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# Identifying the Family, Job, and Workplace Characteristics of Employees Who Use Work-Family Benefits\*

Mary Secret\*\*

*A contextual effects perspective is used to identify family, job, and workplace characteristics associated with the use of work-family benefits by 527 employees in 83 businesses. Parents of dependent children are no more likely than other employees to use benefits but particular family problems predict female employee use of paid leave and mental health benefits. Workplace size, sector, and culture are better predictors of employee use than are employee job characteristics.*

The feminization of the workplace and the escalating competition for highly skilled workers in a global economy have prompted employers and policy makers to address the home and workplace challenges confronting today's workforce. Community and public policy interest in family-friendly workplaces continues to mount as discussion about family leave time and day care services moves from the kitchen table to executive office suites and to the House and Senate floor (Ferber & O'Farrell, 1991; Hansen, 1991; Thompson & Williams, 1995). Many employers have invested in an assortment of policies and benefits that support employees in balancing job and family responsibilities. Over the past 50 years, "employers have progressed from providing no benefits, to providing a standard package of benefits for a male-supported family, to providing innovative and flexible benefits to meet differing family needs" (Wiatrowski, 1995, p. 41). And, in 1993, the federal government acknowledged work-family benefits as part of the legitimate compensation owed to individuals for workplace labor or service by enacting the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Despite the recent attention to the family responsive workplace, little is known about actual employee utilization of work-family benefits. The current study addresses this gap by using a contextual effects perspective to identify the family, job and workplace characteristics associated with employees who use a variety of work-family benefits within a wide range of businesses and organizations. Knowledge about employees who use these benefits can assist family practitioners, employers, and human resource managers in identifying the reach of existing family-oriented workplace policies, the employee groups who need special attention, and the policies and practices that are 'user friendly'. The study also provides a framework to address future questions in the work-family policy and research area.

## Literature Review

The array of family-oriented workplace policies can be categorized into four major benefit areas: (a) alternative work arrangements, (b) leave time allowances, (c) mental health/wellness programs, and (d) dependent care services (Bureau of National Affairs, 1986; Ferber & O'Farrell, 1991; Galinsky, Friedman, & Hernandez, 1991; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). Alternative work arrangement policies include the modification of daily start and stop times, compressed work week, part-time work, job-sharing, and tele-commuting, all on a regular basis. Leave time policies and practices range from the federally mandated FMLA, to Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) plans, to informal arrangements of a few hours or a few days off, with or without pay, available on an ad hoc basis. Mental health and wellness services include Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's), stress management workshops, and seminars on family related issues.

Dependent care initiatives can be on-site child care centers, vouchers to subsidize child care costs, pretax credit accounts for child care reimbursement, or information referral services for dependent care facilities and resources.

Family-oriented workplace policies are expected to comprise the fastest growing employee benefits category in the coming decades (Cook, 1987; Judy & D'Amico, 1997). However, the proliferation of such benefits by employers does not automatically assure adequate or full utilization by employees. In fact, underutilization can be a serious problem for both employers and employees. The closing of on-site child care centers in the 1970s due to underutilization (Ferber & O'Farrell, 1991), was a costly experiment for the employers and muddled the discourse about who needs and who should be responsible for child care in this country. At the same time, employees stand to lose valuable resources that could enhance individual and family well-being by not taking advantage of needed and available work-family benefits.

## Availability and Advantages of Work-Family Benefits

Information about the employees who use work-family benefits is conspicuously absent in the major literatures on family-oriented workplace policies. These literatures focus on the availability of benefits throughout the workforce, on the advantages of work-family policies for employees and their families, or on 'bottom-line' advantages for business and industry. The Employee Benefits Surveys (EBS) conducted annually by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 1992) provides the most extensive data about the distribution of benefits to employees by occupational status and across size and sector of employment establishments. We know from this source that professional employees, and those in large businesses and in the public sector, have more access to benefits than their counterparts in the smaller or private sector organizations. However, EBS defines benefit participation as "those who are currently covered by the benefit plan" (Wiatrowski, 1996, p. 11), a definition that does not specify whether or not covered employees actually use any of the benefits available to them.

Several studies about employee and family well-being (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1997; Ferber & O'Farrell, 1991;

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\*\*Address correspondence to: Mary Secret, Assistant Professor, College of Social Work, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 40506.

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Friedman & Galinsky, 1992; Gonyea, 1993; Landauer, 1997; MacDermid & Williams, 1997; Parker, 1994) contribute to the accumulating evidence of the powerful and pervasive effects of supportive workplace policies and cultures on family well-being. However, these studies do not delineate employees who use the benefits from the employees who do not in these supportive workplaces. Many 'bottom-line' studies, within the organizational management and family policy literatures, indicate that family-friendly benefits provide a competitive edge to businesses in attracting and retaining highly productive employees (Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Galinsky, Friedman, & Hernandez, 1991; Parkinson, 1995; Solomon, 1994). Again, most of these studies do not specifically address employee utilization and leave unanswered the question as to whether the actual use of benefits—or the mere existence of the benefit options within a company—account for the positive employer outcomes (Starrels, 1992).

