

Use of Workplace Work-Life Benefits by Dual-Earner Couples

Over the last two decades especially, employers in the U.S. have given increasing attention to the obstacles their employees face in managing work and personal demands. A variety of formal “family friendly” policies and programs have been implemented in many workplaces to provide workers with child care assistance (e.g., on-site day care, day-care subsidies), easier access to personal resources (e.g., health and wellness programs, counseling services), and improved time control and flexibility (e.g., telecommuting, flex-time, part-time work).

Research to date has identified types of organizations that have adopted work-life policies and has examined the use of these benefits by employees as well as the policies’ effects on both organizations and families. Not surprisingly, studies have revealed that most employers do not offer elaborate, formal work-life benefits to their employees. Those that do tend to be larger companies with greater resources, employers with a larger concentration of female workers, and organizations that depend more on professional employees (e.g., Glass and Estes 1997; Galinsky et al. 1993).

Despite the increasing popularity and presence of work-life programs at such workplaces, and existing research supporting their positive effects on organizations and families (Glass and Estes 1997), there is a growing body of literature documenting a gap between the implementation of these benefits by employers and the perceived availability and actual use of the programs by their employees. For example, in a very recent study, Still and Strang (2003) find that workers are remarkably unaware of or mistaken about what benefits are available and report an overall weak relationship between the availability of benefits and employee use. These

and other researchers have offered several reasons for the disconnect between actual availability of work-life programs and employee knowledge and use of these benefits, including an unsupportive work culture (specifically a fear that using benefits will threaten job security and promotion) (e.g., Glass and Estes 1997); gender expectations within the workplace (e.g., Starrels 1992); and poor communication about available benefits on the organization's part (e.g., Still and Strang 2003).

While many scholars also recognize that some benefits may not be used because employees have spouses who take care of the family side of the work-family equation, there has been to date no study investigating *couple* strategies of work-life benefit use (but see Moen 2003). What is required is a couple-level analysis of conjoint benefit availability and use and how use may be a gendered process and vary by family life stage, education, occupational status, and other characteristics. Furthermore, other studies have not always controlled for the actual availability of work-life programs and policies, and we have found no studies that investigate changes in the use of these benefits by employees over time.

Accordingly, in this paper, we use data on dual-earner, middle class couples (where both spouses were interviewed separately at two times, two years apart) to examine the strategic and dynamic use of various work-life benefits by couples (and their use over time), taking into account the availability and use of such benefits by each spouse in his and her respective workplace. Our theoretical underpinnings are drawn from the life course notion of linked lives and family adaptive strategies (e.g., Elder 1995, 1998; Moen and Wethington 1992; Moen 2003). But we also test hypotheses drawn from stress theory (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981; Thoits 1996) and theories about family and work role conflict (Parasuraman and Greenhaus 1999). Our hypotheses include:

- Both spouses are unlikely to use work-family benefits; if one does, the other is less likely to do so.
- Both gender and life stage predict benefit use, as well as change in use over time.
- Perceived job security by either spouse is positively related to benefit use, as well as changes in use.
- An absence of feelings of successfully managing the work/family interface predicts an increase in work-life benefit use over time.

To test these hypotheses, we use data from *The Ecology of Careers Panel Study*.

Conducted by the Cornell Careers Institute between 1998-2002, with funding and support by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the National Institute on Aging, this longitudinal study surveyed employees from eleven organizations in upstate New York and their spouses. This paper focuses on the data collected from individuals employed at one of the organizations, a large Fortune 500 manufacturing firm, and from their respective spouses (a total of approximately 350 couples). We investigate five formal benefits relevant to couple's management of work and family responsibilities: paid vacation, parental-family leave, personal/dependent care time, flex time, and telecommuting.

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