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"The Policy Exists but You Can't Really Use It": Communication and the Structuration of Work-Family Policies

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"The Policy Exists but You Can't Really Use It": Communication and the Structuration of Work-Family Policies

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Abstract
Although work-family benefits are increasingly important organizational policies, limited research addresses the impact of communication on benefit utilization. However, communication is significant because the perceived appropriateness of work-family benefits emerges through interaction. For example, when coworkers complain about "picking up the slack" for those using family leave, their discourse may impact future decisions of other workers regarding whether they utilize the work-family benefits available to them. We apply Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory to examine organizational members' discursive responses to conditions (and contradictions) present in utilizing work-family benefits in a governmental organization. We argue the daily discursive practices of individuals can either reinforce or undermine formally stated work-family initiatives, and in turn discuss the implications of this "structuration" of policy.

Keywords: work-family policies, structuration, coworker communication, work-family communication

> No one talked to me directly and said, "Gee, I resent the fact that you were on maternity leave," but I know that people felt that way.
>
> People don't understand that when I had six weeks off [for maternity leave], I needed six weeks off. I didn't sit there and play cards, you know what I mean, go shopping every day.

> I have heard situations within the agency where men have asked for paternity leave and not gotten receptive feedback. Either not gotten it approved at all, or certainly not what they had asked for.
>
> Someone wanted paternity leave, and everybody laughed. I mean, they thought that was funny.
>
> I wanted to take two weeks [of paternity leave] and the supervisor was saying, "No, I don't think, you know, that's probably not a very good idea."

These observations from organizational members regarding parental leave surrounding childbirth illustrate an important yet often overlooked aspect of organizational policies: the fact that a policy exists on paper does *not* mean it is always accepted as legitimate or followed as written. Although organizational policies are a form of structure, they are produced and reproduced through processes of interpretation and interaction. Consequently, interpersonal, organizational, and public discourse surrounding organizational policies impact the structuring of the policies and, ultimately, policy implementation in that written policies may differ from policies "in-use." Individuals experience and implement organizational policies in environments that may discursively reinforce or contradict these policies; therefore, in this study we examined the communicative nature of policy implementation.

Communication and Work-Family Policy Implementation

Specifically, we explored the discourse of organizational members regarding the implementation and utilization of work-family policies. In organizations, three major types of work-family policies have been created to assist employees in "balancing" their work and family lives, including flexible work options, family-leave policies, and dependent-care benefits[1] (Morgan & Milliken, 1992). We argue that taking a communicative perspective allows for an examination of how such work-family benefits are enacted through discourse and interactions about the policy because the intent of work-family policies does not come into fruition until they are put into action. Work-family benefits provide a rich context to study policy for several reasons. First, "work-family balance" became a hot career issue starting in the 1990s (Lobel, 1991), and over the past decade, work-family benefits have been a growing trend in terms of personnel policies (Mitchell, 1997; Osterman, 1995). Yet widespread organizational culture change toward work and family is not *automatically* achieved by implementing family-friendly policies in the workplace (Lewis, 1997). This becomes important because research indicates that a supportive work-family culture is significantly related to benefit utilization and work attitudes, such as organizational commitment, intention to leave the organization, and less work-to-family conflict—beyond the mere availability of work-family benefits (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999).

Since work-family policies are relatively new to organizations, there is still some dissent as to whether these policies are even appropriate given traditional separations of work and home (Kanter, 1977). To some organizational members, the idea of assisting employees with their personal lives is contested terrain, because it allows "non-work" issues (i.e.,

childcare, eldercare, spousal care) to have a clear impact on the working environment. For example, maternity leave to birth a child, recover, and provide newborn care essentially removes that working mother from the office for six weeks. However, the workload for the organization does not change, and so her responsibilities are covered by temporary workers, part-time staff, or coworkers. When such leave is also extended to new fathers, the physical component of birthing and recovery is removed. Instead, he would care for the newborn and perhaps the mother—but he still might miss work for six weeks under some family leave policies, and again, his workload must be covered, which in turn impacts the working environment and other employees who must fulfill his responsibilities.

As a result, organizational members may struggle with getting all the work done when individuals are absent for family reasons; even family leaves of shorter than six weeks can increase the workload for others, as can flexible working arrangements such as part-time work. A situation emerges where although work-family policies may be in place, organizational members do not really want others to utilize these benefits because it may increase their own responsibilities. Thus, even in "family-friendly" organizations, managers may send "negative signals indicating that the use of flexible, family-friendly benefits is a problem for them and for the company as a whole" (Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996, p. 19). Research has demonstrated that work-family policies are ineffective if supervisors do not openly support them (Cramer & Pearce, 1990; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Consequently, a growing body of research has disclosed that formal policies do not always equate with corresponding practices; employees may not be consistently informed of their benefits or be pressured not to use them (Kamerman & Kahn, 1987; Raabe & Gessner, 1988; Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996).

Saltzman (1997) refers to work-family policies as a "paradox of the American workplace" in that career repercussions exist for individuals who utilize them; companies who have them in place "expect their most ambitious and devoted workers to forgo such options" (p. 1). The Ford Foundation study of Corning, Xerox, and Tandem Computers found employees who utilized work-family benefits suffered career consequences, although they were typically more efficient and productive than their colleagues were (Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996). Since employees may fear such consequences in using work-family benefits, many companies find a lower-than-expected number of employees take advantage of such benefits even though they have the need (Jenner, 1994; Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996; Solomon, 1994). Gender has a significant and substantive influence on family leave-taking behaviors (Sandberg, 1999); women are more likely than men to take leave (Kim, 1998). Men seem to be penalized in terms of perceived commitment and reward recommendations when they take advantage of family leave (Allen & Russell, 1999). Consequently, benefits are "underutilized" by men, single workers, and career-oriented mothers (Bailyn, Fletcher, & Kolb, 1997). As Lee (1991) suggests, this creates a situation where policies "live or die" by the ways they are applied to individual employees by individual managers.

However, this existing research still does not consider how *communication* between and among supervisors and subordinates impacts whether or not individuals utilize work-family benefits, or how work-family policies are produced and reproduced through interaction. This is a significant oversight, because communication from organizational members creates cultural norms as to the appropriateness of work-family benefit utilization. An

exception is the work of Kirby (2000) who examined supervisory communication surrounding the implementation of work-family policies. In this related study of Regulatory Alliance,[2] discourse indicated supervisors were being told to simultaneously push harder to meet deadlines while remaining sensitive to work-family issues. Amidst such contradictions, the supervisors sometimes sent mixed messages about the policies; thus, while supervisors communicated to their employees that work-family benefits were open to them, at times they did not *really* want people to utilize their benefits so the work would get done. Some of these mixed messages were communicated in direct verbal and written forms, such as emphasizing deadlines over leave. In addition, there were more indirect forms of mixed messages, such as the role modeling of individuals who worked twelve or more hours a day to the detriment of time with their families (Kirby, 2000).

As a result of these mixed messages, employees were not always sure whether supervisors supported the work-family policies and, consequently, whether it was acceptable to utilize the programs. Even though the employees felt their supervisors sent mixed messages about work and family, their discourse did not suggest that supervisors intentionally set out to sabotage the organization's work-family agenda. Instead, the employees saw their supervisors as supportive—even though they still had concerns about taking leave and using other work-family benefits. This can partially be explained through the mixed messages they received; when Regulators were exposed to many of these contradictory messages over time, work emerged as taking precedence over family—without supervisors ever directly addressing the topic (Kirby, 2000). This study illustrates the centrality of communication processes in shaping the implementation and utilization of benefits beyond the individual personalities or agendas of supervisors. However, even though this research is centered in communication, it still echoes prior research in using supervisors as the fulcrum for examining work-family policy implementation. Even when other sources of influence are considered, the typical sources are spouses, friends, and employers (i.e., Lee & Duxbury, 1998). In overlooking the potential impact of coworkers on the process of work-family benefit utilization, existing research ignores an important source of organizational discourse.

