



An unsettled bargain? Mothers' perceptions of justice and fairness in paid work

Journal of Sociology

2017, Vol. 53(2) 476–491

© The Author(s) 2017



Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1440783317696361

journals.sagepub.com/home/jos



Mara A. Yerkes

Utrecht University, and The University of Queensland, Australia

Bill Martin

The University of Queensland, Australia

Janeen Baxter

The University of Queensland, Australia

Judy Rose

Griffith University and The University of Queensland, Australia

Abstract

Mothers' return to work following childbirth is widely recognized as a key stage in establishing employment arrangements that disadvantage them in the long run. This article investigates why mothers accept these unequal arrangements using data from a qualitative study of 109 Australian mothers. It focuses on mothers' perceptions of the fairness and justice of the flexibility of arrangements they commonly enter into upon return to work. The article draws attention to the importance of different justice frameworks, distributive, procedural and interactional, in understanding women's acceptance of gender inequality in paid work. The results indicate that most mothers view their workplace arrangements as fair, consistent with a distributive justice framework. Many women also place great importance on interactional justice, particularly in their experiences in negotiating flexibility. The article also identifies differences across employment type with women in jobs with career prospects more likely to invoke interactional justice frameworks than women in jobs with few career prospects.

Keywords

distributive justice, gender inequality, interactional justice, perceptions of fairness, procedural justice, workplace flexibility

Corresponding author:

Mara A. Yerkes, Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University, and the Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland, Australia.

Email: M.A.Yerkes@uu.nl

The employment arrangements mothers enter into when they return to work after a birth often have negative long-term effects on their careers (e.g. Abendroth et al., 2014; Budig and England, 2001). These arrangements are frequently focused around negotiating increased time ‘flexibility’ (Pocock et al., 2012). Such arrangements include part-time work, flexible hours, or taking jobs with reduced out-of-hours demands to allow new mothers to reconcile work and care. The career effects of arrangements like these are an important part of the explanation for women’s continued disadvantage in earnings (Bardasi and Gornick, 2008; Budig and Hodges, 2010) and lower occupational status (Dex et al., 2008). Additional negative career effects include slowed career trajectories, being assigned less interesting or less complex tasks at work, and fewer leadership and management opportunities (Charlesworth and Whittenbury, 2007; Williams et al., 2013). In effect, knowingly or not, women may trade off career prospects for the increased family flexibility that enables them to shoulder the bulk of housework and child care responsibilities. Why do they do this? This article focuses on one possible factor: that mothers see these trade-offs as fair, despite their long-term negative effects.

Our research question asks: how do mothers assess the fairness or justice of the employment arrangements they make when they return to work following a birth? Answering this question allows us to examine whether there is a normative framework guiding mothers’ decisions and if this framework is best explained in terms of *distributive*, *procedural* or *interactional* justice. Distributive justice is based on evaluations of valued outcomes, contributions and entitlements (Thompson, 1991). Procedural justice is the extent to which people believe established procedures, such as rules, policies and procedures, have been implemented fairly (Leventhal, 1980). Interactional justice refers to the way in which individuals are treated at a personal level, and whether they believe they have been dealt with fairly and appropriately (Major, 1993). A considerable body of literature has examined women’s perceptions of the division of labour in the home, arguing that women define unequal arrangements as fair in accordance with a distributive justice framework. Very little research has considered whether a similar normative framework guides their perceptions of their employment arrangements and the bargains they negotiate with their employers.

The focus is on mothers’ return to work following childbirth because this is when many women accept unequal arrangements that have long-term effects on their careers and labour market experiences. Time-related flexibilities in employment are emphasized because they are widely viewed as offering women the most important opportunities to reconcile work and family (e.g. Stier et al., 2012). They are also by far the most common accommodations mothers and their employers make on return to work in Australia (ABS, 2012). Some 84 per cent of Australian mothers work part-time (less than 35 hours per week) on return to work following a birth (ABS, 2012). Part-time work conditions vary in Australia. Permanent and fixed-term part-time jobs generally offer better benefits and protection to mothers whereas casual part-time jobs are generally of lower quality (e.g. Campbell et al., 2009). Women’s part-time earnings are lower than those of equivalent full-time men and women in Australia (Preston and Yu, 2015), and part-time work is associated with slower wage growth than full-time work (Chalmers and Hill, 2007).

Flexibility arrangements and perceptions of justice

There is considerable complexity and variability in the employment patterns covered by the notion of flexible work arrangements. Some flexibility is legislated by 'right to request' provisions (Hegewisch, 2009; OECD, 2010). While Australia introduced right to request legislation in 2010, awareness among women is low (Pocock et al., 2012) and a lack of enforcement capacity and restrictions on who is entitled to this right limits its use in helping mothers negotiate flexibility in the workplace. While flexibility may also be standardized through workplace employment contracts and collective agreements, it often involves informal arrangements (Troup and Rose, 2012) or variations to formal arrangements that take account of individual circumstances (e.g. Kossek and Lee, 2008). A key question is what women view as equitable in these arrangements, how they come to this view, and how they assess whether they have been treated fairly when they attempt to negotiate flexible work arrangements.

