

May I Work Part-Time? An Exploration of Predicted Employer Responses to Employee Requests for Part-Time Work

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Increasing numbers of professional and managerial employees are requesting a shift from full-time to part-time work. In a policy-capturing study, 200 attorneys (including both partners and associates) rated how likely their firms would be to accept different hypothetical attorneys' requests for part-time work. Supporting predictions based on dependency theory, respondents reported that their firms would be most likely to approve requests to work part-time from attorneys who perform well, would be difficult to replace, have strong organizational connections, and threaten to leave if their requests are denied. Supporting predictions based on institutional theory, respondents reported that their firms would be more likely to approve requests from women than from men and from attorneys seeking part-time work to take care of a child rather than to pursue a personal interest for which there is less institutional support. © 2000 Academic Press

In the past decade, the number of Americans working part-time has increased dramatically (Duffy & Pupo, 1992). Part-timers are a diverse group, differing in numerous respects, including their paths to part-time work (Feldman & Doerp-

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inghaus, 1992; Tilly, 1992). Some initially sought full-time work, but could find only part-time work. Others actively sought part-time jobs and found them. And still others originally worked full-time jobs but subsequently petitioned their employers to allow them to shift from full-time to part-time work. Particularly among managers and professionals, the latter path to part-time work is increasingly common (Tilly, 1991, 1992). In this study, we drew on two quite different, but complementary theories—dependency theory (Bartol & Martin, 1988) and institutional theory (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Scott & Meyer, 1991)—to explore this path. Specifically, we conducted a policy-capturing study, asking attorneys to rate how likely it was that hypothetical attorneys of differing characteristics would be allowed to move from full-time to part-time work in their firms. Supporting both dependency theory and institutional theory, our results document attorneys' perceptions of their firms' practices and suggest new avenues for research on part-time work and other forms of nontraditional work arrangements.

POSSIBLE DETERMINANTS OF EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO EMPLOYEE REQUESTS FOR PART-TIME WORK

Dependency Theory

Dependency theory (Bartol & Martin, 1988) rests upon two fundamental assumptions: (a) managers are dependent, to varying degrees, upon their subordinates and (b) managers use pay to manage their dependence upon their subordinates. That is, managers are most likely to allocate relatively large pay raises to subordinates upon whom they are most dependent, particularly if the threat of dependency disruption is high (e.g., if the employee is considering taking a new job). Managers do this, dependency theory suggests, in an effort to retain the employees upon whom they most depend. We adapted Bartol and Martin's (1988) theory in an effort to explain, in part, predicted employer responses to employee requests to shift from full-time to part-time work. The more dependent a manager is upon a subordinate, we propose, the more likely the manager is to allow that subordinate to work part-time. Better to retain a valued employee part-time, a manager may reason, than to risk losing the employee entirely.

In their theory and research, Bartol and Martin (1988); 1989); 1990) have identified several sources of managerial dependence upon a subordinate. These include (a) ease of replacement (the extent to which the subordinate's knowledge or skills make him or her difficult to replace) and (b) organizational connections (the extent to which the subordinate has connections with powerful others in the organization who strive to safeguard and enhance the subordinate's interests within the organization). Further, dependency threat (the likelihood that the subordinate will leave the organization or intentionally reduce his or her job performance) is conceptualized as a moderator between dependency sources and pay allocation. Thus, the employee who would be difficult to replace and who

threatens to quit is more likely to receive a pay raise than the employee who would also be difficult to replace but does not threaten to quit. Another potential source of dependency is performance (Bartol & Martin, 1988; Sherer, Schwab, & Heneman, 1987); managers rely more heavily on subordinates who perform well than on subordinates who perform poorly.

