workplace accommodations.

However, it is important to consider individual preferences and perceptions, because contact has to be perceived as supportive. Nevertheless, some objective aspects should not be missing, such as structured organizational procedures, collaboration, communication skills training, and RTW support measures (de Rijk et al., 2020). Work-family supportive supervisor behaviors are important, as well, because they support the balance between the employee's various life dimensions and are negatively associated with work-family conflicts (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2011) and positively associated with an earlier RTW (Grether & Wiese, 2016).

Even though the impact of positive supervisor behaviors on employee's well-being is well known, those behaviors are not always manifested: according to Makola and colleagues' findings (2020), WMs state that this support is often minimal or insufficient, especially when compared to colleagues' support. Often, RTW is managed informally, through a reciprocal adjustment between supervisors and WMs, and by creating ad hoc solutions at the team level (Townsend et al., 2016). Evidence describing the specific behaviors that supervisors should develop is limited (Stomp-van den Berg et al., 2007): from an organizational point of view, it is important that supervisors are adequately trained to know how to behave daily in managing RTW after maternity leave. They should have clear and specific recommendations to guide their daily actions.

Munir and colleagues (2012) developed and validated the Behavior Measure for Supervisor to Support Return to Work (SSRW) after long-term sick leaves, a useful measure to manage RTW positively. The measure, based on a competencies approach, is a behavioral point of reference for positive supervisors. This approach has important strengths: for instance, competencies can be observed and learned; they can be modified and developed. Above all, they can be integrated into daily management. In that way, RTW positive management would not be perceived as a further duty by supervisors (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2011).

The SSRW, tested for construct, concurrent and predictive validity, identifies 32 behaviors divided into the following three dimensions: *Inclusive behavior upon initial return*, behaviors useful to promote positive communication between supervisor and the returned employee, aimed to share practices, procedures, and changes, and to make the re-entry as smooth as possible; *Negative behaviors*, bad conducts that supervisors should avoid, such as an aggressive, intolerant and nonempathetic communication style; *General proactive support*, competencies aimed to reintroduce the employee in the team, to display an open and empathetic approach and to comply with legal and procedural issues.

Despite the criticality of the management of RTW after maternity leave, evidence describing the specific supervisor behaviors needed is lacking. RTW after long-term sick absence and RTW after maternity leave have some different characteristics: the injured employee may have to face physical limitations, whereas WMs have to settle in a new role. Nevertheless, they share some features, such as the transition to a different condition and the re-entering the work environment after a long absence. Therefore, some evidence considers RTW after sickness absence a useful means to study and understand RTW after maternity leave (Fisher et al., 2016). We contribute to the development of a shortened version of the SSRW specifically adapted to RTW after maternity leave. We will focus on the most significant behaviors of the SSRW to create a shortened version. Then, we will analyze its psychometric properties. The development of a shortened version of an instrument is preferred, when possible. A shortened version can be used more easily and allows a more extensive analysis because it makes room for other important variables.

POSITIVE SUPERVISOR BEHAVIORS IN RTW AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE AND POSITIVE OUTCOMES

We explore the relationships of positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave on well-being outcomes, to shed light on the extent to which they help to manage this critical moment. In par-

ticular, drawing from the JD-R model and the COR theory, we will explore whether positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave — considered as job resources — give rise to the motivational process that positively influences work engagement that, in turn, positively affects job performance and remaining opportunities perceived by WMs.

Work engagement is a positive, persistent, fulfilling, work-related state of mind; it is characterized by three dimensions: vigor — high levels of energy during one's activities; dedication — a significant and enthusiastic involvement in carrying out job tasks; and absorption — a strong focus on one's work. Positive supervisor behaviors are considered an important antecedent of work engagement (Hendriks et al., 2020; Hutahayan, 2019; Mukaihata et al., 2020; Talebzadeh & Karatepe, 2019; Yang et al., 2020). As stated by the JD-R model, work engagement is the joining link that gives rise to the motivational process: it connects job resources (i.e., positive supervisor behaviors) with positive outcomes (i.e., job performance, remaining opportunities).

