

## Organisational Justice and Work-Family Policies

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### Abstract

*Based in a local government organisation in New Zealand, this paper links the literature on work-family balance to the literature on organisational justice, by examining the predictors of perceived fairness in work-family policies. The study also expands an earlier study in Grover (1991), by considering work-family policy sets, rather than single policies only. Perceptions of the fairness in work-family policies were partly predicted, positively, by a combination of management seniority, perceived benefits in work-family policies, and own usage of those policies. These findings suggest the influence of both group values and self-interest. In terms of organisational justice, the findings raise a question for future research, namely how fairness attitudes relate to the sustainability of work-family initiatives.*

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### Introduction

Work-family policies (e.g., paid parental leave, flexitime) have been characterised as progressive and important (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, & Reilly, 1995). This is because they allow employees to better balance their work and family commitments. Intuitively and theoretically (e.g., Adams, 1965), the concept of balance suggests organisational justice. Grover (1991) stated, “a major reason for studying justice in organisations is to determine the consequences of perceived fairness” (p. 248). Antecedent to perceived fairness, however, is how and among whom a perception of unfairness is formed in the first place. A major reason for studying organisational fairness attitudes, with regard to work-family policies, is that these policies may tend to target certain demographics over others, such as parents over non-parents, females over males, and the young over the elderly. For example, a young mother may require time off for childbirth, a part-time return to work, and then childcare and flexibility once back working full time. What effect do these needs have on the fairness perceptions developing in others, who are non-parents, or employees past childbirth age?

Existing research indicates that perceived fairness is related to aspects of motivation, satisfaction, and commitment (Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Folger & Konovsky, 1989). Grover

(1991) examined the predictors of perceived fairness of a paid parental-leave policy, and suggested that perceived fairness in a work-family policy of parental leave will permeate job attitudes and thereby organisational behaviour (p. 248). The present study extends Grover's idea, by examining an organisation with multiple work-family policies, rather than a single policy. We examine three attitude domains, each specifically targeting work-family policies: (1) *Attitudes towards policies*, specifically how fair employees feel work-family policies are; (2) *attitudes towards male users*, specifically how supportive employees are of male users of work-family policies; and (3) *attitudes towards female users*, specifically how supportive employees are of female users of work-family policies

### ***Organisational Justice Theories***

The literature on organisational justice often focuses on employee perceptions of fairness in organisations (Greenberg, 1987). Early research on organisational fairness (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975) concentrated on distributive justice, i.e., the fairness of outcomes as distinct from processes, as embodied in Equity Theory (Adams, 1965). Equity theory has arguably dominated much justice research in the organisational sciences (Grover, 1991; Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). Adams and Freeman (1976) stated that Equity judgements are constituted from social comparisons between outcomes-for-inputs of self versus a referent other in the workplace or work setting. In a context of work-family policies, an example might be someone who does not use any of the policies comparing their self to an equally hard-working counterpart who does use them (higher outcome for equal input). Perceptions of imbalance like this can have important consequences for the workplace, such as withdrawal of input to match perceived reduced outcome-for-input ratios (Sabbagh, Yechezkel, & Nura, 1994; Sashkin & Williams, 1990). If work-family policies are becoming more popular, then organisations need to be aware of employee attitudes towards the fairness (and equity) of these policies, and toward the wide range of 'others' that might use them. Focusing on the distributive justice of work-family policies may thus enable managers to improve the quality of work life, and work-life balance, simultaneously (Greenberg, 1990).

Perhaps a good point to elucidate the above linkage is through social context, and specifically workplace relationships. Grover (1991) contended that a primary consideration in evaluating the fairness of different resources (e.g., work-family policies) is an employee's relationship to the resource. Someone who uses a policy may hold different attitudes than someone who does not use the policy. Lerner (1977) categorised these relationships as unit, non-unit, and identity.