Adapting Bartol and Martin's (1988) theory to the study of employer responses to employee requests to work part-time, we hypothesized that employees would report that employers would be more likely to grant (a) high-performing employees' requests to work part-time than low-performing employees' requests to work part-time; (b) difficult-to-replace employees' requests to work part-time than easy-to-replace employees' requests to work part-time; and (c) well-connected employees' requests to work part-time than poorly connected employees' requests to work part-time. Further, following Bartol and Martin (1988), we predicted that dependency threats would increase the likelihood that high-performing, difficult-to-replace, and/or well-connected employees would be allowed to work part-time, but decrease the likelihood that low-performing, easy-to-replace, and/or poorly connected employees would be allowed to work part-time.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory and research highlight the impact of institutional forces upon organizations (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Scott & Meyer, 1991). Institutional theorists suggest that institutional agencies (including governmental agencies, laws, courts, professional organizations, interest groups, and public opinion) have "the power to formulate or influence rules and regulations or to promulgate norms and standards governing [organizational] practice" (Scott & Meyer, 1991, p. 317). Organizational decision-makers do not critically evaluate institutionalized practices, institutional theorists suggest, but instead view such practices as valued ends in themselves (Scott & Meyer, 1991). Theorists of this school have suggested that a variety of human resource strategies, including personnel selection (Meyer & Rowan, 1991) and training (Scott & Meyer, 1991), are institutionalized; managers perceive these human resource strategies as valued ends in themselves, above and beyond their practical utility.

Applied to the study of employer responses to employee requests to work part-time, institutional theory suggests that employers' responses to part-time work requests may be influenced not only by immediate, within-organization needs (e.g., dependency) but also by institutional pressures. Goodstein (1994, pp. 353–355) has documented that employers face substantial institutional pressures to adopt work/family programs such as on-site child care, flextime, job sharing, and voluntary part-time employment.

Building on Goodstein's (1994) analysis, we posited that employers face institutional pressures to offer part-time work to: (a) women who seek part-time work and (b) parents who seek part-time work in order to spend more time with

their children. Institutional pressures to provide part-time work opportunities to women stem, we argue, from several factors. First, women are now, and historically have been, far more likely than men to work part-time (Christensen, 1987; Mishel & Bernstein, 1993; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999). Second, women are more likely than men to seek part-time work (Smith, 1983). Finally, historically within American society, while “men are viewed as the stable, primary wage-earners . . . women are typically cast as secondary-income earners and are presumed to be workers for whom reduced working hours. . . are not as devastating as to men who are primary income earners” (Smith, 1983, p. 6). Barham, Gottlieb, and Kelloway (1998, p. 299) found, in their recent research, that “respondents were more willing to grant reduced-hours [alternative work arrangements] to female managers than to male managers.” In a qualitative case study of part-time work among attorneys, Klein, Berman, Chung, Holke, Niles-Jolly, and Laney (1992) found that part-time male attorneys were rare and anomalous. Thus, for example, a male associate in this study commented, “Working part-time would decrease my chances of making partner, especially since I’m a male. It would send the wrong signals to those I work with. It would show I don’t have fire in the belly.” A male partner commented, “Maybe I’m showing myself old-fashioned here but I think I would be a little more prejudiced if it were a man working part-time. It’s wrong, I suppose. You could have two professionals and someone has to stay home. But, honesty compels me to tell you that I wouldn’t view the situation quite the same way.”

Institutional pressures to provide part-time work opportunities to parents stem, we argue, from contemporary social values supporting parents’ involvement in the daily care of their children (despite the increasing prevalence of two-wage-earner families). These values are much in evidence in the popular press and in government publications (e.g., Dusky, 1989; Engdahl, 1990; Perkins, 1993; Kaufman & McCormick, 1998; Schwartz, 1989, 1992; Span, 1992). Thus, for example, Vice President Albert Gore (1993, pp. 84–85) wrote:

Our increasingly diverse workforce struggles to manage child care, elder care, family emergencies, and other personal commitments. . . . [O]ur ability to recruit and retain the best employees—and motivate them to be productive—depends on our ability to create a satisfying work environment. . . . The President should issue a directive requiring that all agencies adopt compressed/flexible time, part-time, and job-sharing schedules.

