WORKING PARENTS' USE OF WORK-LIFE POLICIES

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Introduction

With women entering the workforce in ever greater numbers in the past few decades, and with the associated rise in the number of dual-income households, interest has grown in arrangements that allow employees to combine work and family duties — or, viewed more broadly, to integrate their working lives and private lives more effectively. Such policies include flexible working practices (times and location), leave arrangements and childcare facilities. The earliest statutory work--life measures, an incentive scheme for childcare and a statutory right to parental leave, were introduced in the Netherlands in the early 1990s. The years thereafter saw a rise in the number of statutory leave arrangements, which were then concentrated in the Work and Care Act (2000) (*Wet Arbeid en Zorg*). The act gives working parents the right to take pregnancy/maternity and parental leave as well as ten days of care leave, two days of paternity leave and four weeks of adoption leave. The Working Times Adjustment Act (2001) (*Wet Aanpassing Arbeidsduur,* WAA), furthermore, allows employees to request to have their working times extended or shortened. The new Childcare Act (2005) (*Wet Kinderopvang*) sets out how the responsibility for childcare is divided between the government, parents and employers. The most recent statutory work-life measure in the Netherlands is the life course scheme, which enables employees to save up for a period of paid leave. Despite the growth in work-life policies[1] it has, however, become clear in countless discussions in academia, among policy-makers and in the media that employers do not always implement work-life policies as a matter of course, nor do employees utilize them as much as they could. Some authors have referred to a "gap between policy and practice" (Lewis, 1999).

In this article we will examine working parent's use of work-life policies in financial organizations in the Netherlands.[2] In the past twenty years the amount of working parents has been increasing enormously in the Netherlands. Consequently, a growing number of employees have caring responsibilities in addition to their jobs. Many organizations have adopted work-life policies in response to the changing needs of the workforce (*e.g.* Dulk, 2001; Evans, 2001; European Foundation, 2006). In addition, the government increasingly offers statutory provisions for

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1   We deliberately choose to use the term work-life policies, instead of work-family policies. The latter term is too close connected with family life, while the term work-life policies embodies all policies aimed at reconciling work and private life. For a more elaborate discussion on the terminology in work-life research, see Lewis and Rapoport (2005); Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport (2006).
2   The authors would like to thank Marijke Veldhoen-Van Blitterswijk for retrieving the data given in section two.

working parents (*e.g.* Dulk and Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007). Therefore, working parents can choose from a broad palette of work-life policies nowadays. We examine the barriers and support regarding the actual take up of work-life policies by working parents and to what extent this in turn influence their experienced work-life balance. Therefore, our main research questions are:

— What are the barriers and/or support for the actual take up of work-life policies by working parents?
— Does the utilisation of work-life policies positively affect the work-life balance of working parents?

We collected survey data in three Dutch financial sector organizations: one public sector organization and two private firms. All three differ considerably regarding their organizational culture and working practices. The barriers and support for take up of work-life policies in the organizations are investigated as well as the effect of utilization and work-life culture on the experienced work-life balance by working parents.

In the next paragraph we discuss the current situation of research into work-life policies in the Netherlands. In addition we discuss several theoretical perspectives on understanding the utilization of work-life policies. Based on this theoretical discussion we will employ several hypotheses. In the third paragraph we will present and analyze the empirical data on the utilization of work-life policies and the experienced work-life balance. Paragraph four is dedicated to the discussion.

Research into work-life policies in employing organizations: current situation

Research into work-life policies in employing organizations focused initially on the adoption of various schemes and arrangements (see *e.g.* Dulk, 2001; Remery, van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2003; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram and Simons, 1995; OECD, 2001; Osterman, 1995, Poelmans, Chinchilla and Cardona, 2003). Despite a recent increase in research conducted in other countries and parts of the world, English-speaking researchers continue to dominate the field. However, government intervention is minimal in Australia, the UK and the US, for example, with the emphasis being on market forces. The question is whether findings regarding these countries also apply to other institutional contexts (Dulk, 2001; Poelmans, 2005). Very little cross-national research has been conducted among employers, however, in part owing to the absence of large, cross-national databases at organizational level. An exception is the recently conducted establishment survey of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (European Foundation, 2006).

