Basic Concepts & Definitions

Organizations adopt work-life initiatives for a variety of reasons. Research has focused on investigating firm characteristics that may be linked to policy adoption. Scholars have differed as to the explanation of which characteristics drive the adoption decision as well as to why these specific characteristics are influential. Firm adoption of work-life programs has primarily been examined within the frameworks of institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), managerial interpretation (Milliken et al., 1998), and organizational adaptation (Daft & Weick, 1984).

Currently, there is not a strong consensus among scholars as to what constitutes a work-life policy. Arthur and Cook (2003: 221) broadly define work-life initiatives as "any program designed to alleviate individual conflict between work and family." Moreover, three primary categorizations are generally implemented when examining work-life initiatives: dependent care, family leave, and flexible scheduling. Dependent care focuses primarily on childcare and eldercare. Policies considered as dependent care may vary greatly such as on-site childcare to information assistance for eldercare. Family leave encompasses maternity and paternity leave, as well as any other paid or unpaid family leave policies. And flexible scheduling may entail any policies that allow flexibility with regard to time worked, location worked, or other scheduling arrangements.

Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) asserts firms adopt work-life initiatives in order to gain legitimacy. As defined by Suchman (1995: 574), legitimacy is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions." Basically, legitimacy is a type of acceptance within society. Thus, adoption of work-life policies may increase a firm's acceptance within its environment.

According to institutional theory, this alignment with the environment may be influenced by three pressures: normative, coercive, and mimetic (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). First, normative pressures push for an organization to conform in order to be perceived as more legitimate. Typically, this pressure is exerted by internal or external stakeholders who have a vested interest in the organization. Individuals
exerting normative pressure may be investors who want to assure the safety of their financial investment so they push for the firm to act in ways that society deems appropriate; therefore, maintaining the stability of the stock price. Or the individuals may be employees of the firm who pressure their workplace to adopt practices similar to other firms, thereby increasing the firm’s acceptance in society.

Second, conformity by means of coercive pressures occurs through influence exerted by those in power. Government agencies are examples of powerful groups that may influence the actions of an organization. The EEOC has actively imposed its power over organizations in order to better the opportunities for women and minorities. Another example is The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 which has helped diffuse maternity leave programs across organizations.

Third, mimetic pressures occur when an organization mimics the actions of successful competitors in the industry. Firms may follow or “mimic” competitors merely because of their success. The rationale is if their actions follow those of their successful competitors, they will also be successful. Organizations may also mimic competitors in order to compete for valued human resources. Firms want to hire from a large applicant pool of qualified individuals. If a firm does not offer all the benefits of its competitor, its applicant pool will be smaller than the pool of its competitor and likely offer less qualified applicants. All institutional pressures (normative, coercive, and mimetic) have the capacity to influence an organization’s responsiveness to the adoption of work-life initiatives.

Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) suggests firms adopt work-life initiatives in order to secure the acquisition of resources (in this case, human resources) essential to their survival. Given the changing demographics in the workforce as well as shifts in the domestic division of labor, organizations need to actively respond in order to protect qualified human resources. Women make up nearly half the labor force and men’s responsibilities within the home are continually increasing. Therefore, resource dependence theory suggests firms adopt work-life policies in order to take an active role in offering enticements to its employees and potential employees. Thus, its applicant pool will be increased and allow for selection among the best candidates.

Although both institutional theory and resource dependence theory note the importance of a large applicant pool for future hires, there is a key difference between the two theories. Institutional theory is reactive; firms react to pressures. If a firm's competitors offer certain benefits, the firm must also offer the benefits to remain competitive. Resource dependence theory is proactive. Firms realize their dependence on qualified human resources and subsequently offer enticements to stimulate a large applicant pool. A human resource or efficiency-based model further explores the benefits of a large applicant pool. With regard to work-life initiatives, the model suggests adoption of work-life policies translates into human resource benefits. Specifically, firms offering beneficial programs increase their ability to attract and retain
employees. Given the increased applicant pool and decreased turnover, organizations potentially hire and employ more productive employees; thus, they gain performance benefits (Arthur, 2003).

