

THE COMMUNICATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF
WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY STIGMA

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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July 2017

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THE COMMUNICATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF
WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY STIGMA

Presented by Jessica M. Rick

A candidate for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The number of people who deserve thanks for helping me through the time I have spent in graduate school and, in particular, writing this dissertation is impossible to count. I have received an incredible amount of support during this process, and I will take this space to speak to those who have made this project possible.

Matt, I never would have been able to complete this dream without your love and support. Thank you for understanding my late nights, crazy sleep schedule, random venting sessions, and putting up with my friends when all we talked about was school. Your sacrifices were noticed and I will try to do better. I can't wait to see what life has in store for us.

To my family: Words cannot express how much your support has meant to me these last few years. I am finally done with school. Yes, finally. I know we are moving even further away, but I am so thankful you understand why I do what I do despite wishing I lived closer to home.

To my cohort: We did it! I have learned more from all of you than anything else during this program. Your dedication to your research, teaching, and service made me want to be a better scholar. I will miss all of you like crazy, but thankfully we have conferences to catch up. Peter and Jackie, you are not in my cohort, but I can't imagine going through this program without either one of you.

To my advisor: Rebecca, thank you for being you. Looking back, I can't imagine having anyone else as my advisor. Not only from the academic talks, but I will always be thankful for our friendship. From going to movies, traveling to conferences, and the support you have given me as I struggled with managing my life, you have always been

someone I could turn to. Thank you for pushing me, giving me tough love, and being my cheerleader when things finally started to go right. You are the type of mentor and advisor I hope to become.

To my committee members: Dr. D, Debbie, you will always be Dr. D to me. Without your moral support, I would never have finished this program. Thank you for always being in my corner. Colleen, thank you for welcoming me into the IFC family. I always enjoyed the conversations and ideas we shared. Marilyn, thank you for agreeing to serve on a committee of someone you had never met. Your guidance was instrumental to this project.

Finally, to my participants: Thank you for sharing your stories. Without your willingness to share your experiences, this dissertation never would have happened. I do this for you so that your lives might become just a little bit better.

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ABSTRACT

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.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When you think of balance, there's work on one end of the fulcrum and life on the other, and when one is up the other is down — so it's a zero-sum game.

-Marcee Harris Schwartz, National Director of Diversity and Inclusion, BDO

Work-life, and more specifically, work-family has been conceived of as a balancing act for decades (see Golden, Kirby, & Jorgenson, 2006 for a discussion of this terminology). This balance metaphor has constituted a world where work and life conflict and compete for an individual's time. Existing scholarship on work-life addresses how such conflict is tied to work devotion and family devotion Discourses (Blair-Loy, 2003; Kirby, Wieland, & McBride, 2014), with some scholars suggesting that one result of these competing Discourses is flexibility stigma – the stigma workers experience when using flexibility policies (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). To further understand the influence of societal Discourses on flexibility policies, the moments of worker stigmatization for using such policies, and how such stigmas are constituted, this dissertation seeks to understand the communicative construction of workplace flexibility stigma.

To set up this project, this chapter begins by considering flexibility policies as they operate in workplaces in the United States. These policies are a precursor to flexibility stigma as workers experience moments of stigmatization when using flexibility policies. In doing so, I argue that current flexibility stigma research does not consider the stigmatization process itself nor does it take into consideration the experiences of the working class. Thus, this chapter also lays out the theoretical implications of this

dissertation by arguing the need to understand flexibility stigma from a communicative perspective as well as the experiences of working class individuals.

Workplace Flexibility Policies and Practices

In its most recent status report on workplace flexibility, the Families and Work Institute (Matos & Galinsky, 2011) found that most workers experience a time famine. That is, workers do not have enough time to do everything they wish to accomplish in terms of work and life. Over 60% of workers reported not having enough time to spend on themselves, over 65% of workers reported not having enough time to spend with their partners, and over 70% of workers reported not having enough time to spend with their children (Matos & Galinsky, 2011). Workers with high levels of flexibility options were less likely to experience time famine than workers with low levels of flexibility options. Sabattini and Crosby (2016) argued that flexibility policies allow workers to work the hours best suited for their individual work-life needs. Thus, flexibility policies have significant effects on work-life experiences and are the central focus of this dissertation.

Workplace flexibility has a variety of definitions (see Cowan & Hoffman, 2007). The most inclusive definition comes from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (2016):

Flexibility is about an employee and an employer making changes to when, where and how a person will work to better meet individual and business needs.

Flexibility enables both individual and business needs to be met through making changes to the time (when), location (where) and manner (how) in which an employee works. Flexibility should be mutually beneficial to both the employer and employee and result in superior outcomes.

Flexibility, then, focuses on the ways that individuals and organizations adapt to one another to create suitable working conditions. In other words, workplace flexibility often includes the *scheduling of hours* worked, the *amount of hours* worked, and the *place of work* (Danziger & Boots, 2008). Flexibility policies are ideally beneficial to both the organization and the individual (Matos & Galinsky, 2011; 2014).

Flexibility policies are beneficial to organizations for two primary reasons. First, these policies can create more productive and satisfied workers (Matos & Galinsky, 2011) which increases organizational productivity (Matos & Galinsky, 2014). Therefore, workplace flexibility is often used as a strategy for meeting organizational goals. Second, organizations can also use flexibility policies as a manifestation of organizational values because flexibility policies are more than a monetary issue; “it’s about morality” (Williams et al., 2013, p. 210). By implementing flexibility policies, organizations can communicate to their stakeholders their responsiveness to employees’ work-life concerns by offering policies, practices, and programs to help employees achieve work-life fit.

Flexibility policies are also perceived to be positive for workers. First, workers tend to view flexibility policies as one way to decrease their time famine by allowing them to work the hours that are best suited to their needs (Sabattini & Crosby, 2016). For example, some workers using flexibility policies are able to work from home and/or schedule their working hours to accommodate their non-work lives (Hill, Erickson, Holmes, & Ferris, 2010). Therefore, workers can spend their time the way they wish to if their work still gets done. Second, the use of flexibility policies leads to higher job satisfaction, less turnover intention, and better physical and mental health (Haar, Russo, Suñe, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014; Ilies, Wilson, & Miller, 2009). Thus, flexibility policies

have been shown to provide positive benefits to both the individual worker and the organization.

Although more companies than ever are offering flexibility policies as a way of coping with work and life demands while maintaining organizational productivity, workers are not taking advantage of these policies. Despite most workers in the United States being offered some sort of flexibility arrangements (statistics range from 85-95%), only 11% of workers who have flexibility offered to them, regularly use flexibility working arrangements (Matos & Galinsky, 2011). Of those workers who are offered flexible working arrangements, about 19% of workers reported never using them and 70% of workers reported only occasionally using these arrangements. Half of all employees believed that using flexibility policies could jeopardize their careers (Dominus, 2016; Matos & Galinsky, 2011).