The large organizational justice literature usefully distinguishes different frameworks within which organization members assess the justice of outcomes and processes (e.g. Sheppard et al., 1993; Jepsen and Rodwell, 2012). This literature informs the current article by identifying two possible frameworks – procedural and interactional perceptions of justice – which may guide mothers' interpretations of the fairness of their return-to-work arrangements. Additionally, distributive justice has been used effectively to explain women's perceptions of the fairness of the gender division of *household* labour (Baxter, 2000; Thompson, 1991). This article also examines whether this framework may be applied to *paid employment* arrangements, albeit with some modification. The article thus focuses on distributive, procedural and interactional justice.

Mothers' perceptions of the justice of flexibility arrangements may vary by their employment arrangements and career prospects. Occupational gender segregation and motherhood are widely recognized as central factors in women's labour market disadvantage (Hook and Pettit, 2015), with each playing an independent role (England, 2005). The relationship between motherhood and occupational segregation varies not only by country but also by educational level (Hook and Pettit, 2015). In the US, occupational segregation has declined much more among university- (college-) educated women than among those without university degrees 'because professional and managerial jobs have integrated more than clerical or blue-collar jobs' (England, 2005: 267). There are strong indications of a similar pattern in Australia (Rawstron, 2012). As a result, among women without degrees, the negative labour market effects correlated with motherhood and the use of employment flexibility arrangements may not be immediately visible to women. In contrast, for university-educated women, who are likely to be in more gender integrated occupations where significant career progression is more likely, the long-term career effects of taking up flexible work options after the birth of a child are likely much more transparent. How perceptions of justice might vary between mothers with and without university degrees is considered in order to take account of these important differences in mothers' employment contexts and outlooks. The former are much more likely to be in relatively gender integrated occupations with real prospects for career advancement than the latter.

Justice frameworks

Beginning with distributive justice, both *outcome values* and *comparison referents* (Thompson, 1991) may play an important role in understanding mothers' perceptions of fairness when negotiating flexibility upon return to work. Families' highly gendered organization of mothers' and partners' roles in work and family are likely to structure mothers' *outcome values* – what they consider and value when they assess the fairness of flexible work arrangements (Thompson, 1991). Women may value paid work arrangements that make it easiest for them to fulfil the responsibilities they see themselves having as mothers, and their perceptions of the best care arrangements for their children, even if those work arrangements disadvantage them in employment or careers. This would parallel the way many women place achieving such values above an egalitarian division of *household* labour (Thompson, 1991). These highly gendered expectations, as well as the variation in mothers' work and care preferences (e.g. Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007), may lead mothers to accept arrangements that disadvantage them in the long run (Abendroth et al., 2014) and to see arrangements that are not equal as fair.

Outcome values, however, may vary depending on mothers' employment context. Women without degrees, in lower paid, female-dominated occupations (e.g. administrative, sales or caring), may already see themselves as having limited promotion prospects and may view their labour market engagement pragmatically, valuing flexible arrangements and other convenience aspects of employment (e.g. location). For them, the trade-offs may already be built into their occupational pathways (Hook and Pettit, 2015). In contrast, mothers with degrees, who are often in positions with strong upward career trajectories and higher earning capacity, may value arrangements that preserve their longer term employment prospects, feel more ambivalent about any trade-offs necessary to achieve flexibility, and be less likely to see trade-offs and loss of career prospects as fair.

Second, *comparison referents* may be important (Thompson, 1991). Who do mothers compare themselves with, and how do they make these comparisons? Social justice research suggests the choice of comparison referents is complex and gendered (Tyler et al., 1997). Variation in employment may also be important in producing differences in comparison referents. For example, women without degrees are likely to be in jobs and workplaces where there are many women and few men in similar positions, and where the obvious comparators are similar women rather than men. For university graduates, who are much more likely to be in integrated or even male-dominated occupations and workplaces, choosing comparators in the workplace may be more complex. Here, women might make between-gender comparisons, or they may turn to their friendship and contact networks, or they may simply find it difficult to make comparisons.

Independent of the perceived fairness of outcomes (i.e. *distributive* justice), aspects of the *process* through which outcomes are achieved may be important in mothers' assessment of their fairness. *Procedural* justice may be seen to be violated if the standard procedural norms associated with justice in organizations, such as consistency in the application of procedures, lack of bias, and the use of accurate information (Leventhal, 1980), are not followed. If arrangements are arrived at without procedural justice, mothers may see them as unfair. However, the question of procedural justice will likely only

be significant where procedures for negotiating flexible employment arrangements are well established, particularly through formal organizational policies.

