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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 39
Issue 3 *September*

Article 8

September 2012

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Dina Banerjee
Shippensburg State University

Carolyn Cummings Perrucci
Purdue University

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Banerjee, Dina and Perrucci, Carolyn Cummings (2012) "Employee Benefits and Policies: Do They Make a Difference for Work/Family Conflict?," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 39: Iss. 3, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3687>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol39/iss3/8>

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Employee Benefits and Policies: Do They Make a Difference for Work/Family Conflict?

DINA BANERJEE

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Shippensburg State University

CAROLYN CUMMINGS PERRUCCI

Department of Sociology
Purdue University

This paper examines both the prevalence of employee benefits and whether the existence of any of numerous work/family policies is related to reduced perceived work/family conflict among a 2002 national sample of U.S. employees. We compare the impact of relatively standard employee benefits with more “controversial” work/family policies regarding flexible work time and child care. We determine whether the impact still remains when typical individual employee characteristics, human capital variables, workplace culture variables, and workplace support variables are controlled statistically in multiple regressions. We find that it is the relatively conventional benefits that are most available to employees. However, it is primarily policies pertaining to flexible work time that significantly affect perceived work/family conflict. These effects continue even when supportiveness of the workplace culture and of supervisors and co-workers are controlled. A supportive workplace culture is related to less work/family conflict. Caregiving policies do not impact perceived work/family conflict for this sample of U.S. employees.

Key words: work/family policies, work/family conflict, flextime, childcare, human capital, workplace culture, workplace support

As wives and mothers have continued to enter the U.S. labor force, the potential for stress from work/family conflict has become increasingly important. One estimate, for example, is that 40% of employed parents experience difficulties in

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, September 2012, Volume XXXIX, Number 3

combining work and family demands (Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1993). Indeed, a meta-analysis of sixty-seven studies (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000) finds that negative work/family spillover is associated with such consequences as depression, psychosomatic complaints, and lessened marital satisfaction.

In response, some U.S. employers have instituted policies and practices intended to lessen stress from work/family spillover and promote employees' health and psychological well-being (Mitchell, 1997), along with helping themselves attract, retain, and manage a productive workforce (Glass & Estes, 1997; Kelly, 1999). Such work/family benefits range from the well-established, such as sick leave or health insurance (Osterman, 1995), to the less institutionalized, such as flexibility policies and family-care policies (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002).

Extant research regarding the effect of the availability of work benefits and policies yields inconsistent findings. The availability of flexible scheduling (Thomas & Ganster, 1995) and family benefits (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999) reduces work/family conflict in some studies whereas, in some other studies, it does not (Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996; Mennino, Rubin, & Brayfield, 2005).

This study examines both the prevalence of employee benefits and whether the existence of any of numerous work/family policies is related to lessened work/family conflict among a national sample of U.S. employees. In a time of cut-backs in the economy, it is particularly useful to know what benefits and policies are most helpful and should be maintained. We compare the impact of more or less standard employee benefits with more "controversial and ambiguous" work/family policies regarding flexible work time and childcare (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). The research questions are as follows.

What are the most frequently available employee benefits?

Do these employee benefits reduce work/family conflict?

(a) does the existence of any of several time-flexibility policies reduce work/family conflict?

(b) Does the existence of any of several family caregiving policies reduce work/family conflict?

Does the impact of any employee benefit still remain when typical individual employee characteristics, human capital variables, workplace culture variables, and workplace support variables are controlled (i.e., are in the equation)?

Related Literature

Prior to advanced industrialization in the U. S., work and family were integrated, with the nuclear family being the work unit, initially in the home and then in early factories. With the development of technology within the factory system, husbands, wives and their children were separated from one another and under the supervision of others, often strangers. This led to considerable social concern, the shortening of the work day, and work restrictions on women and children, who were relegated to educational institutions. With the growing labor force participation of women, including married women with children in the latter half of the twentieth century, came social concern once again, this time to reintegrate work and family (Perrucci & Perrucci, 2007). Corporations began providing some social welfare benefits, namely health and life insurance, pension plans, and disability protection. At the national level, there came to be employer-mandated participation in worker's compensation and Social Security (Glass & Estes, 1997).