In their national survey, Matos and Galinsky (2011) found that workers did not feel this pressure from their supervisors; rather, employees thought they would receive negative messages from their coworkers, clients, and organizational norms. Thus, just because organizational flexibility policies are in place does not mean workers will use those policies (Kirby & Krone, 2002). However, little is understood about why or how these organizational policies are going under-used. A key reason for the low numbers of flexibility use may be tied societal discourses such as the ideal worker Discourse, which assumes that work should be the priority in one's life (Blair-Loy, 2003). Kirby and Krone (2002) argued that more research is needed to understand the disconnect between formal organizational policies and the enactment of policies. This dissertation answers that call

by exploring how working class employees communicate about flexibility policies in the workplace and how these policies become stigmatized.

Flexibility Stigma

Williams and colleagues (2013) argued that workers experience a stigma when using a workplace flexibility policy; however, they do not fully define flexibility stigma nor have they yet connected it to existing stigma communication literature. Their definition of stigma occurs in two ways. First, workers who use flexibility policies describe receiving different rewards and punishments for their perceived use of flexibility policies, implying a stigma associated with certain flexibility use choices (Williams et al., 2013). For example, Rudman and Mescher (2013) found that men who request flexible working arrangements (FWAs) for family reasons are viewed as poor organizational citizens and are ineligible for organizational rewards (e.g., raises, promotions). Second, workers who use flexibility policies also experience general mistreatment at work such as being teased, put down, or excluded by coworkers (Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Existing research on flexibility stigma primarily has looked at gender (e.g., Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013). A few studies has considered social class (e.g., Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Dodson, 2013) as factors affecting flexibility stigma; however, most of this research has focused on “the poor” and “professional” workers. Little research on flexibility policies have focused on (a) the “missing middle” and (b) the flexibility stigmatization process itself. These two areas will now be discussed further.

The Missing Middle and Work-Life Research

The missing middle is the unmarked (Brekhus, 1998) social class in the United States. Skocpol (2000) dubbed the “missing middle” as the working men and women of modest economic means. In her book, she details how this missing middle is often forgotten in politics and policy discussions. For example, many people in the missing middle do not benefit from the Federal Medical Leave Act (FMLA) because they work in small businesses. Therefore, while creating this policy in the 1990s, policymakers largely ignored a large portion of working America. The missing middle are not poor – those who are often the subject of welfare reform – nor are the rich – they are unlikely to have stocks and follow the stock market and related policies closely. Thus, the missing middle fall somewhere in between the two.

The missing middle are defined by their characteristics. Skocpol (2000) argued that the clear majority of America makes between the poverty line for a four-person household (\$24,600) and the 75th percentile for income of a four-person family (roughly \$65,000¹). Similarly, Williams and Boushey (2010) defined the missing middle as Americans who are neither rich nor poor have a median annual income of \$64,000, earning between \$35,000 and about \$110,000 a year. The missing middle are slightly educated (i.e., no more than a baccalaureate degree), career-track employees in blue-collar and/or routine white-collar jobs (Williams et al., 2013). The missing middle are often labeled as the middle or working class (Skocpol, 2000); thus, their experiences are similar to those of the working class.

¹ Note, these numbers reflect 2016 estimates from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics.

Working class individuals experience work-life differently than professional workers (see Cowan & Bochantin, 2011; Dodson, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). However, most work-family research has focused on three dominant voices: the managerial or corporate voice, the traditional family, and middle/upper class, white, professional women (Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003). Recently, work-family researchers have called for a more nuanced exploration of the factors that may contribute to an individual's meaning of work-life balance (e.g., Botero, 2012; Golden, 2009) as many workers fall outside of these narrow demographic groups. Thus, work-life balance literature will remain incomplete until researchers seek to understand this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. For example, Williams and colleagues (2013) argued that workplace flexibility is a very elitist term and these policies are written for professional workers. The missing middle is often ignored in these policies and the research on these policies. Therefore, this dissertation aims to answer this call by examining how the missing middle communicate about workplace flexibility and how workers become stigmatized for using such policies.

Stigmatization Processes

The flexibility stigma literature defines stigma via Link and Phelan's (2001) definition of stigma as the co-occurrence of its components: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. However, the flexibility stigma literature tends to conflate stigma and discrimination (see Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013; Dodson, 2013; Fox & Quinn, 2015 as a few examples). For example, Fox and Quinn (2015) developed scales focused on the anticipated and experienced stigma during pregnancy at work. Yet, in their write up of the results, they frequently referred to their

participants' "discriminatory experiences" instead of stigma as their scale called for. Thus, the focus of this literature has focused on the outcome of flexibility stigma (i.e., discrimination) rather than understanding how this stigmatization occurs. I argue that a communicative conceptualization of stigma will help scholars understand flexibility stigma more fully, including how it is constructed and how it is managed.

A communicative definition of stigma focuses on the constitutive nature of stigma. In other words, stigma is a constant process created through daily interactions. For example, Smith (2007) defined stigma as "a simplified, standardized image of disgrace of certain people that is held in common by a community at large" (p. 464). In this definition, the perceptions of a community at large determine a stigmatizing attribute rather than focusing on Link and Phelan's (2001) components of stigma. Meisenbach (2010) added the perceptions of the stigmatized individuals as well as broader communities into her conceptualization and theorizing of managing stigma. Thus, I am building on prior scholarship to argue that the flexibility stigmatizing process is communicatively constructed by individuals, co-workers, supervisors, formal policies, and societal norms. In other words, I argue that this stigma is constructed through the interplay of multiple discursive levels.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) offered a useful framework to understand the ways discourses affect organizing processes. They argued for a "discursive ladder" of discourses which move from the micro (i.e., everyday conversations), meso (i.e., organizational policies), and macro (e.g., ideal worker, family first, pronatalism) discourses. This theorizing helps conceptualize my definition of stigma by combining current communicative understandings of stigma with multiple levels of discourse.

Therefore, my second goal of this dissertation is to explore the communicative construction of workplace flexibility stigma by looking at the interplay of micro, meso, and macro d/Discourses.

