Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

Family-Friendly Policies and Organizational Justice (2002)

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Basic Concepts and Definitions

"Family-friendly policies" are programs sponsored by the organization designed to help employees balance work and family roles. These include the government-mandated Family and Medical Leave Act requiring businesses with more than 50 employees to provide 12 weeks of unpaid leave of absence for family or personal needs, and discretionary policies offered by organizations voluntarily. (For more information, please see entry on Family-Friendly Workplace.) Though there are many different types of programs, Parker and Allen (2001) propose two broad categories: alternative work arrangements (AWA; flextime, telecommuting, part-time) and dependent care support (DCS; on-site facilities, subsidization, or information about child or elder care, parental leave). Health or stress management programs are sometimes also included as family-friendly programs (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990).

"Distributive justice" refers to an evaluation of the fairness of economic and socio-emotional outcomes (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001). People use three different norms or principles to evaluate fairness:

1. Equity — outcomes should be distributed based on one's contributions: fairness is determined by comparing the input/outcome ratio with that of relevant others. Applied when the goal of reward allocation is productivity (Adams, 1965).

2. Equality — the distribution of outcomes should be the same to every member of a given social group regardless of contribution. When team-building is the goal, equality-based allocation principles are typically used (Deutsch, 1975).

3. Need — those with the greatest need should receive the most resources, regardless of contribution. When the group feels a sense of social responsibility toward each other, need-based allocation is viewed as just (Schwinger, 1986).

Procedural justice refers to the evaluation of the procedures that are followed in allocating outcomes. Fairness is increased when employees feel that they have a say in the process ("voice"), the policies are applied consistently, are accurate, and representative of the employee's best interests (Leventhal, 1976). Fairness of the process is also based on how outcomes are communicated; when employees receive
courteous treatment and an explanation for allocations or decisions the negative impact of an unfavorable decision is diminished (Greenberg, 1994).

"Referent" — One critical component of justice perceptions is that a referent, or comparison other, is used to evaluate fairness. Social comparisons is an important part of justice evaluations (Ambrose, Harland & Kulik, 1991).

"Family friendly backlash" refers to the resentment among some employees regarding unequal access to and use of family friendly benefits (Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke, & O'Dell, 1998).

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

Research has supported that if desired allocations or allocation procedures are viewed as unfair, a host of negative outcomes may occur such as negative attitudes, withdrawal, and counterproductive behaviors (e.g., Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Family-friendly policies determine who receives desired outcomes such a paid leave of absence, dependent care benefits, or flextime. Perceptions of equity and fairness regarding differential access to these work/life supports may influence organizational outcomes as suggested by the justice literature, so considering policies from a justice perspective is an important aspect for practical interventions and research agendas.

In fact, it has been proposed that family-friendly policies create a 'backlash' among employees who cannot use the policies; they compare their situation with beneficiaries and see an inequity (Grandey, 2001; Harris, 1997). Besides impacting the climate of the workplace, this reaction may deter coworkers from requesting the policies. In addition, fairness perceptions of managers who allocate the policies may influence the likelihood that policies will be offered to employees and/or used. Thus, though the presence of family-friendly policies relates to positive organization outcomes (Grover & Crooker, 1995; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000), the fairness of those policies may influence their utilization and effectiveness.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Research in this area has tested the factors that influence whether and when policies are considered unfair. This seems to depend on the distribution principle used, the respondents' social comparison with beneficiaries, and the context of the request.

*Are family-friendly policies fair? Allocation Principles and Backlash*

The equity principle is a commonly applied norm in American organizational settings to motivate productivity. By this norm, it is not fair that some employees have access to benefits if their inputs do not exceed those of their colleagues. Some childless workers claim that it is not fair that they have to subsidize benefits for others' families (outcome/input ratio is smaller than referent) and have developed
The Childfree Network to protect themselves (Harris, 1997; Parker & Allen, 2001; Rothausen et al., 1998). Another example of an inequity is employees who compare the current situation with their previous situation: As stated by one manager: "The company didn't help me with my four kids. Why should it help people now?" (Fernandez, 1990, p. 185)

This inequity may produce a 'backlash' against the organization from those who cannot use the policies (Kossek & Nichol, 1992; Rothausen, et al., 1998), although there is limited evidence to a strong reaction against the organization as a whole (Rothausen et al., 1998). Bond, Galinsky and Swanberg (1997) found that only 22% strongly agreed that they would resent family friendly policies that were not personally beneficial: this resentment was more likely among those who were racial/ethnic minorities, had less educational background, and held non-professional or non-managerial jobs. These individuals are also the ones who report the greatest need (Gerstel & McGonagle, 1999) so a policy that does not help them is unfair according to the need principle.

