

Combining Career and Children

Examining the Impact of Family Support Policies on the Wellbeing of Single, Married, Divorced, and Widowed Mothers

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of family support policies on the wellbeing of single, married, and divorced/separated/widowed mothers. A secondary data analysis of the British Workplace Employment Relations Survey of 2004 was conducted. Never married, married, divorced, and widowed mothers were selected (n = 4225) from all respondents who participated in the survey (N = 22451). Results of regression analysis showed that, not all family friendly policies are equally effective in alleviating anxiety or fostering job satisfaction, contentment and commitment among single, divorced/ separated/widowed, and married mothers. While flexi-time has benefits for all mothers, chances to reduce work hours is important for single mothers, whereas chances to increase work hours is important for divorced/separated/widowed mothers, and working only during school term time has benefits for the wellbeing of married mothers.

Introduction

Though married or civil partnered families with or without children are the most common family type in UK, the numbers of single or lone parent families have increased from 1.6 million in 1996 to 2 million in 2012 (ONS, 2012). Single or lone parent families mostly include single mothers and their children since women are more likely to take the main caring responsibilities for any children when the relationships break down. According to Families and Households Survey from the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2012), women accounted for 91 per cent of lone parents with dependent children.

Studies have shown that single mothers experience significant lower psychological wellbeing (Mastekaasa, 1992). The existing body of knowledge suggests that single mothers reported higher levels of physical and psychological illnesses (Brown & Moran, 1997; Cairney *et al.*, 1999; Davies *et al.*, 1997; Kahn *et al.*, 2000; Lipman *et al.*, 1997; Lipman *et al.*, 2001) anxiety, and depression (Guttentag *et al.*, 1980; Williams *et al.*, 1992; Cairney *et al.*, 1999; Lipman *et al.*, 2001; Wang, 2004) compared to married mothers. It is argued that single mothers may have higher exposure to stressors relating to financial difficulties, childcare responsibilities, and social seclusion that may not be the case for married mothers. Studies (Avison, 1995; Brown & Moran, 1997; Hope *et al.*, 1999; Kahn *et al.*, 2000) have consistently supported this line of argument that single mothers have lower wellbeing due to greater exposure to stress. Several studies have found that married mothers have better mental health as compared to

single mothers(Cairney *et al.*, 1999; Cairney *et al.*, 2003; Davies *et al.*,1997; Lipman *et al.*, 2001).

Together,career and childrencould impair women’s wellbeing as the continuous juggling between both roles could, for example, lead to higher role conflict which in turn could result in strain, fatigue,stress and illness (Fokkema, 2002).If help is provided to help them balance these roles, it can improvewomen’s health. In this regard, organizational family support policies can play a crucial role in supporting working mothers to cope with the dual role responsibilities.

Family support practices are, thus, perceived as a means to enable employees to balance their career and family responsibilities to reduce conflicts (Mauno*et al.*, 2006). These family-friendly policies include flexible work schedules, part time schedules; dependent care benefits, and family leaves of absence (Friedman and Johnson, 1997; Allen, 2001; Glass and Finley, 2002; Johnson *et al.*, 2008) job sharing, compressed week and working from home (Lewis, 2001). Flexible work schedules includeflexi time, part time work, job sharing, and working from home may be of benefit for all employees with and without dependent care responsibilities while, family friendly policies including parental leaves, paternity leaves, help with child care etc. are specifically to help employees’ balance career and family roles (Cully *et al.*, 1999). The studies on family support in UK have focused largely on the provision of family friendly policies by employers (e.g. Budd and Mumford, 2006); however, very little attention has been given to examining the impact of employees’ perception of family supportiveness on their wellbeing. The present research is an attempt to fill in this gap.

Although these policies can be beneficial for all employees, they are crucial for women with child or elder care responsibilities.Family support allows women to focus more on their work by reducing the pressure on them of their family responsibilities. There are two possible ways in which family friendly components can foster employee wellbeing: first, by alleviating the negative feelings i.e. anxiety and second, by enhancing the positive feelings such as job satisfaction, contentment, and commitment. Studies found that employees using the family support policies reported higher job satisfaction (Anderson *et al.*, 2002; Scandura and Lankau, 1997; Bond *et al.*, 2002), commitment (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Scandura and Lankau, 1997; Baltes *et al.*, 1999;Allen, 2001; Bond *et al.*, 2002), satisfaction with life (Bond *et al.*, 2002) and lower absenteeism (Thomas and Ganster, 1995), work-family conflict (Goff *et al.*, 1990; Kossek and Nichol, 1992), stress (Kossek and Ozeki, 1999) and burnout (Almer and Kaplan, 2002; Mattis, 1990).