Project Overview

In order to better understand the communicative construction of workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma, I interviewed missing middle employees about their experiences with and opinions of flexibility policies. My study heeds the call of work-life communication scholars (e.g., Botero, 2012; Myers, Gailliard, & Putnam, 2012) seeking to better understand multiple voices within workplace flexibility policy enactment. Additionally, this study takes a communicative approach to flexibility stigma to better understand the process of flexibility stigmatization. To best contribute to the scholarly discussions surrounding work-life policies and flexibility stigma, I conducted a grounded theory project that explored the communicative processes associated with flexibility stigma. Specifically, my project seeks to articulate how workplace flexibility and its attending stigma are communicatively constructed through multiple levels of D/discourse.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how workplace flexibility policies and flexibility stigma are communicatively constructed through the interplay of micro, meso, and macro level d/Discourses. In order to frame this project, this chapter offers a thorough review of the literature on a) work-life flexibility policies as influenced by gender, social class, and parental status at the macro, meso, and micro levels of d/Discourse and b) stigma communication. The chapter begins with an overview of a d/Discourse framework to set the stage for a discussion of workplace flexibility. I then show how macro, meso, and micro level d/Discourses can help scholars understand a holistic picture of flexibility policies, with an emphasis on the way ideologies tied into gender, social class, and parental status impact workplace flexibility. I end this chapter by bringing the current concept of workplace flexibility stigma into conversation with communicative conceptualizations of stigma to argue for a communicative definition of flexibility stigma.

The Influence of D/discourses on Workplace Flexibility Policies

I believe stigma is socially constructed through the interplay of a variety of D/discourses; thus, I begin this literature review with the ways previous research has understood workplace flexibility from macro, meso, and micro levels. This review of the literature shows a need to consider how different genders, social classes, and parental statuses construct the stigmas surrounding flexibility policies. I will first lay out the discursive framework that structures this discussion.

Alvesson and Kärreman's Levels of Discourse

In their attempt to clarify the various meanings of discourse, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) argued that researchers can analyze micro-level conversations and move up the “discursive ladder” in order to understand the ways in which discourse (e.g., everyday talk) enables and constrains Discourse (e.g., cultural ideologies) and vice versa. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) articulated four levels of the discursive ladder (micro, meso, grand, and mega); however, scholarship on D/discourse often combines the last two levels and focuses on three levels: micro, meso, and macro (e.g. Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016; Fairhurst, 2008; Kuhn et al., 2008).

First, micro-level discourses are the social texts of everyday life (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). This level of discourse focuses on the detailed language use in a specific context (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). For example, in their meta-review of work-life literature, Sabbatini and Crosby (2016) argued that the everyday communication with supervisors is vital in helping employees understand the policies, rules, and norms when it comes to work-life policies. For this project, individual conversations with co-workers and supervisors surrounding flexibility policies as well as the conversations within the interview context become the starting point of the discursive analysis at the micro-level.

Second, meso-level discourses are still sensitive toward language use in context but focus on the broader patterns in more generalized contexts. Meso-discourses are subject to both macro-level discursive structures and micro-level discursive enactments. This level of discourse is less studied than micro and macro levels in existing communication research. LeGreco and Tracy (2009) argued, “policy texts themselves can serve as meso discourses, because they attempt to coordinate practices across several

local sites” (p. 1519). Thus, the organizational policies and practices surrounding flexibility policies become a relevant point of focus at the meso-level in the current project.

Third, (big D) Discourses or macro-discourses comprise the two types of Discourse laid out by Alvesson and Kärreman: grand Discourses and mega Discourses. Grand-Discourses help constitute organizational reality as societal ideologies and present integrated understandings of meaning (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). Mega-Discourses are universal connections and interpretations of phenomena. I understand Mega-Discourses as what Lammers and Barbour (2006) call institutions or the “constellations of established practices guided by formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations” (p. 364). Some examples of Mega-Discourses include diversity, globalization, neoliberalism, and democracy. Grand and Mega-Discourses focus on the large scale orders of discourse and have often been combined in macro-level Discourse research (e.g. Kuhn et al., 2008). This project follows this trend, and considers below three ideologies or Discourses that seem particularly relevant macro-Discourses in this dissertation: ideal worker, family first, and pronatalism.

In sum, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) provided a useful framework for understanding the relationships between D/discourse and workplace flexibility. From micro-level conversations to organizational policies to societal ideologies, D/discourses shape the flexibility stigmatization process. A limitation of this framework is understanding how various levels of D/discourse interact with identities and organizing. Thus, I also borrow from Ashcraft’s frames of gender to complicate the relationship of D/discourses on workplace flexibility.

Ashcraft's Frames of Discourse

Ashcraft (2004) posited four frames to view and understand the interactions among gender identity, discourse, and organizing. This framework articulates how scholarship has understood these relationships. For the purposes of this dissertation, I am conceptualizing Ashcraft's use of *gender identity* in a broader sense of *identity*. Therefore, this framework will allow me to understand how multiple identities (e.g., gender, social class, and parental status) interact with discourse and organizing, particularly at the fourth (i.e., discourse as social text) and fifth (i.e., discourse as material-discursive evolution) frames. As I move through the levels of discourse below, Ashcraft's (2004) theorizing helps explain how gender, social class, and parental status influence workers' experiences surrounding flexibility policies. In moving from frame one (outcome) to frame four (social text), the discursive interest shifts from the 'micro' to the 'macro,' or from discourse to Discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

First, the discourse as outcome frame understands how everyday talk is a result of gender; gender identity organizes discourse (Ashcraft, 2004). This frame focuses on the communication style differentiation between men and women and is focused on the outcomes of gender in organizing. For example, frame one assumptions of how these concepts interact might note how being female means I talk in a different way with colleagues than men do. My talk is organized by my gender identity. Fairhurst (1993) engaged in this framing when she examined routine talk of female managers to argue that through a close reading of the women's discourse, patterns emerge indicating women express a concern for the relationships they have with their subordinates. Thus, there is a focus on the micro-level implications of how identity organizes discourse.

Second, a discourse as performance frame sees gender as a performative outcome of discourse; discourse organizes gender (Ashcraft, 2004). This frame highlights how gender roles influence individuals “doing gender,” and gender becomes performed at the micro-level as an outcome of discursive messages (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For example, the assumptions surrounding this discourse would note how the ways I dress and do my hair and make-up are part of a gendered performance in the workplace. I am performing a certain gendered identity. This frame, when broadened beyond gender identity, focuses on how individuals use scripts to perform certain identities. Thus, individuals perform their identities based on the interactions they have had previously within the organization. In this way, this frame of discourse focuses on how discourse constitutes identities. For this dissertation, the discourse as performance perspective demonstrates how identities (e.g., gender, social class, and parental status) are communicatively performed within the workplace as workers navigate workplace flexibility.