Interactional justice – the sense of being treated with respect, honesty, even politeness – has been shown to matter in assessments of the fairness of household divisions of labour (Major, 1993) as well as in myriad organizational contexts (e.g. Cropanzana et al., 2007). Thus, whether women feel they are treated respectfully, honestly and with dignity by their supervisors and managers, and whether their concerns are treated as legitimate and listened to, may matter, particularly if distributive norms are absent. As mothers negotiate flexible work arrangements, their sense of interactional justice may depend greatly on whether managers are sensitive to the challenges they face in reconciling work and domestic responsibilities and commitments, and whether managers treat these challenges as legitimate matters in making workplace arrangements (Daverth et al., 2015).

Data and methods

This article uses data from an Australian study designed to establish an understanding of recent mothers' experience of work and family before the introduction of Australia's first national paid parental leave scheme (Martin et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted between December 2010 and February 2011 with 109 mothers who had babies aged between 11 and 15 months. The sample included both first-time mothers (58 per cent) and those with at least one other child (42 per cent). The majority of mothers were recruited from major metropolitan areas in and around Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney, Darwin and regional New South Wales. Most (74) were recruited via a large national representative survey (Martin et al., 2012). At the time of the interview, their average age was 33 years old and ranged from 19 to 46. Fifteen per cent of interviewed mothers were Indigenous Australians and 25 per cent were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A large majority of mothers were partnered at the time of the interview (87 per cent) and most were legally married (70 per cent). Five per cent of the mothers were on a fixed-term contract and 24 per cent were employed on a casual basis. More than half of the mothers had university degrees (57 per cent), about one-third (29 per cent) had some other post-high school vocational qualification, while most of the remaining 15 per cent had completed high school. At the time of interview, most mothers (75 per cent) had returned to paid work.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed for analysis, and thematically coded using NVivo, following a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Interviews sought mothers' accounts of their experiences returning to work following childbirth. Interviewees were not explicitly asked about their views of fairness. Instead, accounts of fairness emerged as inductive themes as mothers explained their workplace arrangements and experiences. Our data therefore reflect how mothers' sense of the justice of flexibility arrangements is embedded in their discourse around returning to work following childbirth. Using the three themes of distributive, procedural and interactive justice as a guide, three of the authors returned to the interview data to look for cross-cutting patterns between mothers' accounts of fairness, and individual and organizational characteristics, such as education level, age, number of children, sector and size of the

organization. These matrices were further discussed by all authors and related to the literature on justice and gendered theoretical frameworks.

What's fair on return to work?

For some mothers in our sample, return-to-work arrangements were not matters of doubt or question. Any flexibility measures to help support combining work with family appeared to be 'settled' and unambiguous, usually arranged through formal human resource policies or collectively bargained provisions. In these cases, mothers knew what arrangements were possible and open to them, and accepted them as an aspect of their employment relationship. They voiced no concerns that the arrangements were unfair in any sense, or even that fairness was a matter of question or debate. Some mothers indicated they had chosen their jobs before the birth precisely because they offered settled flexibility arrangements of this kind. One interviewee, who was employed permanently by a large state bureaucracy doing mid-level clerical work, succinctly described this kind of situation:

I purposely chose government work so that I would have that flexibility.... If I need to leave, if he's sick, I can just go. There's never any question about that. (004, university degree, 3-year-old and baby)

Mothers for whom flexibility arrangements were settled through formal HR policies of these kinds, generally worked in public sector positions in large organizations and in lower or middle level clerical positions, that are generally viewed as women's occupations (e.g. receptionists or bookkeepers), requiring no more than high school or lower level vocational education. Their opportunities for significant career advancement through promotion were limited, even before giving birth. As expected, occupational sex segregation appeared to have naturalized any gender or motherhood penalties they accrued.

Overall, however, the vast majority of mothers we interviewed did not describe 'settled' arrangements of this kind. Instead, they talked about 'unsettled' arrangements, in which what was fair was far less clear-cut, and not bound by shared perceptions on the part of mothers and their supervisors, managers or employers. In these situations, mothers often talked about their return to work in terms that revealed their perceptions of the fairness of arrangements, and showed how they attempted to negotiate fair forms of flexibility.

Distributive justice – the bargain over flexibility

Overwhelmingly, mothers in our interviews referred to aspects of employment flexibility as central to their decisions and arrangements on returning to work. Their descriptions and assessments of these arrangements made it clear that flexibility is the key 'outcome value' for most women in their thinking about fair employment arrangements. They talked about a range of aspects of flexibility, though the ability to negotiate part-time work on the days and at the times they wanted was most frequently mentioned and

valued. Other forms of flexibility included the ability to take time off or rearrange work schedules at short notice when care demands arose unexpectedly (e.g. sick children, partner's work arrangements changing).

