



# Paradigms of Flexibility: A Systematic Review of Research on Workplace Flexibility

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*As flexibility has become a sine qua non of the contemporary workplace, we performed a critical review of its different uses and understandings in business and management research. Analyzing the literature on workplace flexibility in the period 1970–2018, using a four-part conceptual framework, and on the basis of subsequent content analysis of 262 most relevant publications, we identify two axes of tension embedding scholarly work on flexibility: the flexibility of vs. flexibility for organizations and employees, and a favorability-criticality tension. We further explain how internal divisions are attributable to three different paradigms of flexibility (two of which dominate), resulting from divergent sets of assumptions regarding: its target, rationale, approach to it, as well as methodologies involved in studying it. We propose a research agenda indicating the ways in which paradigmatic underpinnings of flexibility research may be further clarified and divisions between the paradigms made sense of.*

**Keywords:** workplace flexibility; flexible work; flexible work arrangements (FWAs); paradigm; bibliometric analysis; content analysis

## Introduction

Workplace flexibility is in the spotlight and present on many agendas of organizations in the contemporary economy (Way *et al.*, 2015). Even more so, flexibility in the contemporary workplace has become so axiomatic that few scholars nowadays question the necessity of workplace flexibility. As a consequence, research on workplace flexibility is primarily pivoted on the ways through which flexibility can be generated for workers and organizations alike, and on how flexibility enables employee and organizational performance (e.g., Way *et al.*, 2015; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017). For instance, employees are reported to increasingly demand flexibility in their work, and negotiate flexible working hours (Rousseau, 2005; Hill *et al.*, 2008; Bal *et al.*, 2012). Simultaneously, organizations strive to become more flexible in a hypercompetitive environment (Sanchez, 1995; Berk and Kaše, 2010). Finally, governments across the world likewise desire more flexible economies and labor markets where individuals can more easily change jobs (Johnson, 2011; Cuñat and Melitz, 2012).

In particular, business and management research tends to postulate flexibility as a sine qua non of the contemporary workplace, with studies typically focusing on its instrumental nature for employees and organizations. Consequently, both research on flexibility for organizations and for employees tend to claim the importance of flexibility in the contemporary workplace. The literatures on flexibility for organizations and for employees have developed largely separately from each other (Bal and Jansen, 2016), despite not being independent, as already suggested in the 1980s (Pollert, 1988; Tomaney, 1990). Hence, while the business and management literature consists of many different uses of the term ‘flexibility’, the risk is that those disparate meanings may be subsumed under one superficially uniform concept (i.e., flexibility) cloaking the differences. As we show, these meanings may differ to such an extent that contrasting, or even opposing, perspectives on flexibility emerge in different sub-disciplines without these differences being acknowledged. This way, the separate literatures focus on the benefits of flexibility, often without attempting to explore the complexities involved, such as who benefits from it. For instance, researchers discussed how flexibility for organizations was exchanged for greater flexibility for employees (Reilly, 1998; Harvey, 2005), where allegedly both parties

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would benefit, yet those ‘benefits’ differed considerably. Organizational scholars focused on investigating the benefits of flexibility for organizations (Sanchez, 1995), while psychological scholars investigated the benefits for employees (Baltes *et al.*, 1999). The consequence of separation between these literatures entailed ignoring the interplay between (different) forms of flexibility for both parties, hence the degree of potential interdependence between flexibility for organizations and employees has also been largely neglected (Bal and Jansen, 2016). Despite the popularity of the term and its rise across different academic disciplines, it is striking how different conceptualizations and interpretations of flexibility fail to overlap or appear contradictory (e.g., Putnam *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, a more critical discussion on the internal cogency of flexibility as a concept is needed.

In line with one of the established uses of this notion, we propose that those divergent interpretations of flexibility, underpinned by tensions between them, amount to different paradigms (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013; Cañibano, 2019). Because of the usage of the term ‘flexibility’ across a variety of disciplines, tensions emerge over its precise meaning and the potentially contradictory or incompatible views as to what flexibility entails for individuals, organizations, and society. Such state of affairs is problematic beyond semantics. Ascribing meanings to concepts strongly implicated in driving organizational change agendas and informing corporate policies (Vallas, 1999; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2018), may lead to misconceptions, misrepresentation, and even internal discord. For instance, an emphasis on enhancing flexibility for organizations may lead to reduced flexibility or work intensification for employees (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Bal and Jansen, 2016).

Notwithstanding the potential problematic nature of using flexibility across multiple sub-disciplines in business and management, it is surprising that so far no contributions have been made systematically clarifying the various perspectives on flexibility and investigating trends and tensions arising in these literatures. While reviews and meta-analyses have been published on flexibility for employees (Baltes *et al.*, 1999; De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Allen *et al.*, 2013; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017), strategic flexibility (Brozovic, 2018) and supply chain flexibility (Fayezi *et al.*, 2017), there is yet no review taking a perspective on workplace flexibility, in which underpinning assumptions and uses of flexibility are systematically compared.

We restrict the paper to reviewing research on workplace flexibility from a business and management perspective, as at this level flexibility unfolds for both organizations and employees. While uses of flexibility at the societal level may shape dominant discourses (e.g., sociological discussion of flexibility), they fall beyond

the scope of the current inquiry. We first review conceptualizations of flexibility across the different sub-disciplines. Subsequently, we systematically review the literature on workplace flexibility using bibliometric analysis, and content analysis of how flexibility is discussed in the different literatures.

