

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Research examining the effectiveness of statutory and voluntary workplace flexible working arrangements (FWAs) often neglects the impact of specific national and workplace contexts. We argue that more attention to social systems, especially at the macro and meso levels, and the relationships within them is critical for evaluating these policies and practices. However social systems are dynamic and changing, particularly in the context of globalization processes. Drawing on data from eleven case studies of private and public sector organizations undergoing rapid change and transformation, carried out in seven European states, this paper explores the impact of multiple layers of context on parents' experiences of FWAs. The findings shows that although there are many relevant contextual differences cross nationally and across sectors, changes taking place at the workplace level in response to global competition and efficiency drives, especially work intensification, can undermine both regulatory and voluntary FWAs. Processes whereby global context is driving a convergence of experiences of FWAs are examined.

INTRODUCTION

Managing parenthood and employment continues to be problematic in many national and workplace contexts. Policies developed to address this problem are known variously as family friendly, or work-life policies or flexible working arrangements (FWAs). These include initiatives, especially family related leaves, enshrined in public policy, as well as those developed voluntarily by employers. In this paper we use the term flexible working arrangements to refer to policies and arrangements, statutory or voluntary, that are designed in various national and workplace contexts to give employees some control over working time and place through leaves or time-spatial flexibility (den Dulk, 2001; Lewis, 2003). The aim of this paper is to explore the influence of various layers of context on the experience and impact of FWAs.

Studies examining the effectiveness of FWAs often neglect the impact of contextual factors. Research has sought to assess the impact of FWAs on individual outcomes, particularly work-family conflict, or more recently enrichment (e.g. Grzywacz et al, 2008) and on organizational outcomes such as absenteeism and organizational commitment (Wang and Walumnwa, 2007), although evidence of their effectiveness is mixed (Sutton and Noe, 2005). Less attention has been paid to the complex interrelationships between various aspect of home and work domains and the multiple layers of context within which they operate. This largely quantitative research tradition also tends to focus on availability of policies rather than the implementation in practice, with less attention to the processes whereby employees and employers make sense of and respond to FWAs in context and over time and place. Moreover, much of this research has been conducted in North America where there is minimal regulation, so is of limited relevance to other regions such as Europe, where there are various levels of public policy support for the reconciliation of employment and family life.

Drawing on social systems theory, we argue that the social world comprises many interrelated and frequently changing social systems and that meaningful understanding comes from building whole pictures of phenomena rather than fragmenting or studying isolated social experiences. Work and family domains are crucial systems for understanding the need for and experiences of FWAs. However other, more macro social systems are also part of the context for FWAs, include various aspects of national context. The global

context is also vital to an understanding of FWAs and their consequences, through its influence on local workplace change. Employer strategies to compete in increasingly internationalised product and service markets have resulted in many changes in employment and the organisation of work in European private sector workplaces (Burchell, et al, 2002). Global context also impacts on the provision of European public services, as regulatory regimes are liberalised to allow entry into national markets of foreign owned service providers and the New Public Management drives the provision of client services on cost-efficient terms (; McLaughlin, Osborne and Ferlie, 2002). There is a need to understand how trends such as the growing flexibilisation and intensification of work across many contexts affect understandings and experiences of FWAs and whether this differs in diverse national policy contexts. A related and under researched questions is whether national policies and workplace policies and practices support and protect working parents more than others, or whether global trends in the organization of work lead to more homogeneity of experiences

We develop the social systems approach by including a relational perspective which offers a way of fleshing out aspects of workplace systems relevant to experiences of FWAs (Ollier-Malaterre, forthcoming). This involves a recognition that dynamic processes based in relations between social actors shape experiences and behaviours and are a crucial aspect of workplace context. Relational processes include social comparisons which form the basis of notions of social justice theory and particularly the concept of sense of entitlement to support which influences actual take-up of FWAs (Lewis and Smithson, 2001), as well as direct relationships at work.

