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Workplace options on offer for facilitating the work/family balance considered with respect to relationships between gender and professional qualifications

Case studies focussing on the implementation, use and outcomes of the instruments of workplace family policy in organisations within the private sector and the public sector

Within the framework of both gender studies and organisational studies, this doctoral thesis illuminates the basic conditions determining workplace family policy.

Socio-demographic and financial changes, changes in economic structures, the pluralisation of different life models and different family structures, in addition to educational and socio-political consequences, as well as consequences arising from equal opportunity policy provide a challenge to restructure the relationship between work and family. With the demographic transition in Germany becoming increasingly visible, along with the concomitant feared skills shortage, there is evidence of increased interest in both the labour force potential of highly qualified women as well as their opportunities for balancing work and family life. In practice, approaches to finding resolutions in this area, involving a flexible configuration of the interfaces between the domains of family life and work life, are increasingly becoming accepted, and appear to be establishing themselves - in the form of part-time working models, models for flexible working hours and flexible location options, such as home office models, - as a general solution ensuring a successful work/family balance. This study takes empirical findings which advise a variable degree of autonomy for employees to configure this flexibility in line with their own concepts of limitation, and takes into consideration the hitherto existing disregard of less-qualified employees, both male and female. The thesis research question arises from a consideration of these circumstances, i.e. whether the hitherto existing concepts of workplace family policy and the measures for facilitating a balance between work and family life in German companies have proved to be an opportunity for real balance between work and family life for all employee groups, or only for some groups, and whether and how these policies and measures have led to the (re)production of old and new inequalities.

The contradiction between an increasing plurality of life, family and occupation models, i.e. ways of living, living in family and working, and the emerging flexibility paradigm along with the work of Susan Clark in '*Work/Family Border Theory*' form part of the basis for the theoretically well-founded presupposition of this thesis, namely, that a flexible configuration

of the borders between life domains, on account of different possibilities for identification with the domains, is not the correct or workable form of work/family balance for all employees. Consequently, the efficacy of workplace instruments is measured against the various possibilities for configuration, as well as the legitimations for various border forms. For this purpose, organisations are considered gendered organisations, according to Acker and Wilz, and as arenas of class-specific exchange relationships between employees and management, according to Erikson and Goldthorpe.

With respect to the aspect of empirical research, the research question was applied to three comparative case studies in organisations within the private sector as well as within the public service. As a result of the qualitative and quantitative design of the study, the different significances of various border qualities were able to be identified, both from the perspective of management, and from the point of view of employees, and the possibilities, distinctly differentiated according to gender and class, were able to be substantiated. In terms of method, in particular, the intersectional perspective on structures, attributions of identity and symbolic representations proved able to provide lucrative findings, as, in the final analysis, the inconsistencies in differentiation criteria both within and between these levels offer development potential for the advancement of research into work/family balance and work/family balance concepts.

The results of the study show that different status groups and performance standards, as well as static working values, static values as determined by company culture and the applicable attributions of identity to the employees either legitimate or exclude various forms of border configuration between the domains of work and family in the organisations, and as a result of this, social inequalities between genders and within gender groups are (re)produced within the policies for work/family balance. In all three case studies, there exists a group of employees who form the focus of the respective concepts on work/family balance, and in all three case studies, there also exists a group of employees, whose requirements for work/family balance are barely apprehended or taken into consideration.

Thus it has become clear that performance standards and expectations of availability are hardly compatible with family-friendly concepts / models and instruments in all of the status groups, and that management personnel required at the same time to meet these standards and expectations are overwhelmed. This leads to increasingly diffuse and oblique expectations of use and availability, and to segregating processes, which thwart the successful implementation of potentially family-friendly catalogues of measures, and which either do not allow for the effects of the instruments of workplace family policy to be fully developed, or else render these effects void or even lead them to work against the stated objective.

The evidence shows that the possibilities for the configuration of flexible or stable borders between domains are dependent on the assumed reliability of the work identities and loyalties of the employees. The question of whether and which border forms are recognised as appropriate or else rejected as inappropriate, is evaluated according to the degree to which such forms support, hinder or complicate the control tasks and supervisory duties of management personnel in the various working areas. Irrespective of the degree of autonomy granted with regard to the configuration of borders, the configuration of flexible borders tends to indicate a high degree of identification with workplace conditions and motivation, while stable borders signal stable gender roles.

In the process, two criteria for exclusion function in opposite directions: on the one hand, as a consequence of the striving to make best use of the qualified labour potential, mainly those (female) skilled workers form the focus, whose specialised knowledge, skills and expertise are thought to prove to be a worthwhile investment for the company with regard to specific human resources investments. As a general rule, the conception of the suitable instruments for work/family balance developed for this target group cannot be applied to the job characteristics of less-qualified employees. At the same time, the necessity of conceiving of alternative options for these employees is not perceived, as these employees are considered replaceable, and in many cases are so highly dependent on their earned income, that from their perspective, work/family balance is an issue of secondary importance.

Exposure to the existing workplace concepts for work/life balance either contributes to a further adaptation to androcentric work identities by means of the possibility for flexible border configuration, or else it confirms the applicable norms for division between caring for children and work in the family sphere through stable border configuration forms, e.g. in the form of part-time use. With a strong focus on women, conceptions of workplace-supported work/family balance options up-to-now have shown little effect at overcoming the gendered assumptions concerning the ideal employee, who is able to prioritise paid employment ahead of all other occupations and activities, and instead, they have at best had the effect of obscuring these assumptions. This implies discrimination for those women, but also those men, who are either not able or not willing to adopt options for work/family balance from a career-oriented perspective.

Thus, as a universal approach to a solution, flexibility proves instead to be a risk for re-ideologisation, as in practice, with this approach to a solution, it is the case that qualification-oriented objectives and employer interests are pursued first and foremost, and questions of gender are thus able to be shifted to the private domain, where they remain invisible.

Approaches for the development of another understanding of the work/family balance may be found in working through the contradictory objectives of facilitating the work/family

balance as well as the experiences of management personnel in implementing concepts facilitating this. It can be seen at this point, that the classical allocation of gender roles, and thus the accompanying typical female ways of utilising measures aimed at facilitating work/life balance show a certain stability and consistency, not least because they offer a certain functionality and reliability to management personnel. When women continue to remain supplementary earners, and continue to have primary responsibility for work in the family sphere, men may continue to be utilised exclusively as primary earners in the labour force. Norm violations by women, who, using the possibilities for facilitating work/family balance, configure a paradigm of availability that does not signal any prioritisation of family care tasks, may in doing so go against family ideals and role models, but they remain within the greater context of issues affecting women that need to be resolved. In contrast, 'norm violations' by men, who lay claim to significant support in facilitating their work/family balance, show the potential to complicate the exchange relationship between management and employees and thus to prompt a more fundamental reflection on the relationship between the domains of work and family.