We thereby contribute to the literature on workplace flexibility by an in-depth, systematic review of the contributions during the last decade, to ascertain how different streams in the flexibility literature have emerged, and identifying two dominating paradigms of flexibility. This is important as we will show (in the discussion section) that the different literatures tend to mutually ignore the potential opposed meanings and effects of flexibility. However, by virtue of our paradigmatic perspective, we are also able to identify the inchoate body of work which remains outside of the two dominant paradigms (yet, being sufficiently coherent in its assumptions, it warrants being regarded as a paradigm in its own right), problematizing them and therefore offering a possibility for a more integrative lens to understand how the different types of flexibility may mutually interrelate. Finally, we discuss the ways in which this more integrative perspective could be taken forward in future research.

## Conceptualizations of workplace flexibility

Flexibility can be envisaged both at psychological and physical level. At the psychological level, it can be defined as: ‘willingness to change or compromise’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). At the physical level, it is defined as ‘the quality of bending easily without breaking’ and ‘the ability to be easily modified’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). These two aspects of flexibility are important as they imply a dual meaning of the concept, not only in terms of a willingness and ability to change as an individual or organization, but also an ability to be moldable without breaking. However, there is little understanding of the various aspects of workplace flexibility enabling a critically-informed framework for flexibility research to emerge. Towards providing foundations for such a framework across the business and management fields, we now discuss the types of flexibility present in the literature.

### *Types of flexibility*

The term ‘workplace flexibility’ was introduced in the 1980s (Atkinson, 1984), yet, as already mentioned, it has been developed differently in separate literatures, such as strategic management (e.g., Sanchez, 1995) and strategic HRM (e.g., Wright and Snell, 1998; Chang *et al.*, 2013). The literature distinguishes four types of flexibility: organizational flexibility (Schreyögg and

Sydow, 2010), employee flexibility (Beltrán-Martín and Roca-Puig, 2013), flexible work (Sparrow, 2012), and flexible work arrangements (FWAs; Allen *et al.*, 2013).

*Organizational flexibility* refers to the ability of *organizations* to adapt to changes in their environment (Hill *et al.*, 2008; Phillips and Tuladhar, 2000). Organizational flexibility has most often been described in terms of a managerial capability to quick responsiveness. Managerial capabilities for responsiveness are also enhanced through strategic flexibility, which denotes the flexibility in changing and adapting production, distribution and marketing strategies (Sanchez, 1995). The main argument in the organizational flexibility literature is that organizations need to become more flexible to be able to adapt to hypercompetitive environments, and therefore need capacity to readjust quickly in terms of how they operate (e.g., speed of decision making by managers, and redeployment of employees across and beyond the organization), as well as in terms of how organizations manage employment relationships (e.g., having the possibility to hire and fire, and pay employees for their performance). These two aspects of flexibility for organizations should elicit organizations to become more flexible, and thus perform better (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010).

*Employee flexibility* is defined as the ability of employees to adapt to changes in their work or in their organizations (Beltrán-Martín and Roca-Puig, 2013). In this literature, it is argued that the dynamic workplace demands employees to be more flexible in their use of skills, perceptions of their job roles, and abilities to adapt to changing work circumstances (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2005; Beltrán-Martín *et al.*, 2008). This literature has primarily been developed in the field of strategic human resource management and builds on the seminal work of Wright and Snell (1998) to describe the ways through which employees can be made or may become more flexible in their work attitudes and behaviors.

*Flexible work* refers to the ability to adapt employee contracts with the organization to allow greater adjustability to changing circumstances (Wright and Bretthauer, 2010). Hence, flexible work relates to the *contractual* status of employment, such as self-employment, part-time jobs, casual jobs, or zero-hours contracts, and can be considered flexible if deviating from a norm of fulltime, permanent employment (Wilson *et al.*, 2008).

Finally, *flexible work arrangements (FWAs)* are organizational practices that help employees to decide when and where work is conducted (Hill *et al.*, 2008; Allen *et al.*, 2013). FWAs can be arranged on an institutional basis, through for instance making HR practices available to employees (Sweet *et al.*, 2014), but they can also be individually negotiated by employees (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). Empirical research on FWAs

investigated how employees may benefit from FWAs (Baltes *et al.*, 1999; De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Allen *et al.*, 2013) or how tensions develop as a result of FWAs (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Putnam *et al.*, 2014).

All these four types of flexibility tap into the various aspects of adaptability and ability to change quickly in the contemporary workplace (Hill *et al.*, 2008) and thus can be understood as important dimensions or aspects within the broader concept of workplace flexibility. However, the four types are also different in important ways. While organizational flexibility is conceptualized in relation to organizations having to become more flexible, the literatures on employee flexibility and FWAs discuss flexibility in relation to individuals and/or groups of employees. Moreover, while employee flexibility aims at focusing on the flexibility of the individual (employee), flexible work and FWAs focus on flexibility of work conditions, rather than of the person (although they may have an impact on the person). Finally, flexible work is not aimed at flexibility in job content or arrangements (such as when or where an employee conducts the work), as these are referred to as FWAs. While in the literature the two have been used interchangeably (see e.g., De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017), flexible work is conceptualized as contractual flexibility, and more specifically a deviation from fulltime working. Thus, while FWAs do not (necessarily) have implications for the contractual status of an employee (as the arrangement aims at flexibility *within* the job and working conditions), flexible work concerns the flexibility of the contract.

#### *Different meanings of flexibility*

The four main types of flexibility are not sufficient to capture the whole breadth of research streams in this field (Cañibano, 2019), since flexibility can be seen as more than just a specific attribute. In addition to being defined in relation to an entity (employee, organization or contract), flexibility can also be considered as a characteristic of a job or of employment, such as flexibility in jobs, flexible employment or flexible careers (Moen and Sweet, 2004; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2018). On the one hand, flexibility can be described in terms of flexibility *of* the employee, which means that the individual is flexible in having adaptable action repertoires and thus being instrumental for the organization. On the other hand, it can be described in relation to flexibility *for* the employee (see also Alis *et al.*, 2006). For instance, FWAs provide employees flexibility in their jobs, through which they should obtain more autonomy and means to balance work and life concerns (Allen *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, employee flexibility may provide flexibility *for* the organization, as



flexible employees may provide organizations with competitive advantage (Wright and Snell, 1998).