Job performance is a behavior that contributes to the goals and the effective functioning of an organization (Campbell et al., 1993). Job performance is completely under the control of the individual; it is both the act of accomplishing a task and a means to reach a set of goals within a job (Campbell, 1990). Some evidence shows that positive supervisor behaviors are positively associated with performance (Ali et al., 2020; Byun et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2020; De Carlo, Dal Corso et al., 2020; Katsaros et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020).

Remaining opportunities refer to the broader construct of occupational future time perspective, which describes employees' perceptions of their future in the employment context. Its focus on opportunities captures the individual's perceptions of new work-related goals and possibilities for the future. It is analyzed through the COR theory perspective, because jobs that offer resource-rich work contexts help employees to gain additional resources in terms of occupational future time perspective (Zacher et al., 2010). Some authors recommend that it may be analyzed through the JD-R model as well (Henri et al., 2017). Certain job resources could be important antecedents of occupational future time perspective (Rudolph et al., 2018): no study to date has examined the effects of supervisors in developing time-broadening perspectives or work plans for employees (De Lange et al., 2020). Moreover, occupational future time perspective has been considered mainly in the workforce-aging context: to the best of our knowledge, no studies have analyzed this variable in the context of RTW after maternity leave. It would therefore be interesting to study not only the role of the variable in a younger population — as Hommelhoff and colleagues (2018) did — but also which contextual factors influence it (Fasbender & Klehe, 2019).

WORKPLACE ATTACHMENT STYLES AND POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Workplace attachment styles are personal factors that intervene in forming and nurturing work relationships. In addition, workplace attachment styles are a variable of individual difference that influences not only employees' social competencies and relations, but also several organizational processes. Workplace attachment styles derive from the application of attachment theory to organizational contexts and are a measure of adult attachment styles specifically associated to work relations (Leiter et al., 2015). Adult attachment styles are used to understand several social contexts and may affect the response to stressors (Kokkonen et al., 2014). Another important aspect regards the organizational context itself: according to Bowlby (1982), the activation of the attachment behavioral system is more likely in critical situations, such as motherhood and the subsequent RTW.

In particular, we focused on the attachment anxiety dimension of workplace attachment, because its hyper-vigilance to rejection may threaten perceived support and give rise to a vicious circle (Ronen & Baldwin, 2010). Furthermore, this individual tendency may influence work engagement levels, which have a close relationship with the psychological factor (Albrecht & Martin, 2020). In fact, in spite of job resources being available, some employees remain disengaged and this may be due to individual differences (Byrne et al., 2017). Adult attachment theory is a theoretical framework used to analyze the relationships between work engagement and other variables (e.g., performance; Lin & Tsai, 2020). In addition, attachment styles are the direct and indirect antecedent of work engagement (Byrne et al., 2017).

Several organizational studies took into consideration workplace attachment styles, which are associated with vocational and nonvocational outcomes, such as self-esteem (Neustadt et al., 2011), quality of work life (Gerber et al., 2020), job dissatisfaction (Pedrazza et al., 2016), turnover intentions (Richards & Schat, 2011), burnout (Buceta et al., 2019; Bugaj et al., 2016; Falvo et al., 2012; Halpern et al., 2012; Kokkonen et al., 2014; Leiter et al., 2015; Obeid et al., 2019; Reizer, 2015; Ronen & Baldwin, 2010; Ronen & Mikulincer, 2009, 2012; West, 2015), and job performance (Jiang et al., 2019). In addition, if employees perceive they have a safe refuge to return to in case of need, they feel freer to explore new job activities (Lin, 2010), which may be associated with their future opportunities perceptions. However, further research is needed to have a more comprehensive image of the mechanisms connecting workplace anxious attachment to vocational outcomes (Virga et al., 2019). We therefore wish to explore the role of workplace attachment anxiety in affecting work engagement, performance, and remaining opportunities.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

A total of 215 completed questionnaires were collected from Italian WMs who had returned to work after maternity leave. Sixty-one point five percent of participants were between 31 and 40 years old, 26.8% were over 41, and 11.7% were up to 30. The majority (66.6%) held a university degree (26.6% had a high school diploma; 3.4% a middle school diploma; 3.4% other). Eighty-three point seven percent were employees, 11% were self-employed, 2.9% were unemployed, 2.4% other. Most WMs (84.7%) had an open-ended contract (11.6% fixed-term contract; 3.7% other types of contracts). Forty-nine point three percent of participants worked part-time (45.8% full time; 4.9% other). In their opinion, motherhood had quite affected their work considerably ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 1.06$) in various ways, such as 33.7% had to reduce their activities, 9.9% had to give up their jobs, some participants had difficulties working long hours in case of need (30.9%), or attending training programs (16.6%), and/or carrying out some tasks (11.6%). The study was carried out following the recommendations of the Ethics Committee of Psychology Research of the University of Padua. All participants were duly informed that participation was anonymous and voluntary.

