

**PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF FLEXIBLE WORK  
ARRANGEMENTS IN CHANGING EUROPEAN WORKPLACES:  
A MULTI-LAYER CONTEXTUAL APPROACH**

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*Abstract:* Various leaves and other forms of flexible working arrangements have been implemented in workplaces to support employees with family commitments. Some are a response to public policy, others developed voluntarily. However, research examining the effectiveness of these policies in a search for “good practices” often neglects the impact of specific national and workplace contexts. Some researchers are calling for more attention to social systems, especially at the macro and meso levels, and the relationships between them, to extend understanding of work family processes and experiences. We argue that this is critical for evaluating work-family policies and practices. However it is important to recognize that social systems are not static. They are dynamic and changing, particularly in the context of globalization processes. Drawing on data from six case studies of private sector organizations undergoing rapid change and transformation, carried out in six European states, as part of a qualitative cross-national EU project (*Transitions*)<sup>1</sup>, this paper explores the impact of multiple layers of context on parents’ experiences of flexible working arrangements for managing work and family boundaries. The study shows that although various aspects of macro layers of context are important and it is easier to make use of flexibility to combine work and parenting in some national and workplace contexts than others, changes taking place at the workplace level in response to global competition and efficiency drives can undermine both regulatory and voluntary initiatives to enhance flexibility for parents. This is occurring across national boundaries. Some implications for debates on “good practices” and for future work-family research are discussed.

**Introduction**

Managing parenthood and employment continues to be problematic in many contexts (Lewis and Smithson 2006, Heymann 2006, Jansen 2006). This is related to the persistent myth of separate gendered spheres of work and family and the prevailing

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<sup>1</sup> This project, *Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace*, ( short name *Transitions*) was funded by the European Union. See [www.workliferesearch.org/transitions](http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions). The Transitions team included: Suzan Lewis, Janet Smithson, Christina Purcell and John Howarth, then at Manchester Metropolitan University; Julia Brannen and Michaela Brockmann, Thomas Coram Institute, University of London; Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, Laura den Dulk, Bram Peper and Marijke Veldhoen-van Blitterswijk, Utrecht University; Siyka Kovacheva and Atanas Matev, Paissii Hilendarski State University, Plovdiv; Ann Nilsen, Sevil Summer and Lise Granlund, University of Bergen; Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and Lars Plantin, University of Göteborg; Nevenka Černigoj Sadar, Jana Nadoh and Polona Kersnik, University of Ljubljana; Maria das Dores Guerreiro, Pedro Abrantes, Inês Pereira and Inês Cardoso, CIES/ISCTE; Jeanne Fagnani, MATISSE, University of Paris 1-CNRS.

representation of ideal workers, in many contexts, as those who do not need to modify work for family reasons (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt 2002; Lewis 1997; 2001; Williams 2000). A number of policies have been developed to address this issue, mostly intended to address employees' needs for flexibility to manage their employment and non-work commitments. Some initiatives, especially family related leaves, are enshrined in public policy, but nevertheless need to be effectively implemented at the workplace level. Others, such as flexible working arrangements in various forms<sup>2</sup> are often developed voluntarily by employers, in response to institutional pressures. They too rely on implementation and there is often a gap between policy and practice (Bond, Hyman and Wise 2002; Lewis 1997; 2001; Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport 2006).

Do flexible working arrangements make it easier for parents of young children to manage work and family boundaries? Research evaluating these policies and practices has sought to assess their impact on individual outcomes, particularly work-family conflict (e.g. Kossek and Oseki 1998, O'Driscoll et al 2003) and organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, organizational commitment and intention to quit (Wang and Walumnwa 2007), or the permeability of work-family boundaries, although evidence of their effectiveness is mixed (Kossek and Oseki 1998; Sutton and Noe 2005). However, while increasingly sophisticated models of work-family connections, work-family conflict, enrichment and facilitation have been developed (Carlson and Grzywacz 2008; Demerouti and Geurts 2004), less attention has been paid to the complex inter-relationships between various aspect of home and work domains and the multiple layers of context within which they operate. Cross-cultural studies of work-family conflict (Aycan 2008) begin to address the impact of national cultural values, but cultural factors are only a part of wider social contexts and cross-national studies of differences in work-family conflict, capture only a limited range of impacts of contextual factors. This largely quantitative research tradition focuses on restricted aspects of employees' experiences and with less attention to the processes whereby employees and employers make sense of and respond to flexible working arrangements. Moreover, much of this research has been conducted in North America where there is minimal regulation, so is of limited relevance to Europe where there are various levels of public policy support for the reconciliation of employment and family life. The relationships between policies and their individual or organizational outcomes do not occur in a vacuum, yet much of this stream of research tends to assume, implicitly, that any effects are independent of wider context.

Research in this area also often attempts to identify "good practices" in organizational and or public policy terms to support workers with family or other non-work commitments (Drew 2005). Again this often assumes that good practices are

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<sup>2</sup> We define flexible working arrangements as policies and arrangements (statutory or voluntary) that give employees greater control over working time and place through leaves or time-spatial flexibility (den Dulk 2001; Appelbaum et al. 2005; Lewis 2003).

generalisable and context independent. Nor does evaluation or “good practice” research always take account of the turbulence and rapidly changing organizational contexts in which flexible working policies are often implemented.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the importance and complexity of multiple layers of context as well as ongoing workplace and other changes as they impact on working parents' experiences of flexible working arrangements, whether these are initiated as a response to public policy or voluntarily implemented. We conceptualize the impacts of flexible working arrangements within a systems approach, as recommended by a number of work-family researchers (Voydanoff 2001; 2002; Carlson and Grzywacz 2008, Campbell Clarke 2000).

