

Exploring Gender Differences in Employee Attitudes Towards Work-Family Practices and Use of Work-Family Practices

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Abstract

This study explored a number of work-family attitudes and the current and future use of work-family practices by gender, using a sample of 100 New Zealand employees.

Females were significantly more supportive of work-family practice users towards both male and female users. Female employees also perceived greater benefits from work-family practices than male respondents. Finally, female respondents were more likely to consider using work-family practices in the future, although there were no differences towards current use of work-family practices by gender. Overall, the findings suggest that female employees are more supportive of work-family practices, their users, and the benefits associated with their use, supporting the socialisation theoretical perspective. The implications for research are discussed.

The popularity of work-family practices is well established to the extent that adoption of such practices is called progressive and innovative (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). Fundamentally, work-family practices are intended to allow employees to balance the changing and challenging demands of work and family roles (Goodstein, 1994; Judge, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1994; Moore, 1997; Osterman, 1995). Reasons for firm adoption of work-family practices centre on a number of demographic changes. These include increasing numbers of working women and working mothers (Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998; Osterman, 1995); growth in dual-career couples (Goodstein, 1994); the rise in single-parent families (Morgan & Milliken, 1992); and the steady increase in the elderly population (Goodstein, 1995; Hendrickson, 2000). Further, demands from the workplace appear to be increasing, with employees spending more time at work (Jacobs & Greerson, 2001). Combined, these factors mean that employees

continually face challenging situations where the ability to be effective at work and at home may be compromised.

From an equal employment opportunity perspective, work-family practices should allow employees who are influenced by the factors mentioned above (e.g. working mothers) the ability to function more effectively at home and in the workplace. However, little is known regarding any fundamental differences in attitudes and behaviour between men and women with regard to work-family practices. One of the few work-family attitudes that have been examined has found some gender differences with respect to work-family conflict (Guttek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991).

Because gender differences in the work-family arena have not been explored, this paper examines a number of attitudes and behaviours specific to an organisation's work-family practices. As noted by Singh, Finn and Goulet (2004), results of gender differences have been less than conclusive, "encouraging additional research using different data sets and methods" (p. 346). Further, expanding this research into work-family attitudes and behaviours is a natural progression, given the focus of these practices includes the growth of workforce participation by women. Awareness of similarities and differences in attitudes and behaviours by gender should be important for organisations and researchers wanting to focus on the equal employment opportunities that work-family practices supposedly provide.

Gender Differences

The study of gender differences towards job attitudes is nothing new (e.g. Deaux, 1984). However, the issue of differences in job attitudes between the sexes "continues to attract attention in both the academic and popular media" (Singh et al., 2004, p. 346). Such attention stems from the increased workforce participation rates of women (noted above), as well as and the conviction that there are attitudinal differences between men and women (e.g. Konrad, Corrigan, Lieb, & Ritchie, 2000; Lefkowitz, 1994). In addition, Lefkowitz (1994) maintained that interest has been spurred by recognition of sex-segregation in occupational structures, organisational discrimination against women, and the passage of equal employment opportunity legislation. Given that work-family practices have been available within organisations for a number of decades, it is surprising that so few studies have explored gender issues towards attitudes relating to work-family practices.

Singh et al. (2004) stated there "is a relatively large body of literature on the differences in job attitudes between men and women" (p. 346). Singh et al. (2004) noted that a deficiency in the literature has been the focus on single job attitudes, such as job satisfaction (deVaus and McAllister, 1991; McNeily and Goldsmith, 1991) and organisational commitment (Aven, Parker and McEvoy, 1993; Wahn, 1998). The notion that job attitudes may differ by gender has been well established (Schwartz, 1989), even if empirical support has been indifferent (Kaldenberg, Becker & Zvonkovic, 1995).

Women have been found to have greater commitment to their career and job than their male co-workers (Wahn, 1998; Matthieu and Zajec, 1990), but findings towards organisational commitment have been mixed. Singh et al. (2004) found women employees more committed to their organisation than male employees, but this is opposite to that found by (Graddick & Farr, 1983). Women have also been found to have lower job satisfaction than men (Voydanoff, 1979), while other studies have reported no significant differences in attitudes towards the job by gender (Aven, et al., 1993; Smith, Smits, & Hoy, 1998). Consequently, it must be acknowledged that the findings on gender differences have been mixed.

