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Are Family-Friendly Policies Fair? It Depends on your Gender

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Abstract

The benefits of family-friendly policies, defined as "employer policies and practices [designed] to support the integration of paid work with other significant family demands" (Kossek, 2003: 3), have been widely touted as helpful for working women. We look at several variables that influence perceived policy fairness, a variable shown to be important to these policies (Grandey, 2001; Grover, 1991), including user type and gender and gender role beliefs. Multiple propositions based on these factors are discussed.

Are Family-friendly Policies Fair?

It Depends on Your Gender

Although organizations are encouraged to offer family-friendly policies, both by the popular and scholarly press, we are only beginning to understand the policy implementation-organizational outcome relationship. The purpose of this theoretical paper is to address two factors shown to affect the policy implementation-organizational outcome relationship: individuals' relationship to the policy and gender. To look at these factors, we integrated discussions of individuals' relationships to these benefits, using Lerner's (1977) three-relationship model and expanded the discussion of gender to include gender roles. For each, we offer propositions involving perceived fairness (sometimes termed *justice*) and family-friendly policies, which together provide a departure point for further research on the role of fairness in the use of family-friendly policies and outcomes associated with policy use.

Theoretical Framework

Annually *Working Mother Magazine* publishes a list of the best 100 companies for working mothers. Organizations are selected, in part, because they excel in offering family-friendly policies. Initially implemented as a response to the diversification of the workforce (Friedman, 1990; Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990) and to accommodate workers' changing needs (Kossek, 2003), these policies are for employees striving for balance. Family-friendly policies, defined as "employer policies and practices [designed] to support the integration of paid work with other significant family demands" (Kossek, 2003: 3), include flexible schedules, part-time options, maternity leaves (paid or unpaid), and sick-child care (Galinsky, 1986).

Research on family-friendly policies shows that positive outcomes, including attracting employees (Honeycutt & Rosen, 1997), increased organizational commitment, and reduced

turnover intentions (Friedan, 1989), are associated with these policies. Organizations have noticed these findings and increasingly are offering some sort of family-friendly benefits, which makes understanding the benefit implementation – positive outcome relationship increasingly important. Unfortunately, employees offered these policies are not taking advantage of them (Galinsky, Friedman, & Hernandez, 1991; Kossek, 2003), suggesting that the mere existence of these policies is not enough. Recent work suggests perceived policy fairness is an important factor in the policy implementation-positive organizational outcome relationship (Grandey, 2001; Grover, 1991).

<div align="center">Justice Perceptions and Family-Friendly Policies</div>

Organizational justice research investigates people's fairness perceptions. Existing work suggests that justice theories, and especially distributive justice, help to explain fairness perceptions of family-friendly policies and attitudes towards policy users (Grandey, 2001; Grover, 1991).

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice involves perceptions of outcome fairness (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975). To date, distributive justice, because of its focus on allocation among individuals, is the most common justice type applied to family-friendly policies (Grandey, 2001; Grover, 1991). Early distributive justice research concentrated on the study of equitable distribution of outcomes, using Adams' (1965) equity theory, defining "equitable" as a balance between a person's inputs and outputs (e.g. Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958). Distributive justice defined as equity refers to perceptions and responses regarding outcomes received, compared to what the employees believe they deserve, based on some type of comparison (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975; Homans, 1961). Subsequently, Deutsch (1975) proposed two additional allocation rules:

equality and need. Researchers theorize that these two allocation rules, like the equity rule, result in perceptions of outcome (un)fairness depending on the specific human resource policy in question (Gilliland & Paddock, 2004). Distribution according to the equality rule involves giving everyone an equal amount of the object distributed. Organizational benefits such as health insurance for which the same policy is provided to all employees use the equality rule. Using the need rule, the object is provided only to individuals who require it. In theory, family-friendly policies allocate benefits according to need, giving specific benefits only to those who require them. For example, family-friendly policies offer extra benefits and rewards to employees that are caretakers, whether to their children or elderly family members. Family-friendly policies are also allocated based on equality because those employees that need the policy (e.g., maternity leave) are often all given the same amount of this policy (e.g., a month).

Little work addresses how need-based allocation influences individuals' fairness perceptions. Family-friendly policies are an ideal HR policy to study empirically because they are primarily need-based and of practical importance. For this reason, researchers are beginning to investigate variables that influence perceptions of policy fairness and policy users, including whether an individual uses a policy or not and the gender of an individual (Grandey, 2001; Grover, 1991) within the context of family-friendly policies. We extend theory in both these areas by offering testable propositions.

Policy users and nonusers. A person's relationship to the distributed benefit influences their fairness judgment of distributions of this benefit (Leventhal, 1980). Lerner's (1977) work, which classifies an individual's relation to the distributed object into three categories, unit, identity, and nonunit, provides a nice framework within which employees' relationships to family-friendly policies may be classified (Grover, 1991). The three categories fit into two

groups normally distinguished in family-friendly research: *users* consist of the unit relationships and *nonusers* consist of the identity and nonunit relationships.

Unit relationships involve individuals who share a common fate. In family-friendly policy terms, these are individuals who require and currently use the family-friendly policy. Because individuals share a common need for the benefit, they are expected to rate family-friendly policies as fair. Indeed, Grover's (1991) results support this: individuals who benefit directly from maternity leave rate it as fairer and hold more positive views of its users than do those who do not directly benefit.