Systems thinking assumes that social phenomena must be understood as emergent properties of an interrelated whole (Checkland 1981). The social world comprises many interrelated social systems and meaningful understanding comes from building whole pictures of phenomena not from fragmenting or studying isolated social experiences. Thus a systems approach involves exploring processes that occur within multiple social systems, at the micro, meso and macro levels and the complexity of connections and interrelationships between them, recognizing that changes in one social system are reflected in and impact upon other social systems.

In fact, the work-family field of research developed from systems thinking, specifically from a realization that the public and private spheres, traditionally considered to be separate and gendered domains are in fact related and interdependent. It is also now increasingly argued that it is crucial to look beyond work and family systems to understand their influences on work and family domains and processes (Voydanoff 2002, Gambles et al 2006, Lewis et al 2007, Aycan 2008), although the broader impacts of wider social systems on the ways in which employees experience and use or fail to use flexible work arrangements to manage the boundaries between work and family systems have received less attention. Moreover, social systems are dynamic, and rarely static. The work-family field was initiated as a response to changes in the family and hence the workforce (more women and dual earner partners), stressing the need for workplaces to respond appropriately. While these demographic trends dominated the twentieth century, changes at the organizational level, in response to globalization processes, and their implications for public and workplace policies, require more attention at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Systems thinking with its emphasis on the interaction between mutual and dynamic influences of multiple social systems provides a useful framework for examining the meanings, experience and impact of flexible working arrangements for employees with family responsibilities. It acknowledges that such flexible working initiatives are situated within multiple layers of context. These include workplace context, especially the working practices, structures and cultures of and specific organizations as they adapt to changing conditions and demands. Aspects of wider social contexts are also significant, including public policies, economic factors and national cultures, norms and expectations. More broadly still, the global context is vital to an

understanding of flexible working arrangements and their consequences, through its influence on local workplace change, are likely to depend on many layers of context in multiple social systems. Below we discuss briefly some aspects of different layers of context relevant to working parents' experiences of flexibility to manage work and family boundaries.

### **Wider social context**

The impact and the interaction between macro level context and changes at the organizational level are relatively under researched. Some research has investigated the relationships between macro level social policy context across countries and employer provisions of flexible working arrangements (e.g. Den Dulk 2001, European Foundation 2006), but this has not examined the implementation and experiences of policies in the workplace. Other research has focused on the gender contracts on which welfare state policies are based; that is implicit social contracts between women and men about their roles, obligations and entitlements (Duncan 1996), which can impact on expectations and experiences of flexible working arrangements. For example, Lewis and Smithson (2001) looked at links between macro context of different European welfare states, the gender contracts on which they are based and the micro level of young workers' expectations of and sense of entitlement to employer support for reconciling work and family. This study showed that young workers in the Nordic countries where the welfare state is based on an equality gender contract have higher expectations of support from the state and also from employers than those in countries in which the welfare state is more ambivalent about gender equality. However this study did not look at the meso context of the workplace and its dynamics.

Many interrelated aspects of wider social contexts can contribute to an understanding of the ways in which flexible working arrangements are implemented and experienced in practice, including norms and expectations, social policy on working time and the reconciliation of employment and family life, and childcare provisions. At the cultural or normative layer, parents combine work and family in contexts where there are diverse values and social constructions of motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood (Lewis 1991, Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport 2006). Norms and expectations relating to parental roles can influence perceptions and meanings of flexible working arrangements and other working practices (Aycan 2008). However, while European countries have witnessed the gradual unraveling of the male breadwinner model into dual-earner societies, the nature and rate of change is uneven both across and within countries (Crompton, Lewis & Lyonette 2007), suggesting that caution is needed in predicting overall national differences as they play out in different workplace contexts.

Nevertheless cultural values do feed into and/or reflect social policy. While EU initiatives have been implemented to ensure minimal level of support for the reconcili-

ation of paid work and family in member states, at the national level diverse norms and values are reflected in different welfare states regimes in Europe and particularly in the nature and extent of public work family provisions (den Dulk et al 1999). This paper examines the experiences of parents in organizations within five different welfare state contexts: Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, the Netherlands, and the UK. Table 1 (see p.10) summarizes some relevant variations in the partner countries at the time when the Transitions study was carried out (2004).

As Table 1 shows there are substantial supports for working parents in Norway and also in the post communist countries, Bulgaria and Slovenia, although in the latter provisions are declining in the transition to market economy (Metcalf & Afanassieva 2005). Public provisions to support working families in the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK were introduced more recently and are less widely developed. The reduction of working hours is more common in Norway, the UK and the Netherlands, than in the two post communist countries and Portugal. In the Dutch situation in particular, part-time work by women is widely accepted and women often view this as a satisfactory solution for managing work and family life even though they are aware of the career costs (Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport 2006; Portegijs, Hermans & Lalta 2006).

### **The workplace layer of context**

At the workplace level there is growing evidence that aspects of perceived organizational and managerial support and workplace culture, structures and practices influence the experience, take-up and impact of flexible working arrangements (O'Driscoll et al 2003, Lewis 1997, 2001, Andreassi and Thompson, in press). Interpersonal dynamics at work are an important part of the organizational context. In particular, the role of line managers who often exercise discretion about who can make use of flexible working arrangements (Powell and Maniero 1999, Lewis 1997, Allen 2001, Thompson et al 1999, Thomas and Ganster 1995, Hohl 1996) appear to be crucial factors influencing parents' experiences of workplace flexibility. Organizational culture, particularly gendered assumptions about ideal workers as those who do not modify work for family reasons can undermine flexible working arrangements, and reinforce gender differences in the experience and response to these policies, even if they are embedded in public policy (Haas, Alldred and Hwang 2002; Brandthe and Kvande 2001).