Third, these relations can be understood as a text-conversation dialectic as organizing (en)genders discourse (Ashcraft, 2004). This frame moves up to the meso (organizational) level, recognizing how organizations fundamentally gendered and are gendered in the ways they operate and communicate (Acker, 1990); thus organizations (re)produce gendered scripts for organizational members to follow. As organizations gender organizational texts (e.g., policies), texts gender organizing. In this way, organizational policies become central to understanding the role of identity in organizing. When broadening this frame to discuss identity, this frame helps interpret meso-level

discourses (e.g., flexibility policies), and how flexibility policies marginalize some and privilege others according to gender, social class, and parental status.

Fourth, the discourse as a social text frame moves toward macro-level discourses as Discourse (en)genders organization (Ashcraft, 2004). This perspective highlights how macro-level, societal Discourses gender the organization. For example, in their study of self-branding literature, Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) argued that in branding themselves, individuals gendered, raced, and classed themselves to fit masculine, white, professional assumptions about work. Thus, by viewing Discourse as a social text, this discourse moves away from specific organizations to broader Discourses about work. In terms of the current project, this fourth frame of Discourse helps understand the macro-level Discourses as they gender, class, and identify the preferred parental status of the organization.

These four frames prioritize the discursive constructions of organizing while ignoring the material influences on behavior. Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren (2009) argued, “in communication, symbol becomes material; material becomes symbol; and neither stay the same as a result” (p. 34). Thus, Ashcraft recently expanded her original four frames to include a fifth frame – communication as discursive-material evolution (Ashcraft & Harris, 2014). Here, discourse brings into the being the materiality of organizing. This fifth frame helps understand the ongoing interpenetration of discourse and matter in the interactions of everyday life. In other words, the discursive constructions of gender and organizing are constrained by the material world. Thus, material realities also influence the flexibility stigmatization process.

In sum, Ashcraft's (2004; Ashcraft & Harris, 2014) framework provides a useful way to conceptualize the relationships among identity, discourse, and organizing.

Identities shape and are shaped by the organizing process at a variety of levels that align with Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) understanding of D/discourse. In particular, the fourth frame – discourse as social text – and fifth frame – discourse as material-discursive evolution – are particularly helpful in this dissertation. Through the lens of the D/discourse relationship, I will now turn to the ways macro, meso, and micro levels of D/discourse interplay with workplace flexibility policies.

Macro-Level Discourses

Macro-level Discourses are the large-scale, societal-level, assembly of discourses that present an integrated frame of understanding (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Specifically, macro-level Discourses allow me to understand the interplay of societal ideologies and expectations on the construction of workplace flexibility stigma. This section focuses on ideal worker, family first, and pronatalist ideologies as cultural macro-level Discourses that closely interact with conceptualizations and experiences of workplace flexibility. I then show how these Discourses gender, class, and identify the preferred parental status of the organization (see Ashcraft, 2004).

Ideal worker Discourse. This Discourse suggests that the ideal worker possesses full-time availability, mobility, high qualifications, and a strong work orientation (Acker, 1992). Despite also being known as the work devotion schema (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams et al., 2013), most organizational scholars use the term ideal worker (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Mescher, Benschop, & Doorewaard, 2010; Wieland, 2010). Workers expect rewards such as financial security and independence, status, challenging work, and

advancement opportunities for conforming to this Discourse (Blair-Loy, 2003). For example, in her study of a Swedish organization, Wieland (2010) found that workers crafted ideal selves that were both deliverers in the workplace and practitioners of wellbeing. Her participants strived to both get their work done but to do so without using overtime – an indication of wellbeing. In terms of work-life, the ideal worker Discourse assumes that work should have priority over private life, including one's family.

Family first Discourse. The family first ideology reflects cultural assumptions that family demands undivided attention and that family should be the central focus of one's life (Hays, 1996; Mescher et al., 2010). This Discourse has also been called the family devotion schema (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams et al., 2013) and intensive mothering/fathering/parenting (Hays, 1996); however, I prefer labeling this Discourse family first as it is often used in communication research (Hays, 1996; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006). For example, in their study of parental memorable messages, Medved and colleagues (2006) found that almost 50% of the messages about family were about the importance of prioritizing family. As will be developed in the discussion of gender below, this Discourse is especially salient for women (Hays, 1996; Mescher et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2013), generating a subdiscourse for women of the motherhood norms. The motherhood norm is a society-wide belief that women should be mothers, and perform unpaid family care and low-paid care for others in need is perpetuated in society (Drago, 2007). This norm is heavily influenced by the pronatalism Discourse.

Pronatalism Discourse. Pronatalism refers to an ideology that promotes human reproduction and is dominant in culture discourses about family in the United States

(Moore & Geist-Martin, 2013). The standard North American family (SNAF; first marriage nuclear family with children; Smith, 1993) reflects a dominant cultural ideology that shapes and molds the ways individuals and organizations think about family (Dixon, 2015; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2006). For example, SNAF families are perceived more positively than other family structures (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990) and couples who are perceived as unlikely to become parents are viewed negatively (Koropeckyj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007). However, the number of families choosing to remain childfree in the United States has been increasing steadily throughout the last 20 years (see Paul, 2001) with 20% of women in their childbearing age being childfree in 2010 as compared to only 10% in the 1970s (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). Even as demographics shift in childbearing patterns, individuals and women, in particular, remain constrained by the pronatalist ideologies in society (Park, 2002; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Therefore, gender, social class, and parental status identities intersect with the discourses described above in very specific ways in the workplace.

Identities and Discourses in the workplace. The Discourses of the ideal worker, family first, and pronatalism all influence work-life experiences. More specifically, these Discourses are enacted differently for individual workers based on gender, social class, and parental status. I will now turn to each of these three identities to discuss how macro-level Discourses are shaping the experiences of workers as they navigate the work-life interrelationship.

Gender and Discourses in the workplace. The work-family arena is where gender-based stereotypes remain the most entrenched (Bornstein, 2013) due to gendered assumptions about work and family. Organizations are inherently gendered (Acker,

1990); thus, cultural assumptions surrounding work are also gendered. Blair-Loy (2003) argued that the ideal person fulfilling the work devotion schema is a man, while the ideal person in the family devotion schema is a woman. For example, in their study of male executives, Tracy and Rivera (2010) found that the executives framed women's (but not men's) employment as a choice. They believed that women should stay-at-home and take care of the children, which draws upon the motherhood norm (see Drago, 2007). Thus, what it means to be an ideal worker and put family first is inherently different for women and for men.

