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"It's Personal:" Does Disclosure of Family Circumstances Influence Organizational Response to Employee's Requests for Flexibility?

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Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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Work-Life Integration Project Research Team

- Julie Rosenzweig & Eileen Brennan, Co-principal Investigators
- Anna Malsch, Project Manager
- Lisa Stewart, Graduate Research Assistant
- Katherine Huffstutter, Project Collaborator
- Kayti Mills, Undergraduate Research Assistant

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Work Life Integration for Families with Children Who Have Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (2004-2009)

- **Phase I: Caregiver Workforce Participation Study**
- **Phase II: Focus groups: Parents & HR Professionals**
- **Phase III: Work-Life Flexibility & Dependent Care Survey**
- **Phase IV: Design & provide training to HR professional**
- **Phase V: Resource development for families & businesses**

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Research Context

- Flexibility in work arrangements is the keystone of work-life integration.
- Need for flexibility often arises from dependent care responsibilities.
- **Employee**: Reasons for requesting flexibility is personal.
- **Human Resource Professional** (HR): Must reconcile employee flexibility request with business goals at multiple levels in the organization (Rosenzweig et al., 2007)
- *What influences HR professional's responses to employees' request for flexible work arrangements (FWA)?*

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Workplace Flexibility

- A group of alternative work options that allow work to be completed at non-typical hours and places (Rau, 2003).
- Conceptualized in two distinct perspectives: *organizational* and *worker* (Hill et al., 2008)
- **Formal:** written into policy and officially approved by HR professionals (Eaton, 2003).
- **Informal**: undocumented and based on supervisory discretion (Eaton, 2003).
- Workplace culture a significant determinant of utilization if/when FWA are available (Eaton, 2003; Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005; Secret, 2000).

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Family-Friendly Workplace Culture

- Family-friendly workplaces acknowledge and respond to employees' lives outside of work through:
  - benefits, policies, and programs designed to enhance employees' work-life integration,
  - workplace cultures that support and promote family-friendly employer practices,
  - workplace relationships with supervisors and co-workers that demonstrate respect for employees' personal responsibilities,
  - work processes, systems, and structures/practices that sustain an emphasis on supporting employees' personal lives and enhancing productivity (Pitt-Catsouphes, 2002).

Employee Personal Information Disclosure Decision

- Employee disclosure decision-making processes about personal circumstances are complex & not well understood.
- Balancing anticipated benefits (e.g., obtaining FWA) and costs (e.g., fear of stigmatization & discrimination) (Rosenzweig & Huffstutter, 2004).
- Need to understand the role of employee's personal information disclosure and HR professionals' decisions to grant FWA.

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HR Professional Decision-Making Response to FWA Requests

- HR professionals act as gatekeepers to supports in their organizations. They attend to the needs of employees and business goals of the organization, shape policies and practices, resolve workplace problems, and manage organizational supports (Society for Human Resource Management, 2000).
- Factors to consider (Rosenzweig et al., 2007)
  - Needs of the individual vs. needs of the work group.
  - Is the business case strong enough?
  - Concerned about knowing too much information.
  - Breaches of confidentiality.
  - Feeding the rumor mill.
  - Employee taking advantage of flexibility.

Prior Research Findings

- Conceptual model: pathways, processes, and outcomes for employees and HR professionals as they navigate the work-life boundaries.
- Relationships between concepts of stigmatization, disclosure, communication competence, negotiation, positive & negative outcomes (Rosenzweig et al., 2007).

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Current Research Questions

- What factors do HR professionals consider when making decisions to approve or deny employees' FWA requests?
- What is the relative influence of **workplace impact** v. employee **personal reasons** on the likelihood FWA approval?
- What are the contextual/organizational factors that contribute to the likelihood of FWA request approval?