This creates a situation where the concept of flexibility may become ambiguous: (1) it may be considered from either organizational or employee perspective; (2) it may be something that is *for* the employee (e.g., FWAs) or *for* the organization; and finally (3) flexibility may be something (expected) *of* the organization (i.e., strategic flexibility) or *of* the employee, as employee flexibility is instrumental to organizational goals (Lee and Makhija, 2009).

### *Paradigms*

To understand the various uses and meanings of workplace flexibility, we built on the recent work on paradigms in organizational science, and follow the use of the concept of ‘paradigm’ by Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013). Accordingly, paradigms reflect shared assumptions behind communal professional practice (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013) combined with a simultaneous ‘paucity of agreement’ between theory groups (Burrell, 2012). Such notion of a communal paradigm entails possessing ‘recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain’ (Haas, 1989, in: Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013, p. 1706) associated with an authoritative claim to possession of domain-relevant knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 1991). Equally, said knowledge within a given paradigm is founded upon shared normative beliefs within the given community of scholars (Vazquez, 1998), and ‘incompatible’ between those groups (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013, p. 1707). Following Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, we do not perceive different paradigms as entirely sealed or methodologically uniform, and they do change over time. Such is the current state of play in the literature on workplace flexibility, as we shall demonstrate: within different paradigms, the incompatible pockets of theory are developed in relative isolation from each other and marked by mutual tensions on multiple levels.

In this paper, we review the flexibility literature to identify the main axes of the different paradigms. Our contribution is to critically inform the future readings and uses of flexibility by sensitizing them to dynamics existing in the field. Towards this aim, we provide an in-depth review of the publications over the last decade, and identify main ways in which they are disconnected from each other.

## **Methodology**

To ascertain how workplace flexibility is researched and discussed in the business and management context, we performed a bibliometric analysis of the flexibility

literature, a systematic review, and a content analysis. The bibliometric analysis aimed at investigating trends over time, especially focusing on the rise of research on workplace flexibility in business and management. Furthermore, our systematic review focuses on determining what types of flexibility are discussed, and whether these are mutually inclusive or exclusive. Finally, our content analysis proceeds to narrow the range of papers considered to identify tensions existing in the literature. While research may postulate the inevitability and benefits of flexibility in the contemporary workplace, it is important to establish an overview of whether the literatures on the different types of flexibility are integrated, whether critical perspectives on workplace flexibility are generated within research domains, and which perspectives (e.g., employee or organization) are taken into account when discussing flexibility.

To render the developments in this field, both authors have initially searched all the databases available under Web of Science Core collection (including Science Citation Index Expanded [SCI-EXPANDED], Social Sciences Citation Index [SSCI], Arts & Humanities Citation Index [A&HCI], Conference Proceedings Citation Index- Science [CPCI-S], Conference Proceedings Citation Index- Social Science & Humanities [CPCI-SSH], and Emerging Sources Citation Index [ESCI]). Our search included the whole available period 1970–2018. The terms ‘flexibility’ and ‘flexible work’, were used non-discriminatorily, across all available disciplines to generate comparative material. We have subsequently compared the observed regularities – especially, a steady rise from the beginning of the period, which accelerated in 2008–2011 – with the results generated when only Social Sciences Citation Index [SSCI] was included. Juxtaposing the trends between the remaining databases combined and SSCI enabled us to compare and identify the fundamental similarities, namely the steady and generally similar increments in both cases. Having found the observable regularities comparable between SSCI and the remaining databases we decided to focus on the former in all subsequent steps to exclude irrelevant publications.

We have initially identified a set of four notions potentially constituting core terms of our research: apart from ‘flexibility’, we also searched for: ‘organizational flexibility’, ‘employee flexibility’ and ‘flexible work’. The two authors of the paper performed all searches and coded all papers jointly. When we inspected the first results, it was clear that the flexibility literature peaked during the years 2008–2012, with a further rise after 2013, which led to our decision to bracket the period post-2007 for closer scrutiny. We conducted this by means of content analysis, a method for analyzing text data that combines analytic rigor with pliancy needed to address specific research problem (Rosengren, 1981;

Cavanagh, 1997). For the period of 2008–2018, the SSCI database returned 4,198 publications within management and business and including ‘flexibility’ or ‘flexible’. Initially, we considered using the pre-defined ‘core’ terms – flexible work arrangements, flexible work, employee flexibility and organizational flexibility – but we found this approach potentially narrowing. For instance, it was likely that contributions belonging to the area of organizational flexibility did not explicitly use this term, while terms are also used interchangeably. By using more specific terms (such as organizational flexibility or FWAs), we would not capture all the relevant studies in the field, as some studies were using idiosyncratic terms to study workplace flexibility (e.g., the studies on functional flexibility or HR flexibility; Way *et al.*, 2015). Hence, to be able to capture all the relevant studies in the field, we initially searched for all papers on flexibility, thus ensuring our approach is sufficiently inclusive.

Subsequently, we conducted an initial sifting, based on: (i) title; (ii) abstract (where applicable); (iii) keywords; and (iv) type of journal/outlet (where applicable), we have identified those contributions which met the standards of addressing the three areas relevant to our study, namely flexibility of: work, people/employees and organizations. We excluded numerous contributions which diverged from those areas, such as focusing on supply chain management or micro-scale production processes. We have also excluded short forms, such as corrections and news items, as well as book reviews. We frequently moved back and forth between the categories and papers rendered irrelevant in our research context, discussing the reasons and sharing examples. While we tried to remain as open as possible to different approaches to the topic, we remained alerted to discrepancies between the stated content of the publication (title), the abstract and keywords. For instance, even if ‘flexibility’ was included as a keyword, it did not always entail that it was present in the title or in the abstract. Similarly, even if the title suggested focusing on for instance ‘organizational flexibility’, but failed to in any way relate to this concept in the abstract and excluded it from the keywords, we were flagging it up as discrepancy. Subsequently, we discussed the representative sample of discrepancies making decision regarding the inclusion in the final set of texts.