Coworker Communication and Work-Family Policy Implementation

As Nippert-Eng (1996) illustrates, if organizational norms concerning work-family issues and policies are "silent, vague, or negotiable, *the work group is where they are most likely interpreted* . . . work groups let us know if we actually have flexible working hours and places" (p. 188, emphasis added). There is growing literature on how work-family policies may generate resentment rather than support from employees who have no need for them (Gilbert, 1994). Issues of equity emerge, where individuals without families are feeling burdened by work-family policies because of the increased workloads they are facing (Gilbert, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996). In particular, many perceive a child care bias in family-friendly policies (Medjuck, Keefe, & Fancey, 1998). In fact, a national organization called the "Childfree Network" has been founded to create camaraderie and support among employees without children to advocate for equal treatment, calling work-family policies discriminatory (Kirkpatrick, 1997). It follows that coworkers often differ in

the support they provide to their peers who want to use work-family programs. Just as managers may be reluctant to grant flexibility, coworkers may fear having to take on more work as a result of individuals taking advantage of policies such as family leave (Rees Edwards, 1997). Hence, they might not be supportive of individuals who want to use work-family benefits and communicate about the policies in a negative manner.

Of course, coworkers may discuss the process of utilizing the benefits for informational purposes as well. For example, negotiation of maternity leave "does not occur in a social vacuum . . . workgroup members will discuss the process and outcomes with the leave-taker as well as with one another" (Miller, Jablin, Casey, Lamphear-Van Horn, & Ethington, 1996, p. 302). Accordingly, the communicative interactions concerning using maternity leave (or other work-family programs), and the resulting arrangements, affect future interactions and arrangements with other workers. The outcomes of the current negotiation may enable or constrain future negotiations. A central assumption in this inquiry is that micro-communication practices surrounding work, family, and work-family policies have the ability to influence macro-issues, such as organizational policies and even dominant ideologies in the organization concerning work and family. At the same time, more macro-level constructs, such as societal and organizational discourse surrounding work, family and work-family policies, have the ability to impact micro-level interpersonal interactions. Specifically, we are interested in how discursive practices of coworkers reinforce or undermine work-family policy implementation and utilization. This leads to the first research question: What do coworkers say when they talk about work-family policies?

Structuration and Work-Family Policy Implementation

To this point, a two-fold rationale has been offered for this study: (a) the need to explore the role of communication in policy implementation and (b) the need to explore coworker discourse in the process of policy implementation. A final impetus for this study is the need to theoretically ground research on work-family issues and policies. Currently, much of the work-family research creates models to examine mechanisms linking work and family; a primary thrust concerns quantitative outcome variables that measure the amount of "work-family conflict" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) experienced by individuals, as well as its antecedents and consequences (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). In contrast, in this study we attempt to ground knowledge of work-family issues and work-family policy in a theoretical base beyond the construct of work-family conflict.

Since we argue that talk about work, family, and work-family policies impacts policy implementation, a theoretical framework is needed to substantiate this claim. Several theories address how the process of communication impacts individual perceptions of that person, place or thing in the future. For example, one approach based in social-information processing examines individual differences in perceptions of a task based not only on having direct experience with the task, but also on how coworkers and supervisors talk about the task (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Although this offers a useful explanation, this research is primarily centered in interpersonal communication. In contrast, a primary assumption of this study is that interactions of individuals concerning work-family policies are shaped and constrained by the material working conditions they face, as well as discourse, policy,

and ideology about work and family at the organizational and societal levels. At the same time, these interactions among individuals can either reinforce or undermine these larger social systems.

In order to conceptualize discourse across these levels of analysis, we employ Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory as the ontology for this communication research (Banks & Riley, 1993). In using Structuration Theory to explore work-family policy, we liken this research to the metaphor of organizations as discourse, concentrating on structure and process (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1997). Our thinking is guided by Poole and DeSanctis (1990, 1992), who examine concrete ways that "talk about" Group Decision Support System (GDSS) technology impacts the use of technology (also see DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). In this study, we adopt a similar view toward the potential impact of "talk about" work-family policies, looking instead at how discourse (that may reflect organizational and societal expectations) generates and sustains the system of how work-family policies are interpreted and implemented in an organization (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996).

As an example of this perspective, presume that a new father has taken six weeks off for paternity leave. In this process, he has (a) probably increased the workload for others, (b) violated organizational norms (only about 3 percent of fathers actually take this much leave), and (c) questioned macro-societal expectations that he is the breadwinner while the mother is the primary caregiver. A disgruntled coworker, in turn, can use discourse across these levels in complaining about the arrangement (i.e., "I have to do his work," "I can't believe he took that much leave *here*; that's career suicide," "Why should he be staying home? That's the mother's job!"). Coworkers who hear these comments may take this discourse into consideration if and when they are faced with the same circumstances—and may not feel it is appropriate to take six weeks off. Of course, the opposite could happen as well, and if the father is discursively championed for taking six weeks at home with his newborn child, other men in the organization may be encouraged to do the same. The discourse may create rules and resources for addressing work-family issues within the organizational system; these "recipes" for acting are called structures (Giddens, 1984; Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1996).

This reflects structuration, where the reproduction of social systems lies in the routinized, day-to-day interactions of agents in their use of rules and resources; "In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible" (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). The way organizational members talk about work-family programs helps to construct reality as to the "meaning" of such programs in the organization, which in turn shapes the attitudes and behaviors of organizational members. Through the variety of social processes that occur in interaction, people create their own "structures-in-use" (Poole & DeSanctis, 1992). Individuals have the ability to "appropriate" structures in terms of how they use, adapt, and reproduce them (Barley, 1986; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Lewis & Seibold, 1993; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990, 1992). Thus, discourse surrounding work-family policies may serve to reinforce or undermine the policies as written. This leads to the second research question: How does coworker discourse structure work-family policies?

Method

As noted, in this study we are concerned with discourse surrounding work-family policies. Specifically, in this study we asked organizational members to talk about their experiences concerning how work, family, and work-family policies are treated in the organization. Lindlof (1995) summarizes this orientation as "if we want to know how something is done and what it means, we have to know how it is talked about" (p. 234).

Research Respondents and Context

Regulatory Alliance is a governmental body that supervises and examines national banks to confirm that they are following legal requirements. This study details the experiences of Regulators from the Midwestern District of the organization. The primary focus was on the "Metro" field office, which encompasses individuals from three cities (duty stations) in a two-state area. In the study, we were interested in studying groups of coworkers and their respective supervisors to understand both sides of work-family policy construction and implementation, and so participants were purposefully selected to fit this criterion. In the Metro field office, a potential subject pool of 38 individuals existed, and of these individuals, 25 were men (19 were married) and 13 were women (all were married). Of these, the first author interviewed 35 Regulators either in a focus group, an individual interview, or both. Included among these 35 participants were two Assistant Deputy Comptrollers (ADCs), who are essentially the supervisors in the Metro field office.

In addition, we also wanted a generalized perspective as to how work-family policies are viewed by those who work with the policies on an ongoing basis. To this end, the first author interviewed the ADCs from all the Midwestern District field offices (including Metro); there were 11 male participants (all were married) and four female participants (three were married). Members of the Employee Relations Committee (ERC) were also interviewed. The ERC includes employees from all the field offices within the District, and handles work-life and other employee concerns; participants included three males (all were married) and four females (three were married). In total, 56 individuals from the Midwestern District of Regulatory Alliance participated in the study. Of these individuals, 15 were at the management level of ADCs, 36 were bank examiners, and 5 were in administrative staff positions.

The nature of their job requires the bank examiners (Regulators) to travel in order to complete bank examinations. Examiners often leave on Monday morning and do not return to their families until Thursday or Friday night, and at the Metro field office, examiners traveled about 30 percent of the time. Typically, a crew of four to five Regulators traveled to bank locations. Each crew functioned as a self-directed work team and under this structure, the actions of one person readily impacted others. For example, if an examiner did not travel, someone else needed to pick up the slack. This interdependence within each crew at times created tensions when individuals wanted to use work-family benefits, especially in the time surrounding data collection as the agency was understaffed.