Children increasingly became economic and social costs that mothers especially, not communities or employers, bore. At the same time that demands on families to raise well-rounded children were increasing, demands and rewards for market work were similarly increasing. As automation eliminated human labor and globalization made labor cheap, workers were encouraged to invest even more in a 24/7 economy (Perrucci & Perrucci, 2007).

The growth in working time is accounted for largely by a family transformation from single (male) earners to dual-earner couples in which wives are employed. Also, an increasing segment of the U.S. population works extremely long hours, namely couples who are highly educated and in high-profile professional and managerial occupations (Jacobs & Gerson,

2001). These couples develop strategies for balancing family with demanding work, including placing limits on their work hours and scaling back in other areas of their lives, such as limiting the number of children they have, reducing social commitments and service work, enjoying less leisure time, and lowering expectations for housework (Becker & Moen, 1999).

A major response was the development of market substitutes for family care, such as for-profit child care centers, for which families, once again, usually must bear the cost. The only national response is the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, according to which large companies must provide parents with twelve weeks of unpaid leave. Because the leave is unpaid, the U.S. lags behind twenty industrialized countries in a comparison of parental leave policies (Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2008).

In terms of expected findings in the present study, women (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991), those who are married or partnered (Burke, 1988), and those who care for dependent children (Burke, 1988; Mennino, et al., 2005) are expected to perceive greater work/family conflict. As well, so should those who care for dependent elderly.

In contrast, those who have greater human capital in terms of education, occupation, and autonomy at work are expected to experience less work/family conflict, whereas those who work a greater number of hours per week are expected to experience more work/family conflict (Maume & Houston, 2001; Mennino, et al., 2005). Availability of flex-time opportunities is expected to be related to less work/family conflict (Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Moreover, a workplace culture that is supportive of combining work and family responsibilities is expected to lessen work/family conflict (Burke, 1988; Maume & Houston, 2001; Mennino, et al., 2005). In fact, Mennino et al., (2005), find that absent a supportive workplace culture, work/family policies do not lessen work/family conflict. However, they and others (Osterman, 1995) use summary indices of benefits and policies, rather than examining the possibility that it is only some individual benefits and policies that impact work/family conflict. That is the focus of this article.

Data and Methods

Data

Data are derived from The National Study of Changing Workforce (NSCW, 2002), which is the most recent publicly available data set gathered periodically by the Family and Work Institute. The NSCW is a nationally representative sample of workers across all the workplaces in U.S. A total of 3,504 interviews were completed with a nationwide cross-section of employed adults. Interviews were conducted by using the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system. Calls were made to a stratified (by region) un-clustered random probability sample generated by random-digit-dial methods.

Of the 3,578 eligible numbers, interviews were completed for 3,504 numbers, a completion rate of 98%. This study focuses on the work/family conflicts of salaried workers accounting for gender and race. The total number of salaried male workers in the sample is 1,435 and that of female workers is 1,361. Also, there are 2,183 white and 578 non-white salaried workers.

The NSCW provides detailed information about the workplace-related and work-related personal experiences of the workers such as work-family experiences, workplace benefits and policies, working conditions, household enumeration, personal well-being, child care and education, and elder care. Thus the dataset includes information that is required for this study.

Measurement

Dependent variable. Work-family spillover is an index of 4 items that concern the negative impact of work role on family relationships. For example "In the past three months, how often have you NOT had enough time for your family or other important people in your life because of your job?" The responses are: *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), *often* (4), *very often* (5). The alpha = 0.59.

Independent variables: Workplace benefits. Workplace benefits comprise nine dummy variables, where having the benefit is coded (1) for Yes, and (0) for No: Pension plan with guaranteed benefit and self-contribution; Employer contributes to variable (401K) retirement plan; Paid vacation days; Paid holidays;

Allowed paid time off for personal illness; Employer offers training opportunities; Employer pays for job related education/training; and Employer offers wellness program.