The objectives of this paper are therefore a) to examine the impact of multiple social systems and layers of context as they underpin employees' experiences of FWAs across national European and sectoral contexts), b) to highlight differences in, and convergence of different contexts as they impact on working parents' experiences of FWAs, and c) to examine the social and relational processes whereby different layers of context interact to create limiting and enabling conditions for FWAs .

National contexts

We draw on fieldwork carried out between 2003-5 in workplaces in seven European countries. representing diverse welfare state regimes Nordic egalitarian social-democratic welfare states (Norway, Sweden), liberal welfare states (the UK and The Netherlands) a Southern Europe weak welfare state (Portugal), and Eastern European, post communist, states (Bulgaria and Slovenia) making the transition to market economies. While EU initiatives have been implemented to ensure minimal level of support for the reconciliation of paid work and family in member states, at the national level diverse norms and values are reflected in different welfare states regimes in Europe and particularly in the nature and extent of public work and family provisions (Den Dulk, and Doorne-Huiskes,2008). There are substantial supports in terms of family related leaves for working parents in Norway and Sweden and also in the post communist countries, Bulgaria and Slovenia, though the latter are declining. Public provisions to support working families in the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK were introduced more recently. The nature, level and affordability of childcare provisions and of of part time work also vary across states. In the Netherlands situation in particular, part-time work by women is widely accepted and women often view this as a satisfactory solution despite awareness of the career costs (Portegijs, Hermans & Lalta, 2006), illustrating a crucial interrelationships between cultural norms and policy systems.

METHOD

This paper draws on data from eleven case studies of private and public sector organizations, in seven European states undertaken as part of an EU funded study of the

transition to parenthood in changing European workplaces¹. Fieldwork was carried out by a cross-national team with research teams in each participating country. An organizational case study approach was used to gather in depth, contextualised data on organisational processes (Yin, 2003). Case studies are useful for understanding complex phenomena and processes within specific contexts and for investigating contemporary phenomena in real life contexts by exploring multiple perspectives (Yin 2003; Lewis, Das Dores Guerreiro and Brannen, 2006). Within the case study design qualitative enquiry was used for exploring processes of organizational change, to observe the ways in which public policy and other aspects of national contexts and organizational policies interact at the level of everyday practice in the context of these changes, and the perspectives of parents' and their managers on the impacts on experiences of FWAs

Case study organizations were selected purposively to provide a range of diverse welfare state contexts (see above), and cases in the private (finance) and the public (social services) sectors. The sample of case study organizations comprised: five national finance sector companies and one multinational company and five social services organizations. Written documentation was sought about each organisation on its workforce profile and FWAs as background. Participants in each workplace were recruited via HR managers. Human Resources Directors and between six and eleven managers were interviewed in each organisation. Working parents with a child under 12 were selected to participate in the focus groups, see table 1. The document analysis and manager interviews provided a management perspective on workplace changes, while the focus group data provided an employee perspective constructed within a group context (Smithson, 2006).

Table 1 Number of interviews and focus groups in each case study organization

	N Manager Interviews	No. FGs(parents) (No. FG Members)
UK Finance	6	6 (24)
UK SS	11	11 (28)
Sweden SS	13	6 (26)
Bulgaria Finance	7	5(37)
Bulgaria SS	7	4 (26)
Portugal Finance	2	9 (24)
Portugal SS	3	7 (24)
Norway Private	6	4 (15)
Norway SS	4	4 (18)
N'lands Finance	8	4 (32)
Slovenia Finance	7	8 (29)
Total	74	68 (283)

¹ This project, *Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace*, (short name *Transitions*) was funded by the European Union. See www.workliferesearch.org/transitions. The Transitions team included: Suzan Lewis, Janet Smithson, Christina Purcell and John Howarth, then at Manchester Metropolitan University; Julia Brannen and Michaela Brockmann, Thomas Coram Institute, University of London; Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, Laura den Dulk, Bram Peper and Marijke Veldhoen-van Blitterswijk, Utrecht University; Siyka Kovacheva and Atanas Matev, Paissii Hilendarski State University; Ann Nilsen, Sevil Summer and Lise Granlund, University of Bergen; Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and Lars Plantin, University of Göteborg; Nevenka Černigoj Sadar, Jana Nadoh and Polona Kersnik, University of Ljubljana; Maria das Dores Guerreiro, Pedro Abrantes, Inês Pereira and Inês Cardoso, CIES/ISCTE; Jeanne Fagnani, MATISSE, University of Paris 1 - CNRS.