Individuals who have an *identity* relationship with policy users show similar ratings to those with a unit relationship (Grover, 1991). Identity is when individuals receiving the object are basically indistinguishable from the self. With respect to family-friendly benefits, identity is when someone intends to use the family-friendly policy that another individual is using; the prospective policy user and other users of the same policy have a similar policy related identity.

Finally, *nonunit* relationships are defined as individuals who do not identify with another individual. With respect to family-friendly policies, these individuals do not use or perceive a personal need for the policy. Individuals holding a nonunit relationship with policy users include all types of people (e.g. both sexes, individuals with and without children), with the primary differentiation being that they do not identify with those who have a need for the policy.

Based on the ego-centric bias, which suggests that regardless of the objective fairness of a procedure, individuals evaluate distribution methods that benefit themselves as fairer (Friedland, Thibaut, & Walker, 1973; Greenberg, 1987); thus potential policy users are likely to view the policy as fairer than individuals who do not expect to use the policy. Research on on-

site childcare supports the distinction often made between policy user types (Rothausen et al.,

1998). Thus, we predict:

> *Proposition 1: Users of family-friendly policies (those with a unit relationship)*
> *and individuals who intend to use family-friendly policies (those with an identity*
> *relationship) will perceive these policies as fairer than nonusers (those with a*
> *nonunit relationship) of family-friendly policies.*

However, existing research suggests a caveat to this prediction: the *frustration effect*

(Kossek & Nichols, 1992). This occurs when individuals who need a family-friendly policy find

that it is unavailable to them. For example, in some cases individuals must wait to use a policy.

Typically these individuals rate the policy as less fair than individuals who, when in need, find it

available (Grandey, 2001; Kossek & Nichols, 1992). We propose:

> *Proposition 2: Individuals who perceive frustration because they must wait to use*
> *a needed family-friendly benefit will perceive the family-friendly policy as less*
> *fair than individuals who do not have to wait.*

In addition to this caveat, a distinction should be made between types of nonusers.

Research shows that in the abstract, individuals perceive family-friendly policies as fair

(Friedman, 1990). However, this may not be the case when employees feel they have given up

family aspects for work (Grandey, 2001). This suggests that some non-users (e.g., those who feel

they have given up family aspects for work) will perceive family-friendly policies as less fair and

current policy users less favorably. Of course, not everyone feels this way. Some employees may

choose not to have a family and may therefore have no need for family-friendly policies. These

employees simply do not care about the family-friendly policies. They are thus expected to

perceive the policy as fair. Although seemingly intuitive, research only distinguishes between

these groups for some policies and does not do so consistently when discussing policy

perceptions. Proposition 3 summarizes expected policy fairness perceptions of different types of

nonunit relationships.

Proposition 3: Nonusers who feel that they have sacrificed, making them ineligible for family-friendly policy use, will perceive these policies as less fair than those who do not feel that they have made such a sacrifice.

Gender and gender roles. In addition to user type, researchers have investigated gender-related factors in relation to perceptions of distributive policy fairness and the favorability of policy users (e.g., parental leave policies; Grover, 1991). Usually this work focuses on gender as an indicator of (potential) policy use and views women as more likely to desire family-friendly policies than men.

More interesting than this use of gender, however, is the inclusion of Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Attitudes Toward Women scale in family-friendly research. This scale, which indicates whether an individual endorses gender equality, is used by Grover (1991) as a measure of gender role identification. He equates individuals who view women as less equal with those who hold traditional beliefs about women's roles. The extent to which individuals do hold traditional gender-roles should influence individuals' perceptions of family-friendly policies and of policy users.

In effect, family roles are congruent with roles associated with females (e.g., mother, wife, caretaker; Woollett & Marshall, 2001). Family-friendly policies help women fill these roles. In contrast, roles assigned to men are often work-related (e.g., father as breadwinner). Family-friendly policies do not help men fill these roles. Therefore, individuals holding traditional views concerning gender roles may perceive policy users differently depending on the user's gender. We propose:

Proposition 4: Individuals holding traditional views of gender roles will perceive female use of family-friendly policies as fair and male use of family-friendly policies as unfair.

In contrast, individuals who do not hold traditional gender role views should judge female and male policy users as equally fair (or unfair), regardless of user gender.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although organizations are encouraged to offer family-friendly policies, both by the popular and scholarly press, we are only beginning to understand the policy implementation-organizational outcome relationship. To date, limited research is available regarding employees' perceptions of policy and policy user fairness and the implications of these fairness perceptions. Considering that research within the organizational justice area has time and again shown fairness perceptions as linked to both positive and negative organizational and individual-level outcomes, future empirical research investigating these issues is needed.

One important practical avenue for future research is the role of managers in family friendly policies. Evidence suggests that managers are involved in the distribution of these policies, however to date researchers have focused on policy existence and common distribution methods such as allocation by need. The role of managers in policy distribution suggests that additional types of justice, including procedural and interpersonal, are important factors in individuals' perceptions of the policies and policy users. Further research on perceptions, and fairness perceptions specifically, of managerial distribution of these benefits is required.

This paper provides a foundation for investigating this and other practically and theoretically important policy-related issues. In this paper we address previous distributive justice factors shown to affect the policy implementation-organizational outcome relationship, including individuals' relationship to policy users and gender. Expanding on these areas, we integrate several ways in which individuals' relationships to these benefits are discussed, using Lerner's (1977) three-relationship model. We also expand the discussion of gender to include

female and male gender roles. In doing so, we provide research propositions regarding the

relationship between each and family friendly policies, calling for further research in this area.

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