Based on institutional theory, we thus predicted that employees would report that their employers would be more likely to grant (a) women’s requests to work part-time than men’s requests to work part-time and (b) requests to work part-time for child care reasons than requests to work part-time for other personal reasons for which there is less institutional support. Institutional pressures to provide part-time work to women and to parents are not independent, of course. Mothers are more likely than fathers to seek part-time work (Smith, 1983).

Further, part-time work is more compatible with the stereotypical maternal than paternal role (Smith, 1983; Schwartz, 1989). Accordingly, we predicted a gender by reason interaction—that is, we predicted that employees would report that their employers would be more likely to grant women's requests to work part-time for child care reasons than (a) men's requests to work part-time for child care reasons and (b) men's and women's requests to work part-time for other personal reasons.

METHOD

To test the hypotheses presented above, we conducted a policy-capturing study. In an anonymous survey, we asked randomly selected attorneys (including both partners and associates) to rate how likely their firm would be to allow each of a series of hypothetical attorneys (varying in the characteristics specified in the hypotheses) to make a requested shift from full-time to part-time work. In choosing this research strategy, we were guided by four key considerations. First, we were well acquainted with law firms and knew that part-time work was both increasingly common within law firms and of great interest and concern to individual lawyers and to their firms (American Bar Association, 1993; American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession, 1990; Chambers, 1989; Elkin, 1990). In 1999, the National Association for Law Placement reported that 92% of the 1100 individual law offices they surveyed allow attorneys to work part-time. Further, 4.5% of associates and 1.5% of partners work part-time (National Association for Law Placement, 1999). Thus, we chose to focus on part-time work among attorneys. Second, law firms typically did not, at the time of our study, have formal part-time policies; many firms still do not have formal policies. Thus, rather than content-analyzing firms' written policies, we surveyed employees regarding their firms' policies in practice. Third, in our prior qualitative research on this topic (Klein et al., 1992), we found that partners and associates differed in their descriptions of their firm's part-time practices; partners described their firm as far more accepting and supportive of part-time work than did associates. Thus, we chose to assess both partners' and associates' perceptions of their firms' likely responses to requests for part-time work. And, fourth, the attorneys with whom we consulted in piloting the study advised us that, for fear of the possibility of negative press and lawsuits (e.g., charging sex discrimination in the administration of a firm's part-time work policy), attorneys would complete our survey only if each individual respondent's identity and the identity of his or her firm were anonymous. Thus, we mailed anonymous surveys to our sample.

Procedure and Sample

Using the *Martindale-Hubbell Directory of Law*, a national directory of attorneys, we randomly selected a sample of 769 attorneys (356 women, 413 men) working in law firms in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia

to invite to participate in the study. We selected this geographic area for three reasons. First, we were most familiar with the practice of law in this region. Second, we could make local rather than long-distance follow-up telephone calls throughout much of the geographic area. And third, attorneys in this region were likely to respond more favorably to our affiliation with the University of Maryland than were attorneys in regions farther from the University. The National Association for Law Placement (1999) reported that the percentage of law offices in Washington, DC offering part-time work was higher than the national average (99.2% in Washington versus 91.9% nationwide). The percentage of attorneys working part-time in Washington, DC was slightly higher than the percentage of attorneys working part-time nationwide (3.2% in Washington versus 3.0% nationwide) (National Association for Law Placement, 1999).

The sample was stratified by gender, firm size, and date of law degree. We sent a letter of invitation, along with a self-addressed postage-paid response card, to each attorney. The 304 attorneys (167 women, 137 men) who agreed to participate in the study received a follow-up telephone call, the survey, and a reminder mailing. Two hundred attorneys (120 women, 80 men) returned complete, usable surveys. Thus, 26% of the attorneys who were initially invited to participate in the study (and 67% of the attorneys who agreed to participate in the study) did so. This response rate is comparable to that of other policy-capturing studies using randomly selected respondents (e.g., York, 1989), but the total sample size is substantially larger than that of most policy-capturing studies published in the organizational literature (e.g., Graves & Karren, 1992; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Klaas & Wheeler, 1990; Viswesvaran & Barrick, 1992). Sixty percent of survey respondents were female; 40% male. Half of the respondents (49.72%) were law firm partners and half were law firm associates (50.28%). Thirteen percent of respondents worked as part-time attorneys at the time of the survey or had done so earlier in their legal careers.