We also probed contributions related to flexibility, such as the literature around work-life balance (Allen *et al.*, 2013). However, we decided against specifically targeting this literature for an in-depth exploration, as it constitutes a vast body of research which is related to workplace flexibility, but for which flexibility is not necessarily the main focus. Hence, we only included studies from this area when they explicitly referred to flexibility, and for instance measured flexibility or discussed flexible work arrangements (e.g., Bal

*et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the reviews and meta-analyses regarding the topic of work-life balance have already been performed elsewhere (e.g., Allen *et al.*, 2013; Greenhaus and Kossek, 2014).

As a result, we included 262 papers, thus excluding approximately 94% of the initial selection. These papers discussed or measured one of the four types of flexibility mentioned above. While the ‘acceptance rate’ of 6% may seem low, we find it unsurprising given that cross-sectionality and ambiguity of the notion of flexibility was in itself identified as a research problem, thus provoking the thoroughness and rigor of the research process. We observed an initial peak in 2010 in publications, and a steady rise after 2012, supporting the notion that especially in response to the economic crisis (i.e., post-2007), flexibility became a popular theme of research, and has been of particular interest to researchers from 2012 onwards. See also the online Supplementary Material for a detailed overview of publications per year.

We subsequently conducted content analysis of the 262 papers, and coded all papers based on four dimensions. First, we coded each paper methodologically as qualitative, quantitative, mixed or conceptual. Second, we coded the type of flexibility studied in each paper (organizational flexibility, employee flexibility, flexible work or FWAs). Subsequently, we coded the main perspective used in a paper. Perspective refers to the party (i.e., employee or organization) which the main focus in the study was devoted to. It was found that employee, organizational, and mixed perspectives (i.e., taking into account both employee and organizational perspectives) are most conspicuous in the literature. In the case of the empirically-oriented articles decision as regards perspective was made in relation to the dominating party in the employment relationship (either ‘employee’ or ‘organization’), with a relatively few papers being classified as ‘mixed’ in this regard. Similarly, in conceptual or theoretical papers, ‘perspective’ was coded after the primary outlook taken in a paper (e.g., the organizational perspective in the paper on how managers can implement workplace flexibility by Kossek *et al.*, 2015). Finally, we ascertained that typical approaches to flexibility can be coded as being generally in favor of flexibility, balanced in their views (i.e., discussing both positive and negative aspects of flexibility) and being critical towards it (emphasizing the negative aspects of flexibility resulting from its use in the workplace and its unintended consequences).

## Findings and analysis – Paradigms of flexibility

Each of the 262 studies was coded in line with the four categories explained above. Table 1 shows the frequencies

**TABLE 1** Overview of studies on flexibility

<i>Type of study</i>	<i>Type of flexibility</i>	<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Stance</i>
37 (14%) Conceptual	49 (19%) Employee flexibility	99 (38%) Employee	53 (20%) Balanced
13 (5%) Mixed	36 (14%) Flexible work	139 (53%) Organization	27 (10%) Critical
59 (23%) Qualitative	100 (38%) FWAs	24 (9%) Mixed	182 (70%) Favor
153 (58%) Quantitative	77 (29%) Organizational flexibility		

of each of the four categories and Table 2 shows the complete overview of number of studies per aspect. The majority of studies were quantitative (58%). Regarding the types of flexibility, the studies were more varied; 38% investigated FWAs, 29% organizational flexibility, 19% employee flexibility, and 14% flexible work. The largest percentage of studies included organizational perspectives on flexibility (53%), while 38% were based on employee perspectives. 70% of the studies were in favor of flexibility.

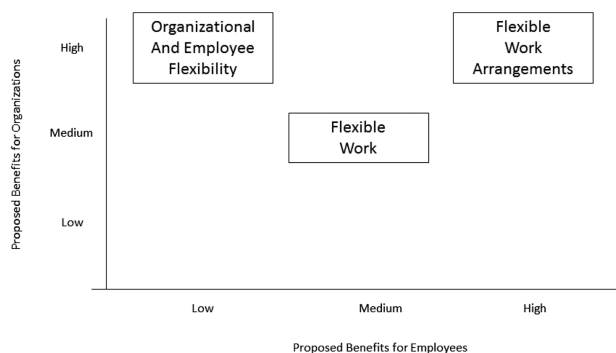
#### *Paradigms within the workplace flexibility literature*

We further plotted the different types of flexibility, underpinned by different paradigms of flexibility, onto a model which is shown in Figure 1. We mapped the flexibility types according to the benefits they are proposed to have for both organizations and employees, thereby constituting the different paradigmatic approaches to flexibility.