Scale Development and Measures

Positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave were assessed through our shortened and adapted version of the SSRW (Munir et al., 2012), named SSRW-WM-9. First, we carried out a back-translation of the original items of the SSRW. We adapted them to the maternity context (e.g., “my ill-

ness/condition” was changed to “my condition”). Next, to have a more manageable tool, two authors, working independently from each other, conducted an item reduction, by adopting the criterion that the three dimensions should all have the same number of items. For each dimension, they selected the three most representative items. The factor loadings obtained by Munir and colleagues (2012) were considered only initially: the semantic meaning of the items was given priority. The final version resulted in a 9-item scale, divided equally into the 3 subscales: inclusive behavior upon initial return to work (e.g., “My supervisor made my first weeks back at work as low-stress as possible”), negative behaviors (e.g., “My supervisor went against my request for certain adjustments to be made to my work”), general proactive support (e.g., “My supervisor promoted a positive team spirit toward me when I returned to work”). The 5-point response scale ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .84.

Workplace Attachment Anxiety was assessed through the attachment anxiety subscale of the Short Workplace Attachment Measure (SWAM; Leiter et al., 2015). The subscale makes specific reference to relationships at work and includes 5 items (e.g., “I worry that others don’t value me as much as I value them”). The 5-point response scale ranges from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .71.

Work engagement was assessed through the shortened Italian version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Balducci et al., 2010; see also Schaufeli et al., 2006). The instrument comprises three subscales: vigor (e.g., “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”), dedication (e.g., “My job inspires me”), and absorption (e.g., “I feel happy when I am working intensely”). The 7-point response scale ranges from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .93.

Job performance was assessed through two items. Specifically, participants were asked to evaluate their performance on a 10-point scale (from *low* to *high*) and to rate the work objectives achieved in the last year through a percentage (from 0 to 100%). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .77.

Remaining opportunities were assessed through the focus on opportunities subscale of the Occupational Future Time Perspective scale (Zacher & Frese, 2009). The subscale has 3 items (e.g., “My occupational future is filled with possibilities”). The 7-point response scale ranged from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*applies completely*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .91.

Statistical Analyses

Scale Dimensionality

We used a confirmative approach to confirm the structure of the shortened scale. In particular, we compared the three-factor hypothesized model to a one-factor model, by carrying out two confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) by means of the Lisrel 8.80 software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006). We used the maximum likelihood method as estimator. We assessed the model fit, starting with the chi-square test (χ^2). A model shows a good fit to the data if χ^2 is nonsignificant. Given that χ^2 is sensitive to sample size, we considered additional fit indices. In particular, we considered the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the nonnormed fit index (NNFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root mean residual (SRMR). Values close to or smaller than .08 for RMSEA, values close to or greater than .95 for NNFI and for CFI, and values close to or smaller than .10 for SRMR indicate an acceptable fit (Scher-melleh-Engel et al., 2003). To compare the two models, we used the χ^2 -difference test: if this statistic has a nonsignificant value, we chose the model with the highest degree of freedom, following the principle of

parsimony. On the contrary, if the χ^2 -difference test is significant, the two models will perform differently, and then we chose the model with the lowest degree of freedom because it performs better.

Next, we calculated the composite reliability (ρ) and the average variance extracted (AVE) indices, to evaluate construct reliability and convergent validity, respectively, of the model chosen. In particular, values greater than .70 for ρ and values greater than .50 for the AVE are satisfactory (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Mediation Model

We tested a structural equation model (SEM) with latent variables, using the Lisrel 8.80 software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006) to explore the relationships described above. In particular, we tested a mediation model in which positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and workplace attachment anxiety were the antecedents, work engagement was the mediator, and job performance and remaining opportunities were the outcomes. We estimated the direct relationships among antecedents and outcomes, as well. To evaluate the model, the same fit indices were considered again: the χ^2 , the RMSEA, the NNFI, the CFI, and the SRMR.