Survey Design, Instructions, and Control Variables

In developing the policy-capturing survey, we crossed and balanced two levels of each of the six orthogonal employee characteristics specified in the hypotheses to create 64 (2^6) profiles of hypothetical attorneys seeking to work part-time. Respondents completed one of four different randomizations of the 64 profiles. To encourage respondents to describe their firm's practices, rather than their own personal values, we instructed respondents to "tell us what your firm would do . . . *not* . . . what *you* would do." To control for assumptions that respondents might make about the profile attorneys, we told respondents to assume that *in every scenario* the attorney: (a) came to your law firm straight out of law school; (b) has worked at your law firm for 5.5 years; and (c) has requested to work 30 h per week for 2 years, with periodic reviews as necessary to ensure that the part-time arrangement is satisfactory for all concerned. (The first two assumptions describe a typical law firm associate who might request part-time work. The

third describes a work schedule that, anecdotal evidence suggests, is typical of part-time attorneys and neither sure to be accepted, nor sure to be rejected.) At the conclusion of the survey, we asked respondents to indicate whether they: (a) were male or female; (b) were partners or associates; and (c) currently worked part-time or had ever worked part-time as an attorney.

Dependent Variable: Approval

Following the presentation of each scenario, we asked respondents "How likely is your firm to approve [Attorney name's] request to work part-time?" Respondents answered using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Extremely unlikely (less than 10% chance)" to "Extremely likely (greater than 90% chance)." The grand mean (the mean of each respondent's mean Approval rating) was 4.08 ($SD = .92$).

Independent Variables

The two representative attorney profiles that follow illustrate the operationalization of the predictors specified in our hypotheses.

Lillian [Gender] has requested to work part-time in order to spend more time taking care of her newborn child [Reason]. Lillian is one of the only attorneys working in an important specialty area of the firm and would be difficult to replace [Ease of Replacement]. She has received uniformly positive performance reviews during her years at the firm; partners are consistently very impressed with her work [Performance]. Lillian's request to work part-time is accompanied by a letter of support from one of the most powerful senior partners in the firm [Organizational Connections]. Lillian has indicated that if she is not allowed to work part-time, she will leave the firm [Dependency Threat].

Robert [Gender] has requested to work part-time in order to spend more time writing a novel [Reason]. Robert is one of several attorneys working in an important area of the firm and would be relatively easy to replace [Ease of Replacement]. He has received mixed performance reviews during his years at the firm; most partners are critical of his work, but some are quite impressed [Performance]. Robert's request to work part-time is accompanied by a letter of support from one of the firm's newest junior partners [Organizational Connections]. Robert has not indicated whether he will stay at the firm if he is not allowed to work part-time [Dependency Threat].

Our operationalizations of the predictors are self-explanatory, with the possible exception of Reason for Seeking Part-Time Work. For three reasons, we chose a request "to work part-time in order to spend more time writing a novel" as the alternative to a request "to work part-time in order to spend more time taking care of [a] newborn child." First, working part-time to write a novel is not institutionally supported. (In contrast, of course, working part-time to take care of a child *is* institutionally supported.) Second, writing a novel is typical of the diverse reasons attorneys may seek part-time work (American Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession, 1990; Dusky, 1989) and thus was credible to our attorney sample. And third, an individual's at-home, nonfirm,

part-time work on a novel is very unlikely to be of direct benefit to a firm. In contrast, an individual's (nonfirm, part-time) work teaching a law school class, working pro bono, or serving as a special prosecutor—alternative reasons for working part-time that we considered, but ruled inappropriate for our scenarios—may be of direct benefit in attracting clients to the firm. A firm may gain institutional conformity and credibility by allowing an attorney to work part-time to take care of a child, but a firm is unlikely to attract clients as a direct result of allowing an attorney to work part-time for this reason. Accordingly, we deemed the juxtaposition of part-time work to take care of a child and part-time work to write a novel as a viable operationalization of a reason for working part-time that is institutionally supported versus a reason for working part-time that is not institutionally supported.