Organizations and sectors differ considerably when it comes to having work-life policies, with larger enterprises and the public sector being the first to

Table 1 Organizations in the Netherlands with childcare facilities by sector and by size mid-1992, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2004 (in %)

	1992	1995	1997	1999	2001	2004
Sector						
Total economy	8	14	14	17	28	38
Industry & agriculture	4	22	9	15	24	29
Construction industry	1	6	4	7	17	29
Commerce, hospitality & recreation	3	9	8	9	18	29
Transport	0	5	4	3	17	32
Commercial services	10	17	21	29	40	49
Healthcare & welfare	25	53	58	68	65	64
Other services	29	31	24	17	24	47
Government	32	58	68	72	81	89
Education	11	11	20	19	34	37
Size of organization						
5-9 employees	-	8	7	8	17	25
10-19 employees	-	9	9	11	24	39
20-49 employees	-	14	16	24	33	46
50-99 employees	11	24	25	25	45	68
100-499 employees	-	43	50	56	72	76
500 or more employees	34	70	82	87	94	98

Source: Institute for Labour Studies (OSA), Labour Demand Panel, 1992, 1996 & 2004

introduce facilities. This is illustrated by table 1, which shows the percentage of employers in the Netherlands that had introduced childcare arrangements for their employees between 1992 and 2004. The table reveals that the percentage of Dutch employers offering childcare facilities rose from 8 to 38% in that period. Eight-nine percent of government organizations have childcare facilities, compared with 29% of the commercial enterprises in the construction industry, commerce, hospitality and recreation, and industry and agriculture. Almost all large-scale organizations with more than 500 employees have childcare facilities, but only a quarter of small organizations. There has been a smaller increase in the number of employing organizations that have parental leave arrangements over and above those required by law, and in fact, the number of informal arrangements reported declined between 1999 and 2001. International comparative research confirms that Dutch employers display a greater involvement in childcare policy than their counterparts elsewhere; they are highly active in this area, but are less concerned about supplementary leave arrangements (Dulk, 2001; European Foundation, 2006; OECD, 2001).

Two theoretical explanations have been put forward to explain the variation in employer involvement within and between countries: the neo-institutional theory and the rational-choice theory (*e.g.* Appelbaum *et al.,* 2005; Dulk, 2001; Poelmans, 2005). The neo-institutional theory claims that a changing labour force is putting organizations under increasing pressure to develop work-life policies; for example, there are growing numbers of women in employment, a rising number of dual-income households and greater interest in statutory work-life balance schemes. The scale of the latter trend differs from one welfare state to the next. Organizations are yielding to institutional pressure to vouch for their legitimacy. Although the neo-institutional approach tells us a great deal about how institutional conditions affect

Table 2   Percentage of enterprises with formal and informal parental leave arrangements over and above those required by law, mid-1992, 1999 & 2001

	Official	Unofficial	None
1992	3	–	97
1999	10	50	40
2001	15	27	58

Source: Institute for Labour Studies (OSA), Labour Demand Panel, 1992, 1999 & 2001

employing organizations, it does little to explain why organizations and the effects of work-life policies differ.

The rational-choice theory focuses on the behaviour of employers; organizations will introduce work-life policies when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. In turn, the costs and benefits of work-life policies depend on organizational and institutional conditions. With the emphasis being on the effects that provisions produce for the organization — for example a reduction in absenteeism and staff turnover, or a better image as an employer — researchers have turned their attention to the costs and benefits of work-life policies. Although this type of research is still in its infancy in Europe, the United States has a long tradition of research into the "business case" of work-life policies. Appelbaum *et al.* (2005) provide an overview of this research and conclude that it has not produced any unequivocal results and that there are numerous methodological shortcomings. For example, the studies seldom investigate the costs, and the assessment of the effects is often based on employee and manager impressions rather than observed behaviour. In addition, such studies tend to assume that the policy is effective and that the employees do in fact avail themselves of the relevant arrangements. Whether that is actually the case is another matter.

Until now, research into work-life policy in employing organizations has focused to a large extent on whether or not the relevant facilities or provisions are in place. There has been less interest in whether such facilities or provisions meet employee needs or whether employees actually utilize them. Having facilities in place is not the same as actually using them, something that becomes evident when we compare surveys of employers and employees: employers tend to report many more facilities than their employees do (Appelbaum *et al.,* 2005; Evans, 2001). The explanations offered for this discrepancy are: the employees do not know about the facilities, and access to the facilities is restricted (Budd and Mumford, 2005).