Using a paradigm lens (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013), we were able to determine in

**TABLE 2** Overview of number of studies in each combination of aspects

<i>Type of study</i>	<i>Stance</i>	<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Type of flexibility</i>			
			<i>Organizational</i>	<i>Employee</i>	<i>Flexible work</i>	<i>FWAs</i>
Quantitative	Favor	Employee		5	3	25
		Organization	50	21	5	12
		Mixed				2
	Critical	Employee			1	3
		Organization		2		1
		Mixed				
	Balanced	Employee		2	1	4
		Organization	5	2	2	4
		Mixed			2	1
Qualitative	Favor	Employee		3	3	5
		Organization	4		2	2
		Mixed	1	1	2	3
	Critical	Employee	1	1	3	4
		Organization	1			
		Mixed			1	1
	Balanced	Employee		3	2	10
		Organization	1		1	1
		Mixed				3
Mixed	Favor	Employee				5
		Organization	2			
		Mixed		1		2
	Critical	Employee				2
		Organization		1		
		Mixed				
Conceptual	Favor	Employee		2	3	3
		Organization	9	4		
		Mixed			1	1
	Critical	Employee		1		1
		Organization			1	
		Mixed			1	1
Balanced	Employee	1		1	4	
	Organization	2		1		
	Mixed					



**FIGURE 1** Typology of Paradigms of Workplace Flexibility Types for Organizations and Employees

particular how the separate literatures on the types of flexibility related to each other. First, we confirmed that almost half of the studies (i.e., 48%) focused on either organizational or employee flexibility, with the significant majority of these studies using quantitative methods and being in favor of flexibility (see Table 2). This constitutes a first paradigmatic approach to flexibility, whereby it is assumed that flexibility is necessary for organizational survival, and hence focuses on how both organizations and employees can be ‘made’ more flexible and adaptable to dynamic markets. Examples of such approaches are Anwar and Hasnu (2017) who investigated the effects of flexibility orientation on firm performance, and Escrig-Tena *et al.* (2012) who investigated the effects of quality management on employee flexibility, based on the rationale that quality management may enhance employee flexibility, and subsequently improve organizational profitability. Most contributions in this paradigm (organizational and employee flexibility) sidestep the implications for (individual) employees, and thus remain silent regarding the benefits for employees. Hence, in Figure 1, both organizational and employee flexibility can be mapped on the upper left corner of the figure. Therefore, in this flexibility paradigm, primarily built on a quantitative methodology, organizational and employee flexibility are strongly associated with benefits for organizations. While both affect individual employees more or less directly – either through increasing adaptability of different parts or functions of the organization, or by inflicting it upon the employees themselves – in both cases the implications for employees are largely ignored. In other words, while due to the very nature of both flexibility types in this paradigm the employees are implicated, the literature does not investigate whether these implications are beneficial, negative or even how they manifest for individual employees.

On the other end of the horizontal axis, FWAs are generally theorized to have strong benefits for both employees and organizations (as Figure 1 shows). The paradigm underpinning literature on FWAs constitutes a

fairly large percentage of the total literature (38%), and has been on the rise since 2012. In contrast to the employee/organizational flexibility literature, FWAs focus explicitly on flexibility for employees, but unlike the first paradigm, FWAs research is generally explicit about the proposed benefits for the other party (in this case the organization). FWAs are expected to deliver benefits to employees in terms of greater well-being and performance, and yet they will ultimately benefit organizations as well by greater performance and lower absence and turnover (Allen *et al.*, 2013). An example is the study of Carlson and colleagues, in which the authors explain that FWAs offer organizations competitive advantage and help to attract ‘high quality employees’ (Carlson *et al.*, 2010). Hence, this quantitatively dominated (Table 2) paradigm theorizes flexibility to have strong benefits for employees and for organizations.

Finally, the type of flexibility labelled ‘flexible work’ results from another paradigmatic approach: our content analysis of contributions within this area suggests that flexibility is postulated to have medium benefits for organizations and employees. A representative example is the conceptual paper by MacVaugh and Evans (2012) on flexible work in Japanese firms, in which the postulated benefits of flexible work for organizations are high, while the effects for employees are briefly mentioned and generally assumed to be positive. Therefore in our visual representation of flexibility paradigms, ‘flexible work’ is located in the center between the two previous paradigms, signifying ‘medium’ benefits for employees and organizations. The strong identifying assumption of this paradigm (in contrast to the other paradigms) is the capacity to approach the topic of flexibility from either employee or organizational perspective (with a small fraction of papers focusing on both). At the same time, flexible work constitutes only a small portion of the total literature on flexibility (14%), which may be indicative of the relative polarization in the literature between organizational and employee perspectives on flexibility. The flexible work paradigm also postulates benefits for both parties (similar to FWA), as the relatively high score of contributions ‘in favor’ of organizations and employees suggests (Table 2), but unlike the two dominating paradigms, flexible work shows a relative lack of methodological preference for either quantitative, qualitative or conceptual approaches.

In sum, our analysis of the literature on the flexibility types revealed two main paradigms of workplace flexibility, and a third minor alternative paradigm. The first constitutes organizational and managerial perspectives on flexibility which emphasize the instrumental logic of flexibility to organizational survival. The second, employee paradigm focuses on what flexibility means for individual employees, but adheres to a managerial perspective by emphasizing the instrumentality of



flexibility for employees in lieu of (but ultimately leading to) organizational benefits. Finally, the minor flexible work paradigm assumes an intermediary position, by bringing together organizational and employee perspectives suggesting a need for balance between them. However, this constitutes only a small and somewhat marginalized area of research. The unassuming volume of contributions within this paradigm emphasizes the relative disconnect between two dominating paradigms of flexibility and the fact that attempts to integrate different perspectives on flexibility are an exception rather than being a norm. Yet, there is a small but significant stream of literature problematizing workplace flexibility, thus constituting counter-movements to the paradigms.