In terms of existing work-family benefits, Regulatory Alliance has family leave, flexible scheduling, and dependent-care benefits in place. The potential types of leave include: (a) annual leave, which is earned time off for personal use; (b) sick leave, which is earned

time off for medical appointments and unscheduled absences due to personal illness, injury, pregnancy, childbirth, or adoption and may include limited sick leave under the Federal Employees Family Friendly Leave Act (FEFFLA) to provide care for family members; (c) family and medical leave taken under the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993, which may be paid or unpaid depending upon whether annual/sick leave time is available; and (d) leave without pay (LWOP). At Regulatory Alliance, unless an individual is on extended leave, there are no replacements hired to cover his or her responsibilities.

Concerning flexible scheduling, the organization uses compressed weeks, particularly in the form of "flex-Fridays," where individuals work nine out of every ten days and get every other Friday off. Another compressed work program, the "4-10," allows individuals to work ten hours a day for four days when they are in overnight travel status. In addition, the Regulators have the options of part-time work, job-sharing, and work-at-home. When an individual chooses to work part-time, his or her responsibilities are reduced accordingly; however, as with leave, the organization does not hire additional workers to cover the employee's prior responsibilities; instead these are distributed among the current workforce. The dependent-care benefits of the Regulators include referral services for locating childcare and eldercare, and financial assistance through pretax payroll deductions. Regulators primarily access information about these benefits through the company website and a written "Employee Benefits Summary." As some Regulators noted, the typical protocol for communicating about work-family benefits is that when an initiative comes up, they receive a system-wide message or "newsblast" on e-mail or an electronic bulletin board, and then must take the initiative to follow up if they are interested. Given this context for work-family discourse, we detail procedures used for data collection and analysis.

Procedures

Data collection

The experiences of Regulators regarding work-family policies were gathered in three ways, including reviewing documented material, facilitating focus group interviews, and conducting extended individual interviews.[3] We started the research process with organizational documents, because these leave a paper trail "indicating what an organization produces and how it certifies certain kinds of activities . . . codifies procedures or policies . . . and tracks its own activities" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 208). Thus, formal documents on work-family/work-life programs were examined for publicly stated work-family efforts in order to examine organizational rhetoric as well as to provide ideas about important questions to pursue through interviews (Patton, 1990).

In the next stage of research, focus groups were utilized to "explain how people regard an experience, idea, or event" (Kreuger, 1994, p. 8). Using an open-ended interview protocol to guide discussion, the first author conducted and tape-recorded four focus group interviews with peer-groups of Regulators from the Metro field office about their experiences with work-family policies. The first two focus groups included two groups of employees from the primary duty station in sex-segregated groups of men and women; the rationale for these groupings was that since work-family policies are often stereotyped as being "benefits for women," men and women might have differing perceptions that they

might be reluctant to share outside of a same sex group. The second set of focus groups included groups of examiners from the duty stations in other cities, and the first author traveled to these locations. The final two focus groups took place at the Midwestern District headquarters. The first group included ADCs from all the district field offices, and the second comprised the Employee Relations Committee. In total, six focus groups were conducted that ranged in length from 70 to 90 minutes.

Individual interviews were then completed as a follow-up to the focus groups. Building on feedback received in focus groups, the original interview protocol was broadened and revised. All individual interviews were conducted within the primary duty station to explore work-family policy communication between groups of coworkers and their ADC. Using the protocol as a guide for discussion, the first author conducted individual interviews that were tape-recorded for later transcription. Interviews were conducted until participant responses became repetitive to information in prior interviews (Patton, 1990); in total, 16 individuals were interviewed anywhere from 30 to 75 minutes.

Data analysis

After processing organizational documents and conducting focus group and individual interviews, the data was transcribed verbatim; in combination, the focus group and interview data resulted in 529 pages of single-spaced dialogue. This data was analyzed using a process of "reduction" and "interpretation" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The transcriptions were first entered into QSR NUD*IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research Nonnumerical Unstructured Data * Indexing Searching and Theorizing). The NUD*IST program was used primarily as a tool to assist in organizing, searching, and sorting the coded data. To clarify themes that emerged in talk about work-family policies, the transcripts generated through NUD*IST were analyzed for recurring patterns in the discourse using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The first iteration involved reading through the printed transcriptions, and composing six potential themes regarding Regulator discourse about work-family policies that seemed consistent across both focus group and interview responses.[4] The first theme encompassed talk about inequities for individuals who did not have the opportunity to use the policies. In addition, Regulators talked about inequities in how work-family policies were applied based on three demographic characteristics: (a) whether the employee had children (theme two), (b) whether the employee was male or female (theme three), and (c) whether the employee was part-time or full-time (theme four). Regulator discourse also grouped around a fifth theme of how policies can be "used" or "abused." The sixth and final theme concerned peer pressure that surrounded work-family policy utilization. The transcriptions were coded first on paper and then in NUD*IST using these six themes and print reports were generated for each.

In the second stage, the first author went through another iteration of the process, reducing the six original themes to two major themes that characterized the discourse (Creswell, 1994). The first major theme, talk about preferential treatment, integrated the four original sub-themes surrounding perceptions of inequities, and in this process themes two and three (regarding family status and gender) were combined. The second major theme, talk about work-family policy utilization, included the sub-themes of policy "use" versus

"abuse" and the resulting peer pressure that Regulators discussed. Through these themes, we attempted to capture the sense of organizational members' meanings regarding the treatment of work-family policies in their organization.

Results and Interpretations

> Everybody's perception is different, but I think at times I probably perceive differences in maybe what's expected out of male versus female or single versus married, or kids versus no kids. (female examiner)

Our first research question asked what coworkers say when they talk about work-family policies. Although some spoke of the merits of these programs, the overarching issue examiners communicated in terms of work-family programs was the perception that such programs granted preferential treatment. A contradiction the Regulators confronted concerning work-family programs was that the work did not go away when someone was granted leave or part-time work, so they needed to assist in completing the work. This created feelings (and discourse) of resentment toward those who utilized work-family benefits. Our second research question asked how coworker discourse structures work-family policies. Coworkers created a rule of determining "use versus abuse" of work-family benefits that contributed to a system of peer pressure where many Regulators felt pressured not to utilize the benefits that were available to them.

"That Just Doesn't Seem Quite Fair": Talk about Preferential Treatment

In the discourse about work-family policies at Regulatory Alliance, the examiners continually compared themselves to each other in terms of benefits they were and were not able to use. Since the Regulators were a composite of single and married individuals with and without children, there was obvious variability in how many people actually utilized work-family programs, and beyond this, in how frequently individuals used these benefits. These variations were reflected in the discourse; perceived inequities emerged according to whether individuals could use the policies in the first place, and if they did, how these were applied based on whether the employee had children or not, was a male or a female, and had part-time or full-time status.

"It is always the buzz": Talk about inequities in work-family policies

As illustrated, perceived inequities emerged in the discourse of individuals who did not make use of the policies. One female examiner "kind of look[s] at them and go[es], 'You know, that just doesn't quite seem fair that just because that person has young children, they get to take an extra 10–15 days a year.'" For another:

> I think that there definitely are perceptions of inequity. Definitely. And in how much benefits some people receive from what the [Regulators] touts as family-life things that are so great. It's like, "Well, yeah, that's great, but that's not doing

> anything for me." And I don't know what more they would do for people without children, what they could do. But there's still the perception that they're really helping them but they're not helping us. (female examiner)

The discourse of several Regulators reflected perceptions that the use of policies by others created more work for them to accomplish. As a male ERC member commented, "That has worked out very well for them. Unfortunately it has increased the workload for us." A male examiner echoed that "sometimes when I take off two or three hours to go to a kids' basketball game . . . in a way you kind of feel guilty about that, because you have been on the other end of things and you know it kind of ticked you off." In this discourse, examiners also exhibited a common concern regarding how much they traveled in reference to their peers—they resented others whom they perceived traveled less than they did. One female examiner saw "people . . . that barely travel and . . . those of us that travel 100 nights a year. So, if things were more consistent there, I think it would be easier to take." As a male ADC had observed, when "people didn't travel nearly as much [as others], it doesn't take too long and the rest of the crew starts to grumble."