It has only been recently that researchers have begun to look at whether employees actually utilize work-life policies, and their studies show that that is not in fact always the case. They explain the "gap between policy and practice" by pointing to different features and background factors: gender, industrial sector, occupational profile, household characteristics, partner's attitude towards the work, and organizational conditions, for example organizational culture (*e.g.* Forth *et al.,* 1997; Grootscholte, Bouwmeester and Klaver, 2000; Haas and Hwang, 1999, Rostgaard, Christoffersen and Weise, 1999; Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, 1999). What remains unclear is the underlying mechanism at work.

We look briefly here at two mechanisms: (1) one based on the "need perspective" and (2) the other based on a "sense of entitlement".

The "need perspective" looks at the changing needs of employees for work-life policies depending on their situation both at home and at work. The leave needs of working parents differ from those of younger or older employees who do not have family commitments. However, there are differences even within the category of working parents. The role theory proposes that people's behaviour is patterned on specific gender roles.

According to traditional gender roles, mothers are (or feel) more inclined to take responsibility for childcare than fathers, and they will therefore be quicker to utilize work-life policies when the occasion calls for it.

H1: Working mothers are more likely to use work-life policies than working fathers.

Working parents with small children are intensely involved in their care, and therefore more apt to utilize work-life policies than working parents whose children are over the age of 12.

H2: Working parents with young children under 12 years of age are more likely to use work-life policies than working parents with children older than 12 years.

The more hours a partner works, the greater the need for back-up work-life arrangements, as the partner will not be available to shoulder as much of the burden of childcare.

H3: The more hours spent in paid employment by the partner, the more likely it is that working parents use work-life policies.

Although some employees may well need to utilize work-life policies, this does not mean that they feel entitled to do so. The second perspective — the "sense of entitlement" — focuses on the extent to which employees feel entitled to utilize work-life policies. Lewis has pointed out the importance of the concept of "sense of entitlement" in various publications. She defines it as follows: "… a set of beliefs and feelings that enable individuals to voice and make visible their needs to modify traditional structures at work and beyond" (Lewis, 1996: 1). In theory, a restricted sense of entitlement leads to a low level of utilization, as the employee has low expectations of the employer. A greater sense of entitlement leads to a greater demand for work-life arrangements and therefore to greater utilization of such arrangements (Lewis, 1996).[3]

Lewis (1996) suggests that there are three factors that influence an employee's "sense of entitlement": gender, the socio-political context, and the organizational culture. As we saw above, gender also plays a role in the need perspective when it comes to the utilization of work-life arrangements. The expectation is that women will tend to make more use of these provisions than men. Based on the sense of entitlement perspective, Lewis (1996) suggests that women are very likely to behave in

accordance with traditional gender roles. They therefore feel less entitled to claim their right to provisions, and they will give up their career opportunities in favour of childcare duties. Men, on the other hand, will reduce their involvement in childcare in favour of their careers. If employee sense of entitlement is to be increased, Lewis proposes, then it is not only the situation at work but also the situation at home that must be considered.

International comparative research has demonstrated the influence of the socio-political context (Dulk, 2001), and has revealed various barriers in the Netherlands to employees legitimately claiming existing or new provisions, for example the ideology of motherhood, the moderate (and only recent) interest on the part of policy-makers in work-life issues, the emphasis on the breadwinner and the one-and-a-half earners model (Dulk, Peper and Doorne-Huiskes, 2005; OECD, 2002). The Netherlands' position in the welfare state typology proposed by Esping-Andersen (1999) also indicates more conservative and traditional attitudes towards work and childcare. Dutch women are not really full-fledged labour market participants; they settle for part-time jobs (between 12 to 23 hours a week) that offer few career prospects.

The internal culture of the organization also influences the extent to which employees feel entitled to utilize or claim work-life provisions (Lewis, 1996). Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness have defined a supportive organizational culture as follows: "A supportive work-life culture has been defined as the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which for women and for men an organization supports and values the integration of work/family lives" (1999: 394). They identify three components in an organization's work-life culture: (1) the amount of time employees invest in the organization, (2) the negative impact of utilizing work-life arrangements on an employee's career, and (3) the degree of support employees receive from management in this respect. Allen (2001) differentiates between the degree of support by managers/supervisors and the degree of support by the organization as a whole. Dikkers *et al.* (2004) also points out that the degree of support by co-workers is also important. The foregoing components of work-life culture in organizations can hence be broken down into a support dimension (degree of support by organization, managers and co-workers when employees utilize work-life policies) and a barrier dimension (demands on career and time). Based on these two dimensions, we can identify four different types of work-life organizational cultures (table 3).