In a *unit relation*, employees align themselves favourably with those others perceived to be in a similar situation. For example, work-family policy users may align themselves with other employees who perceptibly share the same characteristics, such as other parents. Individuals who hold low identification to a particular policy are categorised as having a *non-unit relation*, and would be expected to view policies as less just and less fair. For example, an older female employee who had to leave the workforce to raise children may perceive work-family policies (e.g., paid parental leave) as less fair, if they did not have such support when *they* needed it.

An *identity relation* (Grover, 1991, p. 248) is not to be confused with group identity. An identity relation, according to Grover and Crooker (1995), is a form of *egocentric bias*. Employees evaluate resource distribution schemes that benefit *themselves* as fair, regardless of the social or interpersonal fairness of the procedure or mechanism used (Grover, 1991). For example, Grover (1991) found employees who stood to personally benefit from a parental

leave policy (e.g., employees expecting a child) rated that policy as fairer than those who might not personally stand to benefit (e.g., single employers).

### ***Hypotheses***

While organisational justice theories have been used to examine the work-family policies, a limitation has been that they focus on a single work-family policy, such as parental leave (Grover, 1991), or on-site childcare centres (Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke & O'Dell, 1998). This paper focuses on an organisation with six work-family policies, allowing for the development of hypotheses exploring attitudes towards multiple work-family policies.

An organisation that supports plural work-family policies should have a high level of support among managers within the organisation. This is because managers in an organisation relatively often embody and advocate that organisation's shared values (Lerner & Whitehead, 1980). Shared bonds like these place those managers in a unit relation, collectively standing behind the policies themselves. Hence, in an organisation that has a formal work-family policy expressing commitment towards work-family policies, managers and professionals holding organisational power are expected to have relatively strong support towards work-family policies and users.

*Hypothesis 1a: Organisational seniority will predict positive attitudes towards work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Organisational seniority will predict positive attitudes towards male users of work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 1c: Organisational seniority will predict positive attitudes towards female users of work-family policies.*

Like managerial level, the probability of having children, or starting a family, can also be related to fairness perceptions. For example, the act of having or the intention to have children may foster support for work-family policies, because the policy users perceptibly share similar family values and goals (unit relation). Yet as well, there might be an *identity* relation. Grover (1991) for example found support for an identity relation among employees planning to be parents: They saw parental leave as relatively fair because it benefited themselves directly. We predict that the same relationship will hold towards multiple work-family policies. Employees more certain about in future having children will be more supportive of work-family policies and users.

*Hypothesis 2a: Anticipated likelihood of having children will predict positive attitudes towards work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 2b: Anticipated likelihood of having children will predict positive attitudes towards male users of work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 2c: Anticipated likelihood of having children will predict positive attitudes towards female users of work-family policies.*

The concept of identity above suggests that a criterion for perceiving fairness is personal benefit. The more benefits, the greater the perceived fairness. In the literature familiar to many managers in our study, work-family policies are linked with numerous benefits and advantages. These advantages include improved morale and loyalty (Tenbrunsel et al., 1995), improved recruitment and retention (Lobel, Googins, & Bankert, 1999; Osterman, 1995), and enhanced employee and organisational performance (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Hence the present study hypothesises that those employees who perceive work-family policies as being beneficial will have strong support towards work-family policies and their users.

*Hypothesis 3a: Perceived work-family benefits will predict positive attitudes towards work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Perceived work-family benefits will predict positive attitudes towards male users of work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 3c: Perceived work-family benefits will predict positive attitudes towards female user of work-family policies.*

In keeping with the identity concept, Grover (1991) found that attitude toward work-family policy was positively linked to the planned personal usage of a work-family policy. The present study tests this possible linkage across a wider array of work-family policies. Rothausen et al (1998) used the past, present and intended use approach when examining fairness perceptions towards use of a childcare center. We too combine past, present, and intended use of all work-family policies together, as a single combined predictor variable. We predict that the users of a greater number of work-family policies, as indicated by this combined variable, will also be relatively likely to have an identity relation, and thereby register more positive attitudes towards the policies themselves. Further, unit relations mean that users of work-family policies share similar attitudes to other users. Hence expect users to view *other* users more favourably.