For women, Discourses surrounding motherhood and the ideal worker clash in the workplace when women request flexible schedules (Bornstein, 2013). Thus, mothers often report a "motherhood penalty" (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007) as being a good mother is seen as being incompatible with being an ideal worker (Williams et al., 2013). Working mothers are seen as being bad mothers (Williams et al., 2013) and feel guilty as they are pulled between work and home spaces and perceive they are unable to give it all to whichever space they are currently in (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Eikhof, 2016).

Men who make caregiving responsibilities salient in the workplace also experience flexibility stigma (Williams et al., 2013) due to the feminine traits associated with family obligations and the conflict those traits have with hegemonic masculinity (Eikhof, 2016; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the ideal notion of what it means to be a "man" in a specific society at a given time (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity includes things such as having a wage-paying job, being heterosexual, and being a father (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), yet it also is often used to highlight the ways in which men uphold

gender discrimination (Medved & Rawlins, 2011). Thus, men become stigmatized when the perception of family devotion becomes salient to their reputation in the workplace, resulting in a loss of ideal worker status.

The pronatalist discourse presents motherhood as imminent, natural, and universally expected for all women (Remennick, 2000). Therefore, the pronatalist assumptions and expectations are stronger for women than for men. Parenthood is closely tied to femininity (see Koropecj-Cox et al., 2007) in a way that is not associated with masculinity (see Durham, 2008). Being childfree can become a “master status” for women as it undermines any other merits and achievements they might have, because a life without children is seen as “pointless” (Remennick, 2000). Having children is expected; thus, those who remain childfree become marginalized and stigmatized due to their “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963; Park, 2002).

Defining social class. Social class also an important identity that is shaped by and the ideal worker, family first, and pronatalist Discourses in the workplace. Social class is often cited in organizational communication, but it is a construct that is hard to define. Scholarship on flexibility stigma differentiates between professional and low-wage workers (e.g., Dodson, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Williams and colleagues (2013) define the professionals as “families who work in managerial or professional jobs in which at least one family member has graduated from college” (p. 212). Low-wage workers – also described as the poor in this literature – make up the bottom third of the income distribution in the United States (Williams et al., 2013). Less is known about the missing middle. Skocpol (2000) dubbed the “missing middle” as the working men and women of modest economic means. The missing middle are not poor –

those who are often the subject of welfare reform – nor are the rich – they are unlikely to have stocks and follow the stock market and related policies closely. Thus, the missing middle fall somewhere in between the two.

This conception of social class only understands social class as income. For example, Williams and colleagues (2013) assume that all professionals make enough money to be considered not poor or part of the missing middle. However, communication scholars have argued social class is both material and discursive (e.g. Dougherty, 2011; Gist, 2017; Lucas, 2011). Thus, this dissertation takes a more nuanced approach to social class. It is both material and discursive.

Social class's complexity and fluid nature makes it difficult to define (Dougherty, 2011). Often, scholars use stand-ins such as income, education, or type of labor to define social class (Gist, 2017). For example, low-wage workers are defined in terms of the poverty line or other income levels. In their national study of low-wage workers, Bond and Galinsky (2011) defined low-wage workers as those employees who earn less than two-thirds the median earnings of male employees in the United States. In 2017, this roughly equates to less than \$15/hour and less than \$31,200 per year. However, this definition does not fully encapsulate all workers within the working class. For example, Lucas (2011) argued that though miners make over \$50,000 a year, they “unequivocally identified themselves as members of the working class” (p. 360). Thus, income is not the only indicator of social class.

Social class has also been tied to type of work. Colloquially, white-collar work and blue-collar work has been used to delineate social class. Marvin (1994) explained,

The body associated with literacy is not soiled and does not disport itself in conditions in which it can easily become soiled. It wears a clean white collar. The body of illiteracy wears a blue collar that may become soiled and makes its presence known by producing an odor of sweat and toil (p. 131).

Thus, type of work is inherently tied to the level of literacy and communication of one's work. Marvin (1994) explored the differences between these two groups, which she calls the body class and the text class. The body class embodies their work physically and the text class disembodies their work through the creation of text. Dougherty (2011) extended this work by addressing text work and body work as a communicative phenomenon. Dougherty argued that there is a tension between discourse and materiality that reveals itself in both text work and body work. Text work becomes privileged and remains unmarked. Thus, it is perceived as normative. Body work, then, becomes stigmatized and marked both physically and discursively. Many body workers engage in work that is dubbed dirty work; that is, the work that incurs moral, social, or physical taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am interested in how the missing middle communicatively construct workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma. This population is often ignored in U.S. policy and research on workplace flexibility stigma (Skocpol, 2000; Williams et al., 2013), yet over fifty percent of Americans fall within this group. Thus, it is important to understand how this group of workers communicatively experience workplace flexibility. In summary, social class is inherently tied into work; thus, social class manifests itself within the workplace.

Social class and Discourses in the workplace. Assumptions surrounding the ideal worker are inherently classed as the characteristics of the ideal worker are aligned with professional work. Where professional workers see personal growth as intertwined with career success rather than the quality of family life, low-wage workers are more likely to see their jobs as a means of supporting their families (Williams et al., 2013). Thus, what it means to be an ideal worker changes based on social class standing, because work means different things.

Similarly, many low-wage job work schedules fit poorly with low-wage workers' family lives, and family responsibilities often interrupt work (Williams et al., 2013). What is perceived as work devotion among professional workers who use flextime becomes lack of personal responsibility for low-wage workers (Dodson, 2013). Low-wage workers are held to the same ideal worker standards despite socio-economic conditions that make those ideals much harder to achieve than they are for professional workers. Childcare concerns (e.g., daycare centers closed, family members unable to watch children) mean that low-wage workers are more likely to have to miss work for family reasons than professional workers are (Williams et al., 2013), resulting in low-wage workers being seen as having a poor work ethic and as having made a poor decision for having children (Dodson, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Interestingly, low-wage workers are faulted for conforming to pronatalist ideologies because many low-wage workers cannot afford reliable childcare. Therefore, low-wage workers are less likely to bring up family concerns and would rather be fired for absenteeism than admit family obligations because their professional supervisors are more likely to see them as

untrustworthy workers due to the stigmatization of family obligations in the workplace (Williams et al., 2013).

Parental status and Discourses in the workplace. Just as gender and social class are key factors in managing flexibility policy related discourses, parental status also plays a key role. Childfree workers are perceived as being more competent and dedicated in the workplace than parent workers as they are able to focus on work and not their families (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2007; Williams, 2000). Thus, they can conform more closely to the ideal worker Discourse. Childless women are twice as likely as working mothers to hold professional or managerial jobs (Burkett, 2002). Nonparent workers are also more likely to report higher levels of traditional job satisfaction – achievement, autonomy, structure, participation, cooperation, and rewards – than parent workers (Rothausen, 1994). These are traditional rewards associated with an ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990). Thus, childfree workers can ascribe to the ideal worker Discourse as the assumption that work is the primary focus is not challenged.