For data analysis, the predictors were coded as follows: Variable performance (0), high performance (1); easy-to-replace (0), difficult-to-replace (1); weak organizational connections (0), strong organizational connections (1); uncertain dependence threat (0), high dependency threat (1); male attorney (0), female attorney (1); novel writing (0), childcare (1).

Analyses

To test our hypotheses, we performed within-subject analyses. We contrast-coded (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) the six predictors and then separately regressed each respondent's outcome measures on the predictors and hypothesized interactions. While this procedure permits statistical tests of significance of regression weights for each respondent and is widely used, policy-capturing studies typically report no statistical tests of hypothesized predictor–outcome relationships *across* subjects' regressions. We used bootstrapping to provide such a test (Efron, 1979; Mooney & Duval, 1993). We compiled the regression coefficients for each predictor from all of the participants' regression equations and then randomly sampled these regression coefficients (with replacement), selecting samples of 200 regression coefficients 500 times. We then calculated the average regression coefficient for each of the 500 samples. Next, we calculated the standard error of the 500 average regression coefficients and used this in the *t* test formula for mean differences from 0: the average regression coefficient (from the 200 original respondent equations) divided by the standard error. This procedure provides a test of the strength and consistency of the results across the entire sample.

RESULTS

Tests of Hypotheses

The results of the tests of our hypotheses appear in Table 1. The table lists the average, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation of individual respondents' regression weights for each of the 10 predictors (that is, for each of the 6

TABLE 1
Results of Hypothesis Tests

	Performance	Replacement	Connections	Threat	Threat × Performance	Threat × Replacement	Threat × Connections	Gender	Gender × Threat	Gender × Replacement	Gender × Connections	Reason
Average <i>B</i>	.39***	.17***	.24***	.00	.02***	.02***	.02***	.11***	.43***	.08***		
Minimum <i>B</i>	-0.02	-0.27	-0.20	-0.34	-0.16	-0.20	-0.23	-0.33	-0.27	-0.16		
Maximum <i>B</i>	1.44	.81	1.29	.44	.19	.20	.19	.86	2.06	.73		
<i>SD B</i>	.25	.16	.21	.08	.06	.07	.06	.16	.43	.14		
Average <i>r</i> ²	.23	.06	.11	.01	.01	.01	.00	.04	.26	.02		
Minimum <i>r</i> ²	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00		
Maximum <i>r</i> ²	1.00	.50	.94	.22	.05	.07	.04	.33	1.00	.33		
<i>SD r</i> ²	.21	.08	.15	.02	.01	.01	.01	.07	.28	.05		
Percentage significantly positive	79.19%	39.09%	52.28%	3.05%	2.54%	4.57%	3.05%	22.34%	68.02%	13.71%		
Percentage significantly negative	0.00%	1.02%	0.00%	1.02%	.51%	.51%	2.03%	1.02%	.51%	1.02%		

*** $p \leq .001$

orthogonal predictor variables and for the 4 interaction variables). Also shown is the average percent of explained variance in the outcome measure (Approval) attributable to each predictor (r^2) as well as the minimum r^2 , maximum r^2 , and standard deviation. Finally, the table lists the percentage of respondents' regression equations in which each predictor is, respectively, significantly positively and significantly negatively related to Approval. The results are based on an n of 197; three surveys showed no within-subject variability in Approval and were dropped from the analyses.