These mothers' assessment of the fairness of arrangements often focused around what was traded off to achieve flexibility. Mothers with university degrees, who were in occupations where career pathways exist, were often aware of the long-term consequences of flexible work arrangements and generally held the view that it was fair for part-time work to reduce career prospects or pay. This was especially so for mothers in occupations that are male dominated or mixed (such as accounting or general management). Some mothers accepted as fair having to work longer hours than they preferred to avoid the penalties of part-time work. Describing her 'choice' of working four days per week on returning to work, an accountant (local council, permanent contract) said:

Yeah it was my choice. I think really strictly three days would have been perfect but also if I did three days it would mean taking a step back work-wise and not doing so much what I'm doing. I didn't really want to do that. [...] I knew [...] that it was going to be a sacrifice [...] but at the same time it was a sacrifice I was happy to make and I also knew that it would hold me in good stead in the future as well. (008, university degree, 3-year-old and baby)

However, most women accepted a bargain in which their career prospects were reduced, though not without some wistfulness. One mother, who had a permanent job writing tender bids for a small/medium private company, described what she had given up by working three days per week:

I'm not getting the kind of work that was as demanding or as challenging because I can only give three days a week to it [...] there's an element of jealousy [of] me where I'm kind of envious that I'm not getting the important stuff to work on. Because I feel like the people that came in more recently are getting the more important stuff and I'm not. But I'm just happy that I've still got a job, and that I can pick her up when I need to and it's not impacting my work. [...] I couldn't ask for anything better. [...] You just can't have it all. [...] I want to have the kids. I want to have the job. I want to have all of that. It just doesn't really work like that. It's only for a few years and then if I want to go back to [full-time] work I can then. (027, university degree, one baby)

A third bargain that some women accepted was to work in occupations or sectors that were female dominated, and offered more flexible employment. One mother accepted work in a lower paying, not-for-profit organization:

I work in the organization I work with because they have other things that are quite [...] family friendly [...] they don't pay very well. There's a lot of other stuff that goes on but it's like a trade-off. (041, university degree, project coordinator, permanent contract, small/medium organization, one baby)

In relation to 'comparison referents', comparisons with other women were often central to mothers' assessments of the fairness of the trade-off for flexibility. These highly gendered comparisons also reflect the importance of job context. One rather extreme case

illustrates how a lack of comparable others in the workplace can shape mothers' views of the sacrifices it is appropriate for them to make. A mother working in the finance sector was able to work two days a week when she returned to work after she had her first child.

At that time, working part-time, especially in the investment banking industry even in HR, was unheard of, and if people worked part-time it would typically be four days, three minimum. [...] I sort of felt like I had to make inroads on my days off so I could hit the ground running [...] that initial period I wanted to prove myself. I wanted to [...] have a bit of an impact [...] so I went the extra mile. (032, HR professional, vocational qualification, large private firm, permanent contract, 6-year-old and baby)

Women in workplaces with many other mothers expected to get the same deals as others, irrespective of the kind of job they held. Yet they also expected that, in general, workplaces would be flexible. On the rare occasions when the expectations of women in these workplaces were not met, they saw it as self-evidently unfair. One mother in a workplace where there were a number of others who became pregnant, clearly thought it was inappropriate for her (female) manager to resist a request for flexibility because the manager herself had not received such flexibility:

I asked for unpaid leave and I was met with a little bit of resistance. [...] Her comment to me was: 'Well, I did my Masters with my 2-year-old on my knee and I was in the first trimester.' [...] I remember thinking, 'Well that's not fair that you had to do that; no one else should have to do that.' (029, university degree, TESOL teacher, public sector, fixed-term contract, one baby)

Gendered roles and expectations

Mothers' perceptions of fairness are clearly embedded in gender-specific expectations of flexibility. Among mothers who were conscious of the terms of their own flexibility bargain, most often those with university degrees, many commented on the lack of flexibility in their partner's employment arrangements. They often referred to the expectation that full-time workers like their partners could work longer and more variable hours than themselves, especially when building a career. The value of flexibility to these mothers was significantly increased by their partners' lack of it. One mother who greatly valued the flexibility her current employer (a credit card company) gave her, described the company in glowing terms:

At the moment, I'm doing a couple of days in the office and a couple of days at home. [Company] are really supportive and they're so flexible. I can duck out, especially if I'm here all day, duck out during my lunch break and go and do a grocery shop.