Milliken, Martins, and Morgan (1998) suggest a caveat to institutional theory and resource dependence theory in analyzing organizational responsiveness to work-life initiatives. They propose that managers, independent of these other pressures, interpret environmental concerns and act accordingly. Therefore, if managers interpret work-life policies as relevant to their organization, they are more likely to offer the benefits. Interpretation among managers may vary due to their background and experiences as well as certain demographic characteristics they may exhibit. This variation accounts for different managers reacting differently given the same institutional pressures and resource limitations.

Organizational responsiveness to work-life initiatives has also been explored within an organizational adaptation model (Daft & Weick, 1984). This framework suggests firms align themselves with the environment by recognizing and interpreting changes. Milliken, Dutton, and Beyer (1990), expanding on Daft and Weick’s (1984) model, suggest five phases for this adaptation: scanning, noticing, interpreting, choosing, and learning. Initially, firms scan the environment for relevant changes. Next is noticing issues that may emerge as a result of the change. Interpretation is the analysis of the concerns. Deciding which concerns are significant for the organization and which may be discarded comprises the choosing phase. And last is learning in which the organization opts for a response to the concern.

**SUMMARY CHART OF IDENTIFIED THEORIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Why Firms Adopt Policies</th>
<th>Benefits to the Firm</th>
<th>Sample Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>Adopt policies in order to be considered a legitimate organization within society.</td>
<td>With societal acceptance of the firm, more people are willing to invest in the organization, and more people are willing to apply for employment with the organization.</td>
<td>Do investors respond to firm adoption of work-life initiatives by investing in the organization's stock?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Dependence</td>
<td>Firms engage in certain actions (i.e. policy adoption) in order to obtain needed resources.</td>
<td>By offering work-life programs, firms attract a larger applicant pool (more women and parents) and are thus able to secure the</td>
<td>Are organizations more likely to offer work-life initiatives if they rely primarily on female employees?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Managerial Interpretation

Adoption occurs when key management figures interpret work-life policies as important for their firm.

The importance of work-life policies may be firm specific; thus, programs are only offered if management deems them as relevant.

Are certain demographic characteristics of management related to a greater frequency of firm adoption?

Organizational Adaptation

Firms adopt policies in an attempt to align themselves with the changing environment.

Firms continually recognize and interpret changes in the environment; and by doing so, remain competitive in their industry.

Does a time trend exist in recognizing firm adoption of particular work-family initiatives (i.e. increased adoption of eldercare in the late 1990s)?

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**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

Theories of corporate decision making are important in helping us understand the rationale of firm actions. Analyzing an organization's actions through various lenses, such as a legitimacy lens or a managerial interpretation lens, we can better recognize the reasoning behind the actions. With regard to adoption of work-life initiatives, the corporate decision making theories allow us to delineate why the adoption occurred.

Although the rationale prompting firm adoption varies by theory, research findings specifying particular characteristics have been remarkably consistent. Competitors and size appear to have the most influence. Large firms are more likely than small firms to offer work-life programs, and organizations in the same industry and especially in the same geographic region are more likely to provide policies (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Morgan & Milliken, 1992). Perceived productivity is also a key. When work-life issues are perceived by management to be linked to performance, the organization is more likely to adopt supporting programs (Milliken et al., 1998; Morgan & Milliken, 1992; Osterman, 1995). The proportion of females in the labor force has also been examined with somewhat surprising results. Industries with a high percentage of women in the labor pool are more likely to be comprised of organizations offering work-life initiatives; however, given the workforce makeup of each individual organization, findings have been mixed (Guthrie & Roth, 1999; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Morgan & Milliken, 1992).
Scholars are currently addressing organizational benefits that may be realized as a result of firm adoption. Although this stream of research diverges from the focus of this entry, awareness of firm-level benefits as a result of adoption heightens the importance of this area to work-family research. As a brief overview, this emerging direction attempts to link adoption of work-life policies to organizational benefits realized at the firm-level. Two innovative articles have asserted this relationship. First, Perry-Smith and Blum (2000) suggest a relationship between work-life policies and perceived firm performance. Moreover, they assert that work-life policies as a bundle (grouping of policies) may be a source of sustainable competitive advantage. Second, Arthur (2003) examined firm share price on the day a firm announced a new work-life initiative. Framed within institutional theory, Arthur's (2003) results supported the assertion that work-life initiative announcements positively affect firm value. She found that investors responded positively to work-life program announcements; thus, increasing share price. Though further research is warranted analyzing firm-level benefits, these two studies clearly demonstrate the potential magnitude of work-life policies to a firm.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Firm-level research of work-life initiatives has progressed within two realms: one, why firms adopt work-life policies; and two, how firms benefit from the adoption. Research exploring benefits realized by firms as a result of adopting work-life initiatives is an emerging area, though tangential to the focus of this article. Why firms adopt work-life policies is the crux of this entry. Research examining this stream began in the early 1990s. Initially, scholars examined firm characteristics that might serve as a catalyst for firm adoption. These articles focused on external and internal pressures that push the organization to act. The importance of a single person affecting firm adoption was not initially considered. Given that similar pressures and characteristics of an organization did not always result in the same actions, however, scholars began to examine the importance of key management figures. This research occurred primarily in the mid to late 1990s.

