

The Role of Collective and Individual Voice on Employee Experiences with Work -life Flexibility Policies and Practices in the United States

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Introduction

The work and family literature has virtually ignored the role of unions in the analysis of work-life flexibility policies and practices. Whereas U.S. unions have typically focused on negotiating higher pay and better benefits for workers, the changing composition of the workforce is encouraging unions to take on work-life issues such as time-related flexibility practices in negotiations. More research is needed to understand the approaches unions take in negotiating flexibility policies as well as the impact they have on the use of these policies and practices by individuals.

In this paper, we contribute to the key themes of track 3 (Work, Family and Community) by examining the effect of U.S. unions on employee use of work-life flexibility policies and practices. We also assess differences in use by gender and the role of management practices, such as supervisor support, on the use of work-life flexibility policies and practices. Examples of work-life policies and practices include flexibility in the duration and timing of work, such as flex-time, compressed workweeks, job-sharing, part-time work, telework, and various forms of leave.

We examine several key issues in the paper related to work-life flexibility in unionized organizations.

(1) What approaches do unions take to negotiating work-life flexibility in collective agreements? In particular, we discuss which flexibility policies unions tend to avoid, the policies they tend to negotiate as specific provisions, and those they tend to leave open to supervisor discretion?

(2) What role do unions and individual workers play in gaining access to flexibility policies and practices at the department or work group level? In particular, what are the roles of collective and individual voice in the work-family arena?

(3) What factors impact employee use of flexibility policies and practices across work groups within organizations? In particular, to what extent do union actions impact employee use of work-life flexibility policies and practices?

Theoretical considerations : Collective and Individual Voice

The collective voice model of unions has its origin in research conducted by Freeman (1980) and Freeman and Medoff (1984). In the model, *voice* is presented as an alternative to *exit*. In a traditional labor market, when dissatisfied with working conditions, workers can quit or exit their current employer and search for another job in the labor market. *Voice*, however, offers an alternative to exit. The collective voice model has been applied to work-life policies in a (2004) study by Budd and Mumford. Using the British WERS98 data set, they examine whether unions increase or decrease the provision of family-friendly benefits. They show that unions will use

their monopoly power through high union density and the collective voice mechanism to increase family-friendly policies.

Although unions may increase the provision of certain family-friendly policies over nonunion firms, the relationship of collective voice to individual voice with regards to the use of work-life flexibility policies and practices remains unclear. Through their bargaining power, unions may be particularly effective in delivering distributive policies that come at a cost to employers such as paid leaves (vacation, sick time, personal days). These paid leaves are often seen as essential components of a fringe benefit package; although, they also serve as a key means of flexibility for workers. Other work-life flexibility policies, such as flexible schedules, job-sharing, telework, part-time work, and compressed workweeks, may be negotiated in collective agreements but their use is more dependent on the organization work, job tasks of workers, and varies across work groups within organizations. Thus, accessing and using various scheduling arrangements and to a lesser extent paid leaves depends on individual negotiations with individual supervisors. This is demonstrated in the extensive literature on supervisor support in evaluating use and non-use of practices by workers (Thomas and Ganster 1995).

When one considers not just the adoption of work-life flexibility policies but the use and implementation of these policies and the informal practices present within work groups, it becomes clear that workplaces are not just characterized by collective voice or individual voice but that both coexist. The issue of work-life flexibility in unionized organizations is then how collective and individual voice interact in the provision and use of flexibility policies and practices. The empirical analysis in this paper begins to address this issue.

Sample and Analysis

The data for this paper comes from a multi-level research study of seven unionized private and public sector organizations in the United States. From 2006-2008, we conducted interviews with managers, local union officials and stewards at each establishment in order to understand the context in which flexibility policies were negotiated and how they are implemented. We also interviewed supervisors of various departments and conducted a telephone survey of a random sample of workers linked to those departments and supervisors. Thus, our data allows us to examine the use and impact of work-life flexibility policies and practices from multiple levels and points of view within each organization. When all the data collection is completed this month, we will have surveyed over 900 employees across 100 departments and conducted over 120 interviews with managers and union officials across the seven organizations.

The analysis for the paper consists of a qualitative component assessing the different union approaches toward work-life flexibility and a quantitative component that uses multivariate techniques to examine whether union actions impact the use of seven different work-life flexibility policies and practices. Our analysis makes use of measures from our employee survey and site interviews. These include measures of individual voice, work organization, perceptions of union support, union effectiveness, and supervisor support as well as a variety of individual control variables including gender. We analyze the impact of unions on various types of work-life flexibility policies and practices. In addition, we examine the effect of gender on union action and policy/practice use.

References

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