When asked whether her husband, a hotel manager, could take carer's leave when their child was ill, she said:

He does [get carer's leave] but [...] he's responsible; he's got so much pressure on him. It's not like he can just – you go on holidays and he's on his BlackBerry. [...] If something happens at

the hotel, he's ultimately responsible and he's got people he's got to report to. (050, university degree, sales and marketing worker, large private organization, permanent contract, one baby)

Though this mother expressed some dissatisfaction with the situation, she also seemed to accept the inflexibility of her partner's job as a fact of life, and not a particularly unfair one.

In sum, among mothers in feminine-typed occupations with limited promotion paths, gender assumptions about career expectations and commitment to work and family were usually unquestioned. For these women, the question of fairness arose only when more traditional gender norms were *not* evident in the workplace.

Unsettled bargains – the absence of distributive norms

Although more highly educated mothers in jobs with real promotion prospects, generally accepted that some form of trade-off for flexible work arrangements was fair, the terms of a fair bargain were much less securely settled. The depth of uncertainty around these arrangements, and the associated negotiation of what is fair, is illustrated by one mother in a position with a clear path for career advancement. She accepted a part-time job involving a loss of career prospects, but with the same pay as before she took leave:

They wouldn't let me go back to my Team Coordinator position, which was a bit of a shock to me. But [...] my manager was good in that she managed to negotiate with our HR section to get me at least the same pay and sort of create a new position for me. (031, vocational qualification, administration work, local council, permanent contract, one baby)

The wide variability in what was considered fair in flexibility arrangements and the ambiguity and unsettled nature of many of these arrangements, is illustrated by a mother who worked in a male-dominated firm. She recognized that many women do not share her views about what employers should provide mothers:

I never expected my firm to pay for me to have a child. I know women all think differently but I thought it was my decision to have a child and I didn't expect them to pay, so I wasn't disappointed that I didn't have [paid] maternity leave. [...] I think all they should do is leave our jobs open for us and be supportive of us when we come back. (046, degree, accountant, small/medium organization, permanent contract, one baby)

Procedural justice – the unspoken expectation

Procedural justice – the extent to which people believe established procedures have been implemented fairly – was generally only mentioned by our interviewees when appropriate procedures were seen to have been violated. For example, one mother working permanently as a management accountant for a large, public sector utility told of a boss who:

doesn't see how the role could possibly have been done on a part-time basis, and basically ruled the possibility of doing either part-time work or job-share work or working partly from

home, even though our HR policy states very explicitly that those things will be considered. (062, university degree, one baby)

Examples such as this were very rare, however, and few mothers referred to procedural justice violations. It seems likely that many mothers do not see themselves as experiencing breaches of procedural justice in negotiating employment arrangements on their return to work, although the reasons for this may vary across employers. Large organizations (which include all public sector organizations, large companies and non-profit employers) generally have quite well established and accepted protocols and procedures for mothers to negotiate employment arrangements when they return to work. In these cases, the procedures to determine arrangements are known to mothers, and mothers are likely to focus on the distributive justice of the outcome (e.g. being able to reduce work hours). Only gross violations of these procedures will raise procedural justice issues.¹

Interactional justice – personalized workplace relationships

When fairness in distributive and procedural outcomes is not settled in norms and expectations, one might anticipate that interactional justice will be especially important with regard to the fairness of outcomes. Mothers with university degrees, however, who were generally in jobs with promotion prospects, referred to interactional justice in different ways than mothers without degrees, who were generally in female-typed jobs with limited career paths. The more educated mothers used an interactional justice framework in describing the development and operation of their employment arrangements on their return to work. Typically, this took the form of emphasizing how ‘good’ or ‘fair’ their bosses or employers had been in assisting them in returning to work or managing work and family responsibilities.² A high school teacher described her experiences:

They’ve been really good. I think occasionally I’ve had to ring in sick to say I can’t come in because he’s got conjunctivitis or whatever, and I’ve said, ‘Do I need a doctor’s certificate?’ They’ve said, ‘No that’s fine, don’t worry.’ (021, university degree, small/medium private organization, permanent contract, one baby)

A nurse who worked in a large, public hospital described the interactions with her boss involved in negotiating a possible change in the days she worked:

They’ve been really good actually. [...] I asked if I could do [...] eight till four, which means then I can [...] get home and be back by about a quarter to five and [...] she said yes to that, so that was really good. [...] So she’s very supportive and understanding. (053, university degree, permanent contract, one baby)

Several mothers emphasized that their expectation of interactional justice required reciprocity – if they wanted managers to be honest and treat them with respect, they needed to do the same with the managers. One mother who had chosen not to return to work explained her decision in terms of her inability to be honest with an employer if she did try to return:

But then there's also the issue for me [...] that we want to have another child, and I don't want to go and get a job somewhere and in six months' time say, 'I'm pregnant.' I don't think that's a fair way to do it. (109, vocational qualification, former customer service officer, small/medium organization, casual contract, one baby)

For mothers without degrees, interactional justice seemed to be important in their assessments of the fairness of their treatment when they needed time for childcare problems or when they were asked to do additional work or change their shift arrangements. They were usually in female-typed jobs with limited career prospects, where the terms of the flexibility bargain were generally already built into their jobs through occupational sex segregation.