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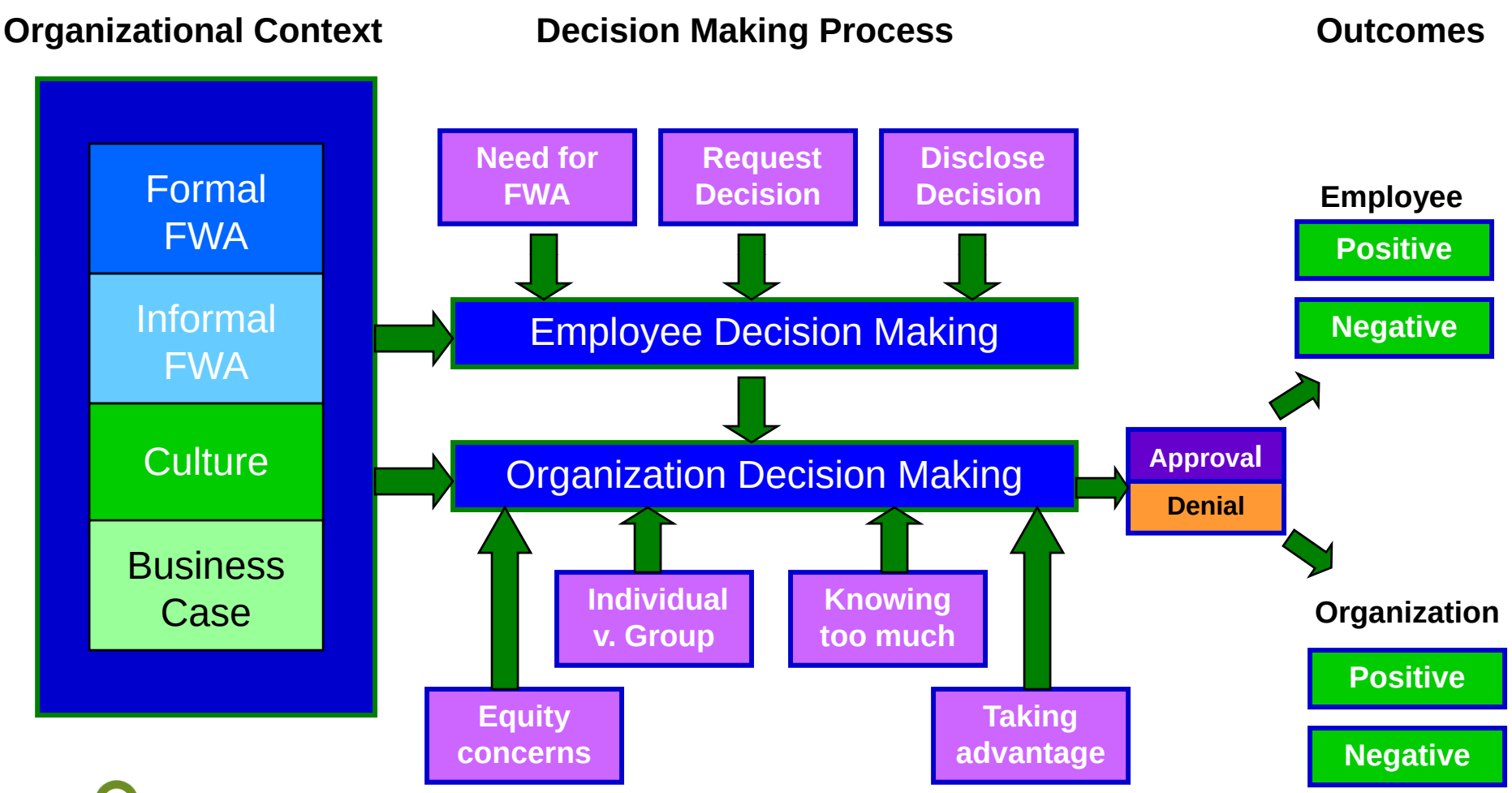
Conceptual Model



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Sample

- WorldatWork/AWLP: international non-profit HR professional association, 25,000 members.
- Random selection of one-fourth of its membership, divides into groups, surveys each group quarterly.
- 4,645 invited via e-mail to participate in the *Work-Life Flexibility and Dependent Care* Survey.
- N=550 respondents, 12% response rate.

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Respondent Demographics

- Sex
  - female (76.9%)
- Age
  - 28-40 (37%)
  - 41-49 years (29%)
  - 50-59 years (30%)
  - 60 or above (4%)
- Education
  - Some college (11%)
  - Bachelor's level (35%)
  - Bachelor's plus (14%)
  - Master's level (38%)
- Employed in the U.S. (87%):
  - Northeastern (18%)
  - Southern (25%),
  - Midwestern (23%),
  - Western (22%) states.
- Employed Internationally (13%)
  - Canada (12%)
  - Puerto Rico, Northern Mariana Islands, & New South Wales (1%)

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Respondent Demographics

- Organization size
  - Less than 100 (10%)
  - 100-999 (32%)
  - 1,000 to 4,999 (26%)
  - 5,000 to 19,999 (13%)
  - 20,000 or more (20%)
- Industry
  - Manufacturing (16%)
  - Finance & Insurance (16%)
  - Professional/technical (12%)
  - Information (6%)
  - healthcare (6%)
  - social assistance (6%)
- Job Responsibilities
  - All HR functions (56%)
  - Compensation & Benefits (15%)
  - Total Rewards (13%)
  - Compensation only (8%)
  - Benefits only (5%)
- Years in the Field
  - 20 or more (20%)
  - 15-19 (20%)
  - 10-14 (33%)
  - 5-9 (20%)
  - Four or less (7%)

