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DIVERSITY IN CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE NEEDS: EMPLOYEE PROBLEMS, PREFERENCES, AND WORK- RELATED OUTCOMES

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This research examines employee background variables moderating problems with child care arrangements and variance in work-related attitudes and behaviors. Gender, household employment configuration, dependents' care profile, managerial status, and use of familial care arrangements help explain variance in child care problems, attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities, and the absence behavior of working parents in a public utility. The relationship between employee backgrounds and preferences for child care assistance is also examined. The study demonstrates that employees' child care needs are diverse, multi-faceted, and changing. It is suggested that organizations consider developing several packages of child care assistance policies that can be responsive to changes in the mix of employees' assistance needs and their work forces' demographics over time.

Although a growing number of U.S. employers (over 4,000 in 1989) provide some form of child care support to their employees, few firms conduct a needs assessment prior to adopting programs (Friedman, 1988; The Conference Board, 1989). As a consequence, there is limited understanding of the conditions related to variation in child care needs across diverse employee groups. This gap can be attributed partly to the fact that the dramatic increase in single parent and dual-career employees is a relatively new phenomenon. As Magid (1983) contends, companies have historically viewed child care as a "women's issue," and not as a mainstream employee relations matter. Also, the literature on

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work/family conflict has traditionally focused on individual psychological variables associated with an employed person's (often female) emotional state or well-being (cf. Gutek, Repetti, & Silver, 1988; Kopelman, Greenhaus, & Connolly, 1983; Wiley, 1987), and only recently begun to also consider the influence of difficulties in managing child care arrangements jointly with work responsibilities on employees, in general.

Research suggests that work/family conflict can have a negative influence on employee attitudes, including stress at work (Gutek et al., 1988), role conflict/overload (Pietromonaco, Manis & Frohardt-Lane, 1986), and job satisfaction and commitment (Burud, Aschbacher, & McCroskey, 1984; Magid, 1983; Sexton, 1977), and also influences behaviors such as absenteeism (Brooke & Price, 1989), tardiness (Burud et al., 1984; Magid, 1983), and turnover (Curry, Wakefield, Prince, Mueller, & McCloskey, 1985; Hock, Christman, & Hock, 1980). Recent attention to a shortage in the supply of high quality care (cf. Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989) has fostered a few studies indicating that parents who experience problems finding and maintaining child care or are dissatisfied with their care arrangements are likely to encounter work-role conflict and stress (Goff & Mount, 1989; Love, Galinsky & Hughes, 1987). Much remains to be understood, however, regarding the relationship between care arrangements and work responsibilities, and also the specific employer actions that should be taken to address the needs of an increasingly diverse work force.

Research Focus and Hypotheses

This research will demonstrate that employees' child care needs are varied and multi-faceted, even within a single firm, and will highlight the complexity of the child care assistance issue. The purpose of this study is to investigate the degree to which employee backgrounds are related to child care problems and work-related attitudes and behaviors. Figure 1, A Map of the Child Care Assistance Territory, shows a framework of the key variables of interest. Employee background variables are believed to moderate problems with child care arrangements, which are negatively related to employees' attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities. Work behaviors such as absenteeism and other productivity measures are also negatively affected. In his review, Miller (1984) points out that much improvement is needed in demonstrating the positive link between employer-sponsored child care and work outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to delineate some of the major influences on child care problems and examine linkages to employee attitudes and absences.