### *Problematizing paradigms*

On the basis of the content analysis and conceptual mapping of studies on the model in Figure 1, we identified three possible ways through which the two dominant paradigms are challenged. First, some studies used mixed perspectives including data among both organizations and employees to differentiate between the effects of flexibility for organizations versus employees (e.g., Thakur *et al.*, 2018, who focused on housewives' and HR managers' perspectives on job sharing as flexible work). Second, some studies explicitly focused on the theoretical dynamics that underpin flexibility at work for employees and organizations, thereby emphasizing the distinctiveness of the effects for both parties (e.g., the review paper of Bidwell *et al.*, 2013, focusing on how flexible work has impacted both organizations and employees). Finally, a stream of literature has taken either a balanced or a critical approach to flexibility – being also relatively frequently associated with non-quantitative methodologies, thereby elucidating the interconnectedness of the various paradigms of flexibility (e.g., the review of Putnam *et al.*, 2014, focusing on how FWAs enhance employee autonomy *and* organizational control). These three counter-movements problematize the notions of flexibility as a win-win situation for employees and organizations (Felstead and Henseke, 2017), and problematize the conceptual mapping of the flexibility types.

Hence, conceptual/qualitative study designs, mixed perspectives, and balanced as well as critical stances (Table 2), provide an opportunity for three outcomes alternative to the paradigms (normally characterized by 'in favor' stance, quantitatively-oriented, and assuming either employee or organization perspectives). First, balanced and critical research may problematize the proposed positive effects of FWAs and flexible work for employees. For instance, the study of Richardson (2009) on geographical flexibility of academics pointed to the tensions resulting from flexibility that academics have to

deal with, often leading them to struggle with structures and rules in their universities. Such studies, therefore, problematize the proposed benefits for employees when not materialized. While organizations still benefit from flexibility, the benefits for employees are less clear and often leading to compromises.

Second, a small stream of research – normally stemming from critical and balanced approaches – problematizes the proposed benefits for organizations. For instance, the study of Lambert (2008) on labor flexibility (and the implementation of reduced-hours contracts) revealed that the implementation of flexibility not only affected peripheral workers, but core (permanent) workers as well, leading to higher employee turnover, and thus higher costs for organizations. Moreover, the study of Stirpe and Zárraga-Oberty (2017) showed when and how FWAs lead to lower employee retention, thereby questioning the relevance of FWAs for these organizations.

Finally, a third stream of balanced and critical research shows how flexibility may have adverse effects for *both* organizations and employees. In this research, flexibility is not considered necessarily to be a trade-off between employee and organization, with one losing and one winning party, but where – over time – both parties may actually experience negative effects of flexibility. For instance, Dick's (2009) study of flexible working in the UK police service showed how flexible working could have a negative impact on employees taking advantage of these flexible practices as well as the organization itself. Dick (2009) argued that the implementation of flexible working may challenge the legitimacy of the dominant order, which may stifle the achievement of team targets, and thus the quality of services.

In sum, this shows that the proposed mapping of the flexibility types at the upper left and upper right part of the model (i.e., indicating organizational benefit regardless of flexibility type) is problematized by balanced and critical research. More often than not, this is coupled with the methodological shift (away from quantitative approach) and perspective shift (towards mixed perspectives). In so doing, the separate paradigms may potentially be integrated, criticized or exposed through work stemming from assumptions alternative to the dominating paradigms: rejecting the overtly 'in favor' approach; being balanced in terms of perspective; and using non-quantitative methodologies. Notwithstanding the importance of this body of work, it is both relatively dispersed and relatively infrequent.

## **Discussion**

This study systematically reviewed the workplace flexibility literature, and revealed three paradigms



underpinning flexibility research (two of which dominate), as well as three ways through which these paradigms are problematized. While paradigms often tend to be implicitly present in research, the explicit discussion of such paradigms elucidates the assumptions underpinning research, and therefore the potential ways through which flexibility is used, perceived, and conceptualized. Consequently, while flexibility is construed differently across the paradigms, its meaning is assumed to be undisputed within each paradigm. In other words: each of the notions of flexibility appear universal within the dominating paradigms, while comparison between the paradigms shows that those meanings are positioned within as well as specific to the paradigms, and divergent between them. The three paradigms therefore point to the incommensurate understandings, and the potential effects they have for employees in the workplace. For instance, while employee flexibility carries the implicit notion that flexibility is beneficial to employees, the positioning of the term within a paradigm prioritizing the instrumentality of flexibility for organizations, reveals that employees may not benefit from employee flexibility. Hence, while both the paradigms focusing on organizational survival – underpinning organizational and employee flexibility (Brozovic, 2018) – and the employee-focused paradigm – underpinning FWAs (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2010; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017) – concentrate on the instrumental nature of flexibility to enhance performance, our review shows that these paradigms exist separately from each other. Moreover, as they operate independently, they ignore the ways through which their paradigmatic assumptions are problematized, such as in the third paradigm in which employee and organizational perspectives are more often taken into account simultaneously. Our study contributes by not only identifying the paradigms underpinning flexibility research, but also – as discussed in above – by recognizing the ways through which these paradigms are problematized.

In sum, our review shows that while flexibility is freely used across the management literature, it has specific different meanings due to the paradigmatic approaches underlying literatures. Analysis of the existing paradigms showed that two (organizational and employee) have different, but equally uncritical perspectives on the meaning and benefits of flexibility for organizations, whereby only a flexible work paradigm problematizes such benefits, as well as supports more critical research. Because these paradigms underpin research, the core assumption holds that ‘flexibility is good,’ which stifles critical engagement with one’s own topic of research. As researchers ourselves, coming from a background of research on the individual experience of flexibility at work, we find the perspective problematizing the unitarist

views on flexibility research appealing, because allowing ourselves to appreciate the multiplicity of views on the topic allows for a greater understanding of how the field is shaped, and also helps with elucidating *why* flexibility has multiple meanings across the literature.