In sum, the data show that a distributive justice framework alone is insufficient for explaining women's perceptions of the fairness of flexible work arrangements. Interactional justice is integral to understanding women's judgements about unequal arrangements in paid employment. Across different kinds of jobs and employment, women consistently used an interactional justice framework when talking about the fairness of flexible arrangements upon returning to work.

Conclusion and discussion

This article examines the largely neglected issue of how mothers assess the fairness of time-related flexible employment arrangements that often disadvantage them in the long-term. Its aim is to contribute to understanding the persistence of employment arrangements that produce long-term disadvantage for women, especially following the birth of a child. Based on a diverse sample of 109 mothers, the data show few mothers perceive the flexibility arrangements they enter into upon return to work as manifestly *unfair*, despite the limited normative grounding of the flexibility bargains they enter. This basic finding adds to current understandings of why mothers or other workers agree to flexibility arrangements that disadvantage them in the long term. There is also strong evidence of the need to pay attention to how people use different justice frames (distributive, procedural and interactional justice) to form judgements about the fairness of time-flexible working arrangements. Moreover, our research re-emphasizes the importance of informal relationships and arrangements in understanding how organizations negotiate mothers' flexibility needs and work-family tensions, even when formal employment policies provide clear guidance and options.

The data show that mothers make practical judgements about many aspects of the fairness of their return to work. Mothers with university degrees, usually employed in relatively gender-integrated occupations with real promotion prospects, almost exclusively use a distributive justice framework. Yet understanding their discourses in relation to interactional justice is also central to explaining their common view that arrangements are fair. For mothers without university education and in female-typed occupations with limited career prospects, the fairness of distributive outcomes was rarely in question. These mothers typically worked in occupations where part-time work following a birth was widely expected. The main issue was whether they could organize a work pattern that would fit with their family commitments and childcare arrangements. Structurally,

we suggest this pattern arises largely because the career and labour market penalties for motherhood are already built into the employment terms of these female-typed occupations, since motherhood, career breaks and part-time work are the norm for those who work in them.

Two possible theoretical implications of our findings relate to the interaction between perceived fairness and educational level. First, among mothers with university degrees, who were usually in jobs with real career prospects and less gender segregation, flexibility was generally seen to be an acceptable trade-off for possible long-term career disadvantage. In other words, these mothers usually saw reduced career prospects as a just cost for their ability to reconcile work and care needs. One key finding is that the terms of employment bargains surrounding flexibility among women with university degrees are often far from settled. For these women, the career costs of accepting flexible arrangements are not assumed to be built into the general employment conditions of their jobs, so questions of distributive justice can easily come to the fore. This more complex understanding of distributive justice in relation to both gender and educational levels should be incorporated into discussions on organizational justice, particularly as distributive norms of what is fair are often absent from the workplace. When mothers see others around them who are not mothers and in similar jobs, it is hard to escape questions of what is fair. Most mothers must answer these questions by accepting the flexibility arrangements they are offered as fair, or agreeing to them resentfully, or refusing them because they see them as unjust.

Second, our research shows that mothers' perceptions of the *process* of achieving an arrangement are also central to their sense of fairness. While formal procedural justice mattered, it appeared to be generally observed. Far more significantly though, mothers very frequently invoked an *interactional* justice framework in explaining why they saw arrangements as fair. This was true for mothers in all jobs, but especially for university-educated mothers, who often referred to being treated with consideration and respect by their bosses. How they were treated in bargaining flexibility arrangements was as important as the arrangement itself in evaluating whether or not they were just. Across the occupational spectrum, the terms mothers use also often connote a sense that their boss or manager is bestowing a favour rather than a right by treating them with interactional justice. Although a large literature emphasizes the importance of procedural and interactional justice in workplace outcomes (e.g. Cohen-Charesh and Spector, 2001; Daverth et al., 2015), a reliance on interactional justice for receiving the discretion and favour of superordinates has not generally been identified. It is especially important when the outcome is an acceptance of arrangements that lead to long-term disadvantage for women.

While our study has produced important findings, we are also aware of a number of limitations. Our single-country study raises a number of questions. For example, is the unsettled bargain related to Australia's relatively liberal, deregulated market economy? We cannot discount the possibility that flexibility bargains are more settled in countries with greater labour market coordination, such as Germany or the Netherlands. Additionally, having drawn attention to the importance of variation in job context for understanding mothers' perceptions of fairness, the gendered nature of organizations and the significant gendering of expectations in the workplace (e.g. Daverth et al., 2015) deserve further attention.