Independent variables: Flexible time benefits. Similarly, flexible time benefits comprise three dummy variables, where (1) is for Yes, and (0) is for No: Can choose own starting/quitting times within some range of hours; Could arrange to work part of the year; and Allowed to work a compressed work week some of the time.

Independent variables: Workplace culture. Difficulty taking time during work day for personal family matter where responses are: *Not at all hard* (1), *Not too hard* (2), *Somewhat hard* (3) and, *Very hard* (4).

Less likely to advance if use flex options: "Is the reason you do not use the flexible schedule options available to you A LOT because" *You don't need them* (1), *Your job responsibilities really don't allow it* (2) and, *You think using them might have a negative impact on your job advancement* (3).

Supportive workplace culture is a scale of 5 items such as "There is an unwritten rule at my place of employment that you can't take care of family needs on company time," where response categories are *Yes* (1), *No* (0).

The following are dummy variables where *Yes* (1), *No* (0): Employer offers service to find elder care; Employer operates/sponsors child care center on/near site; Employer provides direct financial assistance for child care; Employer offers pre-tax account for child/dependent care.

Independent variables: Individual variables. Gender is a dummy variable where 'woman' is coded as 1. Race is also a dummy variable with 'white' coded as 1. Most of the minority categories are African American, but all categories except white are grouped together because there are too few respondents in the individual minority categories to analyze them separately. For ease of discussion, they are referred to as non-whites.

Family size is a continuous variable that has been recoded as a dummy variable with *more than 0 people* coded as 1. Number of children under 18 years is a continuous variable. Special care for elderly relative is a dummy variable where *Yes* (1), *No* (0).

Independent variables: Human capital variables. Education is determined by the question: "What is the highest level of

schooling you have completed?" The responses are: *less than high school* (1), *high school or GED* (2), *trade or technical school beyond high school* (3), *Some college* (4), *two-year Associate's degree* (5), *four/five-year Bachelor's Degree* (6), *some college after BA or BS but without degree* (7), *professional degree in medicine, law, dentistry* (8), *Master's Degree or Doctorate* (9). Education is used as a continuous variable.

Hours of work at main job is an interval-level variable. Occupation is a dummy variable measured by the open-ended question: "What kind of work you do or what is your occupation?" In the dataset there is a variable that has 2 categories of occupation: *managerial or professional* (1) and *others* (2).

The variable "workplace autonomy" is determined by a scale of 5 items such as "I have the freedom to decide what I do on my job." Response categories are: *strongly disagree* (1), *somewhat disagree* (2), *somewhat agree* (3), and *strongly agree* (4). The fifth item is, "Can you choose your own starting and quitting times within some range of hours?" Responses are: *no* (1) and *yes* (2). The alpha is 0.70.

Satisfaction with income is determined by the response categories: *not satisfied at all* (1), *not too satisfied* (2), *somewhat satisfied* (3), *very satisfied* (4).

Independent variables: Workplace support. Supportive supervisor is a scale of 10 items such as "My supervisor or manager keeps me informed of the things I need to know to do my job well." The responses are: *strongly disagree* (1), *somewhat disagree* (2), *somewhat agree* (3), *strongly agree* (4). The alpha = 0.90.

Coworkers' support is a scale of 2 items, such as "I have the support from coworkers that I need to do a good job." The responses are *strongly disagree* (1), *somewhat disagree* (2), *somewhat agree* (3), and *strongly agree* (4). The alpha = 0.68.

Methods of Analyses

All the variables are tested by running frequency distributions, and all the variables have more-or-less normal distributions with acceptable skewness and kurtosis. Next, factor analyses are conducted to construct scales for the variables that consist of more than one item. Items with factor loadings greater than 0.50 are included.