Focus group protocols and interview schedules were developed collaboratively to take account of diverse national perspectives. They were translated into national languages and back translated to ensure comparability. The focus group schedule covered a range of topics including parents' perspectives on: workplace changes; the implementation of flexible working arrangements and other aspects of workplace support; the role of managers and critical incidents such as when a child is ill. In the interviews, managers were also asked about workplace changes, policies and practices relating to employed parents and how they dealt with critical incidents in their own work and family lives as well as how they managed subordinates with family responsibilities. All interview and focus groups were carried out by researchers native to the country context, and were recorded and transcribed.

A common descriptive analytic framework in terms of organising the data analysis under clearly specified analytic themes and fieldwork questions, was developed to facilitate comparison within and across the organisations. Thematic analysis of the data from each organization, was undertaken using this framework, and cross organizational themes relating experiences of FWAs were identified and examined. Organizational comparisons were then carried out. The national teams were paired and exchanged drafts of national reports of the organisational that were translated into English. They were asked to report back on their understandings of these so that the corresponding team supplied the missing information, especially the structural context. This helped to make explicit the wider social context that an insider researcher takes as given (Brannen et al, 2009). Below we focus on the ways that parents and their managers talked about workplace changes and the impact on parents experiences of statutory and workplace FWAs

FINDINGS

Policies (FWAs) and take up.

Although parents had different entitlements to family related leaves and access to other FWAs, embedded in the national social policy context, legal entitlement, is not always reflected in a subjective sense of entitlement to take up FWAs (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). Men took up fewer entitlements than women in all the organizations, but were more likely take up parental leave in the Nordic organizations in the context of the non transferable fathers quota of parental leave, than elsewhere. FWAs beyond those covered by state policy also varied, reflecting both national regulations and sectoral context. There was with greater implementation of FWAs in the public than private sector. Some workplace practices with the potential to enhance flexibility for reconciling work and family, such as self managing work teams were also introduced in many of the organizations.

Contextual Differences

Contextual factors contributing to differences in parents' experiences of FWAs include variations in gender ideologies; organizational beliefs about the impact of FWAs, and economic and labour market contexts. Cultural norms about gender roles and relationships influence the impact of FWAs, especially which parent takes them or whether they are shared. In the Nordic contexts dominant discourses of gender equality include sharing of family work while at the other extreme among the Bulgarian, Slovenian and Portuguese parents, there was little or no discussion of gender and family roles, and mothers were more likely to look to female relatives than male partners for domestic support. Men were thus more likely to feel entitled to use FWAs, especially statutory leaves in the Swedish and Norwegian cases.

Prevailing views of the compatibility of FWAs with organizational effectiveness, among both parents and managers also varied. In the relatively newly privatized organizations in Bulgaria and Slovenia beyond compliance with regulation there was little voluntary formal employer support for parents and little expectation that it should be forthcoming. Parents and their managers considered that formal FWAs were wasnot operationally feasible within a market

economy. A Bulgarian mother was typical in arguing that: "There is no private employer caring for his employees. The state is one thing, the employer is another thing." Paradoxically however, there was much informal flexibility support for parents from older managers, although this was declining among younger managers, schooled in capitalism. At the other extreme, in the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway, FWAs there was often a discourse of FWAs as productivity initiatives arising from other changes.