### *Benefit Utilization*

Existing research about employees who use work-family benefits is limited in the scope of benefits and in the range of organizations studied (Pitt-Catsoupes & Googins, 1999; Kraut, 1990). For example, information about employee utilization of a single benefit item, unpaid family and medical leave, can be found in the evaluation of the FMLA which reports that between 1.75 and 2.5 million employees, or 3.6% of the private-sector employees, took leave under the FMLA (Commission on Family and Medical Leave, 1996). In this study, leave taking employees were more likely to be female, to be between the ages of 35 and 49, to be African American or Latino, to have a mid-range of income between \$20,000 and \$30,000 annually, and to have dependent children. Other studies, however, indicate that males use work-family benefits as much as women and suggest that the utilization of work-family benefits may extend beyond the population of employed mothers (Collingswood, 1996; Thomas & Thomas, 1990). While some evidence shows that employees who use work-family benefits are more satisfied and productive than those who do not (Landauer, 1997), other investigations (Gonyea, 1993; Grover & Crooker, 1995) find no differences in positive attitude and attachment to the organization between users and non-users of benefits.

Overall, national work-family experts have rated employee use of the available work-family benefits as very poor (Solomon, 1994). These experts speculate that the attitudes and values of both employer and employees about work-family issues develop into an 'organizational culture' that greatly influences whether employees will choose to use or not use the benefits offered by employers (Barnett, 1999; Solomon, 1994). Two recent studies illustrate how 'organizational culture' is manifested. The first study found that, in one large private sector company that promotes alternative work arrangements, managers were less willing to grant reduced work hours to males, to employees in managerial positions, and to employees without dependent children (Barham, Gottlieb, & Kelloway, 1998). The second study, again within a single large company, found that "all people of color were more likely than Whites to have a supervisor turn down their request to use one of the benefits . . . and that the least well paid and those who had not been with the company long, were less likely to benefit from them [the policies]" (Kiser, 1998, p. 5). Thus, even the few studies that are available provide inconsistent findings, particularly in regard to utilization by employee gender and occupational status, that further impede the

identification of patterns of employee use of work-family benefits.

In summary, we know that the distribution of work-family benefits across occupational status and types of employer organizations is uneven. We also have increasing evidence that a "company's introduction of family-oriented policies can result in positive gains for both the employee and the employer" (Gonyea, 1993, p. 26) and that organizational culture has some influence on whether employees use the benefits available to them. However, we have no systematic information about the employees who use work-family benefits, and, essentially no knowledge about employee utilization in either small businesses or in the non-profit sectors, the fastest growing areas of employment (Judy & D'Amico, 1997).

### *Current Study*

Guided by the contextual effects perspective articulated by Bowen and Pittman (1995), the present study undertakes a comprehensive and systematic examination of employees who use work-family benefits in several organizations in one community. A contextual effects perspective is a theoretically based approach that looks to both macro and micro settings, circumstances, or processes to explain individual behavior. Two theoretical frameworks, role theory and the job demands model, are especially helpful in selecting and organizing variables into a contextual model to predict employee utilization of work-family benefits (Pleck, 1995). Furthermore, both frameworks include an array of family, employee, and workplace characteristics that have also been associated with the availability and advantages of work and family benefits (Ferber & O'Farrell, 1991; Friedman & Galinsky, 1992; Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Glass & Fujimoto, 1995; Hansen, 1991; Idson, 1990; Kraut, 1992; Mercer, 1996; Moen, 1992; Osterman, 1995; Perlow, 1995; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990).

Role theory, and, specifically the 'asymmetrically permeable' hypothesis, suggests that individual behavior is scripted by the social norms and expectations inherent in specific roles. The 'asymmetrical balance' aspect refers to gender differentiated scripts enacted by males and females (Pleck, 1977). Thus, individuals who are actively involved in the family roles for whom work-family benefits are promoted should be more inclined to use these benefits and, female parents, traditionally the primary family caregivers, should be the most likely of all employees to use benefits. Three hypotheses derived from role theory: H1: employees who fulfill roles associated with work-family benefits, i.e. employed parents, particularly mothers, with dependent children, are more likely to use the benefits than employees in other types of families; H2: employees who experience problematic situations originating in their family roles, i.e. those with family-related crises or child-care related problems, have a greater probability of using work-family benefits; H3: employees who express non-traditional attitudes toward paid work and family roles and who identify employee benefits as an important factor in their decision to work are more inclined to use work-family benefits because they recognize the appropriateness and the merit of work-life benefits.