*Hypothesis 4a: Work-family policy use will predict positive attitudes towards work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 4b: Work-family policy use will predict positive attitudes towards male users of work-family policies.*

*Hypothesis 4c: Work-family policy use will predict positive attitudes towards female users of work-family policies.*

## Method

### **Sample and Procedure**

Data was collected from a New Zealand local government organisation that is a major employer in the rural region. The organisation offers six work-family benefits: Paid parental leave, domestic leave, flexible working hours, a before and after-school room, study leave, and an employee assistance programme. A total of 206 employees with access to the organisation's Intranet were emailed a survey form, with data collection at two distinct times. Survey 1 contained the demographic and predictor variables, and Survey 2 contained the criterion variables. The separation of predictor and criterion variables was aimed at reducing the potential for common method variance. Survey 1 produced 114 responses. After a week, Survey 2 was emailed out to all respondents who had completed survey 1. A total of 100 Survey 2 responses were collected, for an overall response rate of 48.5%. The average age of respondents was 41.7 years (SD=10.1), with the majority being full-time employees (91%), married (77%), and female (69%). Approximately 70% of the respondents were blue-collar workers and 30% white-collar workers. The average length of tenure was 9.2 years (SD = 8.3), and tenure range was 6 months to 34 years.

### **Measures**

#### **Criterion variables**

**Attitudes towards work-family policies** was measured using a 9-item scale, coded 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree (Grover, 1991). Questions were reworded to be inclusive of work-family policies in general. A sample question is "Supporting employees who have children is not fair to employees without children" (reverse worded). This scale had

a Cronbach's Alpha of .88 (full psychometric details on these and other measures in the study are available from the corresponding author).

**Attitudes towards male users of work-family policies and attitudes towards female users of work-family policies** were both measured using a 6-item scale, coded 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree (Grover, 1991). Each set of items followed the stem "My male (female) colleagues who would use work-family policies..." and included items such as "...will be better employees in the long run" and "...want what is best for their children". The Cronbach's Alphas were .80 (attitudes towards male users), and .85 (attitudes towards female users).

#### **Predictor variables**

**Organisational seniority** was measured by a single dummy variable based on current job types, where 1=managerial/professional/supervisor job types, and 0=all other job types.

**Likelihood of children** was measured using a single item from Grover (1991), "What is the likelihood of you starting a family or having more children in the future?", coded from 1 = highly unlikely, to 5 = highly likely.

**Work-family benefits** was measured using a six-item scale created for this study, coded 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Each item followed the stem "Work-family programs..." and included responses such as "...improve employee loyalty" and "...improve firm performance." This scale had a reliability score (Cronbach's Alpha) of .91.

**Work-family practice use** was based on Rothausen et al (1998) with a five-item scale, 1 = past use, 2 = present use, 3 = anticipated use, 4 = never used, 5 = unaware, recoded as a dummy variable 1 = past/present/anticipated users, 0 = non-users (never used or unaware of programme). The usage of work-family practices was aggregated (e.g., use of all six work-family benefits = 6). Respondents who had never used any practices, and did not intend to use any, were coded as 0.

#### **Control variables**

Grover (1991) found three variables to significantly predict outcomes, and these were used in the present study as control variables. They were **gender** (1=female, 0=male), **marital status** (coded 1=married/de facto, 0=single), and **family size** (total number of children).

#### **Analysis**

To examine Hypotheses 1 to 4, hierarchical regressions were conducted. Demographic variables (gender, marital status, and family size) were entered as control variables in Step 1. The predictor variables (organisational seniority, likelihood of children, work-family benefits, and work-family practice use) were entered at Step 2. Three regression models resulted (attitudes towards work-family policies, attitudes towards male users of work-family policies, and attitudes towards female users of work-family policies).