The results reported in Table 1 provide ample support for our hypotheses. All of the predictors were significantly related to respondents' Approval ratings. Reason and Performance were the strongest predictors, accounting for an average of 26 and 23%, respectively, of the variance in Approval. Organizational Connections followed, explaining an average of 11% of the variance in Approval. In order of importance, the remaining significant predictors of Approval were Ease of Replacement (explaining an average of 6% of the variance in Approval), Gender (explaining an average of 4% of the variance in Approval), the interaction of Gender and Reason (explaining an average of 2% of the variance in Approval), and the interactions of Threat with Performance, Ease of Replacement, and Organizational Connection (each of which explained an average of 1% of the variance in Approval). On average, the 10 predictors of Approval (the 6 attorney characteristics and 4 hypothesized interactions) together explained 73% of the variance in Approval (range, 22 to 100%; SD , 15%). Thus, the attorneys were generally quite consistent in weighing the independent variables to formulate their Approval ratings.

Exploratory Analyses

Why did some respondents report that their firms were quite likely to accept employees' requests for part-time work, while other respondents reported that their firms were unlikely to accept employees' requests for part-time work? To begin to address this question, we explored the relationship between each respondent's mean Approval rating and the following variables: (a) respondent gender; (b) respondent rank as a partner or as an associate; (c) respondent's current or prior experience of former part-time work; (d) the reported percentage of female attorneys in the respondent's firm; (e) the reported percentage of female partners in the respondent's firm; and (f) the billable hours standard in the respondent's firm. Women's and men's mean Approval ratings did not differ significantly. Partners' mean Approval ratings ($M = 4.30$) were, however, significantly higher than associates' mean Approval ratings ($M = 3.87$) ($p < .01$). Further, the Approval ratings of respondents who were working part-time at the time of our survey or who had worked part-time in the past ($M = 4.49$) were significantly higher than the Approval ratings of respondents who had never worked part-time ($M = 4.02$, $p < .05$). Firm characteristics were not significantly related to respondents' mean Approval ratings. That is, respondents' mean

Approval ratings were not significantly related to the percentage of female associates in respondents' firms, the percentage of female partners, or the firms' billable hours standards.

In formulating their Approval ratings, why did some respondents weigh some of the predictors (e.g., Organizational Connections) more heavily than did other respondents? To begin to address this question, we conducted a second set of exploratory analyses, correlating respondents' regression weights for the six predictors with the three measures of respondents' personal characteristics. Only 3 of the resulting 18 correlation coefficients were statistically significant. Respondents who were partners weighed Performance more than respondents who were associates ($r = .32, p < .001$). Similarly, male respondents weighed Performance more than female respondents ($r = -.17, p < .05$). (Note that respondent gender and partner–associate status were correlated -0.21 ; men were significantly more likely to be partners than were women. When we regressed the Performance regression weights on both respondent gender and respondent partner–associate status, only partner–associate status was significant.) In addition, female respondents weighed Organizational Connections significantly more than did male respondents ($r = .21, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The results support the application of dependency theory to the study of requests for part-time work. As predicted, respondents reported that their firms would be most likely to approve requests to work part-time from high-performing, difficult-to-replace, and/or well-connected employees. Further, respondents reported that if these employees threatened to quit if their requests to work part-time were denied, their requests to leave would be significantly more likely to be approved. Conversely, threatening to quit significantly decreased the likelihood that requests from poor-performing, easy-to-replace, and/or poorly-connected attorneys would be approved, respondents reported. The research results evince the generalizability of dependency theory. Not only are employers relatively likely to allocate pay raises to the employees upon whom they are dependent (Bartol & Martin, 1989, 1990), law firm employers are—our respondents suggest—also relatively likely to accommodate these employees' wishes to work part-time.

The results also support the application of institutional theory to the study of requests for part-time work. As predicted, respondents reported that their employers would be more likely to approve women's requests to work part-time than men's and also more likely to accept requests to work part-time to take care of a child than to write a novel. Further, as predicted, the interaction of employee gender and the reason an employee sought to work part-time had a significant effect on attorneys' ratings of their firms' likely approval of requests to work part-time; survey respondents reported that women's requests to work part-time to take care of a child would be more likely to be approved than either (a) men's

requests to work part-time for the same reason or (b) men's or women's requests to work part-time to write a novel.