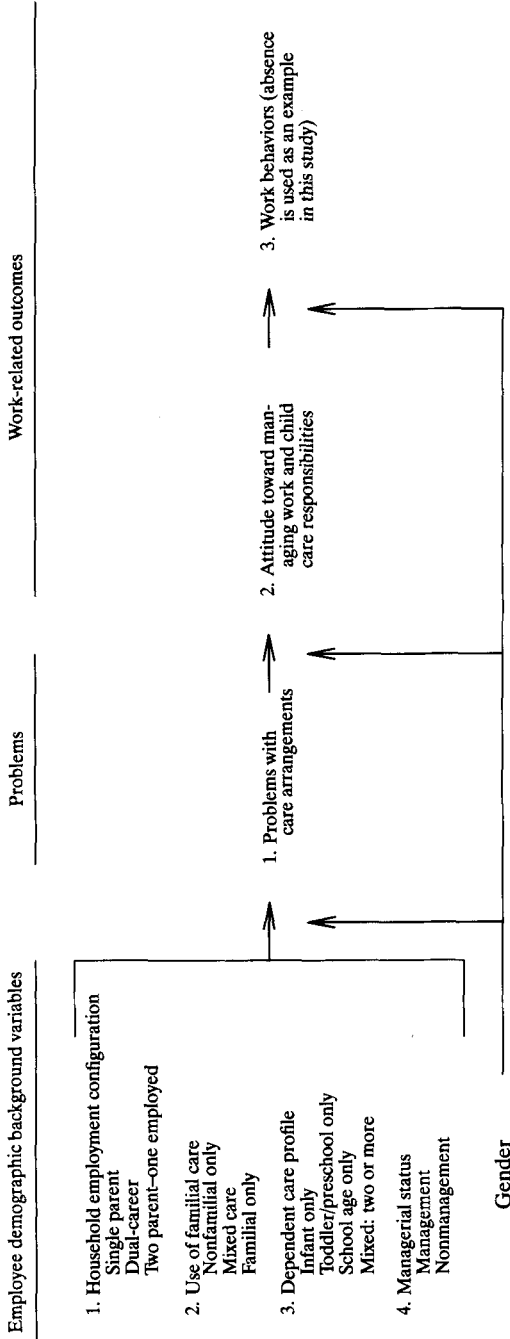


Figure 1: A Map of the Child Care Assistance Territory: Exploring the Relationship Between Employee Demographic Backgrounds, Problems with Care Arrangements, and Work-Related Outcomes

The employee background variables examined include: gender, household employment configuration, dependents' care profile, managerial status, and availability of familial care arrangements during work. Rationale for including variables, which are easily available to any employer contemplating the development of child care assistance, are discussed below. The study illustrates the type of data that a firm could collect to assess child care needs and to help inform decision making regarding human resource policy. Although few companies conduct child care needs assessment (and those that do often move so slowly in implementing programs that the data upon which they are based are often outdated by the time they are adopted), the framework presented reflects one approach that would allow a firm to tailor programs to meet its work force's needs. Given the expectation that employees' child care needs are highly diverse, data on preferences for assistance are also discussed. Experts' predictions of a shortage of skilled, high-quality workers in the coming decades (cf. *Workforce 2000*, 1987) coupled with forecasts bemoaning a shortage of quality care (cf. Friedman, 1989) suggest that companies with assistance programs that are tailored to their labor markets and truly address employees' needs may have a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining employees.

Gender

Studies examining the demographic variables that are significantly related to child care problems and productivity have generally found the employee's gender to be the most important factor (Galinsky, 1989). Despite the increased participation of women in the labor force, Gutek et al.'s (1988) review concludes that employed women still perform the majority of child care tasks (Pleck, 1985), and are more likely than employed men to be concerned and directly involved with care arrangements (Anderson & Leslie, unpublished manuscript cited in Gutek et al., 1988) and stay at home with sick children (Northcott, 1983). National studies consistently show that working mothers are absent more often than working fathers (Klein, 1986).

Although there is a growing interest of fathers in child-rearing matters, society still sees child care as primarily the responsibility of women (Couter, 1984). Female employees assume greater responsibility for child care, regardless of the age of the child (Googins & Burden, 1987). As a consequence, employed mothers are more likely to experience spillover from family to work. Research generally shows, for example, that female employees tend to have greater preoccupation with family matters and experience more interrole conflict and overload than male employees (Jick & Mitz, 1985; Lewis & Cooper, 1988). Studies have also

found that married and single female parents spend more time on child care responsibilities than their male counterparts (Pleck, 1985; Googins & Burden, 1987). When both parents in families with young children work, employed mothers decrease their time spent on household chores rather than on child care (Bernardo, Shehan & Leslie, 1987). In contrast, fathers in dual-career families do not spend significantly more time on child care than employed fathers in single earner families (Nock & Kingston, in press). Research also shows that having children impedes the career advancement of women (Gwartney-Gibbs, 1988) due to career interruptions and temporary departure from the labor force (Ewer, Crimmons, & Oliver, 1977) or lowered job responsibilities, which are sometimes as the result of the choice of "mommy track" jobs (Schwartz, 1989) and at other times due to supervisory beliefs that mothers have decreased job involvement (Lewis, unpublished doctoral dissertation cited in Lewis & Cooper, 1988). For all of these reasons, child care is expected to have the greatest negative influence on the female employees in this study. Specifically, women are expected to perceive greater problems with care arrangements, hold the most negative attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities, and have more absences due to child care than men.

Household Employment Configuration

The employment configuration of the working parent's household—that is whether he or she is part of a dual-career, two parent with one spouse employed, or single parent family—will have a large influence on the extent of household resources (i.e., time, money, support) available to help with child care responsibilities. Indeed, spouse support has been found to help employees cope with managing work/family conflict (Ganster, Fusilier, & Mayes, 1986). Single parents lack this support and typically have no "fall back" person with whom to share the burden of care. Single parents are also assumed to have less time available to look for and less household income available to pay for quality care than dual-income families. Although dual-career employees have a spouse with whom they can potentially share child care responsibilities, they are expected to have less support than a two-parent household with only one spouse employed. Thus, single parents are expected to experience the most problems with care, as well as negative attitudinal and behavioral effects due to care responsibilities, followed by dual-career employees. Employees who are part of a two-parent household with an unemployed spouse are expected to experience little work effects from child care responsibilities.