Nevertheless our findings have important theoretical and policy implications as this is one of the few studies to examine perceptions of fairness in the workplace from a gender perspective. One potential policy implication relates to the comparison referents used by mothers in these jobs, which are particularly important in these ambiguities around fairness. These women look to other mothers, especially those in their workplaces, to make the comparisons they need to assess fairness. This is not to say they regard the experiences of other mothers as inherently fair comparison points; sometimes a comparison calibrates fairness by judging a mother's treatment against another experience she regards as unfair. Mothers do not, however, refer to their male partners' employment arrangements or those of other men when assessing the terms of the flexibility bargain. Indeed, the dominant outcome value in mothers' judgement of distributive justice – gaining the time and flexibility they want so that they can reconcile caring commitments with paid work – is highly gendered. Mothers rarely see flexibility as a value that their male partners can or should aspire to and, interestingly, we find no variations in these views by age. Perhaps this is one reason why the flexibility bargain is rarely seen as central to gender inequality at work, whereas pay injustice, an area where women appear much more likely to compare themselves with men (Liebig et al., 2012), is much more central to women's views about workplace gender equity. To improve gender equity in the workplace, advocacy groups and organizations could work to develop best practices in Australian workplaces, highlighting cases where mothers reconcile work and care without sacrificing pay or long-term career prospects. Such workplace practices would help to strengthen policy efforts aimed at improving gender relations in work and family in Australia, such as the introduction of paid parental leave and pay for fathers and partners. These policies are an important step towards improving persistent gendered expectations around work and family, but need to be strengthened with similar efforts in the workplace to produce long-term change.

Acknowledgements

The data presented in this paper were collected as part of an evaluation of the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave Scheme, funded by the Department of Social Services. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Australian Government. The authors would like to thank our colleagues on the Paid Parental Leave project for any assistance in collecting and coding the data, in particular Ning Xiang for her assistance with the data for this article. We are also grateful to colleagues at Utrecht University for detailed comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

Dedication

We dedicate this paper to Bill Martin, our much missed friend and colleague.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The data presented in this article were collected as part of an evaluation of the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave Scheme, funded by the Department of Social Services.

Notes

1. In fact, one mother described exactly this kind of issue when she was returning to work in a police force. She described superiors who did not follow the procedures that existed for accommodating her when she returned to work, and who then blamed her for difficulties (059, vocational qualification, police officer, permanent contract, 3-year-old and baby).
2. Overall, strikingly few mothers referred to 'bad' bosses or employers. In the two cases where this was evident, mothers had recognized it during their pregnancy and found a new job without these problems when they returned to work.

References

- Abendroth, A.-K., M. Huffman and J. Treas (2014) 'The Parity Penalty in Life Course Perspective: Motherhood and Occupational Status in 13 European Countries', *American Sociological Review* 79(5): 993–1014.
- ABS (2012) 'Pregnancy and Employment Transitions', Cat. No. 4913.0, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Bardasi, E. and J.C. Gornick (2008) 'Working for Less? Women's Part-time Wage Penalties across Countries', *Feminist Economics* 14(1): 37–72.
- Baxter, J. (2000) 'The Joys and Justice of Housework', *Sociology*, 34(4): 609–31.
- Budig, M.J. and P. England (2001) 'The Wage Penalty for Motherhood', *American Sociological Review* 66(2): 204–25.
- Budig, M.J. and M.J. Hodges (2010) 'Differences in the Disadvantage: Variation in the Motherhood Penalty across White Women's Earnings Distribution', *American Sociological Review* 75(5): 705–28.
- Campbell, I., G. Whitehouse and J. Baxter (2009) 'Australia: Casual Employment, Part-time Employment and the Resilience of the Male-breadwinner Model', pp. 60–75 in L.F. Vosko, M. Macdonald and I. Campbell (eds) *Gender and the Contours of Precarious Employment*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chalmers, J. and T. Hill (2007) 'Marginalising Women in the Labour Market: "Wage Scarring" Effects of Part-time Work', *Australian Bulletin of Labour* 33(2): 180–201.
- Charlesworth, S. and K. Whittenbury (2007) 'Part-time and Part Committed? The Cultural Challenges of Part-time Work in Policing', *Journal of Industrial Relations* 23(1): 31–47.
- Cohen-Charash, Y. and P.E. Spector (2001) 'The Role of Justice in Organizations: A Meta-analysis', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 86(2): 278–321.
- Cropanzana, R., D.E. Bowen and S.W. Gilliland (2007) 'The Management of Organizational Justice', *Academy of Management Perspectives* 21(4): 34–48.
- Daverth, G., C. Cassell and P. Hyde (2015) 'The Subjectivity of Fairness: Managerial Discretion and Work–Life Balance', *Gender, Work & Organization* 23(2): 89–107.
- Dex, S., K. Ward and H. Joshi (2008) 'Changes in Women's Occupations and Occupational Mobility over 25 Years', in J. Scott, S. Dex and H. Joshi (eds) *Women and Employment: Changing Lives and New Challenges*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- England, P. (2005) 'Gender Inequality in Labor Markets: The Role of Motherhood and Segregation', *Social Politics* 12(2): 264–88.
- Glaser, B.G. and A.L. Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hegewisch, A. (2009) *Flexible Working Policies: A Comparative Review*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research/Equality and Human Rights Commission.
- Hook, J.L. and B. Pettit (2015) 'Reproducing Occupational Inequality: Motherhood and Occupational Segregation', *Social Politics* 23(3): 329–62.