The job demands model, the second theoretical framework, looks to the workplace conditions and structure, rather than family roles, to account for particular family outcomes and is especially appealing to those advocating for family responsive workplaces (Pleck, 1995). Although somewhat inconsistent with the findings of two previous studies (Barham et al., 1998; Com-

mission on Family and Medical Leave, 1996), the job demands model nevertheless predicts the following hypotheses: H4a: employees in jobs characterized by higher occupational status and income, and H4b: employees with greater attachment to their employer, i.e. employment intention, evaluation, years on the job, are more likely to use benefits because they experience a greater sense of power and entitlement from their work situations than those in more vulnerable work settings; H5a: employees in large organizations are more likely to use work-family benefits because of greater employee anonymity and a longer tradition of these benefits in larger work settings, and H5b: employees in the public and non-profit sectors are more inclined to use work-family benefits because they are less concerned with 'bottom line' issues than their counterparts in the for-profit sector; and H6: a positive workplace culture increases the likelihood that employees will use benefits because it provides the support and latitude necessary for employees to take advantage of what is available to them.

## Research Methodology

### Sample and Procedure

The availability sample reported in this article came from the second phase of a two-part study about family-friendly policies and benefits in one community. Eighty-eight businesses and organizations, out of 325, who were associated with a local community initiative to develop family responsive work places responded to a mail survey asking about the work-family policies and practices offered by their organization. Most (94%) of the organizations who responded to the original mailing provided access to their employees, via employee mailboxes, notices, or payroll mailings, for the researcher to extend written invitations to full-time employees to participate in a telephone survey on the employee perspective of work and family issues. Assurance of confidentiality was emphasized. Fourteen hundred employees, out of an estimated several thousand, volunteered to be interviewed by phone. Financial constraints necessitated limiting the sample size. Thus, 600 employees, proportionate to the gender, dependent care responsibilities, and size and sector of the employer organization of the employees who volunteered to participate, were selected for the survey. The survey, which took about 30 minutes to administer, was conducted by a university affiliated survey research center and included eight call-backs in an attempt to contact all 600 employees in the sample. Ultimately, surveys were completed with 527 respondents employed full-time in 83 businesses or organizations. Because larger organizations generate the greatest pool of employees, it is not surprising that the large businesses/organizations (>250 employees) generated most (60%) of the respondents for the employee sample. Likewise, the greater portion of employee respondents from the public and nonprofit sectors (73%) probably reflects the large percentage of workers in this community who are employed by the major employers in the area, the services industry and government (Lexington Chamber of Commerce, 1997). Compared to the estimates of their workforce provided in the employer survey, this availability sample of employees approximates the proportion of minorities (13%) and those less than 40 years of age ( $m = 41$ ) in these establishments but over represents females (72%), married employees (80%), and employees in professional/managerial occupations (72%).

## Measures

The development of the questionnaire instrument included conducting a focus group with volunteer employee representatives who provided input to the researcher on questionnaire format and terminology. Some of the focus group suggestions that were incorporated in the final questionnaire design were: (a) reminding respondents several times during the interview that the survey was being conducted by a university group and NOT by or for the employer; (b) using the term 'benefits' rather than 'policy or practice'; and (c) asking if the employer 'offered' benefits and providing a 'don't know' choice rather than asking if the employee 'was aware' of benefits. The 190-item questionnaire was administered by phone to obtain information from employees about their knowledge of, use of, and need for work-family benefits and policies; their experiences with and attitudes about their workplaces and work-family issues; and general demographics. This study examines employees use, within the previous six months, of work-family benefits available to them via their current employer.

*Response variables.* Respondents were first asked to indicate, *yes*, *no*, or *don't know*, if their employer offered each of 15 family-related benefit items. The benefit items were derived from the list of family-friendly benefits identified by the Families and Work Institute (Galinsky et al., 1991) for research on the nature of work and family life. Only employees who responded positively to an offered benefit item were asked a follow-up question about whether they had used that particular benefit (*yes* or *no*) within the last six months. Because empirical clustering of variables allows for a more comprehensive approach to understanding the needs of parents in the workplace (Glass & Fujimoto, 1995), a varimax factor analysis solution reduced the 15 offered benefit items to four principal components. Items with loadings of .5 or better were retained and recoded (1 = *offered by employer*, 0 = *not offered by employer or employee didn't know*). The retained benefit items were placed in one of four benefit categories: (a) alternative work arrangements offered, (b) paid leave benefits offered, (c) child care benefits offered, and (d) mental health benefits offered. (See Table 1 for benefit categories, individual benefits items, item loadings, and number of respondents in each benefit category). Likewise, the follow-up items about whether employees used the offered benefit items were recoded (1 = *employee used benefit*; 0 = *employee did not use benefit*). Employees who scored 1 on either the work-at-home item or the used flextime item were placed in the use of alternative work arrangements benefits category (AWA); employees who scored 1 on the used seven or more (non-sick time) paid days for birth, adoption, or illness of family member item or on the occasional paid time for family emergencies item were placed in the use of paid leave benefits category (PL); employees who scored 1 for the use of on-site day care services item or for use of employer help in paying for day care item were grouped in the use of child care services category (CC); and employees who had a score of 1 on either the attended parenting workshops/classes item, or attended work-stress workshops/classes item, or used employee assistance programs item were placed in the use of mental health benefits category (MH). Unfortunately, due to the limited availability of child care, and the subsequent limited number of employees using this benefit, the child care benefit category was dropped from further analysis.

