

Public Abstract

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Title:The communicative construction of workplace flexibility stigma

Workplace flexibility is becoming more and more common in American workplaces. However, most of these policies are created for professional and white-collar workers. Scholars have argued that the “missing middle,” that is, workers who are neither in the professional class nor low-wage workers, are often ignored in formal policies. Scholars have argued that workers experience a stigma for using these policies; however, little is known about how this stigmatization process occurs. This dissertation employs a grounded theory methodology to analyze 29 semi-structured interviews with missing middle workers to understand how they communicatively construct workplace flexibility and its attending stigma. Analysis of the data suggested the missing middle constructed workplace flexibility by drawing upon macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. In doing so, my participants communicated a fine line between use and abuse of workplace flexibility policies based on a) the perception of a worker as lazy, b) the perception of a worker using flexibility too frequently, and c) the perception of a worker having a non-acceptable rationale for using flexibility. Thus, workers become stigmatized for being perceived to abuse, not use, the policies. Based on the data, I offer a ground theory of this flexibility stigmatization process, that includes: a) organizational norms surrounding flexibility, b) the use of workplace flexibility, c) talk surrounding flexibility, and d) stigma perceptions. I then offer potential ways this communicative process can be re-constituted and transformed by human resource personnel, managers, and workers to disrupt the cycle of workplace flexibility stigma.