Thus, examiners compared how long they were working and how much they were traveling to other examiners. In this process of comparison, the typical result was a perception of "you get more time off work than I do, because I don't have a need or reason to utilize these things because [of] the fact that I am not married and I don't have children" (male examiner). One female examiner characterized this perception as an underlying resentment; others would "not necessarily confront you on it . . . [but] it is always the buzz." Most of this "buzz" was circulated by the single examiners, because the "number of times that a single person has a use of it [work-family leave] is not going to be significant" (female examiner). Instead, single examiners "see all these days that somebody got to take off in the year because their child was supposedly sick . . . it's like, 'Okay, they've had all these benefits for however many years and it doesn't benefit the rest of us" (female examiner). In fact, this has apparently been a point of conversation several times among Regulators who did not utilize the policies.

> All the single people in the office used to talk and say we all understood and what a great program it is, but really, I mean, what are we getting in return for that . . . we felt that we needed to be compensated somehow . . . because maybe we will never be able to have kids or something, so we will go through our whole careers never using a benefit like that. (female examiner)

A male examiner agreed that "it would be nice if there would be something to counterbalance that as a benefit to me." As a result, one male examiner "think[s] there's probably a little resentment . . . if you have a child at home sick, I think maybe there's a little more resentment that 'This person has to stay home with their kids where I have to pick up their work.'" But another male examiner "think[s] maybe the biggest problem we have is that those perceptions . . . are allowed to fester within small groups of people." A female support staff member has heard both sides of this discourse of comparison, and in her view, it is "just human nature. 'She's got a bigger bow than I've got. She's got a prettier dress than

I have' . . . the inequities are pretty vague." In summary, although the same benefits were offered on paper to all employees, the discourse regarding perceived inequities indicated that not all employees felt these benefits were really open to them. Instead, benefits were discursively constructed as being targeted at parents, especially female parents.

"We are discriminated against sometimes": Talk about family circumstances

Regulator discourse illustrated differentials in perceived treatment between individuals who were single and those who were married—with and without children. The ERC members reported this was a major concern among Regulators; in fact, "The most consistent work life [issues] are travel and perceived inequities for people who have kids" (female ERC member). Basically, single examiners perceived *they* traveled more because they did not have a spouse or family. One complained how "it's easier to put [us] out on the road than it is somebody that has kids. It's like, 'Oh. Well, they don't need to be home. They don't have children'" (female examiner). To another female examiner:

> It just seems to me that those with the children don't travel as much, and those who don't have children and who aren't married seem to travel a lot more. And that's based on the discussions I hear . . . it does seem that the comments I hear are, "Well gee, how come I always end up getting the exams that are in Timbuktu and so-and-so who's married and has some little kids at home is always in town or has a nice easy commute." I don't think that is fair. I think we're hired for the exact same job, and our job descriptions are the same, and there's nothing that says because you're not married, you can do all the on-the-road assignments. (female examiner)

A female ERC member has heard some of this negative discourse; as she illustrated, "From the peer standpoint, the comments that you get from them. People with no kids, the perception is the people with, the single folks are the ones that are feeling it a little bit more versus people with families." As illustrated, Regulator discourse indicated perceptions that married people might travel less, and that parents received still more preferential treatment in terms of work-family benefits and reduced travel. But *female* parents seemed to be the brunt of most of the resentment regarding preferential treatment.

Regulator discourse illustrated a perception that female examiners with children were really the ones who benefited from work-family policies—even in comparison to married men with children. The perceived differences were most apparent in the situation of parental leave for the birth of a child—maternity versus paternity leave. There were a few women who perceived some resentment of maternity leave. As a female examiner explained, "No one talked to me directly and said, 'Gee I resent the fact that you were on maternity leave,' but I know that people felt that way." However, even amidst such perceived resentment, no female examiners expressed ever being questioned as to whether as women they "needed" to have maternity leave. On the other hand, men did not have similar biologically based reasons for leave-taking, and as noted in the opening quotes, paternity leave seemed to be left open for scrutiny. As a male ADC commented, "Parental leave . . . is still seen as very different for the women as compared to men." Since the reasons that

men would want to take parental leave did not seem to be understood in the organization, few men took advantage of this benefit.

Furthermore, examiners perceived that when returning to work from parental leave, women *still* seemed to be awarded more leniency and understanding. As a female ADC noted, "In order to be fair, you have to have a standard policy, but the mothers find it harder in some cases than the fathers do." For example, one male ADC remembered making special arrangements for a mother with young babies: "I probably made an adjustment, and I think there were a couple of people who resented the fact that she had, maybe, a more favorable schedule." Based on similar situations, perceptions existed among examiners that new mothers "have got it a little bit easier" than new fathers in terms of travel and getting preferential assignments. As one female examiner noted, "If we've got a big complicated bank coming up, I can pretty well guarantee it's not going to be a new mother in charge of it . . . there are accommodations made, work schedule-wise, travel-wise." But at the same time, new fathers "may have had two hours of sleep the night before and yet soon after the birth they're expected to go into work the next day and perform like nothing ever happened" (female examiner).

In addition to these perceptions of preferential treatment toward mothers versus fathers in infancy, Regulator discourse indicated that even when children are older, it was still presumed to be the mother's job to take leave for family responsibilities and the father's job to stay at work as the provider. As a result, "there's probably more understanding that if you stay home a day because a child is sick . . . I think maybe there's more understanding if you're a woman than if it's a guy" (female examiner). Thus, "taking time off as a male is much more difficult than as a female parent" (male examiner). In addition, working part-time was perceived to be more difficult for men than women.

"They are treated more favorably": Talk about part-time examiners

Like female parents, part-time workers were perceived to have it "easier"—and the fact that all part-timers in the district were female ultimately implied differential treatment based on gender.

> A very high percentage, very close to 100 . . . have been, mostly women with children and a new baby that we have made an accommodation of a part time schedule for . . . if we are not careful, we will become the talk that the programs we have are really only for the new parents. Or at least a parent . . . I have heard it . . . I am not sure of the depth of it. If it is rampant that single people are talking, but I think it is an issue. (female ADC)

A male ADC reiterated that going part-time would probably be easier for women than men. As he described, "If I am a female and I've got kids that I want to stay home with a couple of days a week and you try to sell that to the rest of the crew they would say that's a valid reason." But he felt if a man went part-time, the "question would be, 'Well, why is he only working part-time?' as opposed to if it's a mother there's kind of like a reason." A male examiner agreed that "realistically, I think it's much more difficult for probably the male to go part-time . . . I think it just kind of goes against the norm." This perception that

part-time was just a program for women could be problematic. A female ERC member illustrated that "if the only really good [reason] is women having children, that fosters that resentment . . . 'She wants to go part-time and I am going to have to pick up more work' and then you get that backlash."

Based on this perception that part-time is only for women, there was an underlying resentment or "backlash" toward part-timers at Regulators. This led to situations where "maybe people in the office talk about them [part-timers] a little bit more, about them not being as dedicated or so forth" (male examiner). A male ERC member emphasized that "somebody goes part time, [and] from full travel like everybody else to zero travel . . . that means somebody else has to pick up that slack . . . I am likely to be resentful toward that." A female support staff member expanded that part-timers had "the best of both worlds. They work like three days a week, exams are worked totally around them . . . [but] I think there is a lot of resentment . . . Very much so." This resentment translated to a "negative connotation that you're part-time. I'm very aware of that . . . 'I don't have to do as much work as what some others do' . . . I know that there's that type of talk out there" (female part-time examiner). As an illustration of this type of talk, men "will say things to the effect that, 'Well I wish I could go part-time. Then I wouldn't have to travel as much, or I'd get the assignments that were close to home. I would commute.' That sort of thing" (male examiner). In light of these negative perceptions, one female part-time examiner felt she "pay[s] a price being a part-timer."

