Work-Family Policies and Gender Inequality at Work (2005)

Authors: Sarah Beth Estes, The University of Cincinnati - Department of Sociology, and Joe Michael, The University of Cincinnati - Department of Sociology

Date: April 2005

Introduction

The 1989 "Mommy Track" article by Felice Schwartz, in which she proposed that employers create family tracks to address women's family needs so as to retain talented female labor, created a maelstrom in both academic and business circles. Critics were quick to point out that differential treatment of women would lead to their marginalization at work and perpetuate gender inequality in wages and promotions. At the same time, the general "business case" for the implementation of work-family policies was taking shape.

There are two primary logics to the business case (Drago et al. 2001). First, some policies (such as on-site child care) should improve the profitability of organizations by co-opting family responsibilities, thereby allowing employees to devote more time and energy to paid labor. Second, other policies that allow employees to attend to family responsibilities on work time (such as time and location flexibility) are hypothesized to improve aspects of employees’ work-related attitudes and behaviors (see, for instance, Grover and Crooker 1995 and Baltes et al. 1999), which are assumed to be positively related to productivity by increasing work effort and decreasing turnover (Glass and Estes 1997).

Thus, one could extrapolate from the business case that employees who use work-family policies should fare at least as well at work as employees who do not use policies. But this is an empirical question that bears examination. Indeed, as Weeden (2005: 3) argues with respect to flexible work: “[E]conomic and sociological theories of labor market attainment provide compelling reason to be less than sanguine,” about workplace consequences of work-family policy use. Herein, we review research that has related work-family policies to aspects of workplace attainment like wages and promotions, explain the mechanisms through which policy use may be related to gender inequality at work, and offer suggestions for future research on the topic.
Basic Concepts and Definitions

Specifications about what policies and programs constitute work-family policies vary widely (see, for instance, Glass and Estes 1997; Pitts-Catsouphes, Family Friendly Workplaces entry). Although there is no uniform definition of work-family policies, most specifications include dependent care supports, flexible work options, and family and personal leaves. Research examining how workplace accommodations meet family needs tends to focus on these provisions. Such policies include parental/medical leave, on-site child care, telecommuting or working from home, formal flextime or informal schedule flexibility and job sharing.

Studies relating work-family policies to workplace attainment typically investigate wages and sometimes other workplace rewards like promotions. We also briefly discuss subjective perceptions of workplace attainment, as a good deal of ethnographic research focuses on such perceptions.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

How work-family policies are related to workplace attainment is little understood. Much research documents employee perceptions that using work-family arrangements may impair workplace attainment (Fried 1998; Hochschild 1997; Perlow 1998; Ralston 1989). Similarly, some research has shown that employees associated their supervisors’ support for family life with lower chances for advancement (Jacobs and Gerson 2001). A 1994 Families and Work Institute Report (Schwartz 1994) concluded that there may be some mismatch between employee perceptions of how policy use would affect them and the actual outcomes of policy use. Since that time, relatively little research has addressed the question of work-family policy use and workplace attainment. This question is especially important in light of the problem of gender inequality in the labor market, where women still earn less than men and are less well-represented in high-level managerial positions, and in light of the changes in gender roles that may mean some men are becoming more likely to use policies (Hyde, Essex and Horton 1993). As Routhausen (see Gender: Work-Family Ideology and Roles entry) notes, general definitions of the work-family field are gender-neutral, while the experiences of employees who navigate work and family responsibilities are not. Thus, one important aspect of the relationship between work-family policies and workplace attainment is whether or not such relationships depend on gender. A better understanding of the relationship between work-family policies and workplace attainment is an important question in light of predictions that with the breakdown of the “public” and “private” split between work and family, workplace stratification will occur less on the basis of gender, and more on the basis of parental status (Hunt and Hunt 1982).