Theoretical Models and Hypotheses

A number of theoretical approaches can be used to assess gender differences. This paper focuses on the gender model, which is also known as the socialisation perspective (Mannheim, 1983). The gender model argues that gender-related differences in attitudes towards jobs, and arguably, in attitudes towards work-family practices, do represent true psychological differences resulting from male and female socialisation at an early age (Ritzer, 1972; Rosener, 1990). As such, the gender model suggests that gender roles have been socially determined (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). For example, society still reinforces the male role of provider, which should lead to greater dependence on the job for self-fulfilment, leading to more positive attitudes towards the job than females. Further, females are viewed as establishing their identity through nurturing relationships and their focus on extra-work (Singh et al., 2004), such as childcare. As such, women perceive their job as being less central and thus would lead to lower job related attitudes than men. As such, the gender model contends that females will have lower overall job attitudes than male employees. However, whether this difference, which has not always been supported empirically, would also hold for attitudes towards work-family practices is less persuasive.

Using the socialisation perspective to examine employee involvement in work as opposed to family would tend to support men focusing more on the workplace and women focusing more on the home. In their study of work-family conflict, Gutek et al. (1991) suggested that men would feel less comfortable with family issues while women would feel less comfortable with workplace issues. As such, conflict originating in the home or office would be felt differently by gender. Similarly, we expect attitudes towards work-family practices to be different between male and female employees because these practices typically focus on allowing employees to better balance their work and family commitments (Goodstein, 1994). We argue that by offering work-family practices, an organisation is fundamentally acknowledging that working in today's business environment makes the ability to balance family issues much harder, and as such, organisational interventions (e.g. work-family practices) are required. As such, the focus of work-family practices is predominately, although not exclusively, towards

the family. As such, we would expect female employees to be more positive towards these practices than males because of their nurturing and extra-role focus.

Four work-family attitudes and two behaviours from the literature are explored for gender differences. Three attitudes are based on Grover (1991), and relate to fairness perceptions towards work-family practices in general, as well as towards users of work-family practices – separated into male and female users. The perceived fairness of work-family practices relates to employees perceptions of how fair it is for an organisation to focus on employee work-family balance issues, and attitudes towards users reflects how supportive employees are of users of work-family practices. Given that female employees are more aligned with parenting and nurturing roles, and that work-family practices predominately support this role in the workplace, we suggest female employees will have a more positive attitude towards work-family practices than male employees. Further, females are more likely to view positively users of such practices, especially women, who would be seen as focusing on their parental/family roles. We also suggest that male users of work-family practices will be more supported by female employees because their socialised nurturing aspects will inherently be supportive of anyone using practices to support work-family issues, while male users will probably tend to negatively view male users of work-family practices because this is counter to males socialised work role. This leads to our first set of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: The attitudes of female employees toward the perceived fairness of work-family practices will be more favorable than male attitudes.

Hypothesis 2: The attitudes of female employees with respect to attitudes towards female work-family practice users will be more favorable than male attitudes.

Hypothesis 3: The attitudes of female employees with respect to attitudes towards male work-family practice users will be more favorable than male attitudes.

In addition to fairness perceptions towards work-family practices and users, recent advances in the work-family literature have focused on more generalised aspects towards work-family practices. Lambert (2000) explored the usefulness of work-family practices, while Haar and Spell (2004) explored the value of work-family practices and the awareness of such practices. This study explores gender differences towards the benefits associated with work-family practices. Studies by Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke and O'Dell (1998) and Kossek and Nichol (1992) have explored the recruitment and retention benefits of work-family practices, and this study expands these to include a wider array of benefits linked to work-family practices, including improved morale and loyalty (Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, & Reilly, 1995), and enhanced employee and organisational performance (Ed-

wards & Rothbard, 2000). As such, we suggest female employees due to their affiliation with practices that support their nurturing role, will view the benefits of work-family practices more positively.

Hypothesis 4: The attitudes of female employees toward the perceived benefits of work-family practices will be more favorable than male attitudes.

Finally, employee uses of work-family practices are explored. Recent studies on work-family practice usage (Rothausen et al., 1998, Haar, Spell & O'Driscoll, 2004) have expanded usage to include not only current use of practices but anticipated use as well. This paper explores gender differences towards current and future work-family practice use and suggests again that the gender model will encourage women employees to utilise work-family practices more than their male counterparts. This leads to our last set of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 5: The behaviour of female employees toward currently using work-family practices will be more favorable than male behaviours.

Hypothesis 6: The behaviour of female employees toward using work-family practices in the future will be more favorable than male behaviours.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Data were collected from a New Zealand local government organisation that is a major employer in the rural region. The organisation offers a number of work-family practices, including paid parental leave (six weeks at full-pay), domestic leave (care for sick partner and dependents included), flexible working hours (flexitime, part-time work), a before and after-school room, and an employee assistance programme (EAP). A total of 206 employees with access to the organisation's Intranet were emailed surveys, and a total of 100 replies were received (response rate 48.5 percent). The average age of respondents was 41.7 years (SD=10.1), with the majority being full-time employees (91%), married (77%), and female (69%). Approximately 70% of respondents were blue-collar workers and 30% white-collar workers. The average length of tenure was 9.2 years (SD=8.3), indicating a large range of tenure amongst respondents (tenure range was 6 months to 34 years).