Finally, we test the given research questions through a series of analysis programs that include running the

descriptive statistics of all the variables (data not shown), and regression analyses (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1. Unstandardized Coefficients from the Regression using Work-family Spillover as Dependent Variables and Workplace Benefits and Policies as Independent Variables (N = 1064)

Workplace Benefits and Policies	Model	Std. Error
<i>Workplace Benefits</i>		
Availability of personal health insurance through job (yes)	0.58	0.59
Pension plan with guaranteed benefit and no self contribution (yes)	-0.21	0.21
Employer contributes to variable (401K etc.) retirement plan (yes)	-0.23	0.24
Receive paid vacation days (yes)	0.53	0.47
Receive paid holidays (yes)	-0.59	0.44
Allowed paid time off for personal illness (yes)	0.10	0.27
Employer offers training opportunities (yes)	0.03	0.28
Employer pays for job-related education/training (yes)	-0.72**	0.31
Employer offers wellness program (yes)	0.28	0.23
<i>Flexible Time Benefits</i>		
Can choose own starting/quitting time (yes)	0.15	0.22
Could arrange full-time/part-time in current position is want (yes)	-0.82****	0.23
Could arrange work part year (yes)	-0.18	0.30
Allowed to work a compressed work week some of the time (yes)	0.53**	0.22
<i>Workplace Culture</i>		
Difficulty taking time during work day for personal/family matter	0.96****	0.11
Less likely to advance if use flex options	0.78****	0.10
<i>Care-giving</i>		
Employer offers service to find child care (yes)	0.23	(0.35)
Employer offers service to find elder care (yes)	-0.30	(0.29)
Employer operates/sponsors child care center on/near site (yes)	0.33	(0.38)
Employer provides direct financial assistance for child care (yes)	-0.06	(0.34)
Employer offers pre-tax account for child/dependent care (yes)	0.08	(0.23)
Constant	5.63****	(0.80)
F	12.81****	
R ²	0.20	
Adjusted R ²	0.18	

Note: ****p < .001, ***p < .01, **p < .05, *p < .10

Findings

An overview of employee sample characteristics (data not shown), including the variety of conventional employee benefits and work/family policies that are available to them, indicates that the sample is 49% female, 79% white, and 75% partnered. On average, employees have two children, and 35% give special care for an elderly relative.

In terms of human capital, employees have a two-year Associate's Degree, on average, and 33% are in managerial/professional occupations. Most employees work full-time, forty-three hours weekly on average. They enjoy considerable autonomy at work (13 on an 18-point scale, on average), and are relatively satisfied with their income (2.8 on a 4-point scale, on average). Their workplace culture, including supervisors and especially co-workers, is relatively supportive.

Relatively conventional benefits are most available to employees. Specifically, 70% or more have personal health insurance through their job; have an employer who contributes to a variable retirement plan (401k, etc.) and who pays for job-related education and training; and receive paid vacation days and paid holidays. In addition, over two-thirds (68%) are allowed paid time off for personal illness. In contrast, a minority of employees (42% or less) have flexible work time available to them. Moreover, one-third or fewer employees have caregiving policies at their place of work.

Paid time-off policies are commonly available to employees as a "package." For example, paid holidays is correlated ($r = 0.65$, $p < .001$) with paid vacation days; paid time off for personal illness policies is correlated ($r = 0.41$, $p < .001$) with paid holidays and ($r = 0.41$, $p < .001$) with paid vacation days. Additionally, those who receive personal insurance through their jobs receive paid holidays ($r = 0.50$, $p < .001$) and paid vacation days ($r = 0.51$, $p < .001$).

In terms of flexible work time policies, ability to work full-time or part-time is correlated with ability to work only part of a year ($r = 0.38$, $p < .001$). Caregiving policies are also correlated such that employers who offer a service to find childcare also offer a service to provide elder care ($r = 0.56$, $p < .001$), operate/sponsor a childcare center on or near the work site ($r = 0.55$, $p < .001$), and provide direct financial assistance for childcare ($r = 0.38$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. Unstandardized Coefficients of the Regression using Work-Family Spillover as the Dependent Variable and Workplace Characteristics as Independent Variables (continued next page)