The pace of culture change is uneven both within and across organizations. However, less is known about the impacts on experiences of flexible working arrangements of the broader change strategies used by employers to meet the challenges of global competition in the private sector. For example, how do trends such as the growing flexibilisation and intensification of work (Burchell et al 1999, Burchell et al 2002, Green & McIntosh 2001, Green 2001; 2002) or the growth of non-permanent work and changing psychological contracts across many contexts, affect understandings and

*Table 1. National policies on leave arrangements for working parents, childcare provision and policies on flexible working when the study was carried out in 2004.*

Country	Maternity leave	Paternity leave	Parental leave	Leave to care for sick child	Percentage of children in formal childcare 0-2yrs	Flexibility
Norway	6 weeks of parental leave	10 days, unpaid leave	42/52 weeks, paid at 80% or 100% of earnings	10-15 days per year paid	40% (1997 data) or cash for home care	Right for parents of young children to request reduced hours Time account scheme
Slovenia	105 days, fully paid	90 days, 15 days fully paid, 75 days minimum income	260 days, fully paid			Right for parents of young children to request reduced hours work
Bulgaria	19.3 weeks, paid at 90% of earnings	None	33 months, flat rate payment for 21 months, unpaid for 12 months	60 days at full pay until child is 3 and reduced pay when child is older	7% (2003)	None specified
Portugal	120 days, fully paid	5 days, fully paid	6 months unpaid leave	30 days unpaid	22% (2002)	Right for parents of young children to request reduced hours
UK	26 - 52 weeks (depending on employment history) of which 6 weeks paid at 90% of earnings, 20 weeks flat rate	2 weeks, paid at flat rate	13 weeks unpaid leave, take up in blocks of maximum of 4 weeks per year	None specified	26% (2003)	Right to request flexible working for parents of young children
The Netherlands	16 weeks fully paid	2 days	13 weeks unpaid leave	10days at 70% pay	17% (1997)	Right to reduce or extend working hours for all workers

*Source:* Context mapping report (Fagnani, Houriet-Ségard & Bédouin 2004, Immervol & Barber, 2005).

experiences of flexible working arrangements? These broader trends at the organizational level clearly relate to and interact with the wider, macro level of context.

So, most research on experiences of flexible working arrangements tends to neglect the impact of interacting social systems. In this paper we extend research on the impacts of flexible working arrangements and illustrate the importance of multiple levels of context. We draw on a European study which explored the ways in which employed parents with young children experience flexible working arrangements, in a range of national and workplace contexts. A major overall objective of this qualitative cross-national project was to develop an understanding of the impact of workplace environment and organisational change on employees who become parents, in the context of diverse social and economic policies and situations. We were interested in the ways in which pressures associated with the global economy were played out in diverse contexts. Would certain national policies and workplace policies and practices support and protect working parents more than others, or would the effects of globalization override the impact of diverse contexts leading to more homogeneity of experiences? Specifically, we addressed the following research question: how are interacting aspects of macro national context and turbulent and shifting organizational contexts, reflected in parents' experiences of flexible working arrangements?

## THE STUDY

The *Transitions* study involved research in seven European states, selected purposively to provide a range of diverse welfare state contexts: social-democratic, liberal, southern and eastern countries, and different traditions and patterns of female employment. They included Norway, the Netherlands, the UK, Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria as well as Sweden and France<sup>3</sup>. A cross-national team carried out the research project with partners in each participating country. This collaborative model of cross-national comparative research has many advantages over single researchers working cross nationally. Researchers bring their own insider knowledge of national contexts and languages to bear at all stages of the research, although they must also question taken for granted aspects of these contexts and interrogate their own cultures. Working cross nationally facilitates this process.

The cross-national project was carried out in several phases, including mapping relevant aspects of the wider social contexts of the countries in which the empirical work was carried out, organizational case studies and biographical interviews with working parents. In this paper we focus on aspects of the organizational case studies within the wider social contexts.

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<sup>3</sup> The Swedish case study was in the public sector and not discussed here and no empirical work was carried out in France

## **Organizational case studies - the meso level of context**

Empirical data were collected in phase two via organisational case studies. This approach was selected to gather in depth, contextualised data on organisational processes (Yin 2003a,b). Case studies are useful for understanding complex phenomena and processes within specific contexts and for investigating contemporary phenomena in real life contexts (Yin 2003a,b, Lewis, Das Dores Guerreiro and Brannen 2006). This approach therefore provided opportunities to explore processes of organizational change, to observe the ways in which public policy and organizational policies interact at the level of everyday practice in the context of these changes, and how these various processes impact on parents' experiences of flexible working arrangements, within the wider contexts.

### *Selection of case studies*

As the aim was to study the impact of both organisational change and national social policy (and other aspects of macro context), the research design was to select two types of workplace, (one private and one public sector) across a range of countries with very different social policies on, for example, parental leave. This paper focuses on the private sector organisations.

