



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Workplace Flexibility and Daily Stress Processes in Hotel Employees and their Children

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Our research aims to understand the consequences of inadequate workplace flexibility through the lens of daily stress processes. Daily stressors are defined as relatively minor events arising out of day-to-day living, such as the everyday concerns of work, caring for others, and commuting between work and home. They can also refer to small, more unexpected events that disrupt daily life – “little” life events such as arguments with children, unexpected work deadlines, or a malfunctioning computer. There are two primary pathways through which daily stressors impact individual well-being: stressor exposure and stressor reactivity. Stressor exposure is the likelihood that an individual will experience a stressor based on combinations of individual and situational factors. Reactivity is the likelihood that an individual will show emotional or physical reactions to the stressors he or she encounters. Reactivity, therefore, is a dynamic process that links stressors and well-being over time. Previous research shows that people who are more reactive to daily stressors are more susceptible to physical disease than are people who are less reactive. We believe that inadequate workplace flexibility limits workers’ control and time to proactively plan daily responsibilities and thus increases stressor exposure and reactivity and undermines individual health. It is important to mention that the effects of daily stressors are not limited to the individual. Family members and close others may also bear the brunt of such stressors. For example, a worker experiencing a great deal of interpersonal tension at work may experience psychological distress that is transmitted home in the evening and regularly affects his/her spouse and children.

#### Research Findings

Using daily stress and emotional transmission paradigms, we examined the extent to which workers with low flexibility were exposed to more stressors, were more reactive to those stressors, and transmitted these stressful experiences to their children more often compared to workers with high flexibility. We did so by using a sample of hourly hotel employees and their children aged 10 to 18 who participated in a daily telephone diary study. In particular, we investigated the role of flexibility in daily stress processes of female minority hourly workers by addressing the following research questions:

- 1) *Does daily stressor exposure differ by levels of workplace flexibility?* Our findings showed a consistent pattern of hourly workers with low flexibility having greater stressor exposure to work stressors in general and to workplace arguments in particular. Workers with low flexibility had twice as many work arguments than workers with high flexibility. Arguments at work could be on the topic of flexibility, as some open-ended responses have revealed, or could be due to the lack of flexibility and potentially other less-desirable job conditions.
- 2) *Does daily stressor reactivity vary by workplace flexibility?* After stressors occurred, workers with low flexibility were more emotional and physically reactive to them. In conditions of low flexibility, daily workplace stressors were associated with higher negative

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affect and physical health symptoms on the same day. Thus, it seems that low flexibility can make coping with daily hassles at work more difficult, whereas high flexibility is a protective factor. A counterintuitive finding did emerge, however: For employees with high flexibility, the experience of stressors involving coworkers was linked to greater negative affect. Perhaps workplace flexibility may carry some burden when workers cover for flexing coworkers. This could be a sporadic finding, but it brings up an interesting notion; in some cases, high flexibility may not be protective. Future research should examine when high flexibility can be protective and to what point.

3) *Does daily stressor transmission from mothers to children occur depending on the level of flexibility?* Our analysis showed some evidence of stressor transmission when parents had low flexibility. Specifically, for mothers with low flexibility, the experience of work tensions was associated with negative affect in their children. Inadequate flexibility may diminish the energy needed to compartmentalize workplace stressors to the work setting. Future research should continue to explore the possibility of how parents' work experiences can be transmitted or "cross over" to children and how flexibility may be a resource when faced with negative work experiences.

## **Conclusions: Flexibility and Daily Stress Processes**

Increasingly in the past decade, researchers and policy makers have been interested in how flexibility is linked to stress and health. Flexible work policies have been associated with fewer stress-related health problems and better physical health. Little is known about the underlying mechanisms connecting flexibility and health. Our research suggests that increasing workplace flexibility could serve as a protective factor in exposure to stressors and/or how reactive an individual is to stressors that are inevitable in daily life. Workplace flexibility may also diminish the transmission of stress to family members. Unfortunately, often those who need flexible work arrangements the most do not have access to them. Women, less educated, and minority workers are less likely to have access. Low-income workers and hourly workers are less likely to get access. In order to address this important issue we encourage researchers and policy makers to consider a full range of workers and families when investigating and implementing work family policies.