Our exploratory analyses of the relationship of respondent characteristics to respondents' mean Approval ratings and to the regression weights for the independent variables yielded relatively few significant findings. In general, attorneys' responses differed little as a function of the individual and firm characteristics we assessed (gender, partner or associate status, current or former part-time work, percentage of female attorneys in the firm, percentage of female associates in the firm, billable hours standard). Four significant findings do, however, bear mention. First, having had their own requests for part-time work accepted, current or former part-timers considered the approval of part-time work requests significantly more likely than did respondents who had never worked part-time at their firms. Second, partners described the approval of part-time work requests as significantly more likely than did associates. Thus, as in our prior qualitative research (Klein et al., 1992), partners presented a more favorable picture of their firms' part-time policies and practices than did associates. Third, in formulating their Approval ratings, partners weighed attorney performance significantly more heavily than did associates. Thus, partners described their firms' decisions to allow an attorney to work part-time as more rational (that is, as more performance-based) than did associates. And, finally, women rated organizational connections more heavily than did men. Despite women's movement into law in recent decades, the senior ranks within law firms remain quite male dominated. Accordingly, female attorneys are likely to have fewer organizational connections to senior partners than do male attorneys (cf., Ibarra, 1993). Relatively lacking in organizational connections, women may find these connections more salient than do men. Accordingly, women may perceive such connections to be more critical for attorneys seeking to win special privileges (e.g., a part-time work schedule) in their firms than do men.

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation of our study is our inability—given the anonymity of individual respondents' and their firms' identities—to test the within- and between-firm variability of our findings. Thus, we cannot test whether attorneys working in the same firm agree in their assessments of their firm's part-time practices. Further, because requests for part-time work remain rare in law firms, we asked attorneys to describe how their firms *would respond* to differing requests for part-time work, not how their firms *had responded* to such requests in the past. This, too, may raise questions about the validity of respondents' descriptions of their firms. We chose this strategy for data collection because: (a) many of the factors of interest in this study are not factors that would be incorporated into a formal organizational policy, and yet we believed that they would carry weight; (b) most firms do not have large numbers of people requesting part-time status, and determining within-firm patterns based on very

small within-firm sample sizes was problematic; and (c) the complete details surrounding a given personnel decision are unlikely to be made available to outside researchers, both because of confidentiality concerns and because of concerns that nonflattering aspects of a firm's decision process could come to light. In addition, the generalizability of the findings to organizations other than law firms and to employee requests for employment changes other than a shift to part-time work is an open question. Finally, although policy-capturing has many strengths as a research methodology, its use limits the number of predictor variables that may be assessed orthogonally. Factors that we did not manipulate in the policy-capturing survey (e.g., the nature of an employee's work, the timing of the employee's request) may play a role in shaping employers' likely responses to employee requests for part-time work. While these limitations are important, this study is among the first to explore employee requests to shift from full-time to part-time work. Given the increasing prevalence of such requests, our research represents a timely and useful addition to the literature.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Attorneys believe, our results suggest, that law firms are most likely to accept requests to work part-time from high-performing, difficult-to-replace, well-connected women who seek part-time work for child care reasons and who threaten to leave if they are not allowed to work part-time. Additional research is needed, as we have noted, to verify and replicate these conclusions both in law firms and in other organizations. Our results do, however, shed light on attorneys' shared perceptions of law firms' typical practices regarding requests for part-time work. Attorneys' perceptions of the likelihood that different employees' requests for part-time work will be accepted may influence attorneys' personal interest in and willingness to request part-time work. For example, a full-time male attorney who has received satisfactory but not outstanding performance ratings and who believes that he would be easy to replace may not request part-time work even if he would truly prefer such a schedule. He may believe his request would be futile. If employees' perceptions of their firms' likely responses to requests for part-time work do in fact influence employees' actual requests for part-time work, then employees' perceptions may not only reflect, but ultimately shape, firms' policies in practice. Surely who asks for part-time work influences, in part, who gets it.