Data were collected in: Peak<sup>4</sup>, a British insurance company; BIC, a Dutch banking and insurance company; Slofinance, a Slovenian bank; Perelik, a Bulgarian finance organisation; PPC a Portuguese consultancy firm and BOC, a utility company in Norway. The Dutch bank was known for its good working conditions and flexibility, and the Norwegian company was also recognized for providing a number of fringe benefits and secure work in addition to the statutory provisions, while the UK insurance company was attempting to forge a new workplace culture based on flexibility and trust as a response to recent mergers and acquisitions. The Portuguese, Bulgarian and Slovenian companies mostly adhered to labour laws and social provisions with little or no additional voluntary formal support. Continuous change is a fact of life of contemporary organizations (Sennett 1989, Bauman 1993, Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport 2006) and all the case study organizations were undergoing substantial changes, as they continued to adapt to the changing nature of work and global competition. The Bulgarian and Slovenian organizations were also undergoing massive changes as the countries continued the transition to a market economy.

### *Methods*

Each case study involved: analysis of relevant organizational documents; focus groups with employed parents with young children, and with some employees expecting their first child; and interviews with managers at different levels. Participants were

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms are used for each company

recruited via HR managers, who were the key informants on the organisations. Although some background had been gleaned informally during the processes of gaining access to the organisation, the HR managers were asked to provide information regarding the organisational background and also to identify participants for the interviews. Topics of the HR interview schedule focused on workplace policies and organisational change, but also on the perceptions of how managers manage and on their own parenthood and work-family boundaries experience. At the same time written documentation was sought about the organisation and its workforce profile. Indicators such as levels of pay, rotation and absenteeism rates, and training programmes were also collected. However documentation was not readily forthcoming in most of the case studies, much organisational information being considered confidential while in the public sector it was not always collected or in accessible format.

The line manager interviews were used for context setting - providing a management perspective on the workplace changes, while the focus group data provided an employee perspective constructed within a group context – a “public” account that provides insight into the organizational and societal culture within which employment and parenthood were experienced (Smithson 2000; 2006). Focus group protocols and interview schedules were developed collaboratively to take account of diverse national perspectives. They were translated into national languages and back translated to ensure comparability. The focus group schedule covered a range of topics including parents' perspectives on: workplace changes; the implementation of flexible working arrangements and other aspects of workplace support; the role of managers and critical incidents such as when a child is ill. In the interviews, managers were also asked about workplace changes, policies and practices relating to employed parents and how they dealt with critical incidents in their own work and family lives as well as how they managed subordinates with family responsibilities. In total there were 6 case studies involving 36 focus groups with 161 mothers and fathers of young children including some lone parents as well as 36 manager interviews (For more details of the method used see Brannen 2006, Lewis, Smithson et al 2006).

Table 2. *Case study characteristics*

	Country	Industry	No. of focus groups	No. of working parents	No. of managers interviews
Peak	UK	Insurance	6	24	6
BIC	Netherlands	Banking and insurance	4	32	8
BOC	Norway	Utility	4	15	6
PPC	Portugal	Consultancy/ accountancy	9	24	2
Slofinance	Slovenia	Banking	8	29	7
Perelik	Bulgaria	Banking	5	37	7

### *Analysis*

Because of the complexity of doing cross-national research as well as carrying out multiple case studies, a common descriptive analytic framework, in terms of organising the data analysis under clearly specified analytic themes and fieldwork questions, was developed to facilitate comparison within and across the organisations. Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken by organization, using this framework, and then cross sector and cross national comparisons were carried out. One issue that arose at the analytic stage was how to deal with diverse perspectives among managers and employees. One approach is to triangulate data, in the sense of looking for consistencies, to find the “correct” or “valid” accounts of organisational processes. However, this assumes that there is just one way of accounting for what is going on in organisations. Another view is that there are multiple realities and that it is important to understand all of these rather than searching for a single “truth”. The latter approach was adopted in this study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Key aspects of the changing workplace contexts**

There are four important aspects of the organizational contexts relevant to experiences of flexible working arrangements: 1) general trends in organizational change that affect working parents; 2) organizational supports developed in this context; 3) changing interpersonal contexts relevant to work and family; and 4) the persistent male model of work and careers.

### **1. Accounts of workplace trends in organizational change that affect working parents**

#### ***1.1. Intensification of work***

The implementation of flexible working arrangements, whether voluntary and/or in response to national regulations, took place in the context of many other workplace trends and changes. The case study organizations were all undergoing considerable organizational change and turbulence. Mergers and acquisitions, restructuring and downsizing in the six private sector companies, contributed to feelings of deep transition and constant change. Employees in all case studies in the diverse national contexts report an *intensification* of work, that is, increasing workloads and pace of work in the face of downsizing and ‘efficiency’ drives, as well as changes in work organization that frequently put more onus on individual responsibility to manage demanding tasks and schedules (Burchall, Lapido and Wilkinson 2002).

*“There’s an awareness now that you know if somebody leaves the department there’s not an automatic procedure in place to replace them you know, it’s do we need that person coming in?” (Manager, Peak, UK)*

*A: “I think that more is expected of you (compared to 5 years ago)”*

*B: “More productively”*

*A: “Yeah, I think there’s less people to do the same job now”*

*C: “It’s a completely, it’s very difficult to, to compare what it was now with what it was five years ago”*

*D: “The whole environment’s changed hasn’t it?” (Focus group: Peak, UK)*

*“It is proved by numbers. The productivity factors indicate there is more money, more profit per employee. But that means there is greater extent of work. We don’t increase number of workers in spite of enlarging the market. The absent workers are not replaced so those that remain have to do their own work plus the work of an absent person.” (Woman Manager, Slovenia)*

*“We demand a lot from people. All the time we think it’s temporarily, but there is always something new”. (Male manager, The Netherlands )*

*Teodora: Personnel remains the same. There are no vacancies, the amount of work is growing, there are cuts. The tendency for the work is to increase.*

*Ivan: This is a normal process of increase in the productivity. I remember how we worked ten years ago. But now, many people work very hard, which becomes very popular in Bulgaria.*

*Teodora: The truth is that we have become workaholics. I cannot remain away from work for more than a week. There are constantly things you should do.*

*Margarita: In our work, you should really speed up! Even if the minute consisted of 100 seconds, not just 60 seconds, we would still need more time. (Bulgarian focus group).*

Long working hours were an issue in many of the organizational context, even for those working part time, often associated with intense workloads and often unrewarded.