Childfree workers also experience workplace burdens due to their childfree life. The family first discourse tacitly gives permission to parents to prioritize family needs (Hays, 1996). Childfree workers are expected to work longer hours because they do not have “family” that will reduce their work availability. Therefore, their coworkers may assume childfree workers will work more weekends and holidays so coworkers with children can spend that time with their family (Ramsey, 2000). Parent workers are also more likely to receive interruptions on the job as family demands their time and attention away from work (Poe, 2000).

In summary, workplace flexibility is influenced by three main macro-Discourses: ideal worker, family first, and pronatalist ideologies. These ideologies manifest themselves in different ways based on individual identities (e.g., gender, social class, parental status). It is important to note that most research on work-life, and specifically flexibility stigma, has focused on the impact of such stigmas on parent workers. However, the literature on childfree identities and those persons' experiences at work (e.g., Koropecj-Cox et al., 2007; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2006; Rick & Meisenbach, 2017) makes clear that how nonparent workers navigate flexibility policies is an important but under-addressed part of the development and enactment of such policies. Thus, I paid particular attention to the ways flexibility stigma is communicatively constructed by both parent and nonparent workers to address. Moving through the "discursive ladder" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), the macro-level Discourses surrounding workplace flexibility intersect within organizations at the organizational policies and practices level. I will now turn to the meso-level discourses influencing workplace flexibility.

Meso-Level discourses

Meso-level discourses move the discussion of D/discourses to the organizational level. Specifically, meso-level discourses allow me to understand how flexibility policies privilege and marginalize individuals based on their gender, social class, and parental status. Work-life policies in the United States have a short history but have profoundly influenced workers' lives. Modern work-life policies came into being in the 1940s with the influx of women in the American workforce starting during WWII (Sabattini & Crosby, 2016). The next forty years saw dramatic increases in the numbers of women in the United States' workforce; however, the term work-life was not used in the United

States until the late 1980s despite being used in the United Kingdom over a decade earlier.

Pushing organizations closer to what are known today as workplace flexibility policies, the Federal Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was passed in 1993 and provides employees, at many jobs in the United States, with job-protected and unpaid leave for qualified medical and family reasons. With this new law in place, the 1990s saw a shift in work-life programs that focused less on dependent care and more on the effectiveness of work-life programs and organizational and individual benefits (Sabattini & Crosby, 2016). It is during this same period and particularly in the last decade, that American workplaces have moved toward flexible working arrangements.

The meso-level organizational policy that is of concern in this project is flexibility policy. Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) supposedly aid in balancing the demands of work with life and family commitments because they offer options such as allowing workers to work from home and schedule their working hours to accommodate non-work commitments (Hill et al., 2010). Over 80 percent of employers in the United States offer some sort of flexibility policy (Matos & Galinsky, 2014).

Cowan and Hoffman (2007), in their study of employee constructions of work/life borders, found that workers define work-life flexibility in four ways. First, time flexibility included both “macro level flexibility” (i.e., formal scheduling, deadlines) and “micro-time flexibility” (i.e., individuals can make alterations to their daily schedule to accommodate life demands). Second, space flexibility defined flexibility in both physical and mental space (i.e., where work gets done). For example, workers defined physical space as being able to work from home or a coffee shop. Mental space referred to being

able to think about family issues at work and being able to think about work while at home. This type of flexibility is what Clark (2000) referred to as permeability between the work/life border. Third, evaluation flexibility concerned how employees' work was assessed. According to their participants, Cowan and Hoffman (2007) argued that evaluations should be based on the quality of work rather than the amount of face time individuals have with their bosses. Fourth, compensation flexibility (i.e., overtime pay, less pay for more flexibility) is linked to the other three types of flexibility, but financial resources were found to be key for finding work-life fit (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007). For example, some workers explained how high levels of compensation and financial resources were key to finding work-life balance while others would rather have more time flexibility and less financial resources to achieve their desired balance. Workplace flexibility is inherently individualistic as what works for one individual may not work for another (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007). These four perspectives on what constitutes workplace flexibility is likely tied to particular meso-level policies and texts at various organizations.

Despite more and more employers offering flexibility, few workers use these policies regularly. In their national study on work-life issues, Matos and Galinsky (2011) found that only 11% of workers who are offered flexibility regularly use these policies. One reason for this low usage rate is flexibility stigma as workers who use flexible-working arrangements become stigmatized in the workplace (Williams et al., 2013).

Individual workers may feel stigmatized for using flexibility policies as they are associated with caregiving (Burkett, 2002; Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). Kossek and colleagues (2010) argued that work-life initiatives will be marginalized until they

become normalized in organizational life. Work-life and flexibility programs and policies, along with the workers who use these policies, often become stigmatized within the workplace (Williams et al., 2013). This stigmatization is one reason workers who are eligible for these policies do not actually use these policies. The stigma associated with using workplace flexibility policies manifests itself in different ways depending on gender, social class background, and parental status ideologies. These influences will now be discussed.

Gender and workplace flexibility. As noted in Ashcraft's (2004) third frame, organizations (re)produce gendered scripts for organizational members to follow. Work-life policies, and specifically flexibility policies, are inherently gendered (Williams et al., 2013). For men, there is an assumption that these policies are for women and they may not use those policies. For example, Kirby and Krone (2002) found that men who wanted to take paternity leave were encouraged not to because that policy was meant for maternity leave, not paternity leave. Thus, although these policies are offered at organizations for all employees, they might be perceived as women's policies.

Flexible working is seen as a double-edged sword for working women (Eikhof, 2016). On one hand, workplace flexibility is seen to be vital for reconciling work and non-work (i.e., family). On the other hand, using flexible working arrangements can silence women's voices in the workplace and endanger women's career advancement. For example, Stone and Hernandez (2013) found that women working flexibly are more likely to receive stigmatizing treatment, which plays a role in their decision to "opt-out" of the workplace to raise children. Dodson (2013) also found that women believed they

were judged and stigmatized when they needed time to parent, which left them no options but to quit.

Social class and workplace flexibility. Different social class statuses also related to experiences of workplace flexibility policies. Williams and colleagues (2013) argued that workplace flexibility is a very elitist term and its policies are written for professionals. For example, professional workers are more likely to be able to work in different locations and work different hours to still get their work completed. However, many low-wage workers do not have the flexibility to work at alternative locations. They can only work at the physical organization or job site. Similarly, many low-wage workers have shift work which does not allow them to make up the hours at another time. If they miss a shift for family reasons, they miss out on the hours and the income. Therefore, the policies themselves manifest themselves quite differently for professional and low-wage workers.