Dependent Care Profile

Studies on the influence of the number and age of children on productivity are mixed. Galinsky (1989) found that women with three children were tardy more often than women with one child, for example. A Department of Labor study found that female employees with one child under age 6 were absent nearly 13 days a year compared to nearly seven days for women with school age children (Klein, 1986). In contrast, men's rates were much lower and basically constant regardless of the age of the child (three and one half days for one child under 6 and four days for school age children). Goff and Mount (1989), on the other hand, found that the number of children under age 5 was unrelated to work/family conflict.

Recent work on absenteeism has developed a "kinship responsibilities scale" that is based on a composite score of the number of children under age 7 living at home, the number of individuals (excluding children) who are in need and place demands on one's time on a regular basis, and whether the respondent is married (cf. Brooke & Price, 1989; Curry et al., 1985; Price & Mueller, 1981, 1986). Rather than simply counting family data or assuming that dependent care responsibilities stop after a child enters elementary school full time (i.e., the problems of managing before- and after-school care, sickness, emergencies, etc.), it is theorized that the juggling of *multiple* care arrangements is an important negative influence. As Kammerman (1980) points out, working parents do not necessarily make only one care arrangement per child and these plans are often varied and changing. Thus, child care problems and negative work influences can stem from the *configuration* of children's ages between such groupings as infants (under 2 years), toddlers and preschoolers (2-5 years), and school age (6-12 years).

In this study, having at least two children in any combination of infant/toddler and preschool or infant/school age or toddler & preschool/school age—a "mixed dependent care profile"—was expected to have the most detrimental effects due to the need to manage diverse care arrangements. This group was expected to be followed by employees with infants only, given the high attention demanded by new babies and the fact that the employees are likely to be first-time parents. Employees with children of only toddler and preschool ages are expected to be next, and finally employees with only school age children from 6 to 12 years old. My inclusion of elementary school age children as a variable is consistent with Fernandez's (1986) finding from his study of AT&T employees that, unlike men's, women's absenteeism rates did not decrease to natural rates until the youngest child reached 12 years.

Familial Care

Research on social support suggests that families can serve as important sources of support for coping with life responsibilities (Guttek et. al, 1988). Cohen and Wills (1985) argue that family support can help buffer employees from life stress. In light of our mobile society, many employed parents today live in locations that are great geographic distances from their relatives. There are employees, however, who are fortunate enough to have relatives (e.g., parents, siblings, etc.) living in the same city who sometimes opt to share in child care responsibilities. Employees using familial care may have added social support over those employees who must rely totally on nonfamilial care. Recently, there has been a lot written in the press about child abuse by caregivers and the detrimental effects on children of poor quality care and high provider turnover (cf. Lande, Scarr, & Gunzenhauser, 1989). Consequently, it is hypothesized that the more that employed parents use nonfamilial child care arrangements (e.g., care by someone other than a spouse of a relative), the greater the problems with care and the greater the negative influence of child care responsibilities on work-related outcomes. (This hypothesis does not suggest that care by a relative is necessarily of higher quality than care by a nonrelative. However, employees are assumed to be less likely to worry about child abuse, provider turnover, or poor quality with a family member than with a hired nonrelative, regardless of whether this reflects reality. In addition, the general newness of using formalized nonhome based care may be a factor contributing to working employees' views. As late as 1979, for instance, Barne, Lein, O'Donnel and Wells found that over 90% of working parents with children under 13 years of age arranged child care in the home by a relative or nonrelative, or in a relative's or nonrelative's home.)

Managerial Status

Although high prestige jobs typically require increased job involvement and time commitment, they also offer greater job security and scheduling flexibility (Nieva & Guttek, 1981). Management employees who have a child care conflict are less likely to have to ask permission to leave work, and are more likely to have work that can be made up by working at home or coming in early or late than a nonmanagement employee. Income may also be a factor, in that managers who are parents may have more financial resources with which to buy quality care than nonmanagers (cf. Galinsky, 1989). It is hypothesized that management employees will experience fewer problems with care arrangements, and have less negative work-related attitudes and behaviors.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The survey was designed to assess the dependent care needs of employees at a public utility in a medium-size city in the Midwest. It was developed by a collaborative research team of two child care public policy advocates/leaders at the state level and a university researcher, who also received input from an employee task force and human resource professionals at the firm prior to its administration. (It should be noted that union leadership was involved in the task force, which while helping to garner support for the needs assessment study, did result in the deletion of questions to assess employees' interest in flexible benefits. It was feared that the company would use this data in future bargaining over wages and benefits without fully sharing the data with the union.)

A total of 552 surveys (204 of which indicated current child dependents) were returned out of 950 distributed to the firm's entire work force for a 58% response rate. The data used in the present study is based on the complete data that were available from 198 employees who have dependents under age 12. Of the respondents, 73% were male, 56% were members of dual-career households, 12% were single parents, 29% had completed at least four years of college, and 74% were nonmanagement. About two-thirds of the sample had only one child dependent and the other third had more than one child under age 12. Forty-three percent of the children received total care by a spouse or a relative; 43% used a mixture of familial and nonfamilial care; and 13% used total nonfamilial care (i.e., care by someone other than a spouse or a relative.) Of those that paid for child care, the average weekly cost per child per care arrangement was \$50, but weekly costs per child went as high as \$150. (This figure may be deflated by the fact that many of the respondents used a *combination* of familial and nonfamilial care.)