*There are lots of workers who think we work too much. Sometimes people, mainly at a lower hierarchical level, are obliged to work on weekends and sometimes 10/11/12 hours per day, not being paid for that. There is a certain sense of anger, people don’t agree with that, they think things should work on another way and they wonder why this doesn’t seem possible. (Portugal Focus Group 4 – Managers, mixed sex)*

In one of the Norwegian focus groups it was jokingly claimed that there are two cultures at BOC; one where people put in very long working hours whilst the other just involves putting in long hours. The working hours expected in some areas of the company are not compatible with having family obligations.

*Q: Is there a culture of overtime here at BOC?*

*Leif: There’s some for my part, but I think it depends on the working environment.*

*Gaute: I think there are two cultures, one where they work overtime and another where they work an incredibly lot of overtime! (laughs)... I have been in the incredibly long hours category for a long time, and I try to get out of it... it's not so easy to combine with...*

In addition to the intensification of work, the analysis of national debates and discourses (and the biographical interviews in phase three of the study) revealed a widespread perception of intensification of parenting. Debates about what it means to be a good parent were common across the countries. The working parents in our study talked of high expectations of what a “good” parent should do, which typically involved far more care and parental input, as well as more financial resources, than their own parents had been able to provide. Pressure to conform to “intensified” parenting came both from parents’ expectations, but also from wider societies, and, in some countries, from national initiatives to encourage more parental involvement of various forms.

The parents in this study were thus managing work and family in particularly demanding, competitive and pressured contexts, including an intensification of the demands of parenthood as well as an intensification of work. While the intensification of parental demands may make flexible working arrangements more necessary, intensified workloads often undermine working time flexibility or result in flexibility to work more and more to meet workload demands (Holt and Thaulow 1996).

**1.2 Perceived job insecurity** was also fairly widespread, albeit experienced differently across contexts and potentially impacts on employees’ willingness to take up flexible working options. In the UK company, for example, there was a widespread acceptance of the insecurity of jobs, cushioned by the relative ease of securing new jobs at the time, and little distinction in practice between temporary and so called permanent jobs

*“I suppose the only difference in my position to say someone that’s in a permanent role is that somebody’s actually said my job’s like this until the end of a current assignment, whereas someone in a permanent role may not see it coming.” (father of two children, Peak, UK )*

Different discourses of insecurity and flexibility emerged within the Norwegian case study . All agreed that mergers, relocations and other changes made jobs less secure but while senior managers stressed the business rationales for this, and felt that insecurity was not a big concern others were more ambivalent.

*We are a company that often reorganises. There are those who look upon changes as a threat, and then you have those who see it as an opportunity. And of course, if you are thirty I think you always look for the opportunities. But now and then this has lead to insecurity and uneasiness among some people. (...) But it's clear that this focus on cost efficiency and improvement and higher speed, it does something to people. And that could be both good and bad. (Manager, BOC)*

There is much less optimism about finding new jobs in Bulgaria:

*"You make sacrifices, you give up caring for your child and start a job that you may not like, but the possibility of finding another vacancy immediately is very small".* (Woman manager, Bulgarian bank)

Job insecurity and also work intensification are by-products of new forms of competition in the global economy, including the transition to a market economy in Slovenia and Bulgaria where the changes were particularly dramatic.

*"I would say more insecure not only because of the reasons which come out of the(organization). More insecure because of the climate in Bulgaria. How can we be secure when all these 14 years we stand still, a transition that never ends. In reality the statistics show incessant increase in the income, but this is in fact impoverishment. How can a person be secure? If a person is secure, why isn't the birth rate increasing? Why is the birth rate decreasing – because people are insecure."* (Male manager, Bulgaria)

In the Portuguese organization insecurity is accepted because participants know that they are getting good experience which will make them more employable elsewhere.

## **2. Organizational support for working parents developed in this context**

### ***2.1 Views on compatibility of support with organizational effectiveness***

In these shifting contexts, support for reconciling work and family is important. The source and extent of workplace support for working parents in the case study workplaces varied as did prevailing views of the compatibility of support for working parents with sustaining or enhancing organizational effectiveness. At one extreme in the relatively newly privatized organizations in Bulgaria and Slovenia parents relied on long-standing government support for reconciling work and family life, in the form of childcare, leave to care for sick children and parental leave entitlements, but beyond compliance with regulation there was little voluntary formal employer support and little expectation or sense of entitlement that it should be forthcoming. In fact, parents and their managers alike in these two countries often considered that formal organizational support for work and family life was not operationally feasible within a market economy. The focus was on economic drivers, the survival of the company and earning enough money to maintain a family. Supporting work and family was regarded as a cost and a luxury beyond the means of a developing economy. A Bulgarian mother was typical in arguing that: *"There is no private employer caring for his employees. The state is one thing, the employer is another thing."* Paradoxically however, there was much informal flexibility support for parents from older managers, perhaps as a legacy of the communist regime, although this was declining among younger managers, schooled in capitalism.