Workplace flexibility policies manifest themselves differently based on social class positioning. For professional workers, they are allowed to take time off in the middle of the day for family reasons as they are trusted to make up the hours on nights or weekends (Williams et al., 2013); however, taking a career break for family reasons can considerably reduce professional workers' earnings over time (Coltrane et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Alternatively, low-wage workers are not allowed to take time off in the middle of the day and are seen as poor workers if they make availability constraints on their schedules due to family concerns. However, taking a career break for family caregiving has little repercussions on low-wage workers' long-term earnings (Williams et al., 2013).

Parental status and workplace flexibility. Flexibility policies manifest themselves differently for workers based on parental status, as many of these policies were written for workers with children. Thus, childfree workers receive unequal access to flexible working arrangements as they are not eligible for many flexibility policies (Poe, 2000). Burkett (2002) argued childless workers are victims of work-life policies because the policies focus on caregiving. Workers with children are offered benefits packages worth thousands more than childless workers (Burkett, 2002; Ramsey, 2000; Taylor, 2003). Similarly, Lucas and Buzzanell (2006) claimed that work-life programs privilege people with spouses and children because they fit structural definitions of family. As a result, work-life policies often pit parent workers and nonparent workers against each other (Burkett, 2002; Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas, & Shivakumar, 2016).

In sum, flexibility policies are becoming more and more common in the workplace; however, workers are not using these policies. Organizational policies and practices become the focal point of analysis from a meso-level discursive perspective. Existing literature suggests that flexibility policies are gendered, elitist, and may create unfair burdens on workers without children. One way these policies manifest these unfair burdens is through the everyday talk of employees (see Kirby & Krone, 2002). Thus, the policies themselves become an important element to consider when understanding the flexibility stigmatization process.

Micro-Level discourses

Micro-level discourses are the discourses produced in interviews and in everyday life (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). In other words, micro-discourses are the conversations occurring in everyday conversations such as conversations with coworkers

and supervisors. Canary and colleagues (2013) argued that these micro-level conversations become crucial when determining whether a policy would be used or not by individual workers. This section focuses on the ways communication with supervisors and coworkers influences flexibility working arrangements and flexibility stigma.

Supervisor communication is vital in helping employees understand the policies, rules, and norms when it comes to work-life policies (Sabattini & Crosby, 2016). Previous studies have found that managers and supervisors are the most important part of FWAs (Myers et al., 2012; Sprung, Toumbeva, & Matthews, 2015; ter Hoeven, Miller, Peper, & Den Dulk, 2012) as formal policies can be overturned based on a manager's discretion. Ultimately, a manager can grant more flexibility for individual workers or they can make it much more difficult to enact flexibility policies.

In addition to supervisors' communication about work-life policies, interactions with coworkers are an important factor for policy use. In their foundational study, Kirby and Krone (2002) demonstrated that the formal work-life policies can be negated by the micro-level conversations with coworkers. For example, if one perceives that her workers want her to use flexibility policies, then she is more likely to use those policies (Mandeville, Halbesleben, & Whitman, 2015). Similarly, if she perceives that her coworkers do not want her to use the family-friendly benefits – or are themselves not using the benefits – then she will not use the policies regardless of what she wants to do. In another study, Boren and Johnson (2013) found that resentment messages from coworkers, internalized guilt, and burnout were significantly and negatively associated with the likelihood of using work-family policies.

The conversations between coworkers determine the use of work-life policies, and these conversations become a resource when determining work-life policy use. ter Hoeven and colleagues (2012) found employees often collaborate with one another to take short-term leaves and develop flexible working schedules. Paradoxically, there was often a sense of resentment when workers had to take on additional workloads for their coworkers with leave. Therefore, having meso-level work-life policies in place, by itself, is not enough to resolve work-family conflict (Bornstein, 2013). Interactions with supervisors, coworkers, and societal discourses influence the use of work-life policies (Vandello et al., 2013). Therefore, policy makers, managers, and workers need to recognize and address biases against those who use these policies. Flexibility policies are widely in place but are rarely used as informal practices stigmatize the use of those policies (Williams et al., 2013).

Williams and colleagues (2013) call these informal practices daily mistreatment. Berdahl and Moon (2013) defined daily mistreatment as "common acts of social mistreatment, such as being teased, put down, or excluded by coworkers" (p. 343). In other words, the micro-level conversations with supervisors and coworkers can serve to stigmatize individuals who use flexibility policies. Gender, social class, and parental status all influence daily mistreatment.

Gender and daily mistreatment. Workers must navigate competing discourses surrounding the ideal worker, the good mother, and the involved father (Williams et al., 2013). These gender ideologies manifest themselves in the everyday talk – or daily mistreatment – of employees. Berdahl and Moon (2013) explained, "most employees are systematically judged, and treated, based on how well they conform to traditional family

roles. Such contingent treatment is likely to be a powerful force of social control" (p. 359). In other words, not fitting into normative gender roles increased the likelihood of receiving stigmatizing communication messages about using FWAs, while fitting into normative gender roles equate with less everyday mistreatment. This mistreatment was related to employees' gender performance both inside the workplace and inside the home.

For women, flexibility stigma was triggered in micro-level talk for behavior associated with gendered traits (Williams et al., 2013). For example, Rick and Meisenbach (2017) found that in research interviews, childfree workers offered negative assessments of their parent colleagues when they needed flexible schedules to accommodate sick children or school closings. Alternatively, Berdahl and Moon (2013) in their survey of middle class workers found that women without children experienced more daily mistreatment than mothers and mothers who spend less time on caregiving experience more mistreatment than mothers who spend more time on caregiving.

Alternatively, men also receive daily mistreatment for using flexibility policies as men's gender non-conforming behavior becomes more stigmatized in the workplace (Williams et al., 2013). For example, in their study on college student perceptions of flexibility stigma, Vandello and colleagues (2013) found that men who utilized flexible arrangements were seen as less masculine. They also found that men who believe that others will judge them based on hegemonic masculinity are the least likely to seek out flexibility in the workplace. Child-caring fathers also believe that they would receive more daily mistreatment for using flextime for personal and childcare reasons than women, "traditional" fathers, and men without children (Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Brescoll, Glass, & Sedlovskaya, 2013).