In addition to surveying employees about their current child care arrangements, attitudes, and demographic backgrounds, respondents were also asked to rank nine child care assistance options in order of preference. The options included: job sharing or part-time work; information referral assistance; family day care network, which is a series of licensed day care homes organized by the employer; sick care; on-site or near-site center; voucher system, which is financial assistance in purchasing care of parents' choice; flexible spending accounts; parental leave; and educational seminars or discussion groups. Only a small percentage (less than 1%) of all U.S. employers have yet to provide any of these options nationwide (Friedman, 1988). Because many employers, like the one in the current study, are contemplating the appropriate actions to take in

the area of child care assistance, an additional goal of the study was to explore the relationship between demographic backgrounds and employee preferences.

Measures

The problems with child care arrangements variable reflected the extent to which employees were having problems with aspects of their child care arrangements. It was measured using a 9-item composite version of the scales in the literature developed by Burud et al. (1984) and Fernandez (1986). Employees indicated the extent to which they were having problems (1 = no problem; 4 = major problem) with aspects of their child care arrangements, including availability, cost, quality, hours and location of care, sick care arrangements, emergencies, summer care, and provider dependability (coefficient alpha = .90). This scale reflects the general view of leading child care researchers, such as Galinsky (1989), that there is a cumulative effect to child care problems. Rather than assessing the impact of individual problems, most scholars have grouped child care problems into an overall index.

Attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities were measured using an 8-item scale (alpha = .82). The attitudinal scale that was developed enhances existing work/family conflict scales that traditionally focus on an employee's general well-being (cf. Kopelman et al., 1983; Wiley, 1987), in that it is based on items measuring the working person's attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities rather than simply conflict about work and family. Employees' attitudes toward managing both the responsibility of child care and that of being a productive worker is our focus. Sample items include: (a) I feel a lot of stress at work because of my child care problems; (b) My productivity has been hurt by my child care arrangements; (c) I have considered quitting my job because of my child care responsibilities; and (d) I find it easy to combine my work with my child care responsibilities. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree), the items were summed (reversing negatively worded ones). The lower the score, the more negative the attitudinal impact of managing work and care responsibilities.

Work absence due to child care responsibilities was measured using employees' self-report of full days missed due to child care responsibilities during the last month. Notwithstanding the weaknesses of self-report data, it was believed that the full days missed variable probably more accurately assessed the days missed due to child care than the firm's absence control data, which typically only indicates that the employee was not at work, but does not indicate that the absence was due to child

care or partial out the effects of "natural absence rates," that is absence arising from the organization's absence policies. As a U.S. Department of Labor Task Force report (1988a) states that scholarly "research relating child care to productivity, absenteeism, tardiness, turnover, recruitment, quality, and competitiveness is almost nil." The intent of the current study is to use absence behavior as one example of a negative work behavior emanating from problems with arrangements and negative attitudes about managing work and care responsibilities. Clearly, longitudinal work based on archival data is preferred. However, the readers are encouraged to focus on the study's contribution of presenting a general framework for understanding employees' child care problems and attitudinal and behavioral relationships.

Analyses

The first column of Table 1 shows the means of the demographic variables that were entered into a regression model as dummy variables. Thus, the mean for each category indicates the number of employees in that category as a proportion of the total. The following variables were entered into the equation as independent variables: sex; hierarchical level (nonmanagement, management); dependents' care profile (mixed, infant only, toddler and preschool only, school age only); household employment configuration (single parent, two parent—both employed, two parent—one spouse employed); and familial support in providing child care (familial care—all child care responsibilities during work are handled by a relative; nonfamilial care—none of the care responsibilities during work are handed by a relative; mixed care—care responsibilities are shared with relatives and nonrelatives). Means of all of the outcome measures by demographic background group are also found in Table 1. Table 2 shows means and correlation coefficients for the outcome variables for the entire sample. Principal components analysis confirmed that the outcome variables loaded on separate factors.

A recursive 3-equation ordinary least squares regression model (cf. Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 1981) was used to examine the interrelationships between employees' demographic backgrounds, child care problems, work/care attitudes, and absence behavior, which is shown in Table 3. Variance in problems with child care is moderated by the demographic background variables. Favorable attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities are negatively related to the extent of problems with care, as indicated by the correlation of $-.63$ found in Table 2. Conceptually, assuming that a change in attitudes precedes a change in behavior, the number of days of work missed is determined by the previous two equations. Based on the strength of the literature

TABLE 1
*Characteristics of Measures: Means of Background Variables
 by Dependent Variables*