In the Portuguese organization too, reconciling work and family tends to be regarded as an individual responsibility, with an implicit assumption that supporting parents is bad for business. This was particularly evident among this group of male professionals and managers.

*Do you think that the organization should support their employees' work-family reconciliation?*

*W1: I think that in this activity... is really difficult to reconcile work and family life. We must shape our life according to our work, our deadlines. We must work for quality, to keep our organization alive. So it's really difficult to balance things*

*And could that change?*

*W1: I don't know...*

*W2: Each person must coordinate his or her work with family responsibilities. Thanks God, I don't have any problems. But I know that some people here have problems. I think the company can't do much about that. The only thing it could do is to show some understanding. (Portuguese Focus group with male managers and professionals).*

At the other extreme, in the UK, the Netherlands, and Norway, with varying levels of state support for parents, flexible working arrangements are not necessarily considered incompatible with workplace efficiency and competitiveness, and indeed there is often a discourse of such initiatives as productivity or efficiency initiatives arising from other changes. In the UK finance sector organization, for example, managers cited mergers and acquisitions as the catalyst for a drive to create a new culture based on increased flexibility and trust.

*"It's a different kind of, the old adage that a happy workforce is a productive workforce isn't it. So if you can .. you know if you start challenging well, why are we working 9 to 5, because you know customers do ring after 5 o'clock so why not leave it open till 6 when there's people willing to work till 6? So, why are we saying no to people? It's just about challenging some of the preconceptions that were there... And I think we're changing the culture in a positive way ... because we do recognise that you know, we're only successful if our people are happy." (manager, mother of 2 school aged children, British private sector organization).*

In practice this involved a shift from a formalized flexitime system to more informal flexibility based on support and trust. It was presented as a strategic initiative to enhance performance through a focus on people and their needs and well-being, in the context of increasing workplace demands, although it was not always experienced in this way by focus group participants.

In general BOC can be characterised as a 'family friendly' company since there in addition to a policy of following the universal rights designed for the parents of young children by the Norwegian welfare state, are local workplace policies that are regarded as a benefit for parents. 'Flexibility' has become a catch-word in recent years, widely used (and abused).

*This company's policy is that it's possible to have children and a job. Since they have introduced flexible working hours life gets a lot simpler. (Ingrid, 40 years old mother of 4 children).*

### **2.2 Range of flexible working arrangements beyond those covered by state policy**

The actual formal flexible working arrangements available in our case studies, beyond those covered by state policy, varied across sector and national context. Part time or reduced working hours were available in some contexts, and were taken up mostly by mothers in the UK, the Netherlands, Norway . Some fathers talked about wanting to work less, but most did not feel comfortable asking for this, even in the Norwegian company. Where part-time working was impractical for parents, innovations such as compressed hours were sometimes used as a way of organizing the working week more effectively. This was particularly prevalent in the Dutch finance organization, where in some cases employees worked longer daily hours over 4 days rather than 5. This was facilitated by the reduction in the working week in the banking sector from 40 hours to 36 hours that came into force in the 1980s as part of a collective agreement for the sector. The downside of this, for parents, is that the days worked are very long, leaving little time in the evening for the family, and drop-offs and pick-ups at crèches can be complicated. It can only work if a partner can also schedule their working week around this, which may explain why it is popular particularly among men in the Netherlands where a high proportion of women work part time. In many of the organizations in all the countries self managed teams provided autonomy and flexibility, although as discussed below this could be problematic in some cases when combined with an intensification of work.

### **2.3 Implementation gaps**

However, as in other studies, in a range of countries (e.g. Gambles et al 2006), we found a widespread implementation gap between policies, (whether government or organizational,) and actual practice, particularly in contexts where support is regarded as undermining business performance, but also in those where supportive policies were articulated as a positive business strategy.

*"[the organisation] has many fine words on paper on many things, among others, gender equality and consideration for the life situation of employees. Maybe they could get even better at following up what they have on paper? That would make this company even better for everybody."* (Norwegian mother).

Generally, we found that employer support, formal or informal was often forthcoming during crises (sick child, seriously ill family member) but less so in everyday working life with respect to flexible needs of working parents- albeit to different extent across the countries.

### **3. Shifting interpersonal contexts relevant to work and family**

Managers play an important role in determining parents' latitude to work flexibly. As in other research (Lewis 1997, 2001; Bond et al. 2002) line manager support or lack of it was of crucial significance for working parents' options for negotiating their paid work and family responsibilities. While this is true in all the case studies, it is particularly so in the countries with fewer supportive national regulations, or a shorter history of people taking up family supportive initiatives (UK, Portugal, the Netherlands) and in organizations where there are limited resources to cover absent personnel. Inconsistency of management support across organizations, what the focus groups in the UK private sector company referred to as "the management lottery" was common.

*"I don't think there's consistency across the company anyway, across departments... our manager's under the impression that supervisors position is 9-5 which isn't in our contract and she has made you feel bad if you asked to go early which isn't what flexible working's all about."* (Mother expecting first child, Peak, UK)

Managers appear to be shifting somewhat in their views on support for working parents at different rates, both across and within organizations, but management discretion plays a crucial role in parents' experiences

*In work-family reconciliation, how important are managers?*

*W1: Very important*

*W2: Very, very important*

*W3: I think they play the essential role. I mean, even if the organization respects the law, if managers have a different option... they always can...*

*W2: They can penalize someone, you see... on evaluation, etc. I can say – My son is sick I will stay at home, but if my boss doesn't like it... he can show it to me, it may have an impact on my career. There are some things law will never reach... (Focus Group – Managers/Consultants Portugal)*

However, interviews with managers in the case study organizations highlight some of the dilemmas that they themselves experience within changing organizational contexts and changing or ongoing public policy context. Changes in social policy to support parents can occur at the same time as changing workplace conditions including heavy workloads and targets for managers. This often includes organizational restructuring that makes more demands on people so that flexibility appears to be more difficult from a management perspective. Middle and lower level managers in particular have to negotiate intensified targets, changing working practices and parents' expectations of support.