A better understanding of how work-family policies are related to workplace attainment will allow us to refine several concepts already widely used in the work-family field. As we will discuss, this topic is related to our understandings of gendered organizations (Acker 1990 and 1998; Britton 2000) and the concept of the ideal worker (Acker 1990; Williams 1999). Similarly, what we learn about the relationship
between work-family policies and workplace attainment will contribute to our understandings of how extra-organizational factors affect how workplace rewards are assigned.

**State of the Body of Knowledge.**

*Perspectives relating policies to workplace attainment*

Economists and sociologists posit that family responsive workplace policies may be positively related to wages to the extent that they enhance employee productivity, or may detract from wages to the degree that such policies are costly for employers to provide. The productivity-enhancing argument holds that employees who are less conflicted about work-family issues will have more mental energy to devote to work, which should thereby increase productivity (see Eaton (2003) for evidence that employees who use flexibility policies report higher levels of productivity than those who do not).[1] The expectation that the relationship between policies and wages should be negative comes from compensating differentials theory, which views policies as amenities available in place of wages (see Baughman, DiNardi and Holtz-Eakin (2003) for evidence that employers who offer some benefits also offer lower entry-level wages than employers who do not offer such benefits). From this perspective, some employees forgo higher wages in order to secure non-pecuniary job amenities, in this case, work-family policies.

At the same time, both sociologists and psychologists argue that associations between family benefits and workplace policies may depend on factors unrelated to the cost of policy administration or to measures of productivity. For example, Weedon (2004) suggests that to the extent that work-family policy use affects employees’ social networks, work attainment may be stunted. Using flexible schedules or working from home, for instance, may impact employees’ positions in job information networks, which may result in limited access to important workplace resources.

Social psychologists contend that the relationship between family policy use and workplace attainment may be related more to how policy users are perceived than to “objective” factors like productivity or cost.[2] Policy use may serve as a signal to employers that an employee lacks commitment to the workplace (see Rogier and Padgett (2004) for evidence for this perspective), which may result in lower employer investments in the employee over time. Sociological theories of gendered organizations (Acker 1990) suggest that the workplace is organized around the “ideal” worker (Williams 2000), who has neither fealty to nor responsibility for anything outside of the organization. This expectation may be especially pertinent in professional and managerial occupations, sometimes referred to as “greedy” occupations, because of the time expectations they place on incumbents. From this perspective, women’s workplace inequality is due to the fact that they still bear primary responsibility for family life, a responsibility that shapes women’s work lives.

All else equal, these perspectives make gender-neutral predictions about the relationship between work-family policy use and workplace outcomes. Regardless of whether it is men or women who use policies,
the expected relationship between use and workplace attainment is the same. Yet all else is not equal; women bear disproportionate responsibility for domestic labor (Bianchi et al 2001) and are more likely to rely on workplace social networks for workplace attainment (Weeden 2005). Thus, some have posited that policies will be more related to women’s than men’s workplace outcomes through the mechanisms of productivity, compensating amenities, and networks (Glass 2004; Weeden 2005). Similarly, gender theories suggest that the “signaling” mechanism by which policies may be related to workplace outcomes may work differently for men and women.

One theoretical perspective posits that gender roles are not only descriptive (i.e., painting a picture about how men and women usually behave) but also prescriptive (i.e., outlining the “dos” and “don’ts” of being male or female). Even while one survey of almost 1000 residents of a southern state shows that over 80% think that employers should offer fathers flexible scheduling (Andrews et. al. 2004), Allen, Russell, and Rush (1994: 445) argue that “men who take advantage of parental leaves or other flexible work options are seen as eccentrics who are not serious about their careers.” This perspective suggests that the relationship between policy use and workplace attainment may be more negative for men than for women, as policy use by men represents a departure from prescribed gender roles (Eagly 1987).