Measures

Perceived Fairness of Work-Family Practices was measured using a 9-item scale, coded 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree (Grover, 1991). The original measure focused on parental leave only, so the questions were reworded to encompass a number of work-family practices. A sample question is "Supporting employees who have children is not fair to employees without children" (reverse worded). This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

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

Perceived Benefits of Work-Family Practices was measured using a 6-item scale (Haar, Spell & O’Driscoll, 2005), coded 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Each item followed the stem “Work-family programs...” and included responses such as “...improve employee loyalty” and “...improve firm performance”. This scale had a reliability score (Cronbach’s alpha) of .91.

Current Work-Family Practice Use and Future Work-Family Practice Use was based on Rothausen et al. (1998) with a five-item scale coded 1=past use, 2=present use, 3=anticipated use, 4=never used, 5=unaware asked for the following work-family practices: paid parental leave, domestic leave, flexible working hours, before and after-school room, and EAP. Responses were recoded as a dummy variable for Current Use (1=present user, 0=all other responses), then again for Future Use (1=future user, 0=all other responses). Then all current use of work-family practices were added together, and this was repeated for future users. Thus, respondents with a score of zero do not currently use or ever intend using, work-family practices.

Results

Descriptive statistics for all the study variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics									
Variables	M	S D	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Perceived Fairness of Work-Family Practices	4.9	1.10	—						
2. Attitudes Towards Female Work-Family Practice Users	4.8	.90	.43**	—					
3. Attitudes Towards Male Work-Family Practice Users	4.7	.79	.41**	.80*	—				
4. Perceived Benefits of Work-Family Practices	3.8	.79	.26**	.42**	.39**	—			
5. Current Work-Family Practice Use	.35	.66	.12	.00	.06	-.01	—		
6. Future Work-Family Practice Use	.56	.97	.18	.24*	.23*	.25*	-.07	—	
N=100. *p< .05, **p<.01									

Table 1 shows that the perceived fairness of work-family practices was significantly correlated with attitudes towards female work-family practice users ($r = .43, p < .01$), attitudes towards male

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work-family practice users ($r = .41, p < .01$), and the perceived benefits of work-family practices ($r = .26, p < .01$). Attitudes towards female work-family practice users was significantly correlated with attitudes towards male work-family practice users ($r = .80, p < .01$), perceived benefits of work-family practices ($r = .42, p < .01$), and future use of work-family practices ($r = .24, p < .05$). Attitudes towards male work-family practice users was significantly correlated with perceived benefits of work-family practices ($r = .39, p < .01$), and future use of work-family practices ($r = .23, p < .05$). Finally, perceived benefits of work-family practices was significantly correlated with future use of work-family practices ($r = .25, p < .05$).

To examine Hypotheses 1 to 6, independent samples t-tests were conducted. Results of the t-tests are shown in Table 2.

Variables	Females (n=69)		Males (n=31)		Difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	(T-test)
1. Perceived Fairness of Work-Family Practices	4.9	1.1	4.9	1.2	.23
2. Attitudes Towards Female Work-Family Practice Users	4.9	.97	4.5	.71	1.88†
3. Attitudes Towards Male Work-Family Practice Users	4.8	.83	4.4	.63	2.15*
4. Perceived Benefits of Work-Family Practices	4.0	.72	3.4	.80	3.56**
5. Current Work-Family Practice Use	.29	.57	.48	.81	-1.37
6. Future Work-Family Practice Use	.67	1.0	.32	.79	1.66†

† $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 1 shows there is no significant gender difference towards perceived fairness of work-family practices ($t = .23$, non significant), offering no support for Hypothesis 1. However, there are significant differences between female and male respondents regarding attitudes towards work-family practice users. Attitudes towards female users of work-family practices was significantly different ($t = 1.88, p < .1$), as was attitudes towards male users of work-family practices ($t = 2.15, p < .05$). This provides support for Hypotheses 2 and 3. Hypothesis 4 was also supported, with female respondents perceiving greater benefits from work-family practices than male respondents ($t = 3.56, p < .01$). There were no significant gender differences in current work-family practice use ($t = -1.37$, non significant), which fails to support Hypothesis 5. However, Hypothesis 6 was supported, with a significant difference in gender towards future work-family practice use ($t = 1.66, p < .1$).