*Predictor variables.* Five *family role variables* associated with the types of family roles occupied by employees and three

Table 1  
*Factor Analysis Reduction of Individual Benefit Items into Work-Family Benefit Categories*

Benefit Category Items>Loading	Number and % of employees reporting any of the items offered in the benefit category (n = 527)		Number and % of employees reporting use of any of the items offered (n = 527)	
	f	%	f	%
Alternative Work Arrangement Benefits (AWA) 1. Employer offers flextime/.735 2. Employer allows employees to work at home/.729	343	65%	194	37%
Paid Leave Time Benefits (PL) 1. Employer offers 7 or more paid days for birth, adoption or illness of family member without having to use sick or vacation time/.655 2. Employer offers occasional paid time off for family emergencies that is not vacation or sick time/.761	390	74%	139	26%
Child Care Services Benefits (CC) 1. Employer helps pay for day care for employee dependents/.761 2. Employer offers on-site day care/.784	77	15%	9	1%
Mental Health Benefits (MH) 1. Employer offers parenting workshops or classes/.667 2. Employer offers work-stress workshops or classes/.683 3. Employer offers employee assistance programs for counseling about personal problems/.662	484	92%	156	30%

additional demographic variables were measured: gender (1 = *female*, 0 = *not female*); marital status (1 = *married/partnered*, 0 = *not married/partnered*); dependent children (1 = *has children <18 in the household*, 0 = *does not*); life stage phase (1 = *has pre-school age child, under 5*, 0 = *does not have pre-school age child*); employment status of spouse (1 = *employed full-time*, 0 = *not employed full-time*); race (1 = *minority*, 0 = *not minority*); educational level (1 = *high school or less*, 2 = *some college/vocational*, 3 = *college graduate or more*); and total household income (1 = *\$20,000/year*, 2 = *\$20–50,000/year*, 3 = *\$50,000/year*).

Four *family context* variables, reflecting employees' experiences within their family roles, were used. First, a past experience of family-related crisis was operationalized by asking respondents if they had experienced any of the following during their current place of employment: divorce, death of a loved one, family member a victim of a crime, runaway child, marital break-up, or family law incident. A positive response for any one of the experiences yielded a score of '1' for this variable, else a score of '0' was given. All questionnaire items were then summed so that a higher score indicated more family-related crises.

Second, a child-care related problems scale, based on items used in one of the earliest studies to assess child care and corporate productivity (Fernandez, 1986), produced a summated score from seven questions that asked respondents to report how problematic (1 = *no problem or not occurred*, 2 = *somewhat of a problem*, 3 = *major problem*) specific situations had been for them during the past six months: taking time off work to take a child to the doctor or dentist; taking time off work to attend school conference, performance, or other activity; taking time off work to deal with child's academic or behavior problem in school; loss of primary child care provider; arranging for school vacation/holiday child care; paying for child care; being satisfied with the quality of child care. Scores could range from 7 = *no problem*, to 21 = *major problems* with child-care related experiences. Alpha reliability for this scale was .73.

Third, the importance of personnel benefits, a dichotomous

variable, was operationalized by asking respondents whether or not the availability of personnel benefits is one of the reasons they work (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). The final family context variable, attitudes about gender-specific roles, was derived from an attitude measure used by Burden & Googins (1987) in their study on job and home life and operationalized by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement (1 = *agree*, 2 = *somewhat agree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *disagree*) for the following statements: men should earn the money and women should take care of the home; mothers who work outside the home can have just as good a relationship with their children as mothers who do not; child growth is negatively affected by long periods of time in day care. The item concerning mothers who work outside the home was recoded and all items were averaged into a gender-role attitude scale with a possible range of scores from 1 to 4 so that the lower mean score represented the more traditional attitude about roles in the workplace and in the home. Alpha reliability for this scale was .53.

Five *Employee Job Attributes* and three *Workplace Structure Characteristics* were identified for the hypotheses derived from the job demands model. Occupational status (1 = *professional/managerial*, 0 = *not professional/managerial*); salary level (1 = *\$20,000/year*, 2 = *\$20–50,000/year*, 3 = *\$50,000/year*); evaluation by supervisor (1 = *above average*, 0 = *average/below average*); years worked at current place of employment, a continuous variable; and employment intention (1 = *definitely intend to continue*, 0 = *unsure/plan to resign*) are the employee job attributes. The workplace characteristics are organizational sector, organizational size, and workplace culture. The organizational sector (1 = *private, for-profit*, 2 = *private, non-profit*, 3 = *public*) and organizational size (1 = *small (<50 employees)*, 2 = *medium (50–250 employees)*, 3 = *large (>250 employees)*) for each of the 83 businesses employing the respondents were initially specified by the employer organization in the employer survey. Then, based on the place of employment as reported by the respondent, the corresponding organizational sector and size category was appended to the employee data set for each employee.