Variables	Sample Means ^a	Care Problems	Work/Care Attitudes	Days Absent
1. Household Employment Configuration				
Single parent	.12	2.15	3.32	1.59
Dual career	.56	1.79	3.72	.59
Two parent—one employed	.26	1.40	4.32	.43
2. Gender				
Men	.73	1.68	3.98	.47
Women	.23	1.94	3.28	1.23
3. Use of Familial Care				
Nonfamilial	.13	2.2	3.22	1.32
Mixed care	.43	1.89	3.61	.77
Familial	.43	1.4	4.19	.49
4. Dependent Care Profile				
Infant only	.13	1.59	3.87	.58
Toddler/preschool only	.13	2.03	3.42	1.08
School age only	.37	1.60	4.04	.42
Mixed: two or more	.37	1.78	3.70	.74
5. Managerial Status				
Management	.16	1.56	4.17	.67
Nonmanagement	.74	1.75	3.76	1.25

^a Variables were entered into the regression as dummy variables. Thus, the mean for each category indicates the number of employees in that category as a proportion of the total. Numbers were rounded to second decimal.

TABLE 2
*Characteristics of Measures: Means and Correlations
 for Dependent Variables*

Variable	Mean	1	2	3
1. Problems ^b	1.74	—		
2. Work/Care attitudes ^c	3.81	-.63*	—	
3. Behaviors: Full days missed	.66	.20*	-.35*	—

^b 4 point scale: 1 = no problem; 4 = major problem

^c 5 point scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree

* $p < .05$

TABLE 3

A Recursive Three-Equation OLS System of the Relationship Between Employees' Demographic Backgrounds, Problems With Care Arrangements, and Work/Care Attitudes and Behaviors

Equation	Coefficient of	Coefficient ^a Estimate	SE	t
Problems with care ^b	Household Employment			
	single parent	.36	.19	1.9
	two parent—one employed	-.097	.16	-.60
	Dependent Care Profile			
	mixed configuration	.17	.13	1.3
	infant only	.028	.18	.15
	toddler/preschool only	.29	.18	1.6
	Use of Familial Care			
	familial care only	-.37	.15	-2.4*
	nonfamilial care only	.365	.18	2.1*
	Managerial Status	-.04	.13	-.33
Gender	-.02	.14	-.14	
Constant	1.74	.15	11.9**	
Model $F = 4.22, p < .0001$, Multiple $R = .43, R^2 = .18$				
Attitudes	Predicted Problems	-1.04	.18	-5.8**
	Gender	-.397	.14	-2.8**
	Constant	5.69	.30	18.69**
Model $F = 30.65, p < .0001$, Multiple $R = .50, R^2 = .25$				
Days	Predicted Attitudes	-.63	.27	-2.3*
	Gender	.32	.27	1.2
	Constant	2.96	1.07	2.78**
Model $F = 9.47, p < .0001$, Multiple $R = .31, R^2 = .09$				

^a The table shows unstandardized regression coefficients.

^b The regression coefficients for the demographic variable categories show each category's impact on the dependent variable relative to the excluded category (employees in a dual-career marriage in the case of the household groups, employees with school age (6-12 years) children only for the dependent care profile variable, and employees using both familial and nonfamilial child care (mixed care) for the use of familial care variable.

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

reviewed concerning the greater attitudinal and behavioral impact of child care responsibilities on females employees over their male counterparts, gender was included as a direct variable in each equation. Using the dummy variable technique recommended for categorical variables in Pindyck and Rubinfeld (1981), the regression coefficients for the demographic variable categories in Table 3 show each category's impact on the dependent variable of interest relative to the excluded category (e.g., employees in a dual-career marriage in the case of household employment groups). Finally, analyses of variance of employee preferences

for child care assistance as a function of their demographic backgrounds were conducted, which will be discussed in Table 4. Table 5 shows employee ranking of options by selected groups.

Results

Regression Model

Each of the equations in the model was significant ($p < .0001$). In the first equation, demographic variables predicted 18% of the variance in child care problems ($F = 4.22$), however, only familial care predicted problems at the $p < .05$ level of significance.¹ Users of total nonfamilial care experience significantly more problems than families with a stay-at-home parent. Employees using a combination of familial and nonfamilial care or mixed care users experience significantly fewer problems than those using total nonfamilial care, but more problems than those using total familial care (Tukey $p < .05$). Gender and managerial status were not important predictors of problems, as their coefficient estimates were near zero.

The equation with favorable attitudes toward managing work and child care responsibilities as the outcome variable explained 25% of the variance and was highly significant ($F = 30.65$). Employees experiencing problems with child care arrangements held significantly less favorable attitudes regarding their management of child and work responsibilities (regression coefficient estimate = -1.04). In addition, being female is negatively related to holding positive attitudes about managing work and care arrangements (regression coefficient estimate = $-.397$). A breakdown of the means for several items from the work/care attitudinal scale illustrates the greater impact of child care on female over male employees. Female employees indicated that they more often considered quitting their jobs because of child care (a mean of 2.6 compared to a mean of 1.3 for men), that it is not easy to combine work and family responsibilities (2.1 compared to 1.4 for men), and that child illnesses create more problems at work (3.8 compared to 2.8 for men).