Although it is well established that family structure has implications for wellbeing, several key questions remain unanswered. The past research has failed to: 1) distinguishbetween various classifications of single mothers(such as never married, separated, divorced, and widowed) when studying mental health or wellbeing, 2) include multiple indicators of psychological wellbeing such as anxiety, contentment, satisfaction and commitment, 3) examine the relevance of organizational family support policiesfor the wellbeing of single and married mothers. It may be that different policies have different impact due to the difference in the family structure of mothers. The present study, therefore, attempts to address these shortcomings by answering the two main research questions: “Are there differences in the *perceived availability of family support policies* and *wellbeing*among married, never-married, and separated/divorced/widowed mothers? If so, how *perceived availability of family support policies*at workplaces affect the *wellbeing*of married, never-married, and separated/divorced/widowed mothers?”Furthermore, the present study investigates these relationships usinga large sample that is representative of the general population.

Method

The data set

The data used comes from one element of nationally representative Workplace Employment Relations Survey of 2004 (WERS2004) – the survey of employee questionnaire. For employee survey, a self-completion questionnaire was used to collect data from 22451 employees, which represented a response rate of 61 percent.

Sample

The sample (N=4225) was limited to only working mothers who were either married or living with a partner (N=3390), never married (N=273), or widowed/separated/divorced (N=562). All mothers within the sample had at least one dependent child, whom the mother was actively raising. Nineteen percent (N = 780) of these mothers are also looking after an elder family member. A great majority of these working mothers belonged to the age group of 40-49 years (43.4%) followed by the age group of 30-39 years (40.9%). While these mothers worked for a minimum of 4 hours to a maximum of 80 hours per week, the total mean work hours for mothers in the sample was 28.89 (SD=11.67) per week.

Measures

Employees' perceptions of the availability of family support were measured by including both the components i.e. *flexible work arrangements* (7 items) and *childcare benefits* (3 items) on a two-point scale 1= *yes* and 2 = *no*. Respondents were asked if any of the seven flexible work arrangements were available to them including *flexi-time* (FT), *job sharing* (JSH), *chances to reduce working hours* (CRWH), *chances to increase working hours* (CIWH), *working at or from home in normal working hours* (WAFH), *changing working patterns including shifts* (CWPS) and *working the same number of hours per week across fewer days* (WSHW). Furthermore, three childcare benefits including *working only during school term time* (WODS), *paid parental leaves* (PPL), *workplace nursery or help with childcare costs* (WN) were available to them. Before proceeding with the analysis the responses were recoded as 1=*yes* and 0=*no*.

We have assessed wellbeing using four indicators including: *job-related anxiety* (3 items, $\alpha=0.85$), *job satisfaction* (7 items, $\alpha=0.83$), *job contentment* (3 items, $\alpha=0.82$), and *organizational commitment* (3 items, $\alpha=0.85$). All the measures were drawn from the *Survey of Employees Questionnaire*.

Statistical Method

Descriptive statistics were used to reflect on perceived availability of family support policies, and the prevalence of job related anxiety, contentment, satisfaction and commitment. The procedure of hierarchical regression was utilized to determine the relationship between family support policies and various aspects of wellbeing across three family structures.

Results

While analyzing data, first the differences between single, married, and widowed/separated/divorced mothers across a variety of socio-demographic variables were examined e.g. age, job type, earnings, and work hours. For this sample, single mothers are

disadvantaged in the majority of domains examined in this study. A majority of single mothers are young (30-39 years) compared to married (40-49 years) and widowed/separated/divorced (40-49 years) mothers. A minority of single mothers are employed in supervisory jobs (25%) compared to married (30%) and widowed/separated/divorced (29.6%) mothers. Where a majority of single mothers (46%) earn less than £180 a week, a majority of widowed/separated/divorced (40%) and married (38.6%) mothers earn between £181-£360. The mean work hours for single, married, and widowed/separated/divorced mothers are 29.9 (SD= 11.75), 28.54 (SD=11.80), and 30.80 (SD=10.68) hours respectively. No significant differences were found in the reported working hours of single and widowed/separated/divorced mothers. However, widowed/separated/divorced mothers are working significantly more hours than married mothers (MD = 2.26, $p < 0.01$).