Institutional Theory

Organizational responsiveness to work-life policies has most commonly been studied within the framework of institutional theory. Though other theories have been introduced to offer further explanation, the underlying framework has been consistent with the foundation set forth in institutional theory. Two works have analyzed the adoption of paid and unpaid maternity leave policies as a function of coercive pressure (Guthrie & Roth, 1999; Kelly & Dobbin, 1999). Kelly and Dobbin (1999) suggest that the proliferation of maternity leave programs is attributed to government involvement. Though many programs were instituted prior to the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, Kelly and Dobbin (1999) link other government actions such as the EEOC's administrative ruling in 1972 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to the fluctuations in maternity leave offerings. Their conclusion is that government interventions, or
coercive pressure by the government, has helped diffuse maternity leave programs across organizations. Guthrie and Roth's (1999) conclusion supported the idea of coercive pressure by means of state government; however, they found that organizations may also take an active role in providing paid leave that is not mandated.

Integration of Resource Dependence Theory with Institutional Theory

Scholars have integrated resource dependence theory with institutional theory. Goodstein (1994) examined firm responses to institutional pressures. Further, he investigated the percent female within an organization's labor force as an additional motivator for a firm to act. By examining the percent female in the internal labor force, Goodstein (1994) integrated Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependence theory. Specifically, with a firm being dependent on female employees, its response in adopting work-life initiatives may be more a function of trying to retain and promote the application of qualified female employees rather than institutional pressure received from its constituents to adopt the policies. In other words, the organization may be taking a more proactive approach in adopting policies rather than merely reacting to its pressures. Although work-life issues are relevant to men as well as women, they seem particularly salient to female employees; thus, firms which rely on female employees and parents may be more responsive in adopting work-life programs. Ingram and Simons (1995) conducted a similar study finding that the percent female in management was positively related to work-life policy adoption.

Results from both investigations suggest that resource dependence theory may play a role in conjunction with institutional theory in influencing firms to adopt work-life initiatives. Additionally, several institutional pressures were found to be significant across both studies. First, size of the organization influences firms to adopt work-life policies. The supposition is that larger firms are more visible; thereby, they receive more external pressure to adopt "legitimate" work-life programs. Second, competitors' practices influence firms to adopt. Lack of conformity may lessen a firm's legitimacy. Findings support that mimetic pressures influence firms within the same industry and especially within the same geographic region. And last, the interconnectedness within an industry influences firm adoption. The more organizations are connected, the more they feel pressure to conform.

Managerial Interpretation

Accounting for variation independent of the previous two theories, scholars have suggested the importance of managerial interpretation (Kossek et al., 1994; Milliken et al., 1998; Osterman, 1995). Kossek and her colleagues suggest that managements' demographic variables such as experience and background affect organizational responsiveness independent of environmental influences. Examining adoption of childcare programs, Kossek, Dass, and DeMarr (1994) found when human resource managers perceived the initiative favorably, adoption was likely. Milliken, Martins, and Morgan (1998)
affirm the relevance of managerial interpretation in organizational actions. They found when managers interpret initiatives as pertinent and tied to productivity, organizational responsiveness was high.