In contrast, a perspective from the general theory of gender bias suggests that women will be penalized more than men even when both use family responsive workplace policies. It is possible that work-family policy use by women is more salient to employers because such use fits predominant stereotypical notions about women, work, and motherhood. In the same vein, Weedon (2004) suggests that employers may attribute different motivations for use to men and women, with employers more likely to assume that women’s policy use is related to family responsibilities. More particularly, emerging research on “the maternal wall” suggests that it might not be gender, per se, that biases employers’ perceptions, but the stereotypes associated with the particular case of motherhood, instead (see articles in the Volume 60, No. 4 issue of *Journal of Social Issues* edited by Monica Biernat, Fay Crosby, and Joan Williams).

**What Does Research Show?**

In an experiment on workplace rewards associated with parental and medical leave taking, Allen et al. (1994) found that recommendations for organizational rewards were not affected by the gender of the leave taker or the reason given for taking the leave. Yet in a later study, Allen and Russell (1999) found that men who were described as taking a leave for parental reasons were less likely to be recommended for rewards than were women who took a parental leave, and than men who did not take a parental leave.[3] This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that deviations from expected gender roles would be punished. In related research, Wayne and Cordeiro (2003) found that men who were described as taking leave for caregiving reasons were rated by evaluators to be less altruistic at work than women who took leave and than men who did not. All of these findings square with the idea that deviations from gendered expectations result in punishment at work. Yet an organizational analysis of managers in a
financial service organization showed that leaves of absences (taken for family or non-family reasons) were associated with fewer subsequent promotions and smaller salary increases for both men and women (Judiesch and Lyness 1999), suggesting wage-depression through a gender-neutral mechanism.

Survey research on the question of how policies are related to workplace attainment employ two different kinds of policy measures. Some include policy use, some policy availability, and some employ both use and availability measures. Such studies have yielded conflicting findings with respect to both (1) the direction of relationships between policies and workplace attainment, and (2) whether or not such relationships depend on gender. Johnson and Provan (1995) found that availability of policies—including on-site child care, flextime, maternity leave, and sick leave were unrelated to men’s wages. For women, availability of child care was positively associated with earnings. Moreover, among women in nonprofessional occupations, those for whom flextime was available had lower wages than those for whom it was not, while women in professional occupations who used flextime had higher wages than non-users. Among these same women, sick leave availability was negatively associated with wages. The authors suggested these findings can be attributed to the productivity enhancing effects of child care for all women, and flextime for professional women. In the first case, rather than allowing employees to attend to family matters on work time, child care allows employees to be free of family concerns during work time, and may therefore be related to productivity. In the second case, flexibility for professionals allows them to attend to work matters when needed, but the extended hours of such professions means this does not impair overall work ability as it might for women in manual occupations.

Many subsequent studies have focused on occupational variation in the relationship between work-family policies and wages. For instance, using the 1999 Workplace and Employee Survey of Canada, Gagne (2003) showed that associations between policies and wages were dependent on occupation and industry; evidence was so mixed that she concluded no one theory on the expected relationship was supported.

In an investigation limited to the relationship between flextime and wages, Gariety and Schaffer (2001) found that in both 1989 and 1997, women who had access to flextime had higher wages than those who did not. Men’s wages were unrelated to flextime in 1989, but positively related in 1997. Because the relationship between flextime and wages was positive, the authors suggested that this finding was supportive of the productivity argument, and not of the compensating differentials perspective, but they did not address why the findings differ for men and women. The fact that women bear a disproportionate responsibility for domestic labor may account for the gender differences in these findings. Weeden (2005) similarly found that both flextime (availability) and working at home (use) were positively associated with wages, a finding that did not vary across gender or parental status, but that was stronger in non-manual compared to manual occupations. Notably, Weeden’s analysis included a longitudinal component which better addresses issues of causality. In models including lagged wage controls,
Weeden found that working at home was not associated with wage premiums, but flexible scheduling was. In contrast, however, in an analysis focused on mothers only, Glass (2004) found that flexible scheduling (use) and working at home (use) depressed wage growth among professional women. Taken together, this research suggests that policies are not related to wages in uniform ways. Moreover, even investigations of specific policies like flextime report conflicting findings.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

There are three widely shared drawbacks to contemporary survey approaches to these questions that make interpretation of their findings less than clear. First, most of the survey studies rely on cross-sectional data (see, for instance, Johnson and Provan 1995; Gagne 2001; Gariety and Shaffer 2001), which compromises scholars’ abilities to make causal attributions about the associations between policy use and workplace attainment. For instance, employee productivity may just as plausibly be a predictor of work-family policy use as it is a consequence of such policies. Indeed, relationships between policies and workplace attainment may reflect the fact that more (or less) productive employees either pursue or are given such policies.