We considered 95% asymmetric confidence intervals (CIs) based on the distribution of the multiplication term, to verify the significance of the indirect effects. The purpose was to manage the nonnormality derived from the *path a * path b* multiplication, as recommended by MacKinnon's procedure (PRODCLIN; MacKinnon et al., 2007). If the CI does not contain zero, the indirect effect is significant (MacKinnon et al., 2012).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of our CFAs. Regarding the one-factor model, even if SRMR is acceptable, RMSEA, NNFI, and CFI are beyond the cut-off value, indicating poor fit. On the contrary, fit indices of the three-factor model indicate a good fit. The significant improvement of fit was confirmed by the χ^2 -difference test ($\Delta\chi^2 = 73.05$; $\Delta df = 3$; $p = .00$). We therefore conclude that the three-factor model performs better than the one-factor model and is preferable. In conclusion, we confirm the hypothesized three-factor structure of the measure.

TABLE 1
Comparison between the alternative models

Model	χ^2	RMSEA	NNFI	CFI
One-factor	119.48	.14	.89	.91
Three-factor	46.43	.06	.97	.98

Note. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; NNFI = nonnormed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index.

Table 2 shows standardized path coefficients, which are all significant and greater than .50. Regarding construct reliability and convergent validity evaluation, ρ and AVE reach satisfying values ($\rho = .90$; AVE = .51). Therefore, we consider the measurement model validity appropriate.

TABLE 2
Standardized path coefficients for the three-factor model

Subscale	Item <i>My supervisor...</i>	Factor loading
Inclusive behavior upon initial return to work	Item 2	.70
	Item 3	.78
	Item 7	.74
Negative behaviors	Item 8	.50
	Item 11	.80
	Item 12	.69
General proactive support	Item 16	.72
	Item 20	.87
	Item 32	.50

Means and standard deviation of the variables considered are presented in Table 3.

Regarding the relationships hypothesized, the model tested is showed in Figure 1 and fits the data well: $\chi^2 = 48.39$ ($df = 36$; $p = .08$); RMSEA = .04; NNFI = .99; CFI = .99; SRMR = .04. In particular, results show that positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave are significantly and positively associated with work engagement ($\gamma = .29$, $p < .001$) and job performance ($\gamma = .18$, $p < .05$). Workplace attachment anxiety is significantly and negatively associated with work engagement ($\gamma = -.14$, $p < .05$). Moreover, work engagement shows significant and positive associations with job performance ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$) and remaining opportunities ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$). At this point, the requirements exist to verify the mediation role (partial in the positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and job performance relationship, total in the other three relationships) of work engagement.

TABLE 3
Means and standard deviations of the variables considered

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave	3.40	0.85
Workplace attachment anxiety	2.36	0.82
Work engagement	4.17	1.04
Job performance	7.37	1.62
Remaining opportunities	4.16	1.65

Note. RTW = return to work.

All the asymmetric CIs for the relationships between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and the outcomes, through work engagement, do not contain zero. In particular, the unconventional estimate is .21, 95% CI [.09, .36] for the relationship between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and job performance. The unconventional estimate is .24, 95% CI [.10, .41] for the relationship between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and remaining oppor-

tunities. The unconventional estimate is $-.10$, 95% CI $[-.22, -.03]$ for the relationship between workplace attachment anxiety and job performance. The unconventional estimate is $-.12$, 95% CI $[-.25, -.03]$ for the relationship between workplace attachment anxiety and remaining opportunities. Consequently, we conclude that work engagement significantly mediates the relationships between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and the outcomes, as well as between workplace attachment anxiety and the outcomes.