Table 2  
Descriptive Statistics for Predictor Variables

Family Roles and other Demographic Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
female	379	72%
male	148	28%
Race		
non-minority	453	87%
minority	69	13%
Educational level		
high school or less	82	16%
some college/vocational	110	21%
college graduate or more	335	63%
Marital Status		
married/partnered	421	80%
not-married/not-partnered	106	20%
Dependent Children		
yes	374	71%
no	153	29%
Pre-School Stage		
yes	140	27%
no	387	73%
Employment Status of Spouse/Partner ( <i>n</i> = 425)		
employed full-time	360	85%
not employed full-time	65	15%
Total Household Income ( <i>n</i> = 495)		
low (under \$20,000/yr)	17	2.2%
mid- (\$20–50,000/yr)	175	35.2%
mid-high (greater than \$50,000/yr)	303	61.2%
Family Context Variables	<i>f</i>	%
Family-related crisis		
yes	274	52%
no	254	48%
Personnel benefit important reason to work		
yes	316	60%
no	211	40%
Traditional attitudes (1 = traditional; 4 = non-traditional)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	3.05	.76
Child-care related experiences (7 = no problems; 21 = major problems)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	8.24	1.66
Employee Job Attributes	<i>f</i>	%
Occupational status		
professional/managerial	377	72%
not professional/managerial	150	29%
Employment type		
hourly	178	34%
salaried	348	66%
Employment intention		
intends to continue at current place	477	91%
unsure or not plan to continue	49	9%
Salary level		
low (under \$20,000/yr)	56	11%
mid- (\$20–\$50,000/yr)	379	72%
mid-high (greater than \$50,000/yr)	92	17%
Evaluation by supervisor		
above average	397	75%
average or below average	130	25%
Yrs at place of employment (range = <1–32 yrs)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	9.9	7.5
Workplace Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Organization size		
small (less than 50 employees)	64	12%
medium (50–250 employees)	141	27%
large (over 250 employees)	312	60%

Table 2  
Continued

Workplace Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Organization sector		
for-profit	139	27%
private, non-profit	108	21%
public	270	52%
Workplace culture (1 = not supportive; 5 = supportive)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	4.4	1.05

Family-friendly workplace culture was conceptualized as the patterns of norms and attitudes within a workplace setting that relate to work-family issues (Ferber & O'Farrell, 1991). It was operationalized by asking employees to indicate whether particular individuals at their workplaces were *supportive* (code = 1) or *not-supportive* (code = 0) of family friendly policies: organization director or CEO, middle manager, immediate supervisor, clerical and support staff, and co-workers. The five items were summed to form a workplace culture index with scores that ranged from 1 = *non-supportive workplace culture* to 5 = *supportive workplace culture*. Alpha reliability was .65.

## Results

Table 1 shows that, with the exception of child care services, the majority (62–92%) of the respondents in this sample have access to work-family benefits and that a significant number of employees who have access to benefits have used them within the past six months. Of these, 194 out of 343 employees (57%) have used alternative work arrangements; 139 of 390 (36%) have used paid leave benefits; and 156 of 484 (32%) have used mental health benefits. The prevalence of work-family benefits in this sample is relatively consistent with the 1995 Bureau of Labor Statistics reports indicating that few employees have access to child care services, while alternative work arrangements, leave time, and mental health related benefits are more common (BLS, 1997).

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the predictor variables. As noted above, the majority of this sample are female, non-minority, married/partnered, with dependent children and whose spouses are employed full-time. Furthermore, the respondents are primarily middle-income professional/managerial employees, who are employed in large, public sector establishments. On average, they represent a stable productive workforce, having been with their current employer for almost ten years, intending to continue at their place of employment, and receiving above average performance evaluations. Most employees report having experienced a family related crisis and indicate that personnel benefits are one of the reasons they work. Child-care related experiences have not been particularly problematic (*M* = 8.24 on a scale of 7 to 21) in this sample of employees who report primarily non-traditional work-family attitudes (*M* = 3.05 on a 1 to 4 scale). The employees perceive their work environment as family friendly with a mean score of 4.4 (*SD* = 1.01) on a 5 point scale.