The most favourable culture concerning the utilization of work-life arrangements is the approving culture. Hence, we expect that:

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3   There seem to be clear similarities between the concept of "sense of entitlement" and the long-running discussions concerning the utilization or non-utilization of social provisions within the Dutch welfare state (*e.g.* Van Oorschot, 1994). These discussions, however, concern the fact that those entitled to benefit fail to make use of their entitlement under social insurance legislation because there is too much red tape, and the organizational problems related to non-utilization of provisions. The concept of "sense of entitlement" specifically concerns the degree to which people feel they are entitled to claim provisions.

Table 3   Typology of work-life organizational cultures

		Support	
		Low level	High level
Barriers	Low	Indifferent culture	Approving culture
	High	Conflicting culture	Contradicting culture

Based on Dulk and De Ruijter (2005) and on Dikkers *et al.* (forthcoming).

> H4: The more approving the perceived work-life culture is (high support/low barriers) the more likely working parents will use work-life policies.

In addition we expect an approving culture is congruent with a high sense of entitlement. The perception of a positive *e.g.* approving work-life culture may also help people to successfully balance their work and family life. This may in fact be the case regardless of people actually using work-life arrangements. The measurement of utilisation of existing policies is often done at one moment in time. Working parents may take up leave or reduce their working hours in case they need it. To know the possibility is there and that you are able to use it when the need may arise may give the feeling to be able to successfully balance you work and family life. With respect to experienced work-life balance among working parents, we expect that:

> H5: The utilization of work-life policies will positively affect the perceived work-life balance of working parents
>
> H6: The more approving the perceived work-life culture is (high support/low barriers) the more likely working parents will feel they have succeeded in achieving a good work-life balance.

Additionally to the organizational culture, we expect employees who work more years for the organization and/or being in a higher job position, will have are higher sense of entitlement and consequently, more likely to take up work-life policies then employees who are just started and/or have a lower job position.

> H7: The more years working parents are working for the organization, the more likely they will use work-life policies.
>
> H8: Working parents with a higher job position are more likely to use work-life policies than working parents with a lower job position.

Working parents and work-life policy in the financial sector

Research design

In order to investigate the extent to which working parents utilize work-life poli-
cies and how successful they feel they have been in maintaining a good work-life
balance, we have used data collected at three financial organizations in the Nether-
lands: a banking and insurance company, a consultancy firm, and a government or-
ganization. We use the fictitious name of BIC for the Banking and Insurance Com-
pany, and Fincom for the consultancy firm. A questionnaire was distributed to a
representative sample of the employees in all three companies.

World wide, the financial sector is a knowledge driven sector in which a rela-
tively large proportion of women are working. In order to attract personnel but
also customers, financial corporations wish to present themselves as attractive em-
ployers to work for and to maintain a good reputation. Consequently, finan-
cial-sector employers are often in the vanguard when it comes to innovative em-
ployee policies, including work-life policies, and they therefore make interesting
case studies for investigating employee utilization of such policies. However, the
three employers under study do not present themselves as frontrunners or cham-
pions with respect to work-life policies. Rather, like other Dutch employers, they
view the development of work-life policies as a sensible response to a changing en-
vironment. (*e.g.* Remery, Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2003).

All three organizations are large employers that offer good employment terms
and supplementary work-life arrangements. By law, the organizations are obliged to
grant 16 weeks paid maternity leave, 10 days short-term care leave, 2 days paternity
leave and 13 weeks unpaid parental leave. Furthermore, based on the Working
Times Adjustment Act, employers have to grant requests to extend or reduce work-
ing hours unless they can show that granting a request conflicts with serious busi-
ness interests. In addition to these legal entitlements, all three organizations offer
their employees flexible starting and finishing times, childcare support[4] and a range
of choices when it comes to employment terms. These types of supplementary provi-
sions are fairly common among large employers in the Netherlands (*e.g.* Dulk, 2001;
Remery, Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2003). Furthermore, the collective agree-
ment within the banking and government sector contains a 36 hour working week.
Within BIC and the government organization, employees have the option of work-
ing a compressed work week (four nine-hour days). In addition, following the col-
lective agreement in civil services, employees in the government organization are of-
fered (partly) paid parental leave (75% of non-worked hours are compensated). The
consultancy firm has a younger and better educated staff than the banking and in-
surance company and the government organization. A total of 409 employees at the
government organization completed the questionnaire (a response rate of 40%), 638

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4   At the time of the research childcare support was not yet obligatory, however this has become
        obligatory since January 2007.