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Individual Variables</i>						
Gender (female)	-0.38* (0.21)	0.09 (0.21)	0.15 (0.22)	0.28 (0.23)	0.34 (0.22)	0.50** (0.24)
Race (white)	0.50** (0.24)	1.03**** (0.23)	1.04**** (0.24)	1.11**** (0.24)	1.28**** (0.24)	0.98**** (0.26)
Family size (partnered)	0.17 (0.56)	0.41 (0.53)	0.38 (0.54)	0.84 (0.56)	0.72 (0.54)	1.29** (0.60)
Number of children under 18 years	0.28*** (0.08)	0.23*** (0.07)	0.25*** (0.08)	0.25*** (0.08)	0.27*** (0.08)	0.26*** (0.08)
Special care for elderly relative (yes)	0.58** (0.22)	0.51** (0.20)	0.50** (0.21)	0.38* (0.22)	0.23 (0.21)	0.26 (0.23)
<i>Human Capital Variables</i>						
Education		0.11** (0.05)	0.12** (0.05)	0.10* (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.08 (0.06)
Hours of work at main job		0.09**** (0.01)	0.09**** (0.01)	0.09**** (0.01)	0.06**** (0.01)	0.06**** (0.01)
Occupation (managerial/professional)		0.50** (0.24)	0.62** (0.25)	0.55** (0.25)	0.68*** (0.25)	0.56** (0.26)
Autonomy		-0.17**** (0.03)	-0.19**** (0.03)	-0.18**** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)
Satisfaction with income		-0.83**** (0.12)	-0.88**** (0.13)	-0.84**** (0.12)	-0.50**** (0.12)	-0.53**** (0.13)
<i>Workplace Benefits</i>						
Paid vacation days (yes)			0.85** (0.36)	0.93*** (0.35)	0.57* (0.34)	0.65* (0.36)
Paid holidays (yes)			-0.50 (0.35)	-0.76** (0.35)	-0.48 (0.34)	-0.50 (0.36)
Allowed time off for personal illness (yes)			-0.60** (0.27)	-0.38 (0.26)	-0.35 (0.25)	-0.40 (0.27)
Employer pays for education/training (yes)			-0.04 (0.26)	-0.05 (0.24)	0.20 (0.24)	0.18 (0.26)

Note: Numbers in parenthesis are standard errors; ****p < .001, ***p < .01, **p < .05, *p < .10.

Regarding the impact of traditional employee workplace benefits, Table 1 shows that only two of the nine benefits are statistically significant, and barely so. That is, if the employee receives holidays and job-related education/training paid by the employer, there is less work/family conflict.

Table 2 (continued). Unstandardized Coefficients of the Regression using Work-Family Spillover as the Dependent Variable and Workplace Characteristics as Independent Variables

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Flexible Time Benefits</i>						
Allowed to work part-time (yes)				-0.87**** (0.22)	-0.76*** (0.21)	-0.88*** (0.23)
Allowed to work compressed work week (yes)				0.60*** (0.21)	0.61*** (0.21)	0.60*** (0.22)
<i>Workplace Culture</i>						
Difficulty to take time off					0.58**** (0.11)	0.41**** (0.12)
Less likely to advance if use flex options					0.25** (0.11)	0.24** (0.11)
Supportive workplace culture					-0.25**** (0.03)	-0.17**** (0.04)
<i>Workplace Support</i>						
Supportive supervisor						-0.06** (0.02)
Supportive coworkers						-0.20** (0.09)
Constant	9.48**** (0.59)	8.92**** (0.83)	8.97**** (0.87)	8.81**** (0.89)	8.36**** (1.12)	10.72**** (1.30)
N	1355	1318	1243	1173	1125	952
F	5.63****	23.23****	16.72****	15.20****	20.95****	17.35****
R ²	0.02	0.15	0.16	0.17	0.27	0.28
Adjusted R ²	0.02	0.14	0.15	0.16	0.25	0.27

Note: N is the total number of cases; numbers in parenthesis are standard errors; **** p < .001, *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10.

Two of four policies pertaining to the provision of flexible work time significantly affect work/family conflict. Specifically, having the option to work either full-time or part-time in the current work position reduces work/family conflict. Inexplicably, to be able to work a compressed work week (e.g., four days) is related to greater work/family conflict. Perhaps it is trickier to schedule with a spouse who works a five-day week.

In addition to these policies, a workplace culture in which employees have no difficulty taking time off during the work

day for personal or family matters and in which there are no penalties regarding advancement if one uses flex-time options is related to less work/family conflict.