Bivariate analysis (chi-square and *t*-tests) were used initially to explore differences between each of the predictor variables and the response variables. Employees who reported that their employer offered alternative work arrangement benefits (*n* = 343) were selected for the tests between AWA and the predictor

variables. Likewise, employees who reported that their employers offered paid leave benefits ( $n = 390$ ) were selected for the PL tests and employees who reported the offering of mental health benefits ( $n = 484$ ) were selected for the MH tests. None of the family structure variables reached statistical significance for any of the benefit categories. A greater proportion of non-minority employees used FWA ( $\chi^2 = 4.11$ ;  $p = .03$ ) and employees with lower incomes ( $\chi^2 = 6.12$ ;  $p = .04$ ) and with some college or vocational education were associated with the use of MH benefits ( $\chi^2 = 7.06$ ;  $p = .02$ ). Employees who did not work for personnel benefits were associated with the use of AWA ( $\chi^2 = 6.82$ ;  $p = .006$ ) while employees who used PL reported more problems with child care experiences ( $t = 2.59$ ;  $p = .01$ ). Professional/managerial employees ( $\chi^2 = 5.09$ ;  $p = .017$ ) and those in salaried positions ( $\chi^2 = 8.86$ ;  $p = .002$ ) were more likely to report use of AWA while employees who intended to resign or were unsure of continuing in their place of employment were more likely to use MH ( $\chi^2 = 4.98$ ;  $p = .02$ ). Employees in smaller organizations ( $\chi^2 = 8.81$ ;  $p = .012$ ) and in the non-profit sector ( $\chi^2 = 12.88$ ;  $p = .002$ ) were associated with the use of AWA. Likewise, a greater portion of employees in smaller organizations ( $\chi^2 = 6.53$ ;  $p = .03$ ) and in non-profit sector ( $\chi^2 = 9.70$ ;  $p = .008$ ) used PL benefits. Employees who used PL also reported a more positive workplace culture ( $t = 2.23$ ;  $p = .02$ ). Employees in the profit and non-profit sectors ( $\chi^2 = 5.73$ ;  $p = .05$ ) were more likely to report use of MH than those in the public sector.

Some relationships were voided (between work for benefits, organizational size and AWA; between education level, employment intention and MH). Other relationships were uncovered (between non-traditional attitudes and PL; between child-care experiences and MH) when multivariate logistic analysis was used to determine the relative importance and independent effect of the predictor variables while controlling for the influences of the other variables.

Three separate logistic models were used to test the hypotheses, one for each of the three benefit categories. As in the bivariate tests, only those respondents who reported the availability of benefits in the particular categories were included in that respective regression model. In order to address the complexity of the data, a series of interactions were tested for each model in the following way. The key predictor variables of gender and marital status, which are intrinsic to the asymmetrical balance role theory, and household income and employee salary level, associated with the job demands model, were each interacted with those situations most likely to create a need for work-family benefits—pre-school age child, family-related crisis, and child-care experiences. Thus, the interaction terms of gender x pre-school age child, marital status x pre-school age child, household income x pre-school age child, and employee salary level x pre-school age child were entered with the main effects variables for each of the three benefit categories; the interaction terms of gender x family-related crisis, marital status x family-related crisis, household income x family-related crisis, and employee salary level x family-related crisis were similarly entered; and the interaction terms of gender x child-care experiences, marital status x child-care experiences, household income x child-care problems, and employee salary level x child-care experiences were also entered. Statistically significant interaction terms were retained in the final models (see Table 3.)

Despite the finding that employees with dependent children,

even pre-school dependents, are no more likely than other groups to use any of the benefits, Hypothesis 1 received some limited support. Gender predicts the use of PL and MH benefits given particular family circumstances: women who report more family-related crisis are 3.3 times more likely to use PL and women who report more child-care problems are 2.3 times more likely to use MH benefits. These findings also support H2, but, again, for only the PL and the MH benefit categories and only within certain employee groups: the more family-related crisis, the more likely women are to use PL and, the more child-care problems, the more likely women are to use MH benefits. Interestingly, employees in higher paying jobs who report more child-care problems are 1.43 times more likely to take advantage of MH benefits while, overall, employees with greater household incomes are 2.1 times less likely to use MH. The third hypothesis derived from role theory, H3, is not supported. Working for personnel benefits has no statistically significant effect on the use of benefits in any of the three categories and non-traditional attitudes does not effect the use of AWA or MH benefits. In fact, contrary to H3, employees who report non-traditional gender role attitudes are almost 1.5 times less likely to use PL benefits.

Turning to the hypothesis suggested by the job demands model, there is minimal support for H4a. Employees in higher paying jobs are 2.2 times more likely to use AWA. Otherwise, neither salary level nor occupational status of employees in this sample predicts utilization of any benefits. Due to the fact that none of the job attributes indicative of employer attachment predict benefit utilization, H4b is also not supported. However, consistent with H5a and H6, employees in larger organizations and those who report more positive workplace cultures are more likely to use PL than employees in smaller organizations and those in work sites that are less family-friendly. Organizational sector is a predictor for all three benefit categories. In support of H5b, employees in both the non-profit and public sector are more than twice as likely than those in the for-profit sector to take advantage of AWA benefits and employees in the non-profit sector are 1.18 times more likely than those in the for-profit sector to use PL benefits. However, a different pattern is observed for MH benefits in that employees in the public sector are less likely than those in the for-profit sector to utilize MH benefits.