"It's a different kind of, the old adage that a happy workforce is a productive workforce isn't it. So if you can .. you know if you start challenging well, why are we working 9 to 5, because you know customers do ring after 5 o'clock so why not leave it open [later] when there's people willing to work till [later] ? ...It's just about challenging some of the preconceptions that were there ..And I think we're changing the culture in a positive way " (Woman manager, UK finance)

The implementation of FWAs, voluntary and/or statutory, took place in the context of many other workplace trends and changes. Mergers and acquisitions, restructuring and downsizing in the private sector companies and reorganization in the public sector, contributed to feelings of deep transition and constant change. A decline in perceived job security was reported widely, more in the private than public sector, but was experienced differently across contexts affecting employees' willingness to take up FWAs. There was, for example, a widespread acceptance of job insecurity in the UK company cushioned by the relative ease of securing new jobs at the time, but much less optimism about finding new jobs in Bulgaria where the rise in uncertainty in the transition to a market economy was particularly dramatic. In the Portuguese organization insecurity was accepted as the price of opportunities to increase employability, but a long hours culture reduced willingness to take up FWAs. Here it was the type of organization rather than the national context that was significant. These interrelated contextual variations fed into differences in parents' sense of entitlement to take up FWAs.

Similarities: Intensification of work

One trend that emerged consistently in all the organizations, which impacts on ways in which FWAs are experienced was reports of increasing workloads and pace of work in the face of downsizing and 'efficiency' drives, as well as changes in work organization that frequently put more onus on individual responsibility to manage demanding tasks and schedules (Burchall et al, 2002). There are greater demands due to lean workforces, lack of cover for absences, developments in IT and long working hours:

"We don't increase number of workers in spite of enlarging the market. The absent workers are not replaced so those that remain have to do their own work plus the work of an absent person." (Woman Manager, Slofinance Slovenia)

"Tasks are more complex and have to be done more quickly. IT makes that we exchange information very rapidly. People expect to get an answer fast.. There is more pressure) and you can see that very clearly". (Male senior manager, Dutch finance)

Sometimes people, mainly at a lower hierarchical level, are obliged to work on weekends and so metimes 10/11/12 hours per day, not being paid for that.. Focus Group Portuguese finance).

Gaute: I think there are two cultures, one where they work overtime and another where they work an incredibly lot of overtime! (laughs)..it's not so easy to combine with family (Focus group Norway, private company)

Work pressures make it difficult to use FWAs or even take vacations

People...they feel too pressured at work, that when they do take the time off the work is still going to be there when they get back. So what's the point of taking the time? (Woman manager, UKSS)

Intensified workloads were thus often undermining working time flexibility or resulting in flexibility to work more to meet workload demands. An ideal-type context would be one in which national regulations and workplace FWAs and other contextual factors are mutually supportive of parents. There were individual parents who felt well supported and able to make good use of FWAs. However, in none of the case study workplaces was this systemic and organization wide. Rather, a number of processes undermined experiences of FWAs suggesting a growing convergence of experiences across national and workplace contexts due to the changing organization of work in response to global competition.

Interaction between layers of context: growing convergence in experiences of flexible working arrangements in diverse contexts.

Three processes emerged from an analysis of parents' and managers' accounts of how FWAs are experienced in practice.

i) Changes in the organization of work can undermine national policy: job insecurity, work intensification and pace of change

Parents' concerns for future job security in rapidly changing job climates can undermine public policy. This was particularly evident in the organizations in the two post communist states where generous parental leave provisions were increasingly challenged in practice.