This is precisely what the concept of ‘paradigm’ helps us explain. The reasons *why* the literatures are separated and do not ‘talk’ to each other cannot be fully understood, if the fundamentally different and sometimes opposing perspectives on flexibility – paradigms – are not accounted for. Therefore, as suggested above, while we fully acknowledge the pluralism of views expressed in those literatures, our broad review enables us to demonstrate that such a variety of perspectives may occur problematic when those fundamental (paradigmatic) differences are unrecognized. While we encourage pluralism and the existence of different perspectives in scientific discourse, we claim that the state of play in research on workplace flexibility, so far, shows limited propensity for an admission of differences between those perspectives (such move would indeed have been pluralist in spirit, e.g., Fox, 1974; Van Gramberg *et al.*, 2014). On the contrary, the current clustering of perspectives in separate paradigms projecting one-sided norms on what flexibility entails in the workplace typically cloaks these differences, thus impeding the debate.

#### *Favorability vs. criticality*

Moreover, whereas workplace flexibility has been criticized since the 1980s (Pollert, 1988; Tomaney, 1990), it is notable how across the various types of flexibility, the vast majority of publications tends to have unequivocal favorable views towards flexibility. Hence, flexibility is often taken for granted and perceived to be something that is good for both employee and organizational performance, even when the ‘business case’ seems to be lacking (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011). Regardless of organizational or employee perspectives, the overall literature on flexibility is unequivocally in favor of the concept (accounting for 70% of the studies). Across all sub-disciplines, studies tend to have favorable views toward flexibility, thereby ignoring the critical aspects of flexibility and bypassing the potential incompatibility between employee and organizational perspectives. In other words, while studies tend to affirm positive features of flexibility, they remain divergent – clustered – as regards the specific features perceived as being positive, or the reasons for claiming that they are positive. Importantly, this separation exists *within* the literature: while studies on organizational and employee flexibility have primarily used organizational perspectives, studies on FWAs have primarily used employee perspectives. It is therefore not surprising to observe a dominance of favorable perspectives on workplace flexibility, as a

significant amount of research may exclusively focus on the primary benefactors of particular types of flexibility, thereby overlooking or ignoring the potential negative effects on or costs to other stakeholders (Dick, 2009).

#### *Methodological underpinnings of the main paradigms*

Jointly, the above analysis showed that these literatures rarely take into account the multi-faceted nature of flexibility (except for the far less pronounced paradigm of 'flexible work'). The divergent construal of flexibility between employee and organizational levels (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017) is substantiated through the modes of inquiry being applied: in both main paradigms quantitative studies strongly dominate. It has been often stated that quantitative studies do not generally, or typically, share the qualitative bend towards reflexively delving into the deeper assumptions and stances from which study is undertaken (Ryan and Golden, 2006). Therefore, it is also relatively less likely for quantitative studies to become involved in discussing the heterogeneity of meanings which may be associated with pivotal notions used in the process.

However, as we attempted to demonstrate, the notion of flexibility features in a variety of contexts and perspectives, to the point that it may entail diametrically different meanings, including those which may mutually contradict one another (see also: De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011). Without due process of theoretical groundwork, in disciplines in which basic rules and notions driving inquiry are far from settled – and as we argued, they are far from being so when it comes to 'flexibility' – it is likely that dominance of quantitative methods furthers the incommensurability between different notions of flexibility.

Moreover, as our findings suggest, the extreme imbalance between critical and affirmative stances within the dominating quantitative approach, largely precludes theoretical cross-fertilization between different types of flexibility – critical stance is by and large a rarity in this domain. We only found with the flexible work paradigm that the array of methods (including qualitative) and stances is wider, leading to more nuanced views towards the role of flexibility in the workplace – unsurprisingly this is also the only paradigm in which critical and balanced approaches are relatively more welcome.

This is by no means an abstract or purely theoretical matter – the relative lack of openness within the dominant paradigms towards alternatives to quantitative methodological procedures may render research outcomes occurring in one of the paradigms perceived as manipulative in another. As our study shows, it is easily conceivable, for example, strategic level research (outlining the benefits of flexibility) to employ the notion of flexibility which involves facility of downsizing and

lack of employee level regulation – effectively disempowering employees – while this very notion not as much differs from, but in fact contradicts FWA's perception of flexibility as being strongly associated with employees' increased agency. And whilst, it is extremely likely that studies within both paradigms will be quantitative (and unlikely to be critically-inspired), the prospect for productive dialogue between the two is remote.

#### **Future research agenda**

Taking the cue from this analysis and discussion, the incommensurability of the two standpoints can be showed – while being pressed to work harder despite ostensibly having increased freedom to decide for oneself is certainly a problem for an individual employee (coming from either *FWA* or *flexible work* angle), from the organizational perspective there is nothing paradoxical about supplementary work being performed without investing additional resources thus increasing organizational performance: after all increased firm's performance is the basic rationale behind *employee flexibility*. It is therefore needed that the different literatures 'talk' to each other to understand the more problematic nature of flexibility which may arise from contradictory perceptions across the different literatures. While our study is the first attempt at taking a more communicative approach toward workplace flexibility, more research is needed to better understand the dynamic nature of the term within business and management literatures as well as in practice, where both managers and employees may struggle with the unintended consequences of the implementation of a concept which may be inherently diffused (Bal and Jansen, 2016; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017).

In this vein, we suggest a number of avenues for future research. First, our bibliometric analysis showed an overall growth in research on flexibility. Yet, at the same time, we also observed that the majority of research is dominated by quantitative methods, and that qualitative and mixed-methods are in the minority. Especially mixed methods research amounted to only 5% of the total studies, and thus, we advocate that in the future more mixed-methods research may be conducted to provide not only in-depth understanding of how flexibility actually unfolds in the workplace (through qualitative methods), but also substantiating further evidence for the effects of flexibility beyond the well-studied outcomes such as well-being and performance (Bal, 2017). Some of such avenues could be the study of flexibility effects on social cohesion (Dick, 2009), dignity (Bal, 2017), or gender equality (DeMartino and Barbato, 2003). Moreover, mixed-methods research may also shed more light upon how flexibility is 'exchanged' within and

across organizations. As organizations have increased their own flexibility by outsourcing and subcontracting (Vallas, 1999), employees have faced increasing precariousness of work, while at the same time having more flexibility in work arrangements.