## Discussion

This is one of the first research efforts to attempt a comprehensive and systematic examination of employee utilization of available work-family benefits. Guided by a contextual effects perspective, the study uses role theory and the jobs demand model to provide a conceptual base for locating individual employee behavior within the context of family and work settings. Overall, role theory is helpful in identifying important family variables associated with the use of paid leave and mental health benefits, but provides little insight into the use of alternative work arrangements. In fact, none of the family roles or family context variables, even in interaction, contributed to understanding employee utilization of alternative work arrangements in this sample. On the other hand, the job demands model is able to identify some important workplace characteristics for all three benefit categories.

Despite obvious sampling weaknesses that prevent generalizing the findings to other employee populations, the study nonetheless offers a framework for reviewing the existing literature and for posing questions to be addressed by more meth-

Table 3

Effects of Family, Job, and Workplace, Variables on Employees' Use of Flexible Work Arrangements, Paid Leave, and Mental Health Services

Predictor Variable	Use of Alternative Work Arrangements		Use of Paid Leave Benefits		Use of Mental Health Benefits	
	Logit Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Logit Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Logit Coefficient	Odds Ratio
<b>Family Roles and other Demographics</b>						
Gender	-.08	.92	-.17	.83	-6.52	.01
Marital Status	-.54	.58	-.20	.81	-.03	.96
Dependent Children	.34	1.40	.18	1.19	.20	1.22
Pre-school Stage	-.15	.85	.47	1.60	-.11	.89
Employment Status of Spouse	.37	1.50	.45	1.56	.54	1.68
Race	-.81*	.44	-.13	.87	.22	1.25
Education level	-.26	.76	.11	1.12	-.28	.75
Total Household Income	-.05	.94	-.29	.75	-.77**	.46
<b>Family Context</b>						
Family-related crisis	.02	1.02	-.42	.62	-.20	.81
Child-care experiences	.05	.98	.25**	1.28	-1.47**	.22
Work for benefits	-.32	.73	-.26	.77	-.21	.80
Non-traditional attitudes	.29	1.34	-.38*	.68	.18	1.19
<b>Employee Job Attributes</b>						
Occupational status	.23	1.26	-.29	.75	.53	1.71
Salary level	.79*	2.20	-.04	.95	-2.43	.08
Evaluation by Supervisor	-.25	.77	-.01	.98	-.18	.83
Yrs at place of employment	-.03	.97	-.01	.99	-.02	.97
Employment Intention	-.23	.79	.59	1.81	-.68	.50
<b>Workplace Structure</b>						
Organization sector (non-profit)	.88*	2.40	1.18*	3.27	-.34	.70
Organization sector (public)	.76*	2.14	-.33	.71	-.65*	.51
Organization size	-.10	.90	.65*	1.93	.18	1.20
Organization culture	.01	1.02	.35**	1.42	.05	.94
<b>Interaction Terms</b>						
Gender by family-related crisis	—	—	1.20*	3.33		
Gender by child care experiences	—	—			.87**	2.39
Salary level by child care experience	—	—			.36*	1.43
-2 log likelihood		416.06		439.00		548.09
Model Chi Square		39.35**		50.46***		51.08***
<i>n</i>		332		377		474
<i>df</i>		22		23		22

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

odologically rigorous investigations. Several key observations about this study population are consistent with findings from other investigations into related work-family issues. First, the finding that the family context from which social roles are enacted predicts employee utilization better than occupancy in the roles themselves echoes the mound of evidence within the women and well-being literatures which show that role experience rather than role occupancy accounts for individual outcomes (Barnett, 1999; Moen, 1992). Second, the finding that workplace structure characteristics are, across the board, better predictors of the use of work-family benefits than are the individual employee attributes contributes to the growing body of empirical evidence that macro level conditions exert a major influence on the work-family considerations of employees (Bond, et al., 1997; Galinsky & Stein, 1990; Glass & Fujimoto, 1995; MacDermid & Williams, 1997; Starrels, 1992). Data from this study are also consistent with those that indicate no relationship between employee use of benefits and employee attachment to the employer (Gonyea, 1993; Grover & Crooker, 1995). In other words, regardless of whether or not employees actually use the benefits, the fact that the employer offers work-family benefits may be enough to generate some positive outcomes for work organizations. The minimal effects of the individual employee job attri-

butes further suggests that when paid leave and mental health benefits are made available to employees, they are used equally by all segments of the workforce regardless of occupational status or salary level.