The last equation, with full days missed during the past month as the outcome variable, was significant ($F = 9.47$) and explained 9% of the variance. Holding favorable attitudes toward managing work and family responsibilities was negatively related to missing work ($t = -2.3$, $p < .05$). However, gender did not directly predict absences to a significant

¹ Although not meeting the traditional standards of significance ($p < .05$), it can be noted that single parents and parents of toddler and preschool age children predicted problems at a level approaching significance ($p < .10$).

TABLE 4
*Summary of Significant Results for Analysis of Variance
of Preferences for Child Care Assistance by Employee Backgrounds*

Options	Employee demographic variables										
	Gender		House. employ.		Dep. care profile		Managerial status		Use of fam. care		
	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	
Job share/ part time	100.8	14.8*									
Sick care			39.9	9.2*					28.3	5.5*	
Voucher system			26.39	3.9*							
Family day care network			27.74	4.5*			45.34	2.75*			
On- or near site center					22.85	2.9*					
Flex. spend. account							60.52	9.3*			
Parental leave											
Educ.seminars/ discussion groups									31.46	5.7*	
Child care referral			16.89	3.26*							

* $p < .05$ or lower

TABLE 5
*Employee Ranking of Options by Selected Groups**

Options	Total pop.	Nonfamilial care	Single parents
Sick care	3.5	3.2	2.8
On- or near-site care	4.9	4.2	2.9
Parental leave	4.6	4.3	4.8
Flexible spending account	5.1	4.7	5.5
Voucher system	4.9	4.8	4.5
Family day care	4.7	4.9	3.9
Information referral	5.4	5.5	4.6
Ed. seminars/ discussion groups	7.0	6.7	6.9
Job share/part time	7.3	7.0	6.9

* Average rank order from 1-9; lower number indicates higher preference.

extent. Although women in the sample's general population miss work more than their male counterparts due to child care arrangements (1.2 days per month for women compared to .5 days per month for men), the analysis suggests that having problems with care and negative attitudes about managing work and child care is more important than merely being female. Although the R^2 may appear modest, it is important to

point out that the variable reflected days missed during only a one month period.

Analysis of Child Care Preferences

The current sample helps illustrate the great diversity in preferences for employer support and the highly segmented nature of the employee child care assistance market. While further research on additional samples is needed to validate that the preferences of the employees in this study are truly representative, all of the demographic variables helped to explain significant variance in preferences for at least one option of child care assistance, except parental leave, which did not significantly vary in ranking between groups.

In general, sick care and on- or near-site care were the most preferred options for employees in need of assistance, although there was some variation. Overall, single parents had significantly greater preference for sick care assistance compared to other employee groups ($F = 9.2$). An interaction between household employment configuration by sex was also found for this option ($F = 6.27$). Male employees in either single parent or dual-career households were significantly more interested in sick care than their female counterparts. Similarly, employees using total nonfamilial care were significantly more interested in sick care assistance followed by those using a combination of familial and nonfamilial care ($F = 5.5$). Parents with infants or a mixed dependent care profile were significantly more interested in on- or near-site care.

In addition to ranking sick care and on- or near-site care highly, single parents also had significantly higher preferences for information and referral assistance ($F = 3.26$) and voucher systems ($F = 3.9$) than other households. The voucher system finding may reflect the fact that the high cost of care probably places the greatest financial burden on single parents.

Surprisingly, gender explained significant variation in preferences for only one option—job sharing and part-time work. Female employees preferred this category to a significantly greater extent than male employees ($F = 14.8$).

Employees with infants had significantly higher preference for employer support of a family day care network of licensed provider homes than those with older children. A triple interaction between gender, child age group, and household employment configuration was found ($F = 3.69$), signifying that female employees in dual-career households who have infant children especially preferred this option. Nonmanagers were also significantly more interested in the establishment of a family day care network than managers. Managers on the other hand, were

significantly more interested in flexible spending accounts than nonmanagers, reflecting their probable higher tax brackets. Finally, parents with children in full-time or partial nonfamilial care were significantly more interested in educational or discussion support groups than those using total familial care.

Discussion

Overall, the results indicate that demographic variables do help explain variation in employees' problems with child care, their general attitudes toward being able to manage work and care responsibilities, and their absence behavior. The results can be viewed with general enhanced interest if one considers that the background variables in this study are factual data that are easily obtainable from most organizations' existing databases or through needs assessment surveys. As many employers begin to contemplate offering child care assistance for the first time or increasing their support, collecting the data noted may help determine the need for and amount of variance in preferences for assistance in the work force.

