

Making sense of menopause: identity threat and reconstruction at work

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Menopause is a natural, biological time of change and transition for almost all women* in mid to later life. Experience of the numerous and highly individualised symptoms of menopause can present a challenge to how women continue to engage with work. It was recently reported that 10% of women leave paid work due to menopause symptoms (Bazeley et al., 2022) and 14 million working days are lost annually to menopause symptoms (ONS, 2016). Normalising and de-stigmatising menopause through increased awareness is a current topic of academic, organisational and societal interest (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2021), particularly salient as more women than ever before work through their entire menopause cycle (Hardy et al., 2018). Reducing the 'taboo' nature of menopause at work (Grandey et al. 2020) and providing social support networks (Steffan & Potočnik, 2022) can help women manage their symptoms at work. Individually, women manage their symptoms at work through social and psychological coping mechanisms (Griffiths et al., 2013), hiding and denying symptoms (Brewis et al. 2017), and using the menopause as a point of identity distinction at work (Butler, 2020). What is less explored is how women understand the influence of their menopause symptoms on their mind and bodies in relation to their specific work context, prior to engaging in coping strategies to manage their symptoms.

A recent literature review suggests that many women themselves have little understanding about menopause, which is out of balance with other natural, biological changes such as pregnancy (Verdonk et al., 2022). While a burgeoning body of taboo-reducing, awareness-building work is encouraged, we suggest taking a step back to understand how women themselves make sense of this deeply personal transition within themselves at work. Our line of enquiry, therefore, is to ask: *How do women make sense of menopause-related changes to their minds and bodies at work?* For this, we turn to the mutually enactive theoretical frames of identity and sensemaking (Brown, 2022; Vough, Caza & Maitlis, 2020).

With the exception of Steffan (2021), who recently found that women engage in self-deprecating identity work in relation to their menopausal bodies at work, there is a paucity of literature on the impact of menopause transition on identity, especially work identity. This is an important omission as identities are a "means through which we render our lives meaningful" (Brown, 2022 pg. 1206). Keeping in mind that menopause is a time of change and transition, we turn to the concept of

sensemaking as a behavioural component of identity (Vough et al., 2020). While identity work has been extended as a form of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Moore & Koning, 2016), there are gaps in our understanding of sensemaking as identity work. We respond to the call for scholars to consider: “*What role does sensemaking play in identity processes?*”, or indeed vice-versa (Vough et al., 2020, pg. 251).

Using a mixed-methods approach, we report findings from a longitudinal study on experiencing menopause at work. We collected our data from UK-based participants across three Waves. In Wave 1 (June 2021), 978 participants completed an online survey. In Wave 2 (December 2021), 685 participants out of 978 that took part in Wave 1 completed the second online survey. In Wave 3 (June 2022), we interviewed 53 participants who completed the online survey at Waves 1 and 2. We observed that 22%, 26% and 37% of women had a neutral or negative response to how well they understood how their symptoms have affected their work to date, will affect them in one month's time and are likely to impact them at work within the next five years, respectively. We also found that individual resilience moderated the relationship between symptoms (physical and psychological) and the occupational dimension of quality of life and job performance. Interview data, specifically in response to a line of questioning around resilience, revealed evidence of how the process of the sensemaking of menopause was conducted in response to work identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011). We report on three key themes: threatened sense of resilience led to work identity threat, frustration when life-long coping strategies diminish, and post-menopausal awareness of identity threat “*the scales fell from my eyes and I realised it wasn't me...*”.

The current cohort of women experiencing menopause are the vehicle for change in how menopause is understood, discussed and ‘managed’ in the workplace. This study extends the previously highlighted importance of social support at work (Steffan & Potočnik, 2022), showing how women themselves engage in sensemaking, often before they are able to ask for or accept help at work. We contribute to identity literature by addressing Brown's (2022) offering that identity and sensemaking are mutually enactive. We do this by revealing the role that sensemaking plays in identity process around the timely and important subject of menopause at work.

**The authors acknowledge that all people who menstruate can experience menopause, however, we use ‘women’ as a representative term throughout this article, as all participants in our study identified as women. We also acknowledge that not all women will experience menopause due to individual health conditions.*

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