Osterman (1995) proposed a slight deviation from managerial interpretation. He tied adoption of work-life policies to the firm's employment strategy. If the programs were perceived as important for the firm and for productivity, adoption was likely. Osterman (1995) suggests that firms which utilize high-commitment work systems are more likely to adopt work-life policies in order to enhance organizational commitment. This enhanced organizational commitment may, in turn, increase productivity.

An additive model of institutional theory and managerial interpretation has been suggested by Bardoel (2003). She contrasted the previous three theories in her empirical analysis. Bardoel's (2003) findings affirm the relevance of a manager's actions; however, her overall conclusion is that managerial interpretation in tandem with institutional theory provides the most accurate model. Results did not support resource dependence theory.

Organizational Adaptation

Goodstein (1995) empirically tested Milliken, Dutton, and Beyer's (1990) framework of organizational adaptation in examining firm adoption of eldercare policies. He asserts adoption of policies will occur as a result of recognition (scanning, noticing) and interpretation (interpreting, choosing) of changes in the environment. In Goodstein's (1995) investigation, awareness issues of eldercare were ascertained, existing work-life policies were determined, and organizational demography was established. Results affirmed the significance of awareness and the importance of pre-established work-life programs in promoting organizational responsiveness. Demography did not play a role. Interestingly, though, this study also found support for the idea of managerial interpretation. If organizations perceive that eldercare issues may influence employee commitment or productivity, they are more likely to adopt a corresponding policy.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Implications

Implications of these findings may span several perspectives. First, implications exist for employees or potential employees. For example, individuals who are concerned about working for a firm offering work-life policies should look for certain characteristics. Specifically, larger firms rather than smaller firms will be more likely to offer work-life policies. Further, if a firm is part of an interconnected industry, its actions will likely follow the actions of the majority of the firms; thus, as a potential employee, one could gauge the likelihood of firm adoption. Second, implications exist for management. Primarily, key management figures have the capacity to react strategically to institutional pressures. If work-life programs align
strategically with the goals of the firm, policies should be implemented. Moreover, the increased legitimacy offered by adopting work-life initiatives will positively affect shareholder value. Given those two key concerns for management, adoption of policies may be viewed not only favorably, but also as a necessity. And third, implications exist for society. As demonstrated in the "maternity leave" articles, adoption of work-life policies often result because of governmental coercion. Without mandates from government, some organizations may choose not to offer work-life initiatives. Moreover, smaller firms are often exempt from governmental pressure to offer such programs. Given the large percentage of employees of small firms, work-life balance may be much more difficult to achieve without the work-life policies offered (or required) in larger organizations.

Future Research Directions

Specific organizational characteristics have been identified that make firms more susceptible to pressures from external forces such as size, labor force composition, and government regulation. Exhibiting these particular characteristics may serve as a catalyst for firms to adopt "legitimate" work-life initiatives. Given the benefits organizations receive as a result of offering work-life programs (i.e. decreased absenteeism and turnover, increased organizational commitment), it would further our understanding if future research examined the perceptions employees have of these policies under specific conditions. For example, research may investigate if employees discount the value-add of work-life policies if they attribute the firm's motivations for adoption to external causes. Lambert (2000) suggests that policies yield positive employee benefits through the mechanism of social exchange; such that the firm provides a policy that is above and beyond what is required of them, and in turn, the employees perform above and beyond for the firm. Thus, the employer-employee relationship moves from an economic to a social exchange. If, however, employees attribute the firm adopting a work-life policy to external pressures such as governmental coercion, it is possible that the employees will not perceive the policy as something above and beyond what is required of the firm; therefore, the relationship between the employees and the organization will remain an economic exchange and benefits to the firm will not be realized.

Another research vein worth exploring is to investigate possible interactions of the suggested perspectives (institutional theory, resource dependence theory, managerial interpretation, organizational adaptation). For example, how do institutional pressures for legitimacy interact with managerial interpretations of policy adoption? Bardoel (2003) taps into this area, however further analysis is warranted. She suggests an additive model, yet other possible integrations as well as theories set against other theories might shed additional light.
References


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:


Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix ...).

Concepts related to adult development are relevant to all of the "Individual" domains in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Study. In addition, theories of adult development are relevant to Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings.

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. Key Informants: The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. Literature review: Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. Peer review: On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

**Outcomes**

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

**Limitations**

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

**Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map**

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:
1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see
Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
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