The study implies that employers would be well-advised to conduct a systematic needs assessment prior to adopting programs. Child care requirements may not only vary for employee groups within a firm, but also vary substantially between firms (U.S. Department of Labor, 1988b). Unfortunately, many companies have jumped on the "child care corporate bandwagon" without delineation of how such programs fit with their human resource strategy or work force profile. (A recent statewide study, Department of Commerce, State of Michigan, 1989, showed that one out of five employers with child care assistance programs—mostly information and referral—added them in the past year.) Few of these organizations conducted formal child care needs assessments or surveyed their work forces before adoption. Assuming there are scarce organizational resources available to attack the child care problem, adding programs based on current labor market data will better ensure that the policies added will be *needed and used*. For example, a recent study (Kossek, 1989) found that less than 2% of the work force (mostly managers) used a flexible spending account that a Fortune company had adopted as its chief policy to address child care. Not surprisingly, the company had not conducted a needs assessment.

Although longitudinal research is needed, the results for this sample suggest that using familial care to a partial or full extent does appear to ameliorate problems. A practical implication is that employers might strongly consider offering part-time work, job sharing, parental leave,

and where feasible, work at home arrangements, which may enable more employees to use familial care to a greater extent.

While less conclusive, household employment configuration may be related to problems with care. Single parents appear to be a special employee group that is high on child care assistance needs. Future research should attempt to improve on the way that the household employment variable was operationalized. One should measure not simply whether an employee is part of a dual-career household, but also whether the household includes at least one part-time career. Another way of improving the accuracy of this variable would be to assess the number of hours worked per week by each parent, which would give an indication of the distribution of household resource hours for work and child care responsibilities. (Like the current household employment configuration variable, government statistics on working mothers tend to have a similar problem with accurately measuring the impact of dual careers on child care. While it is true that a majority of children in the U.S. under age 5 have working mothers, as the popular press has recently publicized, only *one-third* of mothers of preschoolers work full time, Charen, 1990.)

The results also cautiously suggest that future work should attempt to measure diversity in the children's age configuration, reflecting employees' dependent care profiles, rather than merely counting the number of children. One weakness of the problems with care variable was that it was based on the average of nine child care problems. As a consequence, it did not reflect the *specific* issues that become salient at various stages in each child's and family's development. For example, parents with infants were significantly more concerned with the cost and quality of care, while parents with school age children had significantly greater problems with summer and before- and after-school care.

An explanation of why employed parents with toddlers and preschoolers in this study may tend to perceive greater problems with care than other groups is due to a probable change in household employment configuration and care arrangements since the child's infancy. Unlike the infant years, when perhaps the employee had a spouse who took extended leave or worked part-time or the employee opted to do so, during the toddler and preschool years, the employee and possibly the employee's spouse may be involved in the labor force to a greater extent. Care arrangements may also have shifted from largely familial care during infancy to increasingly nonfamilial care during the toddler and preschool years, allowing employees less flexibility when sickness or emergencies arise.

A possible factor contributing to the lack of significance of the managerial status variable was its dichotomous basis—perhaps it needed to include more hierarchical subgroups. Rather than simply measuring

management versus nonmanagement status, using salary data might be a better indicator of the level and importance of an employee's position, the probable freedom to juggle one's schedule for care, and the amount of resources the employee has with which to purchase quality care. For example, a breakout of the clerical workers from the nonmanagement group, which is also largely female, showed that as a group they missed significantly greater full days than all other groups (Student Newman Keuls, $p < .05$).

The results for the equation with attitudes as the outcome suggests that those with problems feel less positive about their handling of work/child care interface and that in general, female employees are still more negatively affected by child care responsibilities. Gender does seem to matter regarding employee attitudes about managing both work and care arrangement duties. The results also suggest that future work should incorporate measures that tap into employees' feelings about their child care and work responsibilities, in addition to those regarding general work/family conflict.

The equation predicting absence behavior may have explained the lowest variance because of the way the that variable was measured. Despite the problems with archival data, which generally do not reflect child care as a reason for absence, it is clear that such monthly self-report absence estimates may have low reliability because most people do not have a chance to be absent very much in only one month's time. Thus, there will be limited variance between people. Curiously, one might gain reliability, but lose accuracy, if one asks for memory longer than one month. Studies that include data collected prior to and after the adoption of employer-sponsored child care assistance clearly should be a goal for future research.

An implication of the findings on employee ranking of preferences is that the options rated most highly by employees in this company (i.e., sick care and on- or near-site assistance) are not consistent with the options most likely to be adopted by its employers (i.e., dependent care accounts and information and referral). If employees in this sample are at all indicative of the general population, these employees wanted greater support than most employers are willing or financially able to provide. An interesting area for future research on the desirability of care assistance might compare working parents' assessments of the attractiveness and effectiveness of various child care options with those of employers. One way to improve the operationalization of variables measuring preferences would be to ask employees not only to rank their preferences in order of importance, but also to indicate those which they would definitely use, if adopted. Future assessments should also include summer care and before- and after-school care as possible options, which would

help give better data on the assistance needs of those with school age children.