Considering the perceived availability of family support policies (Table 1), the perceived availability of JSH and WAFH is higher among married mothers, CWPS and WSHW is higher among single mothers, and WODS is higher among both married and widowed/separated/divorced mothers. On the other hand, no differences were observed among single, married and widowed/separated/divorced mothers on the reports of the four measures of wellbeing such as work related anxiety (ANX), satisfaction (SAT), contentment (CONT), and commitment (CMT).

Table 1: Availability of family friendly policies to married, divorced/widowed/separated, and single mothers

Variables	Single (a)	Divorced/separated /widowed (b)	Married/ living with a partner (c)	Differences
Family friendly policies:				
FT	.58	.50	.52	a=b=c
JSH	.45	.44	.51	a=b<c
CRWH	.65	.66	.67	a=b=c
CIWH	.59	.58	.60	a=b=c
WAFH	.10	.13	.16	a=b<c
CWPS	.46	.35	.39	a>b=c
WSHW	.42	.34	.38	a>b=c
WODS	.28	.34	.38	a<c=b
PPL	.16	.21	.21	a=b=c
WN	.19	.13	.13	a=b=c
Work related wellbeing:				
ANX	2.36	2.48	2.41	a=b=c
SAT	3.50	3.57	3.59	a=b=c
CONT	2.94	2.83	2.88	a=b=c
CMT	3.67	3.77	3.78	a=b=c

Regression analysis

In the next part of analysis, the effects of family support policies on the four measures of wellbeing were examined for single, married and widowed/separated/divorced mothers. The results (Table 2-5) showed that JSH and CRWH reduce *anxiety* among single mothers ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.05$;

$\beta = -0.39, p < 0.05$). FT, WAFH, and WODS have a positive impact on the job satisfaction of single mothers ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$). Furthermore, CRWH have a positive impact on *contentment* ($\beta = 0.53, p < 0.01$) and *commitment* ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.05$) of single mothers.

Table 2: Results for anxiety

Variables	Single		Divorced/ separated/ widowed		Married/ living with a partner	
	β	t value	β	t value	β	t value
FT	-.01	-.06	.07	.70	-.11	-2.39*
JSH	-.39	-2.13*	-.05	-.45	.05	1.05
CRWH	-.39	-2.12*	.07	.55	-.01	-.23
CIWH	.10	.63	-.29	-2.48*	-.05	-1.23
WAFH	.11	.73	-.07	-.64	.06	1.60
CWPS	-.25	-1.28	-.03	-.24	-.05	-1.22
WSHW	-.25	-1.03	.03	.22	.02	.36
WODS	.27	1.90	.02	.23	-.10	-2.51*
PPL	.03	.17	.13	1.28	.04	1.09
WN	.18	.94	.12	1.22	-.09	-2.17*

* Significant at 0.05 level.

Table 3: Results for job satisfaction

Variables	Single		Divorced/ separated/ widowed		Married/ living with a partner	
	β	t value	β	t value	β	t value
FT	.10	2.20*	.03	.24	.08	.43
JSH	.06	1.43	.09	.84	-.01	-.04
CRWH	-.03	-.54	.15	1.25	.31	1.54
CIWH	.00	.01	.23	2.11*	.06	.32
WAFH	.09	2.21*	-.06	-.55	-.14	-.85
CWPS	.06	1.30	.09	.74	-.15	-.64
WSHW	.06	1.29	-.12	-.95	-.06	-.21
WODS	.12	3.06*	-.02	-.17	-.24	-1.51
PPL	.01	.35	-.15	-1.43	.01	.05
WN	.05	1.35	.01	.10	.05	.24

* Significant at 0.05 level.

The results (Table 2-5) showed that CIWH reduce *anxiety* ($\beta = -0.29, p < 0.05$), increase *satisfaction* ($\beta = 0.23, p < 0.05$), and *contentment* ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.05$) among divorced/ separated/widowed mothers. In addition, WN have a positive impact on the job related *contentment* ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.05$) and *flexi-time* have a positive impact on the *commitment* ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.05$) of divorced/ separated/widowed mothers.

The analysis for married mothers or mothers living with a civil partner (Table 2-5) showed that availability of FT and WN reduce *anxiety* among married mothers ($\beta = -0.11, p < 0.05$; $\beta = -0.09, p < 0.05$). The availability of WODS is important for reducing anxiety ($\beta = -0.10, p < 0.05$) and for enhancing the positive feelings of *contentment* and *commitment* among married mothers ($\beta = 0.11, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01$). Lastly, WAFH have a positive impact on the *commitment* ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$) of married mothers.