Table 4   Characteristics of working parents in the three organizations (in percentages)

	Fincom N= 208	BIC N=271	Government N=228
% of women	38	28	27
Child under 12	76	71	63
Partner in employment	80	83	84
Age			
24 years or younger	5	–	–
25-34	55	23	8
35-44	29	44	48
45-54	11	31	41
55+	–	2	3
No. of years of service			
0-5	36	26	12
6-10	21	17	4
11-15	19	17	5
16-20	12	14	23
21+	14	27	56
Managerial position	60	19	9
Educational level			
Primary	2	4	7
Secondary	26	57	66
Higher	72	40	27

at the consultancy firm (a response rate of 40%) and 521 employees at the banking and insurance company (a response rate of 43%). From each sample, we selected the working parents (respondents with children living at home). Table 4 lists the characteristics of working parents employed by the three organizations. The vast majority of working parents in all three organizations have partners in paid employment (80-84%) and a child younger than 12 years of age (63-76%). Table 4 confirms that the working parents at Fincom are relatively young and well-educated; they are also more likely to be in managerial positions than at the other two organizations. This is in part owing to the hierarchical organizational structure at Fincom.

The questionnaire revealed the respondents' perception of the work-life culture in their organization by having them respond to 17 items asking them how they saw the support given by the organization as a whole for the work-life balance, the support of their managers, their co-workers, the demands made on their time and the consequences that utilizing work-life policies would have for their careers (Dikkers *et al.*, 2004; Dulk and de Ruijter, 2005).

Results

The measures show that the organizations differ significantly with respect to the support parents believe they receive and the perceived barriers (time demands and impact on career) (see table 5). The government organization had the most approving culture; its employees report the greatest level of support and the lowest barriers. The culture at Fincom and BIC is more incompatible or contradicting; the two receive high average scores on both the support dimension and barrier dimension. In other words, working parents in these two organizations do believe they receive

Table 5   Perception of work-life culture (average mean scores), utilization of work-life policies and perceived work-life balance (percentage of employees) at Fincom, BIC and the government organization

	Fincom	BIC	Government
Work-life culture	Contradicting	Contradicting	Approving
Support	3.23	3.44	3.54
Barriers	3.69	3.24	2.62
Utilization			
Flexible working hours	59%	70%	81%
Part-time work	39%	29%	32%
Childcare facilities	30%	29%	15%
Parental leave	14%	18%	49%
Work-life balance			
Unsuccessful/limited success	31%	25%	13%
Reasonably successful	56%	58%	65%
Very successful	13%	17%	21%

support for maintaining a good work-life balance, but that support stands in sharp contrast to expectations concerning working hours and career demands. The score for barriers is particularly high at Fincom.

The table also indicates the four categories of work-life policies utilized: flexible starting and finishing times, part-time work, childcare arrangements and parental leave. If we consider the degree to which working parents utilize work-life policies, then it is immediately clear that they tend to make quite a lot of use of flexible starting and finishing times. Approximately a third of working parents in the three organizations work part time. Almost half of working parents employed by the government organization take up parental leave, very likely because it is paid leave. Working parents at BIC and Fincom who have the option of taking up unpaid parental leave are less likely to do so. Remarkably, only 15% of working parents employed by the government make use of childcare facilities, whereas at BIC and Fincom that is 25 to 30%. These parents may make more use of these facilities because salaries in the commercial sector are often higher than in the public sector, and so the working parents at Fincom and BIC may be able to afford formal childcare more easily than working parents employed by the government organization. In addition, their utilizing childcare facilities is less likely to conflict with the demands made on their time and careers at BIC and Fincom than utilizing parental leave facilities. Given the positive, supportive organizational culture at the government organization, employees can be expected to have a greater sense of entitlement. However, because this organization is staffed by a relatively large number of older male employees, they may have less need of work-life arrangements — although the same can be said of the staff at the banking and insurance company.