Such coworker discourse regarding part-timers had actual material consequences. The ADCs illustrated when individuals perceived resentment about their use of the program, they tended to overcompensate by working more than their allotted hours. Consequently, not many individuals requested part-time status because "most people that have been part time end up working full time" (female examiner). In summary, the part-time program and part-time workers were discussed in a negative manner, especially in terms of being a "woman's benefit." Part-timers and women with children (and to some extent, men with children) were constructed by examiners as receiving "preferential treatment" in terms of the policies that were open to them and their easier travel schedules.

As illustrated, when certain individuals or groups seemed to be continually benefiting from work-family policies, tones of resentment emerged. At times, this caused the Regulators to communicate about work-family benefits and the individuals who utilized them in a negative manner; subgroups of "married versus single," "full-time versus part-time," "parents versus nonparents," and "men versus women" were created. Of these groups, resentment seemed to repeatedly occur in the case of married examiners with children and female examiners with children in particular, especially those who were part-time examiners. The Regulators illustrated a key problem that emerges with work-family initiatives, in that employees assumed the benefits applied only to a few people for part of their work lives—primarily women with young children (Bailyn et al., 1997).

This reflects the growing literature on how work-family policies may impact issues of equity and generate resentment because individuals without families are feeling burdened by family-friendly policies (Gilbert, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996). For example, the single examiners in the study talked about "banding together" to share their perceptions of inequity, which translated to feelings of resentment toward those who were

using the policies. Such feelings surfaced when examiners negatively communicated about work-family policies. As a result, part-timers experienced a "negative connotation" for using the program, and examiners who needed leave for family reasons were occasionally talked about with disfavor. A structurational framework implies that such talk may actually impact work-family benefit utilization, and we explore this possibility through the second major theme.

"It Kind of Ticked Me Off": Talk about Work-Family Policy Utilization

The discourse surrounding how work-family benefits were utilized exists at two levels. Since many Regulators did not feel the policies really applied to them, there seemed to be scrutiny of individuals who did use the policies and whether or not they really had a good "reason." In making these determinations, examiners constructed a notion of "use versus abuse" of work-family benefits. In light of this scrutiny, some individuals were less likely to use the work-family benefits that were available to them. Thus, as a result of the structure of "use versus abuse" and perceptions of preferential treatment, peer pressure existed not to use the benefits.

"That person is always gone": Talk about use versus abuse of policies

Regulator discourse articulated an underlying assumption concerning "use versus abuse" of work-family policies, where it was acceptable for individuals to utilize the work-life benefits available to them as long as other examiners did not perceive the benefits were being abused. As a male examiner explained, "If you know somebody that's out of the office frequently, then maybe the topic will pop up. 'Well, maybe they're abusing their benefits.'" A female examiner noted how

> You see some examiners that are just routinely always gone . . . [and] it impacts my exam when I have a lot of people taking all this time off. And I think it probably is mostly legitimate, but there's still times I sit there and think, "Gee, it seems like that person is always gone and never works their full day and the boss doesn't seem too concerned about it. How can that happen for that person but not for the next?" . . . There's just sometimes you look at that and say, "It seems like some people get more benefit from that than others."

Although another female examiner thought "everyone is pretty good about, you know, if their child is sick that's what they're using it for and they're not lying about it and going shopping or anything," certain policies were regarded as having potential for abuse, especially the 4-10 policy. This was a sore spot in terms of policy because it was not available to everyone, and "a couple of people that are utilizing that, well, they're taking advantage of it" (male examiner). The discourse from examiners also illustrated that some actually did take this idea of "use versus abuse" into consideration when using the policies. To one male examiner, "We know everybody so well that nobody can afford to abuse it because you have peer pressure or whatever, so I don't think anybody has abused it." The potential for abuse was often related to time; as one examiner noted, he did not "feel uncomfortable

asking for that time off, as long as it's not a long period of time" (male examiner). Another male examiner actually used the word "abuse" in articulating his own circumstances:

> I haven't used much [FMLA] for kids. I mean I stay home with the kids when they're sick, but I try not to abuse it. I haven't felt anything that was overt . . . I've used the [benefits] that I'm aware of that I think have some merit and benefit me, and I haven't felt like I've abused anything.

Essentially, "use versus abuse" structured interaction and served as a control mechanism over individuals who wanted to utilize work-family benefits. As an example, if a female examiner worked at home, "She's afraid that guys are going to say . . . 'If you're a woman with kids, you get to do this and that. Man, I could never do that' . . . That's the control mechanism" (male ADC). The notion of use versus abuse had more concrete consequences in actual interactions between coworkers, where they exerted "peer pressure" over each other concerning the appropriateness of work-family requests.

"The crew will reward or punish you": Talk about peer pressure

Given the discourses of preferential treatment and "use versus abuse" expressed by coworkers about work-family benefits, individuals had mixed feelings about whether they should utilize the programs. One male examiner did not "think there's any negativism attached to using any of them." However, many more examiners did see negative perceptions attached to utilizing work-family benefits. A male ADC perceived "considerable peer pressure that keeps people from taking advantage of those." As described, within the Regulators a team structure existed where the examiners worked as a crew. This created a unique situation where supervisory influence did not seem to be the primary factor driving policy utilization. Instead, individuals seemed to feel more pressure not to utilize work-family benefits from their *coworkers* than from their ADCs. One male ADC commented that "most of the people here know and think I'm kind of easy about those things. And I don't think very many people fear that I'm going to downgrade them or penalize them." A female ERC member expressed how she has "gotten more conflicts from peers than managers. The managers have been supportive . . . but the comments from the peers is oh, you are pregnant, you are going to have the easy world [and] the in town assignments."

Echoing this perception, a female examiner who had utilized work-family benefits explained, "The bosses have never made me feel guilty. I have had other people at work make me feel guilty." A male ADC conceptualized such behavior in the context of peer pressure because the "four or five person crew is totally dependent upon one another to get the work done . . . they just don't want to do it [ask for leave] unless they absolutely have to."

> There's an enormous amount of peer pressure that happens, and so you're out there with four other people and you, if you don't pull your weight, it's not ever going to get back to the ADC that you're not working. They will, the people who are on that crew, will reward you or punish you because you're either contributing or not contributing to the team. Because if you're not contributing, they

> have to pull your slack for you and it makes it painful for them, so there's an awful lot of pressure that's put on you to make sure that they conform to this standard of working hard . . . you get to know people and there's also an awful lot of peer pressure. (male ADC)

One male ADC felt this system "normally keeps those requests reasonable, because they have that sense of awareness of what impact it is going to have on others." Another ADC agreed that "a lot of people are pretty apprehensive about asking for anything special that would require the other examiners to travel more . . . if it is me at his detriment, then I am not probably going to ask for it." A male examiner echoed these perceptions in regard to leave: "I could take it if I wanted to but I know that it will make me farther behind and be putting a burden on everyone else to get work done." Beyond the crew structure, fear was also a component of this peer pressure. A female ADC explained that "some people keep close track on who is going and who is not, who got that and who didn't get that. They can tend to rile people up a little bit." A male ADC agreed:

> There's a fair amount of peer pressure . . . Let's say that [Regulator name] decided she was going to work at home half the time or a third of the time or occasionally when she's scheduled to be in the office. I think [Regulator name] is afraid, not that I'm going to be on her case, but that somebody else will say, "Well, where's [Regulator name] . . . I'll bet she isn't working. I'll bet she's shopping or something like that." I think there's a considerable peer pressure that keeps people from taking advantage of those, not as much from the managers . . . I think they fear each other. And I think that goes particularly between some of the men and women.

In fact, several ADCs heard stories where examiners actually consulted each other prior to making a work-family benefit request to management. Thus, "they talked among each other first . . . I think a lot of these things are worked out informally before they come to us" (female ADC). A male ADC agreed that "you don't know how many of those requests they have run up the flag pole and nobody salutes and they just don't do it." This peer pressure created a situation where coworkers did not want to be seen as getting special treatment. Thus, a female examiner who had recently had a baby came to her ADC "horrified that people were going to think that she was getting preferential treatment in staying in town longer, when in fact it was mere coincidence. She didn't want anybody to think she was asking for special accommodations" (female ADC).