Adopting a Life Cycle Approach to Assistance: Managing Heterogeneity

As Baruch, Biener and Barnett (1987) note, traditional research on the stresses of the work place in mainly all male samples has assumed that work is the main stressor and that home is a benign, mostly stress-free place where one recovers from work. However, the demarcation of these domains will become increasingly blurred due to a rise in single parent and dual-career households, the continuation of a critical shortage of high quality care in the U.S., and increasing pressures on employers to attract and retain skilled, productive, and highly committed members. It is inevitable that more and more employers will become involved with child care support, even if not totally by choice. Most employers will no longer be able to maintain a "hands off" approach to the problems of employees' private lives, nor can they afford to wait to intervene only after performance has severely deteriorated.

As the diversity in problems and preferences noted in this study suggests, organizations might ideally be encouraged to offer two or three packages of child care provisions that would correspond to given mixes of employee needs and be responsive to changes in the mix over time. This approach is more feasible than trying to meet the needs of every single employee perfectly and will also help to put a cap on the amount of resources devoted to dependent care per employee. Such an approach would allow organizations to take a life cycle approach to child care assistance, which is consistent with Evans and Bartolome's (1984) model of work/family issues. They contend that a family's developmental stage raises the salience of different issues regarding the work-nonwork interface as the family moves through its life cycle. As this study and the developmental stage observation implies, organizations should consider taking a systematic, multi-faceted, and flexible approach to child care assistance by having programs and policies that can be tailored to individual needs and life cycle changes.

Achieving the suggested flexibility in child care assistance policies may be difficult to do, for as Schneider and Rentsch (1988, p. 192) point out, historically human resource policies have "implicitly homogenized the work force resulting in the artificially 'equal treatment' of all." The need for flexibility in human resource policies to address child care assistance is one important example of the problems that employers may face in revamping human resource policies and philosophies to meet growing future work force diversity. Single parents may need to have greater assistance in managing the child care situation than employees who have a

spouse that stays home to be with the young children or is able to work part time. Employees with newborn infants may want to have the option of taking parental leave, but still have their positions waiting for them. Other employees may wish to work part time or job share or have the option to work at home. Hence, employers will be challenged to implement assistance policies that will be perceived as equitable and effective by various employee individuals and groups with diverse needs and interests.

An apparent tension for employers will be to offer not only policies that account for diversity in child care needs and preferences, but also to help foster a climate in policy implementation that combats stereotyping of employees—for example, making assumptions regarding the work/family needs of female versus male employees. It appears that organizations would benefit from training supervisors in the companies' philosophies regarding the administration of work/family policies, which will probably be communicated mainly via supervisors' interactions with subordinates. Similarly, supervisors might need to be trained to be careful not to inadvertently (or advertently) give the message that employees who heavily use formal company policies to support work/family conflict, such as those who frequently use flextime to work later hours or have to take work home due to emergencies or child care situations, are viewed as less valued employees.

Effectively implementing assistance policies to account for diversity is an important issue facing employers. Certain policies may appear sound on paper, but unfortunately are likely to be operationalized and administered in ways that may defeat the purpose and benefits of the program. For example, organizations often face the problem of equitably allocating rewards to employees who work part time or job share (a common work/family policy) vis-a-vis employees who work full time. Some firms may deal with this problem by not allowing employees who job share or work part time to be eligible for full benefits, or by overlooking them as being eligible for the highest rating on a performance appraisal, for top merit or bonus increases, or priority candidates for attendance at company education and development classes. As a consequence, the administration of HR policies to account for diversity such as job sharing, while logical particularly in the context of dealing with the short run issues of equitable allocation of scarce rewards and resources, may be deleterious over the long term.

Other equity issues are raised by the case of one hospital's employer-supported quality on-site day care center, which many view as the ideal option (J. Goth-Owens, personal communication, 1989). Space limitations are such that not all employees are able to use the center and there is a long waiting list as a result. A priority system has been developed that

gives preference to those working full time over part time, to nurses over maintenance and cafeteria employees, and so forth. While such a priority system is technically sound, given the generally tight national labor market for full-time nurses, it also conveys the message that certain employee groups are valued over others. And even when space is available, often on-site care is so expensive that employees in lower paid positions (e.g., maintenance or receptionists) are unable to afford to use the on-site center. The latter problem raises another child care assistance equity issue. Should discounts for care be available to lower income workers?

Research on the reasons companies have chosen to adopt or not adopt child care is another area ripe for future research. It may be, for example, that high cost and fear of liability exposure are viewed as the major deterrents to the establishment of on-site care, despite substantial employee interest in this option. Understanding existing employer ideologies of work/family policies might give insight into some of the systematic differences between adopters and nonadopters. Some companies (e.g., IBM) might adopt aggressive child care assistance policies, such as its 3-year parental leave policy, not because it can unequivocally be proven that assistance affects productivity, but because it fits with its culture and lifetime employment policy that allows the company to view its human resources as a long term fixed asset. Variation may also occur by industry. For example, companies in high tech industries may value appearing progressive and/or may face labor market competition for quality skilled workers to a greater extent than those in smokestack industries. Finally, the influence of organizational size on work/family policies must also be considered in future studies, as there may be certain financial limitations on the extent of assistance that a small employer is able to provide.

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