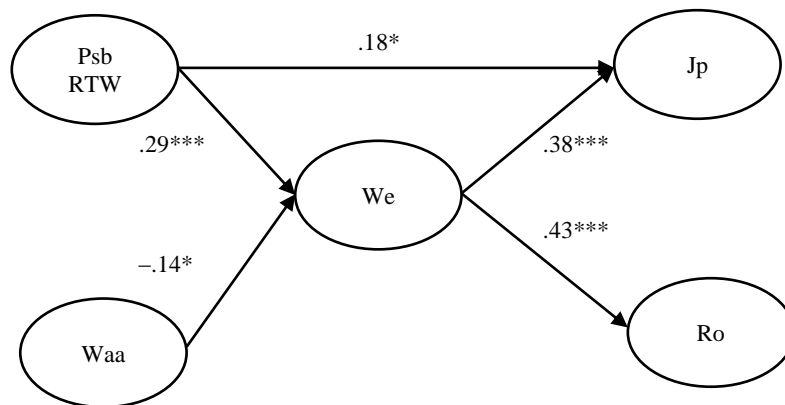


FIGURE 1
The mediation model.

Note. Psb RTW = positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave; RTW = return to work; Waa = workplace attachment anxiety; We = work engagement; Jp = job performance; Ro = remaining opportunities.

DISCUSSION

Having a clear and handy tool that shows which specific behaviors should be encouraged is a key factor from both a research and an organizational point of view. From the theoretical perspective, the shortened version of a questionnaire is not only easier to administer, but it also makes room for other important variables to be investigated, for a wider analysis that will boost the research. From the practical perspective, a punctual tool guiding supervisor behaviors will instruct on how to positively manage RTW after maternity leave. In fact, training programs often abound in theoretical concepts that do not help supervisors in the daily management of employees (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2011); quite the opposite, they add a further burden to their responsibilities.

Our study aimed to offer a contribution to the development of a tool by providing psychometric evidence for a shortened version of the SSRW, specifically adapted to RTW after maternity leave. Moreover, we analyzed the relationships that positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave, together with workplace attachment anxiety, have with job performance and remaining opportunities, hypothesizing the mediation role of work engagement.

Therefore, we developed a shortened version of the SSRW with 9 items, equally divided into the three dimensions (inclusive behavior upon initial return to work, negative behaviors, and general proactive support). Results supported the hypothesized three-factor structure, which was better than the one-factor model we compared it with. Moreover, ρ and AVE reached satisfactory values, giving evidence of construct reliability and convergent validity.

Regarding the mediation model tested, findings showed that positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave were significantly and positively associated with work engagement and job perfor-

mance. Workplace attachment anxiety was significantly and negatively associated with work engagement. Moreover, work engagement showed significant and positive associations with job performance and remaining opportunities. The significance of the indirect effects was verified through the asymmetric confidence intervals, which confirmed the mediation role of work engagement. In conclusion, also drawing from the theoretical frameworks on which our research is grounded, we state that work engagement partially mediated the relationship between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and job performance. In addition, it totally mediated the relationships between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and remaining opportunities, between workplace attachment anxiety and job performance, and between workplace attachment anxiety and remaining opportunities. Furthermore, the relationships between positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave and the well-being outcomes could be considered evidence of criterion validity for the shortened version of the tool.

Taken together, our results showed that a supervisor who displays willingness to consider work adaptations and to make RTW as low-stress as possible, who is patient and empathetic, who promotes a team spirit toward WMs who have just returned to work and listens to their concerns will contribute to making them more engaged and performant. In addition, increased work engagement levels positively affect the WMs' perspective of remaining opportunities, by helping them perceive their future as filled with more possibilities. Regarding workplace attachment anxiety, worrying that colleagues do not value WMs as much as WMs value them, fearing that friends at work will let them down, and perceiving that others are reluctant to be as close as WMs would prefer will contribute to making WMs less engaged. These fears indirectly and negatively affect WMs well-being, in terms of job performance and remaining opportunities.

This study brings some noteworthy contributions. First, it provides psychometric evidence for a shortened version of the SSRW adapted to RTW after maternity leave. This meets the need to do more to identify the organizational factors that are perceived as (un)supportive by WMs (Sabat et al., 2016). In fact, to the best of our knowledge, there is no handy tool to guide supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave management. Second, our study analyzes RTW after maternity leave process by exploring the relationships that positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave have with some important vocational outcomes; for instance, we explored the role of positive supervisor behaviors in broadening WMs' perspectives (De Lange et al., 2020). Third, we focused on some rather innovative relationships thus expanding the knowledge on comprehension the relationship between workplace attachment styles and work engagement by showing that work engagement levels can be explained by workplace attachment anxiety, as well (Byrne et al., 2017). Moreover, we provide some evidence in supporting the relationships that workplace attachment styles have with job performance and remaining opportunities. Fourth, we analyzed possible antecedents to increase remaining opportunities in a different context (i.e., RTW after maternity leave) than the usual one (i.e., workforce aging); this is an important contribution because WMs often see their career opportunities, their professional development, and their work achievements reduced or changed (Verniers & Vala, 2018).