The findings pertaining to dependent children and gender in this study differ from those of the national study regarding use of unpaid family leave time (Commission on Family and Medical Leave, 1996). In the current sample, dependent children, even those of pre-school age, are not associated with the use of any benefits. While it is possible that the employees who use these benefits are attending to family members other than dependent children, i.e. needy spouses, adult children, or aging parents (Bond, et al., 1997), it is also likely that the benefits are attractive to employees for reasons totally unrelated to family responsibilities. The finding that gender is not a particularly strong predictor of work-family benefits in this sample, except under certain conditions, is consistent with other smaller studies that conclude that men use work-family benefits as much as women (Collingswood, 1996; Thomas & Thomas, 1990).

Two noteworthy findings that contradict the study hypotheses are: (a) employees with more traditional gender role attitudes are more likely to use work-family benefits; and (b) em-

ployees in the for-profit sector are more likely than those in the public sector to use mental health benefits. In regard to work-family attitudes, it may be that employees with traditional work-family attitudes are more sensitive to family needs than are employees with a less traditional orientation, and thus are more inclined to temporarily opt out of workplace responsibilities in order to take care of family emergencies or illnesses. And, it may be that employees in the public sector shy away from using mental health benefits, that are often available to them from within the public sector, for reasons of confidentiality.

These and other speculations about employee motivation for using or not using benefits are left unexplored in this study and, consequently, spark several questions for future investigation. For example, are employees in the non-profit sector more inclined to use alternative work arrangements and paid leave benefits because they perceive such benefits as due compensation for lower salaries? Do employees with less household income use mental health benefits because they have a greater need for mental health services, i.e. they experience more stress than higher income families, or because the mental health services provided through the workplace are generally less expensive than those that can be purchased elsewhere? At the same time, how does this finding about employees from lower household incomes coalesce with the finding that employees in higher paying jobs who experience more child-care problems also utilize more mental health benefits than other groups? Finally, why would workplace culture be a prominent factor in an employee's decision to use paid leave, but not in the decision to use alternative work arrangements or mental health benefits?

As noted above, a major limitation of this study is the response bias resulting from an availability sample. The sample was drawn from employees in businesses and organizations that were assumed to be 'family-friendly' because of their participation in a community initiative to develop family responsive workplaces. This of course, limits the pool of potential respondents to a select group of organizations. Of greater consequence is the volunteer nature of the sample. There is no way of knowing what motivated these specific individuals to respond to the study invitation or how their choice to participate impacts the findings. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that this sample of predominately female, dual earner couples, in professional/managerial positions, and with high household income have some special interest in work-family issues. Unfortunately, this sample does not include a greater portion of employees from lower-paying and non-professional jobs who continue to be not well-represented in work-family literatures but whose insight is particularly important in the current welfare-to-work era.

Another major limitation in this study is the removal of the child care benefit category from the data analysis, due to the small number of employees in the sample who have and use child care benefits. An expansion of the study to employees in more organizations should target child care benefits. Additional studies using more representative samples will also provide an opportunity to further develop the instruments and conduct validity and reliability tests for the measures.

### Practice Implications

For family practitioners, the awareness that a number of work-family benefits are available to and used by a wide range of employees strengthens the growing recognition that work is

central to adult identity and a major organizing framework for many clients' day to day experiences (Kurzman & Akabas, 1993). Furthermore, paid leave and mental health services can be considered potential resources for clients experiencing family-related crisis or child-care problems. Also, the findings suggest the reach of work-family benefits, particularly alternative work arrangements, extends to a segment of the workforce beyond employed parents and can be useful to employers who are concerned about equalizing benefits between actively parenting and non-parenting employees (Starrels, 1992). Moreover, the majority of respondents in the study possess employee characteristics that employers find desirable—above average performance evaluations, long work histories, a high educational level, and intentions to remain with their current employer. Insights about the broad appeal of work-family benefits can be incorporated into developing recruitment tools for a large cross-section of desirable employees.

The study can help family professionals and other advocate groups focus their attention and resources on employee groups who appear not to take full advantage of the family-oriented policies and practices available to them. For example, the fact that minorities and low-income groups in this and other studies (Kiser, 1998) are more likely to report less use of some available work-family benefits may alert family advocates to the possibility of discriminatory patterns in the work-family policy area. Similarly, because employees in the for-profit sector are the least likely to use the work-family benefits, family advocates can target for-profit sector businesses for intensified campaigns to increase employee utilization of available benefits. Furthermore, family professionals can promote the increased use of paid leave benefits by providing consultation and training to all businesses and organizations, but particularly to the smaller employers, in developing organizational cultures that support family-friendly policies and practices in the workplace.

Finally, community-oriented family professionals can use the study findings as baseline data to assess the overall growth of family-responsive workplaces on a local level. Repeated administrations of the survey instrument can chart community-wide increases or decreases in employee use of specific family-oriented workplace benefits over time and expedite appropriate responses by employers and policy-makers. The monitoring of employee utilization of work-family benefits can help detect the demographic and structural changes in future work-forces that will need the attention of family professionals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Mary Secret is Assistant Professor in the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. She teaches research methods and social policy and investigates family-friendly workplace policies and settings.

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