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics for all the study variables are shown in Table 1. The three criterion variables were correlated significantly with one another. Attitudes towards work-family policies were significantly correlated with attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $r = .41, p < .01$ ), and attitudes towards female users of work-family policies ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ). Attitudes

towards male and female users of work-family policies were very closely correlated ( $r = .80, p < .01$ ), indicating little difference between overall attitudes towards users.

From Table 1, attitudes towards work-family practices were significantly correlated with: Perceived work-family benefits ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ), work-family practice use ( $r = .20, p < .05$ ), attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ), attitudes towards female users of work-family policies ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ). This pattern of correlations suggests that the predictor variables work-family benefits and work-family practice will be useful predictors of the criterion variables.

Table 1  
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Organisational Seniority	.29	.44	--						
2 Likelihood of Children	1.8	1.4	-.01	--					
3 Work-Family Benefits	3.8	.79	-.03	.01	--				
4 Work-Family Practice Use	1.9	1.6	.09	-.06	.20*	--			
5 Attitudes Towards Male Users of Work-Family Policies	4.7	.79	.20	.10	.39**	.23*	--		
6 Attitudes Towards Female Users of Work-Family Policies	4.8	.91	.19	-.02	.42**	.17	.80**	--	
7 Attitudes Towards Work-Family Policies	4.9	1.1	.06	.07	.26**	.23*	.41**	.43**	--

$N = 100$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . All significance tests are two-tailed.

Of the control variables, gender was significantly associated with attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), and family size was significantly associated with attitudes towards female users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .22, p < .05$ ).

Results of the regressions on the hypothesised predictor variables are shown in Table 2. Organisational seniority was significantly associated with attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), and attitudes towards female users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .17, p < .05$ ). This provides support for Hypotheses 1b and 1c. Likelihood of children was significantly associated with attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .17, p < .05$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2b only. Work-family benefits were significantly associated with attitudes towards work-family policies ( $\beta = .24, p < .05$ ), attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ), and attitudes towards female users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ). This provides support for Hypotheses 3a, 3b and 3c. Finally, work-family practice use was significantly associated with

attitudes towards work-family policies ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), and attitudes towards male users of work-family policies ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), which provides supports Hypotheses 4a and 4b.

Table 2  
Regression Analysis: Predicting Fairness Perceptions

Predictors	Criterion Variables		
	Attitudes Toward Work-Family Policies	Attitudes Toward Male Users of Work-Family Policies	Attitudes Toward Female Users of Work-Family Policies
<b>Step 1 Controls</b>			
Gender	-.01	.21*	.18
Marital Status	-.01	.03	-.02
Family Size	.12	.21	.22*
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.01	.07	.09*
F Change (3, 96)	0.28	2.38	3.10*
<b>Step 2 Predictors</b>			
Organisational Seniority	.01	.20*	.17*
Likelihood of Children	.13	.18*	.07
Work-Family Benefits	.24*	.31**	.36***
Work-Family Practice Use	.20*	.20*	.12
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.11*	.20***	.18**
F Change (5, 91)	2.88*	6.46***	5.59**
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.12	.27	.27
Adjusted Total R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.22	.21
F Statistic (8, 91)	1.77	4.94***	4.78***

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Standardised regression coefficients. All significance tests were single-tailed.

Overall, two of the regression models were significant: The model for Attitudes towards male users of work-family policies  $F(8, 91) = 4.28$  ( $p < .001$ ); and the model for Attitudes toward female users of work-family policies  $F(8, 91) = 4.20$  ( $p < .001$ ). The regression model for Attitudes toward work-family policies themselves was not significant,  $F(8, 91) = 1.77$ . However, the R<sup>2</sup> change (Step 2) for all three of the criterion variables was significant. The predictors (managerial position, likelihood of children, work-family benefits, and work-family practice use) accounted for 11% of the variance in attitudes towards work-family policies ( $p < .05$ ), 20% of attitude variation towards male users of work-family policies ( $p < .001$ ), and 18% of attitude variation towards female users of work-family policies ( $p < .01$ ).