Consequently, when examiners needed to utilize work-family benefits, there were many factors they took into account when approaching their coworkers. First, they knew that some coworkers were more supportive of these policies than others, and so they often talked to individuals who had used the policies before. Even though it was often unspoken, examiners in the study recognized the underlying resentment toward some of these policies, and this created a fear of coworker reactions. As a result, they sometimes "tested the waters" to see how coworkers might react if they needed to use a certain program. This

fear of coworker reactions sometimes created situations in which individuals were reluctant to utilize the work-family benefits that were available to them. As a female examiner explained, "They may feel like they'll be criticized if they do some certain program, like maybe they feel if they go part-time that people will look negatively on them for that . . . that can have an impact on them." A female examiner articulated some of the fears, where "sometimes I feel like people look at me, 'Oh my God, she's leaving early.' And I just feel guilty . . . it makes a big deal to me if people are saying 'I don't think [Regulator name]'s putting in her time.'" This fear also created situations where individuals who did utilize work-family policies tended to overcompensate, as illustrated by part-timers who worked more than the allotted hours.

Ultimately, the way coworkers responded seemed to depend on whether or not examiners were perceived to be "using" or "abusing" the work-life programs available to them. Thus, examiners addressed dilemmas regarding the use of policies by creating informal norms of what constituted "use" versus "abuse." Overall, the examiners did not want to push their luck by using too many work-family benefits, because this would impact how peers viewed them. As a result, a system of peer pressure seemed to impact policy utilization even more than supervisory attitudes; in this team culture, coworkers served as a system of control over the utilization of work-family policies. The Regulators have discursively created meanings surrounding work-family programs that in turn structured work-family policy implementation. The locus of control shifted from ADCs to the examiners themselves, who watched each other as "peer managers" more closely than managers (Barker, 1993). However, this is not to say that all examiners in the study were equally subject to such "control mechanisms." Some employees did not seem to succumb as easily to the perceptions of others; one examiner "earned the leave and was going to use it. That's just my priority" (female examiner).

Yet despite some of the polarized discourse summarized in these results, there were some glimpses of a "coming together." Several examiners emphasized that even though there may be perceived differential treatment at times, individuals should not be so resentful because "their time is coming" (female examiner).

> They are going to have needs later on, whether you are married or not, whether you have kids or not, somebody is going to have needs eventually. They are going to need support and as long as they know that is there, I think a lot of people can live with that. (male ADC)

Even when some examiners were complaining about programs or individuals, they still thought they might eventually use the policies themselves. A male examiner explained, "If they're not using it now they can see themselves using it in two to three years or five to seven years or somewhere down the road." Although one female examiner complained about the current conditions, she did not "want to give the impression that I'm knocking the program because I think it's great. I know I will use that when I have children and I will love it." Another female examiner summarized that "they'll all have kids eventually and they'll realize what a wonderful benefit that is. But by that time, it'll be too late. They'll all have been so mad all those years for no reason."

Discussion

To explore these results in more depth, we revisit our original areas of inquiry. While the previous discourse addresses our question as to what Regulators say when they talk about work-family policies, it is also of theoretical and practical consequence to explore what was not said/what was absent from participant discourse about work-family policies. Furthermore, participant talk about work-family policy utilization begins to illustrate how coworker discourse structures work-family policies, and in this discussion we explicitly address these processes in relation to structuration theory. In particular, we look at macro-level structures Regulators seemed to be appropriating through discourse in micro-level interactions, even though they did not specifically articulate these. Following this discussion, we suggest directions for future research on work-family communication, outline limitations, and offer implications for both theory and practice.

Revisiting the RQs: Coworker Discourse and the Structuration of Work-Family Policies

As illustrated, predominant in the discourse of what coworkers said about work-family policies was that the programs created conditions of inequity and preferential treatment. In thinking about how structures, or "recipes for action" emerged in this context, examiners resented when others seemed to travel less or work fewer hours due to work-family circumstances. These Regulators, in turn, used agency to allocate resources to "control" others—mainly in the form of using discourse that was supportive or unsupportive of coworkers who utilized work-family benefits. When coworkers were not supportive of those who utilized work-family policies and talked badly about either the individuals or the policies (or both), this sent a message to others who were considering the same benefits and created a system of peer pressure not to utilize work-family programs.

We argue that in this structurational process, there were macro-level structures from the wider social system being appropriated in this process (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996); organizational and societal discourse and expectations did seem to influence the meanings Regulators held for work-family programs. Examining *what was not said* about work-family policies and their utilization serves as a framework for exposing these structures. Regarding the perceptions of inequity, the examiners who expressed resentment did not reconcile the fact that they really do not have the same responsibilities for dependent care their coworkers do. Amongst examiners without child or elder care responsibilities, there was no talk about the "second shift" (Hochschild, 1989) that coworkers would be performing when they left work. Instead, their use of family leave or a part-time schedule seemed to be perceived as "time away" from *real* work. This reflects societal norms that reward work performed in the public sphere while marginalizing work performed in the private sphere (Auerbach, 1988; Gilbert, 1994) and the related assumption that commitment is lessened for workers in caregiving roles (Bruce & Reed, 1994). Since these benefits effectively remove the employees from the "public sphere," for some these benefits seemed to reward employees for having children. As a married female examiner with children noted:

> They think that we're getting all these benefits that they're not getting . . . the leave for family that they don't take. Also, the occasional sick day that your kids have . . . so I think they look at it like we're getting all these benefits that they're not getting . . . Does that make them happier if I'm on annual leave rather than if I'm on sick leave [under FEFFLA]? Well, that doesn't make any sense. Why should that matter to them except that then they think I'm getting an extra day off. Well, they've never been home with a sick kid. You know, that's not a fun day . . . It's so unnecessary. There's no reason we need to compare.

This Regulator did not feel that other examiners understood that she was not utilizing the policies in order to get out of work and do something more fun. In fact, no examiners reflected a collectivist orientation by saying they were glad the benefits were available to their coworkers to help them balance work and family; instead, the response was more likely that "I had to cover so-and-so's work so he could spend time with his family." This discourse was accompanied by the unspoken (and sometimes spoken) sentiment that this difference in work efforts might not be reflected in the performance appraisal process. This reflects an individualistic orientation that is consistent with workers in the system of American capitalism (Fricke, 2000).

The emphasis Regulators placed on covering the work of others who take family leave reveals another "silence" in the discourse. Although work-family programs and benefits were constructed broadly, Regulators almost always narrowed the focus to parental leave and part-time work, even though flexible work schedules and dependent care benefits existed as well. There did seem to be a perception that if people took annual leave, it was nothing that deserved resentment because all Regulators earned similar amounts of annual leave. Furthermore, while the organization operated on compressed weeks and offered pretax benefits for dependent care, no one complained about these policies as discriminatory. The inequities emerged when sick leave was used for family, or the Family Medical Leave Act was utilized.

Looking at the notion of meritocracy (where individual hard work is rewarded with individual merit and rewards) as a structure being appropriated to interpret work-family policies assists in illuminating these characteristics of the discourse. For example, everyone received the benefit of compressed weeks, and so although it was a "work-family" type of benefit, it was not perceived as exclusive because all employees were rewarded with this work schedule. But when work-family policies were employed, some examiners experienced violations of the principle of meritocracy because they perceived that individuals who had dependent care responsibilities were "rewarded" by getting additional time off from work. At the same time, their hard work and efforts to be a loyal employee by staying at work were "rewarded" by needing to work harder to cover the workload of examiners who were absent on work-family leave or a part-time schedule. Work-family policies were therefore perceived as rewarding employees with dependents by allowing them to do less "real work" in the organization, which then impacted the workload of those without dependents. Thus, when Regulators believe in meritocracy and related individual rewards, the utilization of work-family policies contradicted this structure; therefore, their discourse reflects inequities they perceive as inconsistent with meritocratic principles.