Employees in the three organizations differ in the extent to which they feel they have achieved a successful work-life balance. The group of employees who feel that they have not succeeded — or only to a limited extent — is larger in the contradicting culture than in the approving culture of the government organization. The importance of organizational culture is confirmed by regression analysis,

Table 6   Linear regression analysis of the utilization of work-life policies by working parents in three financial organizations (N=561)

	Beta
Gender	.323*
Children younger than 12	.315*
Partner's no. of hours paid employment	.200*
Work-life culture: perceived support	.076*
Work-life culture: perceived barriers	-.083*
No. of years of service	.161*
Managerial position	-.093*
Higher education	.021
Adjusted R²	.36

* p < 0.01

Table 7   Linear regression analysis of degree to which employees feel they have succeeded in achieving a good work-life balance (N=552)

	Beta
Utilization of work-life policy	.001
Gender	.086
Children younger than 12	.006
Partner's no. of hours paid employment	-.010
Work-life culture: perceived support	.285*
Work-life culture: perceived barriers	-.158*
No. of years of service	.024
Managerial position	-.099*
Higher education	-.020
Adjusted R²	.17

* p < 0.01

which includes the background characteristics of the working parents (see table 6). The analysis concerns a sum variable consisting of the four work-life policies discussed: flexible working hours, part-time work, childcare and parental leave. The perceived support by the organization for a good work-life balance has a positive influence on the utilization of work-life policies, whereas perceived career and time demands that contrast with the utilization of such facilities reveal a negative relationship. Other characteristics that have an enormous influence on the actual utilization of work-life policies, however, are those that influence the need for such facilities: gender, presence of young children, and the number of hours that the employee's partner works. Women utilize work-life policies more often than men do. Employees are also more likely to utilize such policies if they have children under the age of 12 and if their partner works longer hours. The number of years of service is another influence; the longer an employee has worked for the organization, the more he or she tends to utilize such policies. A long employment record may increase an employee's sense of entitlement, meaning he or she will be more likely to make use of the various options available. It would seem logical that employees in senior positions would also have a greater sense of entitlement, but what this

analysis reveals is a negative relationship with managerial positions: managers are less likely to utilize work-life policies than non-managerial staff.

An underlying assumption behind work-life policies is that utilization help employees achieve a better work-life balance. Table 7 shows the results of regression analysis concerning the perceived work-life balance of employees in the three financial-sector organizations investigated. The analysis reveals that actual utilization is not an influence on their perceived success; however, a significant relationship was found between organizational culture and the degree to which the employees felt they had been successful in achieving a good work-life balance. In addition, a negative relationship was found between managerial position and perceived work-life balance, suggesting the presence of a "trade-off" between career and work-life balance.

Discussion

Work-life policies should enable employees to combine paid employment with household and childcare duties. However, the presence of formal policies does not mean that employees actually make use of them. Employees may hesitate to do so because they fear it will damage their career; after all, it is hazardous to show that work is not the only important thing in one's life. They may be afraid that reducing their working hours will mean that they are given less interesting work to do because they are not in the office every day. In other words, when an organization introduces work-life policies, there is no saying that there will be an associated change in the traditional ideal of the full-time, male employee who is always available. Work-life policies are just the first step, to be followed by a change in the "attendance culture", which takes visibility and long working hours as indicators for dedication and commitment.

The take up of work-life policies is less then could be expected, based on availability of these policies in organizations. In this article we analysed this "gap between policy and practice" in three financial service organizations. Two underlying mechanisms are examined in relation to the utilization of work-life policies. First we expect some employees have a greater need for work-life policies than others based on their household situation and gender; i. e. a need perspective. And, secondly, not every employee may feel entitled to use work-life policies in the same degree: the sense of entitlement perspective. The latter is mainly examined by looking at the impact of organizational culture. Furthermore, we expected the work-life balance of working parents is positively affected by utilization of policies and an approving work-life culture.

Utilization

Based on the need perspective we expected that the utilization is effected by individual and household characteristics. Indeed, the first three hypotheses are confirmed by our findings: working mothers, working parents with children under 12

years of age, and employees with partners who work a lot of hours in paid employ-
ment, are all more likely to use work-life policies than working fathers, working
parents with children over 12 years of age, and employees with partners who work
less hours in paid employment.

The second mechanism we employed was the extent to which employees feel
entitled to use work-life policies. Gender does play an important role, as we have
already seen in relation to the need perspective. We found women more likely to
take up policies then men; this is probably both related to a higher need as well as a
higher sense of entitlement. Women do feel entitled to take up work-life policies,
but they accept the trade off with less career possibilities. Fathers as main bread-
winners are less likely to take this trade off risk, which is tacitly connected to taking
up caring tasks.