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## Discussion

This paper sought to extend the work-family literature into the domain of organisational justice. Some theory in this domain suggests that employees who view the policies and their users more favourably will be those who share similarities with other employees and are users of work-family policies themselves (Grover, 1991). The paper extends Grover's work in at least two ways: Firstly, by exploring a number of work-family policies, rather than a single policy, and secondly, by exploring *existing* policies rather than a policy that 'may' be implemented. Overall, the present study supports organisational justice theorising, with all four predictor variables holding at least one statistically significant incremental association with one of the criterion variables.

Of the predictor variables, only perceived work-family benefits yielded significant associations with all three of the criterion variables. This is new. While the work-family literature is replete with references to the advantages of work-family programmes, few studies have examined attitudes related to those advantages. The present study examined the benefits associated with work-family policies including recruitment, retention, morale, loyalty and performance. Respondents who perceived work-family policies as beneficial also held more positive perceptions about (i) work-family policies and (ii) toward (i)'s users. Thus, perceiving work-family policies as more beneficial may encourage positive attitudes towards the policies themselves *and their users*.

The concept of a unit relation predicts greater support for policies by employees aligned in a similar situation. Lerner and Whitehead (1980) defined the unit relation as other employees who "share a similar fate with oneself. They are positively-regarded-others who are expected to share similar perspectives and values" (p. 230). Based on this definition, we expected users of work-family policies to view both male and female users of work-family policies relatively positively. However, there was a failure of work-family practice use to predict attitudes towards female users. This null result does not support the unit relationship completely. Differences like this suggest the influences of possibly competing unit relations, for example gender bias.

Work-family policy use supported the concept of an identity relation. Those who utilise a policy will egocentrically perceive it more fairly. The findings indicate that, all else being equal, employees who are past, present or intended users of work-family practices perceived work-family policies as being fairer. This supports similar findings in the work-family literature (Grover, 1991; Grover & Crooker, 1995). For example, Grover (1991) found employees who stood to benefit from a parental leave policy rated the policy more positively than excluded employees (non-parents). The findings here are important because users (of work-family practices) included actual users and intended users, which differs from Grover's (1991) 'anticipated' users of a potential work-family policy. However, the findings for the unit relationship construct are mixed.

A further novel feature of our study was the direct examination of organisational seniority. Greenberg (1990) asserted that fairness should be important to managers. Yet seniority per se was not found, in our direct test of the assertion, to be a significant predictor of attitudes towards work-family policies. At the same time however, attitudes towards (male and female) *users were* more positive with organisational seniority. This would seem to contradict any fears, on the part of employees, that uptake of work-family policies may jeopardize their careers by making them appear less dependable, self-reliant, etc. As well, however, gender of the respondent was significantly associated with attitudes towards male users of work-family

policies, but not female users, with female managers bring more supportive of male users than male managers were of male users. Nonetheless, attitudes towards male and female users were generally highly inter-correlated ( $r = .80, p < .01$ ; see also, Grover, 1991).

### **Limitations**

The use of a single local government organization, limits the ability to generalise from our findings. Further studies, including the private sector and private sector organisations, are needed to confirm findings. Larger organisations would also provide the potential for enhanced statistical power. However, New Zealand is somewhat limited by its preponderance of small- and medium-sized businesses.

One common limitation of survey research is the use of self-reported data. In our study however, there was a one-week gap between predictor and criterion variable surveys. That gap minimises the risk of common method variance, halo effects, and self-presentation biases. The design feature thereby lends some credibility to the relationships in the data. Nevertheless, future research should include measures of actual organisational behaviour, and a longer-sighted form of longitudinal design. Only through this kind of method will we ultimately know the systemic effects of potential perceived injustices, stemming from work-family policies, on organisational sustainability.

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