- Jepsen, D.M. and J. Rodwell (2012) 'Female Perceptions of Organizational Justice', *Gender, Work and Organization* 19(6): 723–40.
- Kangas, O. and T. Rostgaard (2007) 'Preferences or Institutions? Work–Family Life Opportunities in Seven European Countries', *Journal of European Social Policy* 17(3): 240–56.
- Kossek, E.E. and M.D. Lee (2008) 'Implementing a Reduced-workload Arrangement to Retain High Talent: A Case Study', *The Psychologist-Manager Journal* 11: 1–16.
- Leventhal, G.S. (1980) 'What Should Be Done with Equity Theory? New Approaches to the Study of Fairness in Social Relationships', pp. 27–55 in K.J. Gergen, M.S. Greenberg and R.H. Willis (eds) *Social Exchange: Advances in Theory and Research*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Liebig, S., C. Sauer and J. Schupp (2012) 'The Justice of Earnings in Dual-earner Households', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 30(2): 219–32.
- Major, B. (1993) 'Gender, Entitlement, and the Distribution of Family Labor', *Journal of Social Issues* 49(3): 141–59.
- Martin, B., B. Hewitt, M. Baird, J. Baxter, A. Heron, G. Whitehouse, et al. (2012) *Paid Parental Leave Evaluation: Phase 1. Occasional Paper 44*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.
- OECD (2010) *Moving Beyond the Jobs Crisis*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Pocock, B., N. Skinner and P. Williams (2012) *Time Bomb: Work, Rest and Play in Australia Today*. Sydney: NewSouth.
- Preston, A. and S. Yu (2015) 'Is There a Part-time/Full-time Pay Differential in Australia?', *Journal of Industrial Relations* 57(1): 24–47.
- Rawstron, K. (2012) 'Diverging Pathways: Occupational Sex Segregation, Australia and the OECD', proceedings The Australian Sociological Association Annual Conference 2012: Emerging and Enduring Inequalities.
- Sheppard, B.H., R.J. Lewicki and J.W. Minton (1993) *Organizational Justice: The Search for Fairness in the Workplace*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Stier, H., N. Lewin-Epstein and M. Braun (2012) 'Work–Family Conflict in Comparative Perspective: The Role of Social Policies', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 30(3): 265–79.
- Thompson, L. (1991) 'Family Work: Women's Sense of Fairness', *Journal of Family Issues* 12(2): 181–96.
- Troup, C. and J. Rose (2012) 'Working from Home: Do Formal or Informal Telework Arrangements Provide Better Work–Family Outcomes?' *Community, Work & Family* 15(4): 471–86.
- Tyler, T.R., R.J. Boeckmann, H.J. Smith and Y.J. Huo (1997) *Social Justice in a Diverse Society*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Williams, J.C., M. Blair-Loy and J.L. Berdahl (2013) 'Cultural Schemas, Social Class, and the Flexibility Stigma', *Journal of Social Issues* 69(2): 209–34.

Author biographies

Mara A. Yerkes is Assistant Professor in Interdisciplinary Social Science at Utrecht University and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR), University of Queensland. Her research interests include work, care and family, gender, comparative welfare states, industrial relations, social inequality and women's employment.

Bill Martin was Professor of Sociology and Program Leader (Employment and Education) in the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR), University of Queensland from 2009 to 2016. His research interests included the sociology of work and employment, work and family, work quality, skills utilization, retirement pathways and institutions, labour markets and inequality.

Janeen Baxter is Professor of Sociology and Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course in the Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland. Janeen has research interests in inequality, family, gender and the life course, and has published widely in these areas. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

Judy Rose works at Griffith University in the School of Education and Professional Studies. She is the co-convenor of the Families & Relationships Thematic Group for The Australian Sociological Association. Her research interests include education, inequality, gender, work and family.