The organizational culture, especially in relation with work-life issues, plays
a major role in explaining the actual use of policies. We have measured the
work-life culture via a support dimension (degree of support by organization,
managers and co-workers when employees utilize work-life policies) and a barrier
dimension (demands on career and time). A supportive organizational culture for
work-life issues is very important for the actual take up of work-life policies, as our
findings point out. The data confirms therefore our fourth hypothesis; a more ap-
proving culture leads to more use of work-life policies. Interestingly, we found a
contradictory work-life culture in two of the three organisations. We will elaborate
below on the mixed messages this work-life culture sends to the employees.

In addition to the work-life culture in the organisations, we found that, on the
organizational level, the more years an employee has worked in the organization,
the more likely she/he will use work-life policies. This finding confirms our sev-
enth hypothesis. The hypothesis which is not confirmed by our data is the idea that
a higher job position leads to a higher sense of entitlement. Supervisors are less
likely to use work-life policies than non-supervisors.

Work-life balance

We expected that the take up of work-life policies will lead towards a more posi-
tive work-life balance. This result was not found empirically, the utilization of
work-life policies has no direct effects on the perceived work-life balance. There-
fore hypothesis five was not confirmed. However, the organizational culture did
have a significant influence on the perceived work-life balance, which confirms
the sixth hypothesis. Again, the empirical evidence points to the importance of
the organizational culture.

Impact of work-life culture

A contradictory culture, in which the presence of formal work-life policies and sup-
port for the combination of work and family life is accompanied by career and time
demands that contradict utilization of work-life policies can create inconsistency
and differences in implementation within an organization. A contradictory culture

is, in fact, sending out mixed messages about work-life support, i. e. on the one hand saying work-life policies are open to employees but on the other hand role modelling individuals who are always available and prepared to work long hours (see also Kirby and Krone, 2002).

How do Dutch employers think about work-life policies? Generally, employers in the Netherlands do not want to present themselves as frontrunners or champions with respect to work-life policies. Rather Dutch employers adapt to changing circumstances, but this adaptation is not primarily based on an internalised conviction that setting up work-life arrangements is, in terms of business or strategic planning, the best thing to do. It is seen as the most adequate or sensible response to a changing environment. For many employers, employee satisfaction turns out to be the primary reason for setting up provisions (*e.g.* Remery, Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2003). This could imply that a contradictory culture, as found in BIC and Fincom, might be rather common among Dutch organizations. When work-life policies are not set up for substantial reasons and remain marginal in the organization it is unlikley that they will cause any real change in the organizational structure and culture. In fact, organizations may get external legitimacy as desirable employers but may intentionally or unintentionally discourage employees from ever using these benefits. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) argue, based on the institutional theory, that when work-family policies are controversial or ambiguous, they are in their early and not yet taken for granted stages of adoption. Policies are not yet embedded in organizational practices and structures, and they may conflict with organizational norms relating to time and career demands, as found in our banking and consultancy firm. The only case with an approving culture was the government organization. A possible explanation for this finding is that the core business of government organizations is service instead of profit. Public organizations are more often the subject of public attention and are more likely to be evaluated according to government standards and norms.

The fact that we found in all three cases support for the combination of work and private life might be related to the high value on private life and parenthood in the Netherlands. Dominant pattern in the Netherlands is the one and a half earner family in which the men are the main breadwinners and women have a part-time job. The men as main provider of family income is still a fairly dominant phenomenon in the Netherlands. Generally, parental care is prefered above formal care. Wereby a strong motherhood culture, but also ideas around active fatherhood are promoted (Dulk, Peper and Doorne-Huiskes, 2005). There is a high value on parental care, which increases the sense of entitlement. However, time and career demands stay behind. The finding that parents with a managerial position are less likely to use work-life policies and feel less succesful in their work-life balance, indicates that there is a trade off between having a career and a work-life balance. As long as this trade off is tacitly accepted, gender inequality is sustained and there will be less women in mangerial positions.

For the work-life balance of working parents a supportive organizational culture is more important then the actual take up of work-life policies. This suggests that employers, who are able to turn their organizational culture towards a more

family-friendly direction, can create a working environment where their employees experience a better work-life balance. Future research should investigate the prevalence and impact of contradictory work-life culture in other organizational settings.