Discussion

This paper sought to expand the types of attitudes explored from a gender difference perspective. While the literature is extensively filled with mixed findings, there has been an absence of studies exploring attitudes towards work-family practices. Given that work-family practices inherently seek to support employees in balancing their work and family roles, this lends itself more readily to exploration under the gender model. Overall, the findings support the gender model or socialisation perspective, as three of the four work-family attitudes were significantly more positive with female employees than men. Thus, it appears that gendered roles and societal expectations of motherhood even for working mothers, may lend female employees to be more supportive of practice users, including both female and male users. Further, females were more likely to see work-family practices as beneficial, providing multiple benefits for employers, including recruitment and retention benefits and performance aspects. Thus, organizational adoption of work-family practices to secure scarce labour is supported from female employees. Interestingly, there was no gender difference towards the perceived fairness of work-family practices, perhaps suggesting that while male employees appear to have significantly lower attitudes towards practice users and the beneficial nature of practices, they perceive work-family practices similarly positive with female employees, and that firm adoption of work-family practices is a good idea that should be supported and encouraged.

Another new aspect to the literature is exploring gender differences towards behaviours. In this paper, current and future uses of work-family practices were explored. This type of behaviour also fits well with the gender model theory, allowing for such hypotheses to be developed and tested. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in current use of work-family practices; however, future use was significantly higher for female employees. Further analysis of current work-family practice usage shows that 35% of males are current users of flexible work practices, compared to only 23% of women; however, there is no statistically significant difference when all work-family practices are combined and compared.

For future use, flexible work practices were also a major point of difference but for future use female employees anticipated using this practice twice as much as male employees (20% compared to 10%). Consequently, while both male and female employees similarly use work-family practices at the present time, for anticipated use, it is significantly higher for females.

Despite this analysis, what is not known is for what purposes employees use flexible work practices. For example, the gender model suggests female employees would use work-family practices to enhance their family roles, while males might be more likely to focus on personal or work related aspects, for example, fraternising with a supervisor over a game of golf. Whether there are gender differences in practice use such as flexitime needs

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to be further explored, and this should encourage more in-depth studies of what work-family practices might be used for, particularly flexible work practices.

Implications

The findings also have implications for organisations and particularly Equal Opportunity (EO) policy. EO is predominately based on justice, that is, equality for all. As such, it is not about creating a climate of distrust and unfairness. The perceived work-family fairness measure used in the present study asked employees about how fair they thought it was for employers to offer work-family related assistance. The mean score was above the mid-point indicating an overall positive perception amongst employees. Importantly for the organisation, there were no gender differences in this perception, indicating that both females and males viewed the firm's work-family practices as fair and equitable. Firms with work-family practices wanting to gain an understanding of EO implications of their work-family practices could similarly conduct short surveys on employee perceptions and use of work-family practices. While socialisation may lead to different views regarding work-family practices between females and males, this may be a necessary outcome of offering work-family practices. By that, we mean the gender group who has been inherently disadvantaged in managing family and work commitments (females), may inherently be predisposed to having more positive work-family attitudes than males because they feel something is being done to address their imbalance. Consequently, firms need to test the benefits of work-family practices and their influence on employees otherwise their ability to address EO concerns will be diminished. Consequently, firms should take a proactive role in testing their EO policies, particularly work-family practices, to at least benchmark the effects these practices are having.

Limitations

Despite the findings, there are some limitations to the present study that need to be highlighted. Chiefly, this study is based upon a single organisation, with a small sample size ($n=100$), and set in the public sector. Further studies on organisations with larger samples, in diverse sectors (e.g. private, not-for-profit), are needed to aid interpretation of these findings. Nevertheless, the requirement for an organisational setting with multiple work-family practices does make this more challenging. Similarly, different organisations may offer a wider variety of work-family practices than examined here, which may also have implications for work-family practice attitudes and behaviours. Again, wider replication will strengthen the conclusions made here and aid our understanding of gender differences. Thus, implications for research include exploring a wider range of work-family attitudes; particularly those found to be significantly related to positive job outcomes, such as work-family usefulness (Lambert, 2000), and work-family practice value (Haar & Spell, 2004).

Conclusion

Overall, the present study sheds some light on gender differences towards work-family attitudes and behaviours, which has been previously neglected in the literature. This study also provides support for the gender model, but further studies are required before these findings can be suggested as being generalised towards the working population. While the literature lacks any conclusive evidence towards the gender model, this study goes some way towards supporting the socialisation perspective if only towards the work-family attitudes and behaviours examined here.

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