Many studies also share the second problem, which is reliance on policy measures that are of questionable validity. For instance, flextime measures often reflect whether or not employers allow flextime (Johnson and Provan 1995) or employee reports that they could change their schedule if they wanted to (Weedon 2004). It often is not clear whether or not employees are talking about formal flextime policies, or informal flexible arrangements. It is also not clear whether or not those whose employers allow flextime actually use it. There are advantages to linking the simple provision of policies to workplace attainment of employees (who may or may not use such policies) (see Glass (2004)); however, our understandings of this issue would benefit from more explicit distinctions between policy use vs. availability. Similarly, even when measures reflect policy use, surveys often do not include information on how often policies are used. Many of the theoretical mechanisms linking policies to work attainment would suggest that frequent use—for instance, weekly, or perhaps several times a week—is more likely to be related to workplace attainment than is occasional, or infrequent use. Finally, research that stands up to these design and measurement pitfalls (Glass 2004) relies on data that do not allow a test of the notion that gender or parental status may moderate the relationship between policy use and workplace attainment.

Experimental studies are well-suited to demonstrate causality in the relationships among policies, gender, and workplace attainment. The chief advantage of experiments in the investigation of this research question is that they can manipulate rationale for policy use (so as to tap signaling arguments) and can gather reactions of observers to such policy use. A host of ethnographic studies (Hochschild 1997; Fried 1998; Perlow 1997) suggest that employees fear that employers will penalize them for using work-family policies. But surveys do not typically include data with which such notions can be empirically
tested. Experiments allow controlled environments with which to test signaling perspectives, but to date, findings from experimental studies are also unclear (Allen and Russell 1999; Allen, Russell and Rush 1994). Moreover, there is a methodological divide in the kinds of policies that are related to wages in studies. Survey researchers most often focus on flextime and/or flexplace (i.e., working at home) (Gareity and Schaffer 2001; Weeden 2005), or on a panoply of policies (Gagne 2003; Glass 2004). To date, experimentalists have focused mostly on leave-taking.

These shortcomings are to be expected, as research on the relationships between work-family policy use and workplace attainment is still in its early stages. Future research should further investigate the occupational conditions under which various mechanisms linking policies and attainment are salient, and should be oriented to the distinction between use and availability of policies. This focus, however, will require the gathering of data more attentive to these issues; to date, no nationally representative longitudinal data set includes data with which these questions can be adequately answered. Without such information, how work-family policies are related to workplace attainment will likely remain much debated but little understood.

References


Other Recommended Readings:


Footnotes:

[1] An alternative perspective associating productivity with higher wages holds that more productive people select into jobs offering work-family amenities, or are rewarded at work with such amenities.

[2] Indeed, though the productivity argument assumes that productivity is explicitly measurable, it is notoriously difficult to measure (and growing even more so in the postindustrial era) apart from organizational-level measures like turnover costs and number of sick days logged by employees.

[3] In the 1999 study, the authors hypothesized that the lack of a finding in the 1994 study might be due to the fact that there was performance homogeneity among the leave-takers. In the 1999 study, the authors
manipulated the performance levels of leave takers and found that performance level did not moderate
the effect of gender and rationale for leave taking on recommended rewards. The discrepancy between
the 1994 findings and the 1999 findings was left unexplained.

[4] Use measures are crucial in assessing theoretical arguments involving employer perceptions of policy
users, while availability measures are well-suited to investigating organizational-level compensating
differentials arguments (but not individual-level compensating differentials arguments).