Table 4: Results for contentment

Variables	Single		Divorced/ separated/ widowed		Married/ living with a partner	
	β	t value	β	t value	β	t value
FT	-.21	-1.24	.07	.64	.06	1.24
JSH	-.05	-.23	-.12	-1.81	-.04	-.79
CRWH	.53	3.82**	.11	.97	.07	1.47
CIWH	.17	1.03	.24	2.24*	-.03	-.65
WAFH	-.11	-.67	-.03	-.23	.00	.07
CWPS	.02	.11	.04	.28	.05	1.20
WSHW	.04	.16	.00	.02	.04	.85
WODS	-.08	-.54	.00	.04	.11	2.81*
PPL	-.25	-1.29	-.07	-.72	-.03	-.71
WN	-.05	-.27	.21	2.07*	.07	1.70

* Significant at 0.05 level.

Table 5: Results for commitment

Variables	Single		Divorced/ separated/ widowed		Married/ living with a partner	
	β	t value	β	t value	β	t value
FT	-.29	-1.67	.24	2.23*	.01	.31
JSH	.17	.79	-.11	-.96	.06	1.44
CRWH	.35	2.02*	.11	.96	-.01	-.27
CIWH	-.10	-.56	.04	.34	-.05	-1.22
WAFH	.12	.72	.05	.42	.12	3.03*
CWPS	-.15	-.70	-.02	-.14	.06	1.48
WSHW	-.12	-.45	-.09	-.74	.03	.74
WODS	-.16	-1.09	.13	1.26	.21	5.54*
PPL	.07	.38	.07	.69	-.03	-.70
WN	.17	.86	.02	.23	.06	1.42

* Significant at 0.05 level.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that family-supportive policies produce significant benefits in terms of employee attitudes and well-being. Results from this study illustrate that, all policies are not equally effective in reducing *anxiety* or fostering *job satisfaction*, *contentment*, and *commitment* among single, divorced/ separated/widowed, and married mothers. Of all the practices included in this study three practices are of utmost importance such as *chances to reduce work hours*, *chances to increase work hours*, and *working only during school term time*. *Chances to reduce work hours* have strongest implications for single mothers as it contributes in lowering *anxiety* and enhancing *contentment* and *commitment* among them. *Chances to increase work hours* have implications for divorced/ separated/widowed mothers as it contributes to lowering *anxiety* and enhancing *job satisfaction* and *contentment* among them. *Working only during school term time* has implications for married mothers as it fosters in them *job contentment* and *commitment* and helps in lowering *anxiety*. These findings support the argument

that balance between work and family life may be more affected by a single intervention that is relevant to an individual or a particular group's needs rather than an array of policies, some of which are not relevant for individual or group (O' Driscoll *et al.*, 2003).

Flexi-time, though has benefits for all the three groups of working mothers, produces different outcomes for the various family structures. It helps to improve *job satisfaction* among single mothers, *commitment* among divorced/separated/widowed mothers, and reduces *anxiety* among married mothers. *Workplace nursery or help with childcare costs* not only enhances *contentment* among divorced/separated/widowed mothers but also reduces *anxiety* among married mothers. *Working at or from home in normal working hours* has a positive relationship with *job satisfaction* in single mothers and with *commitment* among married mothers. These findings extend the extant research, confirming the importance of family supportive policies to attain a balance between the career and personal lives of working mothers.

The results of the present study should be considered in light of important limitations. First, the cross-sectional designs do not allow drawing inferences about the causal links between perceived availability of family friendly policies and wellbeing. Furthermore, *family structure* may not be a fixed state and change over time (Afifi *et al.*, 2006). With time, single mothers may come to be married and married mothers may become separated, divorced or widowed. Thus, cross-sectional data only allow us to explore the relationships between family support policies and wellbeing for different marital statuses at a particular time only and does not explain changes in the *family structure*. Studying these associations using a longitudinal design will enable future research to shed light on the causal relationships between family support policies, family structure and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The present study examined the impact of family friendly policies on the wellbeing of employed single, married, divorced, separated or widowed mothers. The study demonstrated that single mothers were economically more disadvantaged than married or divorced/separated/ or widowed mothers. Differences exist in the perceived availability of family support policies among mothers in three family structures, however no differences were found in their wellbeing. The present study revealed that different interventions of family friendly policies are needed for working mothers with different family structures to improve their wellbeing. The study showed that *chances to reduce work hours* has important implications for the wellbeing of single mothers. On the other hand, *chances to increase work hours* and *working only during school term time* have important implications for the wellbeing of divorced/separated/widowed and married mothers respectively. Furthermore, *flexi-time* is important determinant of the wellbeing of working mothers in the three family structures considered.

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