*"We are in a team with six people; one is on a four months leave, the other has maternity leave, so you lose a great part of your manpower. And to replace them takes a lot of hassle, or you end up with trainees who finally start to get it after 3 months. When I*

*oversee this situation as a manager, this is very badly solved by the organization” (Male team leader, father of two young children, Dutch financial sector organization)*

Employees vary in their expectations of support from managers and multiple layers of context again influence this. In Bulgaria and Slovenia there are limited expectations of formal manager support beyond statutory entitlements, although some mothers expect and get informal support, based on ongoing relationships embedded in former times. Expectations of support are also relatively high in Norway and Sweden influenced by public policy and work-family discourses embedded in a discourse of gender equality. In the UK finance sector organization, a prevailing national discourse of work-life balance, and at the workplace level a management discourse of increasing trust and flexibility cloaked within a business case framework, raised parents' expectations of manager support. This appeared to create dilemmas for some managers and dissatisfaction among employees whose managers were not supportive.

In some contexts however this was beginning to change. With increased use of techniques such as self-managing teams, managers' roles in managing employees' flexibility was increasingly devolved to work teams, so that colleagues were becoming as or even more important than managers in relation to support for parents.

#### **4. The persisting dominant male model of work and careers**

Despite all the organizational change that is going on across all the case studies, one area of continuity is the prevailing male model of ideal workers who do not need time or energy for family work (Lewis 1997;2001; Rapoport et al 2001). Taking leaves or flexible work options continues to be widely regarded as career limiting, a risk that women continue to be more willing to take than men.

*We have all the options, parental leave to sabbatical leave, and it is really possible, but in practice your decisions should be taken with care because they can harm your career... it's the same with all these policies; it is possible but take care its at your own risk, its not as ideal as you might expect” (Dutch man, bank, father of two, manager)*

*Q: You work reduced hours?*

*Anita: Yes, I had two years of leave after she was born and now I work 75%. That's because I want to have time to take care of my child. But of course, wage wise and career wise, it's not a good option to choose. I've chosen not to give those aspects too much weight. (Mother, BOC, Norway)*

The study also highlights the continuing gendered expectations, in all the countries (to varying degrees, least in Norway) that policies for combining paid work and family care are primarily, or only, for women. This assumption is often made by managers at all levels, as well as by many of the parents themselves.

*You do get a different perspective on life when you become a parent from what you had before, don't you? I've experienced that myself. But then your life as a whole gets less flexible. If you were used to working very long hours you can't continue with that when you become a parent. The practical part of it becomes more strenuous, especially for mothers who often do more of the domestic tasks. And if you work part time you lag behind career wise, no doubt about it. (Father, BOC, Norway)*

*"Most people expect the mother, to take the time off, in general, so it's probably harder for the men in some ways. Because they probably think, well what's your wife doing, or what's your girlfriend doing, why can't they do it?" (Father Peak, UK)*

*"I found it ok to leave at five because I suppose I know that people will be thinking she's a mother she's a parent she's not long had a baby and therefore she's obviously got to go and pick him up from wherever yet they probably wouldn't think the same about my husband 'cause I'm the direct link so to speak, I'm the one that's been off on maternity and things." (Mother, Peak, UK)*

INTERACTION BETWEEN LAYERS OF CONTEXT:  
EXPERIENCES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS  
IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

National social policy and workplace policies, practices and attitudes to the compatibility of support for parents and business effectiveness can all make a difference. It is somewhat easier to manage work and family boundaries in Norway than Slovenia, for example. Nevertheless an implementation gap between policies (whether government mandated or voluntary) and practices in all the countries, discussed above, is exacerbated by the changing nature of work, especially intensified workloads, the fast pace of change and in some contexts job insecurity, all of which can challenge flexible working arrangements. This is however played out in different ways across contexts.

Our analysis of parents' and managers' accounts of what flexible working arrangements mean to them and how these arrangements are experienced in practice, in the light of macro and meso level contexts and the changes that are taking place revealed three processes at play. First workplace changes stemming from wider contextual pressures interact with and can undermine national policy context. For example, Bulgarian mothers are entitled to nearly three years parental leave, which had previously been taken up by mothers (rarely fathers). However, rising unemployment and perceived job insecurity, intensification of work and the fast pace of change replacing previous job protection in the communist era create anxieties. The Bulgarian women discussed how they took only a few months leave because they feared that they would lose their jobs or be unable to keep up with the fast pace of change if they stayed away for a longer period, as illustrated by this focus group excerpt:

*Antonia. The tendency is to take as short maternity leave as possible, and you hurry up to go back to work. You fight for your position with teeth and claws.*

Kostadina. *Everything is so dynamic now. And things change all the time. Leaving work for two years keeps you far behind the others. The normative documents, the requirements for the employees change very quickly. In order to provide a better future for your children, you should catch up with the others.*

Rositza. *After two years on a maternity leave they have to train you again.*  
(Focus group in Bulgarian finance organization)

Secondly, workplace changes stemming from wider contextual pressures interact with and can undermine workplace policies to support working parents. Part-time and reduced hours work schedules provide one example. Reduced hours schedules, available in the case study organizations in Norway, the Netherlands and the UK, though rarely in the other countries, can provide a very satisfactory arrangement for new parents in relatively affluent contexts if it is well supported by management.