Family-friendly policies "share features of both equality- and need-based distributions" (Grover, 1991, p. 252): The policy should be available equally to anyone who has the need. Mosier and colleagues (2002) found that the equality principle, followed by the need principle, were rated the most appropriate when allocating family friendly benefits. However, there is evidence that those who report the greatest need for policies are actually less likely to use the policies (Gerstel & McGonagle, 1999). Benefits such as flextime and on-site child-care are typically more available to employees with higher status and income in comparison with people in entry level, low income jobs (Caputo, 2000; Holcomb, 2000). Or, the policy may be offered to everyone but realistically cannot be used by everyone who needs it. For example, the FMLA offers unpaid leave that may is not practically available to lower income families (Gerstel & McGonagle, 1999; Harris, 1997). Similarly, parents who were on a waiting list for an on-site child care center saw the center as less fair (unequally available) than workers currently using the center (Kossek & Nichol, 1992). Thus, family-friendly policies may violate both the equality- and need-based principle of fairness.

Who thinks family-friendly policies are fair or unfair?

Research has directly asked who evaluates family-friendly policies as fair or unfair. In general, those who can identify with the beneficiaries see the policies as more fair. Younger workers and parents, or those who see the likelihood of needing the policies, viewed family-friendly benefits as more fair than did older workers and non-parents (Grover, 1991; Parker & Allen, 2001). However, it should be noted that these relationships are small (under .20) and inconsistent with other findings (Bond et al., 1997). Another way to interpret these findings is that those who can personally benefit from the policies believe they are more just. Justice research supports that if outcomes are beneficial to an individual then the fairness of the allocation policies (e.g., unequally distributed) has less of an impact on reactions (e.g., Ambrose, Harland, & Kulik, 1991; Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996). Males typically perceive these policies as less fair than...
females, potentially because they are less able to identify with the need, or perhaps because they do not view the benefits as available to them due to social norms (Baxter, 2001; Grover, 1991; Hyde, Essex, & Horton, 1993; Parker & Allen, 2001). Parents of older children can certainly identify with the need for policies, but perhaps perceive family policies as less fair than parents of younger children because they cannot use them now (Parker & Allen, 2001).

**What contextual factors influence fairness perceptions?**
Individuals determine the fairness of family-friendly allocations based on perceptions of the situation. Allocations based on need are seen as appropriate when the organization fosters a sense of social responsibility among the members. For example, those who had a greater degree of task interdependence viewed family-friendly benefits as more fair after social identity variables (gender, parental status) were taken into account (Parker & Allen, 2001). Providing outcomes for a need that arises due to uncontrollable circumstances are perceived as more fair than a need occurs from a personal choice (Mosier, et al., 2001; Schwinger, 1986). For example, needs due to childbirth or adoption may be viewed as less fair than sick child care or eldercare, since it is assumed that the individual chose to have a child but had no control over the illness of a family member (Grover, 1991; Mosier et al., 2002). Skitka and Tetlock (1992) suggest that when organizational resources are scarce, need based allocations for individuals who were perceived as having control over their situations were viewed less fair.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Many companies are working to make the policies seem more just according to the equality principle by marketing them as work-life policies. Offering personal leaves or flextime to all employees or offering a cafeteria-style benefits plan are two ways of meeting the equality principle (Grover, 1991; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). Research is needed on how people respond to work-life programs rather than "family-friendly" policies. Giving managers and employees voice in determining policies, communicating justification for them, and being sensitive to beneficiaries and non-beneficiary's reactions can increase fairness of the process (Grandey, 2000; Greenberg, 1990). Research on whether these approaches increase fairness perceptions of work-family interventions is needed.

Recently there has been increased interest in the general work culture surrounding family friendly policies (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al. 1999). These often entail perceptions of the 'supportiveness' of the supervisor and work environment for balancing work and family needs. If an employee views the policies as unfair due to the unavailability of the benefits, then the organization should be seen as unsupportive. However, it is also possible that employees may view the organization as very family-supportive, and yet think that is unfair (e.g., to childless workers). Merging of these two streams — the fairness perceptions of policies and the family-supportive culture — is needed.
Research attention and interventions are needed to address the experiences of employees who have less access to work-life initiatives. Future work-family and fairness research needs to directly consider the socio-economic status (SES) of employees (Rothausen et al., 1998). Work-family initiatives need to be designed with many different employees in mind - unpaid parental leave or flextime may not help the assembly line worker, though child-care benefits may. In general, needs assessments and perceptions of policies should be conducted with employees in all areas of the workforce, not just white-collar workers.

Given the rise of team-based work settings, fairness perceptions of these policies may vary depending on whether using them creates a hardship for team functioning. Given the recent economic changes, fairness of the policies may become more critical in a time of scarcity versus abundance (Mosier, Naranjo, & Yasuda, 2002; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992). In the same vein, can justifications minimize negative reactions to the disgruntled team members or after offering or cutting these benefits in times of economic hardship? (Greenberg, 1990). Many questions still remain unanswered.

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**
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).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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