Second, while we observed variation in the types of flexibility studied and the perspectives used, we also observed a dominance of favorable perspectives toward flexibility. This translated into research stating that flexibility needs to be enhanced in organizations and people, without expressing more critical perspectives on the concept of flexibility, and its potential problematic features. All the four flexibility types are proposed to have benefits for organizations, and depending on the type of flexibility, benefits for employees may vary. However, we need more research that investigates why, when and how the flexibility types may prove to be disadvantageous for either organization or employee. While there is some evidence for the adverse effects of flexibility (e.g., Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Putnam *et al.*, 2014), we need more structured approaches to understand the dynamics and unintended effects of flexibility in more depth.

Third, we need more research crossing the boundaries of the flexibility paradigms. Since flexibility has been coined in business and management research, it has been theorized as a trade-off between organization and employee, whereby organizations have enhanced their own flexibility and that of the employees, in return for FWAs (Bal and Jansen, 2016). However, we have not found any research empirically investigating these trade-offs, and the extent to which flexibility types cross over (e.g., Adame-Sánchez *et al.*, 2016). In future, researchers could, for instance, investigate employee perceptions and evaluations of organizational and employee flexibility, as well as organizational perspectives of FWAs, as well as the interplay between them. Researchers could also investigate organizations where explicit negotiation regarding the exchange of flexibility is taking place between management and employees, and how this affects both organizationally-relevant and employee-relevant outcomes.

Fourth, such boundary-crossing may be rendered possible by the fact that the paradigms do not exist in the vacuum and can also be undermined. While Figure 1 represents an overview of the intended theorized benefits of the different flexibility paradigms, there are three ways in which they can be problematized. While some previous research has indicated that flexibility may have unintended and contradictory effects for employees (Putnam *et al.*, 2014), it is needed to further ascertain whether the different types of flexibility empirically align with this theoretical frame. In other words, it is important to empirically assess to what extent the flexibility types benefit the parties involved, as well as discuss the factors that contribute to benefits for both parties, for example,

with a view to potentially identify the common ground where advantage is mutual. For instance, it might be that some level of organizational flexibility may provide benefits for employees as well, for example, in that a more flexible organization may be able to provide job security in the long run and dignity to the workers (Bal, 2017).

Finally, Figure 1 remains a static picture of how flexibility is intended to benefit either party. This may change over time, and as alluded by Dick (2009), flexibility may have other consequences in the short-term versus the longer-term. For instance, the introduction of flexible work may cause disruptions to existing organizational climates, but over time may benefit employees and organizations by staff retention (Dick, 2009). However, at the same time, flexible work may have short-term benefits for organizations such as cost-reduction (Sanchez, 1995; Way *et al.*, 2015), but long-term detrimental effects, including a lowering of commitment and retention of employees, and an increase in job insecurity, precariousness and income inequality (Bidwell *et al.*, 2013). Hence, more careful analysis of the short- and long-term effects of flexibility is needed, as well as critical assessments of such effects for both organizations and employees.

## Conclusion

Taken together, this review set out to critically analyze the different uses and understandings of workplace flexibility in business and management. Using a systematic review, bibliometric and content analysis, we postulated a framework for understanding the different types of flexibility. The subsequent analysis showed that the different domains are largely separated, yet overlap in their primarily favorable view of flexibility. Our in-depth analysis of the flexibility literature over the last decade further corroborated our findings, and showed that ambiguities involved in understanding and operationalizing flexibility in business and management literature amount to different paradigms underlying perspectives on flexibility: (1) *Organizational and employee flexibility* committed to organizational benefits from the organizational perspective; (2) *FWA* promulgating employee perspective and primarily employee benefits (potentially leading to organizational benefits); and (3) *flexible work* paradigm combining both perspectives and to varying degrees open towards both types of benefits. Paradigms 1 and 2 strongly dominate in the field and they are both oriented quantitatively. Hence, while the first prioritizes the organizational need for and benefits of flexibility, the second one emphasizes the role of flexibility in how working conditions are shaped for employees. The result is that whilst sub-disciplines remain overly favorable towards



flexibility, they tend to overlook or ignore the potential problematic features, such as incommensurability of meanings and claims put forward between separate flexibility paradigms, thus not being able to ‘communicate’.

There was one flexibility paradigm potentially providing the most fertile ground for conceptualizing non-dogmatic exchange and understanding of different positions, as well as being more methodologically balanced. While flexible work primarily focuses on contractual arrangements, it can be extended to become a more fully developed paradigm, taking into account both employer and employee perspectives on flexibility. This paradigm can be developed on the basis of the following principles. Workplace flexibility is a trade-off between multiple stakeholders, most notably employees and organization, and it is about the balance between various interests and needs. Flexibility may have various disadvantages as well as advantages to stakeholders and trade-offs between them should be taken into consideration. Thereby, research on flexibility may need to more explicitly include the benefits and consequences of flexibility for both parties (Dick, 2009), for instance using paradox-lens as advocated by Cañibano (2019). Aided by the three counter-movements to existing paradigms, the flexible work paradigm may potentially create an opportunity for a more critical-constructive approach toward studying workplace flexibility acknowledging both employer and employee perspectives, using a wide array of methodologies, as well as, whenever possible, understanding and appreciating the fundamental differences in approaches to flexibility. Other stakeholders, such as coworkers, unions, and family members should also be invited to participate in this dialogue, which we advocate.

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