*"I've worked here since (19) 85 so this is my everyday life and as far as I've seen it there aren't any negative sides when getting children..... When I came back from leave I asked to have 60% work, and there was not problem. I can continue with that for years if I so wish."* (Norwegian mother, private sector )

However, intensified workloads lean workforces in the case studies often undermined such arrangements. Often managers and colleagues supported reduced hours in principle but workloads and expectations were not reduced proportionally to the reduction in work hours, or work was redistributed to other team members, resulting in overload for part time workers and/or their colleagues. This occurred even in national contexts where there was policy and cultural support for part time work

*I still have to do the same amount of work, only in less hours. My workload is not adjusted"* (Female employee, mother of one child, Dutch financial sector organization)

The intensification of workloads reinforces ideal worker assumptions that take little account of parental commitments, again, even in the organizations where the discourse is relatively "family friendly"

Thirdly increasingly global workplace changes impact on the interpersonal level within workplace contexts and can again undermine policies with the potential to support working parents in highly pressurized contexts. Parents were often reluctant to change working patterns because of the impact on already overburdened colleagues. In these contexts the support or disapproval of colleagues, who often became agents of social control, becomes increasingly significant, often reducing sense of entitlement to flexibility.

*You know that if you do not go to work, the others would have to work harder.* (Bulgarian mother, Finance company)

AA. *"(...if a child is sick) it is impossible to be absent an entire week (...)* We could...

BB *The company doesn't create obstacles to that. It is more our sense of responsibility, of mutual support. Obstacles to that are the deadlines, nobody obliges us to come ...*

(...) *We work in teams* (Focus group in Portugal, finance company)

*“I feel guilty sometimes because of, not so much my boss, but my, my colleagues and some colleagues who don’t understand what, what I go through, what I have to do and one guy who’s particularly keen about the clock, and has to be there at 9 o’clock and you know, somebody will walk in at 10 past and you can see him look at the clock or his watch, laughter, and so I feel so much more, more as though I have to justify myself to him then, then my, you know, my manager.”* (parent, UK finance company)

*“I know that legally that’s possible, but let’s be honest, when there’s work that takes 8 hours and you say you want to work 6 hours, another person will have to be hired to do your job or your co-workers will have to work overtime. But the organisation doesn’t take on new workers or pay out the overtime hours, so nobody wants to work overtime. And that’s why they simply won’t tolerate it.”* (man, Slovenia)

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Parents’ satisfaction with and experience of flexible working arrangements were influenced by their expectations of and sense of entitlement to work-family support, which in turn were related to the various layers of context. We found some examples of positive changes in some social systems and subsequent sense of entitlement to support among some parents. However if changes in one layer of context were not reflected in changes in other social systems this created transitional tensions. For example, the growing involvement of fathers in parenting in some countries, particularly Norway, encouraged by government policies and campaigns raised expectations of shared parenting but also created tensions when some employers continued to expect that men should not take family leaves. Different changes and trends within one layer of context can undermine also each other. For example the shift to more autonomous work groups might enhance parents’ experiences of flexibility but is undermined by other changes, particularly the intensification of work.

At the workplace, organizational change can raise expectations of support for managing work and family boundaries and therefore generate a greater willingness to take up entitlements and for mutual flexibility to develop with give and take by employees and their managers. For example, in Peak in the UK a company drive for culture change including more flexibility and trust, and a wider context of a high profile government campaign and national debates on “work-life balance” raised expectations of support among parents, some of whom were able to work very flexibly and work very effectively. Tensions arose in this context because of management inconsistency in applying the new culture, due partly to intensification of work, but also the lack of change in the values and skills of many managers.

The qualitative, case study based project on which the paper is based set out to explore the ways in which pressures associated with the global economy were played

out in diverse contexts. Would certain national policies and workplace policies and practices support and protect working parents more than other, or would the effects of globalization create more homogenous experiences? Both appear to be true to some extent. Certainly some national provisions and policies and employer flexible working practices can provide support for working parents, albeit in complex ways, mediated by the interaction of factors such as economic context and employees' expectations and sense of entitlement to support. At the same time, however, there is some convergence of experiences across national contexts, as the intensification of work and other trends associated with global competition and efficiency drives can undermine national and employer initiatives to support employed parents. Indeed, in the contemporary, changing European workplaces studied here, intensified workloads are emerging as a major barrier to flexibility for managing work and family life.

The recurring themes from the case studies point to the difficulty in defining what are good practices, as these are so complex and context dependent. This paper demonstrates that the experience of flexible working arrangements varies according to many layers of context. Both state and employer policies have the potential to support employed parents. However while the impact of policies such as state subsidized childcare (not a focus in this analysis) are unequivocal, state and workplace flexible working policies are undermined by a number of contextual factors including perceived job insecurity, the fast pace of change and the intensification of work associated with global competition or efficiency drives in all the countries in this study. In this context there is some growing convergence of experience between countries with diverse social policies. Future research needs to take account of both national and organizational contexts as they frame parents' opportunities for flexibility in managing work and family boundaries. It also needs to consider globalization processes and contexts in particular times and places and the convergence of experiences that they may encourage. Longitudinal research would be useful not only to capture the impact of flexible work arrangements but also the dynamic process of change and the way developments in different layers of context interact. "Good practice" for supporting working parents is a moveable feast, requiring continuous monitoring of the impacts of new developments at within many layers of context.

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