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Introduction

The theoretical implications of studying the role collective organizations play in the access and use of work and family policies have been largely unexplored within the work and family literature. Much of this literature is dominated by studies associating family friendly policies and practices with individual affect, behaviors, and attitudes, e.g. role conflict, stress, turnover, commitment, and satisfaction (Kossek and Lambert 2005; Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek et al. 2006). While an individual perspective is useful, the literature lacks discussion of a collective perspective on employee access to work-life flexibility policies, for example considering a unionized context or public policy implementation.

Past Studies have used institutional theory or economic factors to explain the adoption of work-life flexibility policies across organizations (Goodstein 1994; Goodstein 1995; Ingram and Simons 1995; Osterman 1995; Arthur 2003). Other studies have examined the relationship between availability of work-life policies on a variety of outcomes such as recruitment, organizational commitment, or firm performance (Konrad and Mangel 2000; Avery and McKay 2006). As Eaton (2003) points out, often there are many barriers to actual use of available policies; moreover, as Lambert and Waxman (2005) note, there is typically organizational stratification in the availability of these policies as they are often designed and implemented in ways that do not necessarily help workers, particularly those in blue collar or lower level jobs.

Paper goals: In order to address the gaps noted above, we examine the association of collective voice, individual voice, individual and workplace characteristics on employee access to various work-life flexibility policies and practices. In particular, we expand theories of collective and individual voice by applying and testing them in the work-family arena. Moreover, we examine the extent to which collective and individual voice moderate the association of specific individual and workplace characteristics with employee access to work-life flexibility policies and practices. Below we provide a brief overview of the collective agreement provisions in our study and the outcome variables of interest.

Work-life issues covered in collective agreements. Collective agreements typically include a set of paid time off provisions such as vacation, sick days, and personal days. These provisions can be helpful for employees in balancing work and family demands. Less frequent, but certainly present, in collective agreements are provisions that allow for temporal and spatial flexibility. These policies and practices include flex-time, telecommuting, compensatory time, as well as the ability exchange shifts, compress the workweek, and return to work gradually after an illness or birth. We will show in the paper, collective agreements typically vary in three ways in regards to provisions governing work-life flexibility and working time. They are either 1) Explicit, where collective agreements either explicitly give employees the right to negotiate such flexible work arrangements with their supervisors, 2) Supervisory Discretionary where access to these work-life flexibility policies and practices is left to supervisor discretion, or 3) Absent, where they provide no language at all. Thus, even when collective agreements are explicit in language regulating the workplace, accessing time and spatial flexibility depends in large part on supervisor-employee interaction within different forms of work organization and job tasks.
Given this reality, individuals with a strong voice and access to collective voice should be more likely to access work-life flexibility policies and practices.

*Collective voice outcomes from flexibility.* Collective voice has two dimensions in our study: union effectiveness and union support. The literature on collective voice emphasizes the ability of employees through their union to express their thoughts and concerns about the workplace in a variety of ways (Freeman and Medoff 1984). Unions that are effective in responding to employee concerns and needs are exercising collective voice on behalf of workers. Union effectiveness is a measure of how strong employees perceive the union to be as their collective representative. Union support focuses on how well the union helps employees solve problems at work and problems specifically related to their schedule.

*Individual voice.* Individual voice focuses on the extent to which employees have a say about their jobs and how comfortable they feel expressing their thoughts about their work schedule to their supervisor. The work-family literature typically integrates any concept of individual voice into workplace climate variables such as individual perceptions of supervisor support, or organizational support, or of the negative consequences from policy use. However, we see this as a separate construct since individuals views of usability may vary from worker to worker. Thus, we separate out this effect to test its individual impact.

**Hypotheses**

We will investigate and provide theory on the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis (1) Collective and individual voice are positively associated with employee access to work-life flexibility policies and practices.

Hypothesis (2) Collective and individual voice moderate the association of workplace and individual characteristics with employee access to work-life flexibility policies and practices. Given that certain work-life flexibility practices, e.g. telecommuting, are more likely to be possible in certain types of jobs, we include a test for moderation of voice with occupation and work organization characteristics. This will demonstrate whether union or individual voice can influence the impact of these factors on employee access to work-life flexibility.

**Sample and Analysis**

The data for this paper comes from 8 unionized public and private organizations across the United States. We conducted interviews with managers and supervisors at each organization and conducted an employee survey based on a stratified random sample across departments in each organization. The individual survey data consists of 897 employees within 20 labor unions across the 8 organizations. These data provide us with direct measures of employee access to flexibility policies and practices. The flexibility policies and practices include measures of temporal flexibility such as flex-time, flex-shifts, compressed workweeks, compensatory time, part-time return to work, as well as a measure of spatial flexibility such as telecommuting. We use a probit analysis to test the effect of union support, union effectiveness, individual voice, and various individual and workplace characteristics on employee access to work-life flexibility policies and practices.

Although labor unions are key institutions in negotiating wages and benefits for millions of employees, U.S. unions are not traditionally thought of as champions of work-life flexibility.
This paper can make a substantial contribution to issues of employee voice by demonstrating how unions can make a difference in employees’ demand for work-life flexibility.
References