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Resumo/abstract/résumé/resumen

Utilização das políticas de conciliação da vida profissional com a vida privada pelos pais trabalhadores

Neste artigo, examinamos a utilização das políticas de conciliação entre a vida profissional e a vida privada pelos pais trabalhadores, em três organizações do sector financeiro dos Países Baixos. Analisamos os obstáculos e os apoios a uma utilização efectiva destas políticas pelos pais trabalhadores e a medida em que ela influencia, por sua vez, o equilíbrio por estes sentido entre a sua vida profissional e familiar. Recolhemos dados de inquérito em três organizações do sector financeiro holandês: numa organização do sector público e em duas empresas privadas. As três diferem consideravelmente quanto à cultura organizativa e às práticas laborais. Duas das organizações são caracterizadas por uma cultura contrária à conciliação entre a vida profissional e a vida privada e a outra por uma cultura que lhe é favorável. Os resultados indicam que as características do agregado familiar e a cultura da organização nesta matéria determinam a utilização das políticas de conciliação entre a vida profissional e a vida privada. No que respeita ao equilíbrio entre a vida profissional e a vida familiar dos pais trabalhadores, a cultura da organização é uma determinante fundamental, não se encontrando qualquer impacto da utilização das políticas.

Palavras-chave   pais trabalhadores, políticas de conciliação trabalho-família, cultura organizatizacional, utilização das políticas, equilíbrio trabalho-família.

Working parents' use of work-life policies

In this paper, we examine working parent's use of work-life policies in three financial sector organizations in the Netherlands. We analyse the barriers and support regarding the actual take up of work-life policies by working parents and to what extent this in turn influence their experienced work-life balance. We collected survey data in three Dutch financial sector organizations: one public sector organization and two private firms. All three differ considerably regarding their organizational culture and working practices. Two of the organizations are characterised by a contradictory work-life culture, and one by an approving work-life culture. Findings point out that household characteristics and the work-life culture in the organization determine the take up of work-life policies. With respect to the work-life balance of working parents, organizational culture is an important determinant, no impact is found of the utilization of policies.

Key-words   working parents, work-life policies, organizational culture, policy utilization, work-life balance.

*Utilisation des politiques de conciliation de la vie professionnelle avec la vie
privée par les parents qui travaillent*

Cet article analyse l'utilisation des politiques de conciliation entre vie professionnelle et vie
privée par les parents qui travaillent, au sein de trois organisation du secteur financier des
Pays-Bas. Il analyse les obstacles et les aides à une utilisation effective de ces aides par les
parents qui travaillent et dans quelle mesure elle influence, à son tour, l'équilibre qu'ils
ressentent entre leur vie professionnelle et leur vie familiale. Les données de l'enquête ont été
recueillies au sein de trois organisations du secteur financier hollandais: une organisation du
secteur public et deux du secteur privé. Leur différence est considérable quant à la culture
organisationnelle et aux pratiques de travail. Deux des organisations sont caractérisées par
une culture contraire à la conciliation entre vie professionnelle et vie privée et l'autre par une
culture qui lui est favorable. Les résultats indiquent que les caractéristiques du ménage et la
culture de l'organisation concernant cette question déterminent l'utilisation des politiques de
conciliation entre vie professionnelle et vie privée. Quant à l'équilibre entre vie
professionnelle et vie familiale des parents qui travaillent, la culture de l'organisation est un
facteur essentiel, aucun impact de l'utilisation des politiques n'étant observé.

Mots-clés   parents qui travaillent, politiques de conciliation de la vie professionnelle
avec la vie privée, culture organisationnelle, utilisation des politiques, équilibre entre vie
professionnelle et vie familiale.

*Utilización de las políticas de conciliación de la vida profesional con la vida
privada por los padres trabajadores*

En este artículo examinamos las políticas de conciliación entre la vida profesional y la
vida privada de los padres trabajadores, en tres organizaciones del sector financiero de
los Países Bajos Analizamos los obstáculos y apoyos en la utilización de estas políticas
por padres trabajadores y a su vez, en que medida ellas influyen en el equilibrio entre
vida profesional y familiar. Recogimos datos de encuestas en tres organizaciones del
sector financiero holandés: una organización del sector público y dos empresas privadas.
Las tres difieren en forma considerable en relación a la cultura organizativa y a las
prácticas laborales. Dos de las organizaciones se caracterizan por una cultura contraria a
la conciliación entre la vida profesional y la privada y otra por una cultura que le es
favorable. Los resultados indican que la características del agregado familiar y la cultura
de organización en esta materia determinan la utilización de las políticas de conciliación
entre la vida profesional y la vida privada. En lo que respecta al equilibrio entre la vida
profesional y familiar de padres trabajadores, la cultura de organización es un factor
fundamental, si no se encuentra algún impacto en la utilización de dichas políticas.

Palabras-clave   padres trabajadores, política de vida profesional, cultura de
organización, política en uso, conciliación trabajo-vida.