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Measures

- Weighting items
- Organizational variables
  - Availability of formal flexible work arrangements
  - Family friendly workplace culture
  - Business case for flexibility
- Outcome variable
  - Likelihood of approving FWA for dependent care reasons

Weighted Decision-Making Process

- Respondents indicated how much weight they place on 9 different variables when evaluating an employee's request for FWA
  - For example:
    - "Length of time needed"
    - "Need for coverage"
    - "Past performance"
    - "Job duties"
- 3 point scale (a little or no weight, some weight, significant weight)
- $\alpha = .86$

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Formal Flexible Work Arrangements

- Respondents indicated which FWAs were available in their organization (11 items)
  - For example:
    - "Flex-time"
    - "Daily flex-time"
    - "Compressed work week"
- Based on Families and Work Institute's index of flexibility
- $\alpha = .64$

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Family Friendly Workplace Culture

- Work-Family Culture Scale (Families and Work Institute)
- 4 items
  - "There is an unwritten rule at my place of employment that you can't take care of family needs on company time"
  - "At my place of employment, employees who put their family or personal needs ahead of their job are not looked at favorably"
- 4 point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree)
- $\alpha = .86$

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Business Case for Flexibility

- Respondents answered the question
  - "From the prospective of your organizational leadership, how strong are the following business reasons for allowing employees to have a flexible work schedules?"
  - 15 business reasons
    - "Improves employee retention"
    - "Decreases employee absenteeism"
    - "Improves employee productivity"
- 5 point scale (very weak to very strong)
- $\alpha = .95$

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Likelihood of Approving FWA for Dependent Care Reasons

- Respondents rated the likelihood that they would approve FWA for 12 reasons related to dependent care
  - For example
    - "Short-term child illness"
    - "Child expelled from school"
    - "Elderly parent needing care"
- 5 point scale (not at all likely to very likely)
- $\alpha = .94$

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Factor Analysis

- Submitted 9 “weighting” items and determined a priori to extract two eigenfactors
  - The first component accounted for 28% of the variance and included 7 reflective of “*workplace impact considerations*”
  - The second component accounted for 17% of the variance and included 2 items reflective of “employee’s *personal reasons considerations*”

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Weighting Composites

- Workplace impact considerations
  - 9 items (α = .66)
    - "Need for coverage"
    - "Impact on customers"
    - "Employee retention"
- Employee personal reasons considerations
  - 2 items (*r* = .42, *p* = .000)
    - "Length of time needed"
    - "Employee reason"
- Relative influence
  - Difference score
    - Workplace impact – Personal considerations

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Relationships Between Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Availability of FWA	--	.10*	.23*	.14**	-.22**	.27**	.02
2. Family Friendly		--	.41**	.02	-.12*	.12*	.38**
3. Business Case			--	.08	-.14**	.17**	.46**
4. Workplace Impact				--	.16**	.30**	-.05
5. Personal Reasons					--	-.89**	-.11*
6. Relative weighting						--	.08
7. Likelihood to grant FWA							--

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Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Organizational Variables & Decision-Making

- More weight given to employee personal reasons was related to fewer FWA, weaker family friendly culture, and less agreement with the business case.

- More weight given to workplace impact was related to the availability of more FWA.

- Relative weighting (more weight on workplace impact than personal reasons) was related to the availability of more FWA, stronger family friendly culture, and more agreement with the business case.

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Approving FWA for Dependent Care

- A greater likelihood to approve FWA was related to stronger family friendly culture and more agreement with the business case
- A greater likelihood to approve FWA was related to less weight placed on employee personal reasons

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Discussion

1. This study reflects a preliminary exploration of variables embedded in the HR review process of employees' requests for FWA.
2. Objective and subjective considerations are inherent in the approval/deny choice that a HR professional must make.
3. Identifying the subjective/objective considerations and the relative weighting on the decision to approve or deny is beneficial to both employee and organization.

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Discussion

4. Organizational variables, e.g., family friendly culture, may be expected to be more strongly related to placing weight on personal reasons.

- Possible explanations for a lack of relationship:
  - A family friendly organization has structures and processes in place that already reflect an acknowledgement of personal circumstances
  - Liability factors and concern about knowing personal information
  - FWA negotiated between employee and supervisor, and may not come to the attention of HR professionals

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Limitations

- Workplace culture measured only by one organizational representative
- Survey sample may not be representative of all HR professionals, organizational sizes, and business sectors
- Cannot infer causation

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Future Directions

- Continued development of model
- Examine possible moderators
- Examine decision making differences between HR professionals and supervisors; and in relation to employee
- More research needed on the role of employee disclosure of personal information

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