Given the paucity of prior research on requests for part-time work and the likelihood that requests for part-time work and for other flexible work schedules will increase in coming years, our findings provide a useful beginning and point of departure for additional research. For example, our research results may prompt new research not only on employers' decisions to allow requesting employees to work part-time, but also on the consequences of voluntary part-time work. What, for example, are the consequences of working part-time for employer dependence on the employee? If a high-performing, difficult-to-replace,

well-connected employee requests and receives part-time work, perhaps the employer's dependence on the employee diminishes over time, as a function of the employee's part-time schedule. If so, a shift from full-time to part-time work may engender a loss of employee power within the employee–employer relationship. Alternatively, the employer's dependence on the employee (and thus the employee's power) may grow with a shift from full-time to part-time work because the employee is less available to the employer than before his or her shift to part-time. Further, dependency is not a constant. Projects come and go and have critical moments and less critical moments. Some businesses (e.g., accountants, construction companies) have “busy seasons” in which the majority of their work for the year is accomplished. Economic conditions and a tight labor market can make it virtually impossible to replace an employee. In each of these cases, it could be a significant hardship to have a valued employee reduce to part-time status. However, it might be a more significant hardship in the long run to lose the employee altogether. Future research should address the nature and consequences of variation in the strength of the employer–employee dependence relationship.

Given that institutional support is greatest for part-time work for mothers, what are the consequences of working part-time for other groups? This too is an important topic for future research. Perhaps men who buck institutional trends and work part-time to take care of their children experience more negative career consequences than women who work part-time for the same reason. If so, to what extent does employer dependence on the male part-timer—for his performance, difficult-to-replace skills, and/or organizational connections—mitigate the negative consequences of defying institutional norms? Further, our results suggest that women may have greater access to part-time work than do men, even if the women seek part-time for reasons other than taking care of a child. Additional research is needed, however, to examine the differing experiences and reactions of childless women and women with children to family-friendly alternative work arrangements, such as part-time work.

The limitations of our study also provide avenues for future research. For example, research on the accuracy of employees' perceptions of the reasons for part-time (and other personnel) decisions would be both theoretically useful (in determining the extent to which surveys of employees about personnel practices are warranted) and also practically useful (in providing employers with information about unintended consequences of personnel decisions due to the interpretations of those decisions by other employees).

Our study also is limited to professional positions, specifically attorneys. This is a profession in which a person can move to part-time status, with a reduced salary, and still live comfortably. Many people—and especially single parents—in other professions may be unable to do so. Single parents in nonprofessional positions may in fact be the individuals who would most like to reduce their work hours, but who can least afford to do so. Barham et al. (1998) found

that requests for reduced working hours were more likely to be approved for subordinate than for managerial employees. Thus, those least likely to be able to afford the cut in pay associated with a shift from full-time to part-time work may be most likely to have the opportunity to work part-time. Additional research is needed regarding part-time work among nonprofessional employees.

Finally, research is needed to examine whether our findings generalize to employee requests for other changes in working conditions and to other reasons for such changes. One can, for example, readily imagine an employer approving an employee's requests for work at home, additional responsibilities, or special training if the employer is highly dependent on the employee. Further, institutional norms and employer dependence may influence an employer to allow an employee to take time off to care for an elderly parent—particularly, our results suggest, if the requesting employee is a high-performing, difficult-to-replace, well-connected female. We should note, however, that Barham and her colleagues (1994) found that employee requests for alternative work arrangements to care for an elderly parent were less likely to be approved than employee requests for alternative work arrangements to care for a child.

Conclusion

Dependency theory and institutional theory offer novel and complementary perspectives on likely employer responses to a new but increasingly common question in today's workplace: "May I work part-time?" Supporting these theories, our results suggest that employers are most likely to accept requests for part-time work from high-performing, difficult-to-replace, well-connected women who seek part-time work in order to take care of a child. Dependency theory and institutional theory may also shed light on employers' responses to related employee questions: "May I work at home? May I work flextime? If I take a leave of absence, will you hold my job?" Our study suggests numerous promising avenues for future research on part-time work, on other alternative work arrangements such as telecommuting and flextime, on employers' dependency on employees, and on employees' perceptions of their firms' human resource policies.

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