But what was missing from this discourse was any recognition of what individuals may be giving up in utilizing work-family programs. As illustrated, women who utilized the policies felt resentment from coworkers, and even the men were cognizant of needing to balance "use" versus "abuse" so as not to be seen (and treated) as a less committed worker. It could become a matter of trade-offs, where examiners "gave up" some facets of coworker relationships in order to preserve family relationships. Furthermore, some benefits had material consequences; part-time employees at Regulators received a proportionate decrease in salary, and had to subsidize more of their insurance and other benefits (also see Skinner, 1999). Yet this was never mentioned by anyone except part-timers and their managers; fellow examiners seemed largely oblivious to the trade-offs that were made, despite their access to the published policies. In fact, this was an underlying current throughout the discourse, in that work-family policies were seen as peripheral until they were perceived as infringing on others.

In addition, it appears the system of sex-role stereotypes in our society was appropriated in the structuration of work-family policies. Among these examiners, an underlying expectation existed (and was somewhat articulated) that it was the responsibility of the female examiners to take a primary caregiving role. This "recipe for action" based on sex-role stereotypes was appropriated in the structuration of work-family benefits. As a result, when women were granted leave for family, their coworkers were often more understanding than they would be to men; however, the women in the study still suffered consequences in terms of being perceived as less dedicated to the organization (Perlow, 1997). While maternity leave was never questioned (even though it may have been resented), the need for paternity leave of more than a short endurance *was questioned* in the organization. Since men were assumed to be the breadwinners, when they wanted to utilize programs such as parental leave, other Regulators "thought that was funny."

In summary, what was said (and unsaid) in examiner discourse illustrated that both "micro" structures, such as coworker interactions, and "macro" level structures, such as traditional separations between public and private, gendered expectations, and orientations of individualism and meritocracy, impacted the system of how work-family benefits were constructed. These structures both enabled and constrained Regulators in determining whether or not to utilize work-family benefits. In particular, examining coworker interactions as structures illustrated the amount of influence peers had in this system. The power of coworker discourse goes beyond traditional conceptions of the structure of power interests in organizations. A typical instinct, as illustrated in the literature, is to place all the power for influencing work-family program utilization in the hands of supervisors. But in the team structure at Regulators, coworkers seemed to have as much influence as the ADCs. ADCs obviously had more "power" to allocate material resources in the form of allowing (or not allowing) individuals to utilize work-family policies in given circumstances. However, both ADCs and coworkers allocated the resource of social support, and since examiners spent their days with each other rather than ADCs, meeting the expectations of their coworkers was often of primary concern. Consequently, when examiners feared the consequences from coworkers in using work-family benefits, there was not a widespread use of work-family policies.

Future Directions for Research

A primary direction toward which this study leads is the need to seriously consider the role of coworkers and their discourse in the process of policy implementation. Since modern organizations are moving more toward self-directed teams, the implication that coworkers have an impact on policy use is significant. These findings suggest that in this team culture, coworkers are beginning to serve as a system of control over the utilization of work-family policies. This definitely warrants future research. How do coworkers communicate what is and is not acceptable concerning not only policy utilization, but broader behaviors (i.e., Barker, 1993)? How do they influence and control the actions of others through their *discourse*?

In addition, this study implies a direction for future research outside the realm of work and family. The discourse (in the context of work-family programs) continually illustrated the tension between the policy as written by Human Resources and the policy as implemented and utilized. We do not believe this is a unique phenomenon; a bountiful area for future research is to examine how managers and coworkers appropriate organizational policies such as those generated by Human Resources. How are policies appropriated faithfully and ironically? What is the role of communication in this process? All of these directions emphasize the centrality of communication processes in shaping organizational outcomes, which is a central strength of this study. However, there are potential limitations as well.

Limitations of the Study

The implications of this research must be contextualized in light of its limitations. The organizational context itself might be viewed as a limitation. The Regulators operated in the public sector, and as a branch of the federal government they were subject to clear federal policies, which granted equal access and rights to employees, while holding the organization accountable for enforcing them. It follows that the same study of a private sector organization, such as a bank, that has even fewer policies and/or less accountability for enacting these programs, could have very different results, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Another drawback of the research is that although it taps into how Regulators talk about work, family, and work-family policies, it does so through the method of interviewing. In terms of the efficiency of data gathering, this was the preferable method because work and family issues are not a predominant focus of Regulator discussions. However, it would be interesting to follow the conversations of participants in "real time" to see how these interactions operate and serve to structure how individuals perceive work and family in the organization. Yet we believe these limitations are minimized in light of the implications of this study.

Implications and Conclusions

Structuration increases knowledge of work-family policy implementation by providing a lens to view how discourse, at multiple levels of analysis, structures policies as they are constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis. These policies are structured not only by intentional efforts, but are produced and reproduced through unintentional consequences as well. At Regulatory Alliance, the work-family policies were designed at least

in part to help examiners "balance" their work and family lives. But even though Regulators saw value in the policies, a primary reason they did not use them was due to intentional and unintentional forms of communication from other organizational members that sent messages about work-family policies. Specifically, coworker discourse and communication processes have shaped their perceptions of what is valued by their "team members" in the organization, and the policies did not always mesh with these values. Exploring the discourse of organizational members reveals how communication influenced the implementation and utilization of work-family policies.

Furthermore, a structurational perspective illustrated how micro-level interactions rooted in policy can have macro-level implications. For example, the way work-family policies were talked about in the organization reflected (and reproduced) broader conceptions of the "proper role" of men and women—not only in the workplace but society as a whole. Since women were encouraged to take maternity leave and spend time with their children, but men were discouraged from paternity and parental leave, this sends a message about gender stereotypes that extends beyond the confines of the organization. This relationship can also be examined from the reverse perspective, lending insight into how cultural conceptions of men and women as parents and workers are communicated in micro-level interactions, and the implications when generalized stereotypes and public discourse constrain individual and organizational conceptions of work and family. But perhaps the strongest contribution to theory is that policy as written is not always policy as practiced; policy implementation and utilization is instead a communicative and structurational process. Consequently, future studies of policy may also benefit from the theoretical frame of structuration (Giddens, 1984).

As a further theoretical implication of this study, institutional theory suggests the increased attention being given to issues of work and family creates pressure for organizations to respond (Goodstein, 1994). Once leaders in an industry begin to implement work-family policies, competitive forces drive other companies in those industries to follow (Morgan & Milliken, 1992) because work-family initiatives at one company are made known to employees and managers in other companies (Goodstein, 1994). Gonyea and Googins (1992) note that "as corporate work-family programs have moved from the curious to the mainstream, they have also moved from the lifestyle pages to the business section of the newspapers" (p. 210). Through this perspective, the adoption of childcare, eldercare, and workplace flexibility benefits is a tangible accommodation to institutional pressures; it signals to important constituents that an organization is responsive (Goodstein, 1994, 1995). As Kingston (1990) observes, the responsive workplace may come to symbolize the "good" workplace. Thus, organizations often respond to work-family pressures in order to enhance external legitimacy as well as satisfy internal constituencies (Milliken, Dutton, & Beyer, 1990).

However, when policies are implemented primarily because of institutional pressures, they basically position the organization in reference to other similar organizations. Simply instituting policies does not address the "inner workings" of the organization; as illustrated, if work-family are just "added on" to the existing culture (Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996), coworkers and supervisors may not see the full merits of the policies, and they may remain underutilized. This seems to be the case at Regulatory Alliance—the Regulators expressed

mixed feelings about the policies themselves as well as their utilization. Consequently, in some ways the policies seemed to be serving institutional rather than human purposes; while they look good on paper, they may not be fully understood, which may lead to mixed messages and impact benefit utilization, so the human needs are never served. This leads to practical implications concerning how to alter these dynamics.