Additionally, none of the five employer-provided caregiving benefits is statistically significant. Specifically, employer-provided services to find childcare or eldercare, employer operation of an on-site childcare center, and employer provision of financial assistance or a pre-tax account for child or adult dependent care do not impact employees' perception of work/family conflict.

A final part of the analysis determines whether the impact on work/family conflict of the significant flexibility and childcare variables in Table 1 retain significance in Table 2 when four blocks of relevant independent variables are entered into the equation. These include a set of individual employee characteristics, human capital variables, workplace culture variables, and workplace support variables.

Model 1 in Table 2 regresses work/family conflict on five employee characteristics, namely gender, race, partnered status, number of dependent children, and whether the employee is providing special care for an elderly relative. It can be seen that all but partnered status have significant impact on work/family conflict. Specifically, there is the suggestion ($p = < 0.10$) that women perceive less work/family conflict than men. However, in Model 6, with all blocks of variables in the equation, women appear to experience more work/family conflict than men. White employees, those with dependent children, and those who care for an elderly relative experience more work/family conflict than non-whites, and those with no dependents at either end of the age continuum.

When the second set, human capital variables, are added to individual characteristics in Model 2, we see that all five of the former significantly affect work/family conflict. Higher-placed employees in terms of education and occupation, and those who work longer hours per week, perceive more work/family conflict. On the other hand, employees who have more autonomy in their jobs and who are satisfied with their income experience less work/family conflict. The addition of the block of human capital variables to the equation affects the impact of the individual characteristic variables very little; namely, gender (woman) loses its marginal significance.

The block of traditional workplace benefits is added to the equation in Model 3. Only paid time off for personal illness is related to less work/family conflict. Receipt of paid vacation days is related to more work/family conflict here as well as in Model 6 when all blocks of variables are in the equation. The significant effects of all human capital variables are not changed in Model 6.

In Model 4, a block of three flexible-time benefits is added to the equation. Two of these policies significantly impact work/family conflict. Specifically, the opportunity to work either full-time or part-time reduces work/family conflict. On the other hand, the opportunity to work a compressed week increases work/family conflict and remains so in the final Model 6. Having the option of flex-time is not related to work/family conflict.

Apart from formal policies, the effect of workplace culture is examined in Model 5. It can be seen that the existence of a supportive workplace culture lessens employees' perceptions of work/family conflict. However, the more difficult it is to take time off and the less likely is advancement if employees use flex-time options, the greater the work/family conflict. These effects persist for Model 6 when all blocks of variables are in the equation.

Finally, the supportiveness of supervisors and co-workers is added to Model 6. The more supportive the supervisor and co-workers, the less the perceived work/family conflict.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examines the prevalence of an extensive number of employee benefits and whether the existence of numerous work/family policies is related to reduced work/family conflict among a national sample of U.S. employees. In general, it is conventional benefits that are most available to the employees, such as health insurance, contributions to retirement plans, job-related education/training, sick days, vacation days and holidays. In contrast, only a minority of employees have flex-time and care-giving policies available to them at their workplaces, yet it is flexible scheduling that is most desired by employees (Rogers, 1992).

Despite the prevalence of the conventional employee benefits, few are related to reduced work/family conflict, namely paid holidays and paid education/training. And correlated with the scarcity of family caregiving policies is the lack of their effect on work/family conflict. This may be a statistical artifact in that only about ten percent of employees have access to such policies. But it could be that the lack of an effect is somehow related to the fact that relatively little support for family caregiving is a part of the culture in the United States.

Rather, it is flexible work-time provisions that more likely reduce work/family conflict, especially the option to work part-time and the lack of sanctions for actually using flextime options. These effects continue even when supportiveness of the work culture and of supervisors and co-workers are in the equation. Indeed, the effect of flexible time benefits persists even when all blocks of variables—individual, human capital, and workplace benefits, as well as workplace culture and support—are controlled (i.e., are in the equation in Model 6). It is a matter of both/and rather than either/or when examining impacts on work/family conflict. And, despite the many controls, women and those in traditional childcare roles continue to perceive more work/family conflict.

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