Antonia. *The tendency is to take as short maternity leave as possible, and you hurry up to go back to work. You fight for your position with teeth and claws.*

Kostadina. *....things change all the time. Leaving work for two years keeps you far behind the others..* (Focus group, Bulgarian finance)

Work intensification also undermines progressive policies such as the fathers' quota of parental leave in Norway and Sweden , (Brandthe and Kvande, 2001. A Norwegian father who took part-time parental leave, working 50 per cent time during his last parental noted that:

It was incredibly difficult; you keep most of your work tasks, but have only half the time to do them! I'll never do that again. (Father, Norwegian multinational))

The potential advantages of some state provisions are thus being eroded to some extent by current workplace and economic changes.

ii) Changes in the organization of work can undermine workplace policies to support working parents: work intensification

Contemporary working practices also impact on employer policies to support parents across contexts. For example, reduced hours schedules, available in the organizations in Norway, Sweden the Netherlands and the UK, provided a satisfactory arrangement for many new parents in relatively affluent contexts if well supported by management. However, intensified workloads and lean workforces frequently undermined such arrangements. Often managers and colleagues supported reduced hours in principle but workloads were not reduced proportionally to the reduction in work hours, or work was redistributed to other team members, resulting in overload for part time workers and/or their colleagues.

ii) **Changes in the organization of work impact on the interpersonal level in workplaces and can again undermine FWAs : roles of managers and colleagues**

Managers play an important role in determining parents' latitude to work flexibly (Lewis, 1997, 2001; Bond et al., 2002). However, interviews with managers in the case study organizations highlight some of the dilemmas that they themselves experience within changing organizational contexts. When organizational restructuring makes more demands on people, flexibility tends to appear to be more difficult from a management perspective. Middle and lower level managers have to negotiate intensified targets, changing working practices and parents' expectations of support. However, the role of colleagues and of intense workloads, featured as equally as, and in some cases were even more important than, manager support. For example, high performance" management techniques (White et al., 2003) such as relatively autonomous teams involve devolving responsibility for managing flexibility to teams. On the positive side, in some cases parents displayed considerable solidarity by covering for each others' absences. But this was undermined, by intensified workloads and the decreasing likelihood of official replacement for employees taking leave for family reasons. Parents became reluctant to change working patterns because of the impact on already overburdened colleagues.

AA. "...if a child is sick) it is impossible to be absent an entire week (...) We could...

BB The company doesn't create obstacles to that. It is more our sense of responsibility, of mutual support ...(...)We work in teams(Focus group in PPC Portugal)

It's really important to deal with your colleagues, as when you are away they are the ones who have to do your job, it's not the manager// so you try to not be away too much. (working father Swedish social services)

DISCUSSION and Conclusions

The impact of FWAs are not context neutral. Global, national and workplace context matter. This study shows that some national provisions and policies and employer FWAs can provide support for working parents, although sense of entitlement to take up initiatives is influenced by the interaction of factors such as economic context, gender norms and prevailing beliefs about the compatibility of FWAs with workplace effectiveness.

Nevertheless there is some convergence of experiences across contexts, as the intensification of work and other trends associated with the global context undermine national and employer based FWAs as well as the potential flexibility offered by workplace practices such as autonomous teams. Indeed, in the contemporary, changing European workplaces studied here, intensified workloads emerge as a major barrier to the effectiveness of FWAs. The intensification of workloads reinforces ideal worker assumptions that take little account of parental commitments and sustains greedy organizations' (Burchalla and Fagan, 2004; Van Echtelt et al, 2009)even where the workplace discourse is relatively "family friendly". The findings highlight the need for evaluations of so called " good practice" in relation to FWAs to be context sensitive. Changes in one social system are reflected in and impact upon other social systems. The practical implications are that systemic and need to take account of systemic and relational factors . Good practice" for supporting working parents is a moveable feast, requiring continuous monitoring of the impacts of new developments within many layers of context.

Many other layers of context are likely to impact on the effectiveness of FWAs. Future research should take account of other aspects of national and organizational contexts as they frame parents' opportunities for flexibility in managing work and family boundaries as well a family and community layers of context. It also needs to consider globalization

processes and contexts in particular times and places and the convergence of experiences that they may encourage. Longitudinal research would be useful not only to capture the impact of FWAs, but also the dynamic process of change and the way developments in different layers of context interact. “

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