Research Limitations and Future Directions

In discussing these findings, some limitations have to be considered. First, the cross-sectional design of our research does not allow us to make any inferences about the direction and the causality of the relationships. Even if strong theoretical frameworks support our results, future research should conduct longitudinal studies to confirm the direction of the relationships. Second, we used only one data gathering

method; future research may take into account different kinds of evaluations (Falco et al., 2013) and use not only self-report measures but also other data sources (Falco et al., 2012, 2018), such as supervisor, colleagues, and team perspectives. Third, the number of participants is limited because it was not easy to involve WMs in the administration of the questionnaire; even though RTW after maternity leave is a real and shared concern, speaking freely about it is not yet taken for granted, because research may reveal issues related to discrimination (Sabat et al., 2016). Moreover, this study was carried out in Italy: given that national regulations on RTW after maternity leave, as well as various organizational cultures, may vary greatly from country to country, studies with wider and more culturally heterogeneous samples would be useful to circumscribe the possible effects due to the specific participants of this study. Finally, this study focused on WMs' perceptions when they have already returned to work; given that RTW is considered a broader process (Fisher et al., 2016), future research is needed to explore RTW management in its earlier stages, such as pregnancy disclosure and planning while on leave.

Practical Implications

The present study provides important practical implications for organizations that wish to promote organizational well-being and performance in designing work teams. Taken together, our results suggest that organizations may boost employees' work engagement and prevent maladaptive consequences if they create a supportive, empathetic, inclusive, and safe work environment (Byrne et al., 2017; Falvo et al., 2013). There are also practical fallouts for the training of both supervisors and WMs.

Regarding training directed at supervisors, specific interventions could be planned to learn how to positively manage RTW after collaborators' maternity leave, by following the behaviors identified by the tool just validated. In that way, supervisors would take advantage of a guide to proactively manage RTW rather than to be managed by it. For instance, sharing needs and expectations between supervisor and WM, as well as positive and regular communication, is a crucial aspect to manage an effective RTW, in particular in terms of work engagement, job performance, and perceived occupational opportunities. Designing training for supervisors is advisable, but not sufficient: it is important that the RTW culture becomes diffused throughout the organization and that it involves every stakeholder, like a waterfall: from the top management to the bottom line. No organizational intervention can be effective without the involvement of the top management (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2011; Girardi et al., 2018).

As stated by the JD-R model and the COR theory, it is crucial to develop WMs' personal resources, which help them deal with RTW (Grether & Wiese, 2016), because they are general resistance resources (Hobfoll et al., 2003) able to cope with critical and transitional life stages (Fisher et al., 2016). Interventions aimed to improve WMs' stress management skills can be particularly useful (Dal Corso et al., 2013). Nowadays, these interventions can take advantage of innovative technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) (De Carlo, Carluccio et al., 2020). Further helpful strategies are networking with other WMs to share work-life integration issues and future career perspectives, and speaking honestly with significant others to dispel myths about what a "good" mother should do (Greenberg et al., 2016).

More broadly, effective interventions should aim to strengthen the resources available to the returned employee at various levels, by taking into consideration not only the individual and the supervisor, but also the group, the organization and the overarching social context, both in work and in non-work contexts, in accordance with the framework integrated by Nielsen and colleagues (2018).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to shedding light on how to manage a positive RTW after maternity leave. Our findings provide psychometric evidence for a shortened version of a tool that identifies and measures positive supervisor behaviors in RTW after maternity leave. We hope that this study will help to stimulate research on this topic, because RTW after maternity leave is a critical moment for women. Supervisors can do a lot to boost WMs' well-being, by adopting specific positive conducts during RTW: our findings show that their behaviors positively affect WMs' perceptions in terms of work engagement, job performance, and remaining opportunities. Finally, this study helps organizations in promoting the development of supervisors' managerial skills, an important step toward the development of interventions directed at supervisors in the management of RTW after maternity leave.

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