We have established that putting a policy on paper does not ensure it will be embraced or followed as written. In order to create a supportive climate for work-family policies, attention must be given to structures that might facilitate their implementation and utilization. In previous research, the primary structure of interest has been managerial discourse; however, we were interested in how coworkers constructed the programs through their ongoing discourse. As illustrated, the existence and use of work-family benefits can divide employees and create perceptions of preferential treatment that stimulate negative discourse about work-family policies.

In addition, these perceptions may create more "hidden" conflict in the organization, where individuals are not confronted about their use of policies but "it is always the buzz" (female examiner). A male examiner noted a "problem we have is that those perceptions are allowed to fester within small groups of people . . . they say this is unfair, but yet . . . I don't think they brought those issues to their supervisors." If supervisors, organizational leaders, and Human Resource professionals are aware of the subtle yet pervasive role that communication plays in the process of work-family benefit utilization, perhaps they can address these issues and the resulting potential for conflict in a proactive and productive manner. This is important, because if individuals are feeling work-family conflict, yet do not utilize policies to help alleviate this stress, it can create problems both at work and at home.

So what suggestions would we offer to enact positive changes on the discourse of work-family policies? Rodgers (1992) outlines features of organizational environments where work-family initiatives have been successful and "fully integrated" into corporate culture, rather than simply being adopted to increase external legitimacy. Once work-family policies are formally instituted, support for the implementation of such policies is clearly communicated from the top of the organization, and expectations for the programs are communicated to employees. Managers are trained not only to understand the reasons for the policies, but they have also been trained in specific skills they will need to implement flexibility. Finally, success stories of implementing programs are disseminated throughout the organization (Rodgers, 1992). Embedded in these features are several potentials for improving the current environment at Regulators.

At the organizational level, Regulatory Alliance should start by more clearly communicating support for work-family policy implementation from the top. The current practice of providing factual information via the website only serves to illustrate that a policy is on paper—it does not guarantee that the policy will be embraced in practice. As part of this communication, Human Resources departments should focus on communicating that these programs are not just "women's benefits" or only for those with children. The use of success stories in localized discourse as well as in formal company newsletters (Friedman & Johnson, 1991; Rodgers, 1992) may help mitigate the negative perceptions of work-family policies. For example, profiling examples of men working part-time, providing eldercare,

taking paternity leave (etc.), might frame the policies more broadly than the current discourse has allowed by effectively questioning the public/private dichotomy and sex-role stereotypes that are now being appropriated in talk about work-family policies.

In reducing negativism among coworkers, a key factor that seems to be missing is organizational communication about the reasoning behind these policies to *employees* (rather than just managers), as well as communicating expectations of what the programs entail. When corporate work-family initiatives are considered as a whole, "the evidence points to positive effects of organizational support on productivity, absenteeism, turnover, tardiness, stability and loyalty, employee morale, and recruitment and retention of quality employees" (Zedeck and Mosier, 1990, p. 245). Perhaps some of these advantages should be communicated to workers; training sessions could illustrate the positive aspects of work-family programs (such as increased commitment and retention), while providing a realistic overview of their limitations. In the larger scheme, employees may prefer taking over a day of work for someone on work-family leave than training a new person for two weeks because a colleague who was dissatisfied with his or her work-family balance resigned. But if employees do not have the full context, it can be hard to see how work-family benefits are of any assistance to those who do not have dependents.

Still, no matter how much knowledge employees have about the merits of work-family policies, if they are being burdened with someone else's work, and operate from individualistic and meritocratic structures, they are bound to be frustrated. If Regulatory Alliance does not currently have access to material resources (i.e., temporary workers, part-time staff) to take on excess workloads, then perhaps communicative resources at the interpersonal level can be utilized to reduce examiner frustrations. For instance, if an examiner has to complete the work of a colleague gone on family leave, but she feels rewarded for these extra efforts through informal means or praise, perhaps that could mitigate some resentment. Supervisors (and coworkers) can communicate in rewarding ways even if more material resources are not available.

In addition, managers should set up an open communication environment where employees feel free to share their perceptions of inequity, so these do not "fester" in small groups. For example, if someone complained about the nice schedule a part-time examiner is receiving, and the supervisor reminds him or her about their proportionate reduction in salary and benefits, perhaps this would diffuse some resentment and reduce some of the negative discourse. Of course, the same goes for coworkers; to begin, those who use the policies might want to stick up for themselves and point out the tradeoffs involved. To improve the discourse across groups, another possibility is to "open up" negotiations of work-family policies to the coworkers who will experience increased workloads by covering for the leave-taker.

Thus, after an individual approaches his or her supervisor about taking family leave (see Miller et al., 1996), meetings could also be scheduled between coworkers, with or without the presence of the supervisor. For example, they might arrange a trade-off where the coworker who takes on the extra work of the leave-taker is then "repaid the favor," perhaps the leave-taker could cover his or her coworker's responsibilities to allow vacation time upon returning. Regardless of the final agreement, the process of group negotiation could help determine what facets of the leave-taker's workload need to be done in his or

her absence, which may also help diffuse resentment and negative discourse. This additional step would broaden policy negotiation so that all invested parties have at least some involvement in the process. In short, while discourse can create a system where work-family benefits are not utilized, perhaps discourse can also change this same system.

Yet we realize communication cannot solve all the problems embedded in the system of work-family policies and their utilization. Organizations must make more than "half-hearted" attempts at implementation to have lasting changes. Thus, to really encourage individuals to take family leave and not worry about the consequences from coworkers and supervisors, temporary or contingent workers should eventually be brought in to replace leave-takers in their absence. Alternatively, additional compensation could be offered to permanent employees who agree to take on extra work for those who are on family leave. Such actions would position the organization in a way that gives more than just lip-service to issues of work and family; this takes more organizational commitment than just putting a policy on paper. We do not foresee that any of these changes can necessarily be immediate, but hope that incremental changes over time will improve the climate for work-family issues and policies in this and other organizations.

To conclude, these observations as to how coworkers shaped work-family policy through communication were observed in a branch of the federal government in the financial field, an industry with significant institutional pressures to offer work-family benefits. In other words, this organization is a "best case scenario" of sorts. Yet even in these circumstances, a climate was created in which employees hesitated to request or utilize the available policies. We assume the difficulties associated with work-family programs and their implementation and utilization would be more prominent in less ideal circumstances. Consequently, we hope this study prompts similar research that conceptualizes work, family, and work-family policy through the lens of communication in order to begin illustrating process as an addition to existing causal models and linking mechanisms of work and family.

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Notes

1. Flexible work options, also called alternate work arrangements, may include: (a) flextime, (b) permanent and temporary part-time work, (c) job sharing, (d) flexplace or telecommuting, and (e) flexible use of vacation time and personal days (Morgan & Milliken, 1992; Rodgers, 1992; Swiss, 1998). Typical forms of family leave include maternity leave, parental and paternity leaves, adoptive leave, and leave for elder care or other family emergencies (Morgan & Milliken, 1992). These forms of leave vary widely among organizations concerning their length and compensation, if paid leave is an option (Raabe & Gessner, 1988). Finally, dependent-care benefits exist in the form of financial assistance, information and referral services, and childcare and eldercare

services (Magid & Fleming, 1987; Morgan & Milliken, 1992; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). With all types of work-family initiatives, the scope of the policies and programs can be organization-wide, or applicable only to certain departments or employees, a process some researchers call "modified" adoption (Raabe & Gessner, 1988). In addition, informal, unwritten policies can be created and applied to individual employees, whereas formal written policies pertain to large groups of employees (MacDermid, Williams, & Marks, 1994; Raabe & Gessner, 1988).

2. This study was generated out of a larger project describing and analyzing work-family ideologies, work-family communication and work-family policy implementation in the organization of "Regulatory Alliance" (pseudonym). Although the present study uses the same interviews that formed the basis of a previous article (Kirby, 2000), it draws on different data and extends the analysis beyond supervisory discourse.
3. As part of the larger project, the data collection and interpretation was completed by the first author under the advisement of the second author.
4. As part of the larger project, there were more than six themes in the data; however, in regards to the research questions in this report, only six themes emerged.

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