Social class and daily mistreatment. The communication with supervisors changes based on social class status. For example, daily communication with supervisors becomes incredibly salient for the implementation of flexibility policies for low-wage workers as many of their managers are professional workers. In their experimental study, Brescoll and colleagues (2013) found that managers were less likely to grant flexibility requests for workers in low-status positions. Whereas high-status men were the most likely to be granted flexibility leave, low-status men were the least likely. Similarly, low-wage working mothers believed they were judged by their supervisors when they needed to utilize flexibility policies to take care of family needs. Thus, it is incredibly difficult for low-wage workers to request and use flexibility policies.

Parental status and daily mistreatment. Workplace conversations also serve to marginalize and privilege workers based on parental status (Dixon, 2015). Due to their failure to conform to the SNAF, LBGQT and single workers – many of whom are also childfree – become othered in organizations by becoming invisible and hypervisible (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). Invisibility occurs when alternative families become silenced because they are perceived as not having anything to contribute to family related conversations. On the other hand, hypervisibility occurs when an alternative family structures become marked and workers are intensely scrutinized by their coworkers.

The micro-level perspective on discourse allows me to understand the way everyday talk influences workplace flexibility policies and how those policies become stigmatized. The daily mistreatment of workers becomes an important factor to the stigmatization process. Specifically, for women and nonparent workers, micro-level

discourses can serve to stigmatize them for not conforming to the macro-level Discourses surrounding work-life interactions.

The discursive framework provides a holistic understanding of workplace flexibility. Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) levels of discourse allow me to understand the macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses as they influence workplace flexibility. Specifically, this project views D/discourse as both a social text and as a material-discursive evolution (see Ashcraft, 2004; Ashcraft & Harris, 2014). Through this perspective, I first have argued that the macro-level Discourses of the ideal worker, family first, and pronatalism compete with one another as workers navigate their work-life interactions. Second, the meso-level discourse perspective highlights how flexibility policies marginalize some and privilege others according to gender, social class, and parental status. Third, micro-level discourses can also marginalize workers in everyday talk. Thus, it is through the interplay of all three levels of D/discourse that workers construct flexibility policies. Thus, my first research question is as follows:

RQ1: How, if at all, do the missing middle communicatively construct workplace flexibility via macro, meso, and micro levels of D/discourse?

A Constitutive Approach to Stigma

A stigma is traditionally defined as an identity discrediting mark on someone of questionable moral status (Goffman, 1963). Scholars in a variety of disciplines have since expanded this definition. In this section of the literature review, I will differentiate three different perspectives on stigma. First, I will explain Link and Phelan's (2001) definition of stigma as flexibility stigma research grounds itself within this definition. Second, I will move into a more communicative understanding of stigma and define stigma using

Smith's (2007) theory of stigma communication. This understanding of stigma specifically focuses on how stigmatizing messages are spread throughout society. Third, I will then explicate stigma communication theorizing by defining stigma using Meisenbach's (2010) model of stigma management communication. This approach builds off Smith's theorizing but also considers individual perceptions of their stigmatizing mark. It is important to note that all three of these perspectives have similar assumptions that build off one another.

Link and Phelan's Definition of Stigma

Link and Phelan (2001) defined stigma as the co-occurrence of its components - labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. These five characteristics alone do not make a stigma unless they are connected to power, as "it takes power to stigmatize" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 375). Without political, social, or economic power – real or perceived – an individual would not be able to stigmatize the other because status loss and discrimination would not occur without power imbalances. I will now go through Link and Phelan's components of stigma to understand this conceptualization of stigma.

First, labeling occurs when individuals distinguish and mark difference. Labels have weight because they are the taken-for-granted categorizations individuals create to organize society. Labels are "just the way things are" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Thus, labels can become problematic as they are oversimplifications of the differences within society. These labels also carry significance due to the stereotypes associated with the labels.

Second, stereotyping occurs when “dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics and to negative stereotypes” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Goffman (1963) highlights this facet of stigma by defining a stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p. 3). Goffman describes three types of stigma that have stereotypes associated with them: body, personal, and tribal. First, a body or physical stigma occurs due to physical deformities. For example, burn survivors have physical burn scars that can constitute a physical stigma (Noltensmeyer & Meisenbach, 2016). Second, a personal stigma focuses on “blemishes of individual character” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). For example, individuals who choose to not have children are often stereotyped as selfish for not following pronatalist ideologies (Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2007). Third, tribal stigma refers to the stigmatization of a group of people based on designations such as race, nation, or religion.

The third element of Link and Phelan’s (2001) approach to stigma focuses on the separation that occurs when social labels create a boundary between “us” and “them.” They explained that throughout history, “old-order Americans” have defined African-American slaves, American Indians, and other immigrants as “them” who are distinctly different than “us.” In turn, these groups were separated geographically, educationally, socially, and economically from established Americans. In other words, non-stigmatized groups attempt to separate themselves from the stigmatized group.

During the final component of stigma, the labeled individual experiences status loss and discrimination based on that stigmatizing attribute (Link & Phelan, 2001). Humans tend to create hierarchies to categorize their worlds. Thus, as a stigmatized identity becomes marked, labeled, and separated from “normal,” they will also lose social

standing within society. In other words, a stigmatized individual's status will be reduced as they lose power and prestige due to the stigma. Link and Phelan (2001) argued that their conception of stigma is related to power because status loss is inherently tied to power. For example, whites and men are much more likely to be in positions of power than blacks and women. Thus, these groups frequently have the power to stigmatize others.

Due to this power imbalance, stigmatized individuals become discriminated against. By comparing structural discrimination to structural racism, Link and Phelan (2001) argued that being stigmatized affects an individual's life chances including education, housing, and employment opportunities. They argued,

For example, low status might make a person less attractive to socialize with, to involve in community activities, or to include in a business venture that requires partners who have political influence with local politicians. In this way, a lower position in the status hierarchy can have a cascade of negative effects on all manner of opportunities (p. 373).

Thus, the loss of status that stigmatized individuals face also becomes a form of discrimination. Stigma, then, becomes a structural force that has negative consequences for individuals. Link and Phelan (2001) argued that previous concepts of stigma would often miss the long-term effects of stigma as they only focused on labeling and stereotyping.

In sum, Link and Phelan (2001) defined stigma in the convergence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. The presence of power also becomes important in this definition. They argued, "when people are labeled, set apart,

and linked to undesirable characteristics, a rationale is constructed for devaluing them” (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 370-371). Thus, people are stigmatized when all five elements occur simultaneously. Link and Phelan focused on the nature and consequences of stigma; however, this conception of stigma does not address the sources of stigma. Smith’s (2007) theory of stigma communication offers scholars a conception of stigma that focuses on the discursive constructions of stigma.

Smith’s Theory of Stigma Communication

Building from the definition of stigma offered by Link and Phelan, Smith’s theorizing focuses on the sources of stigma and the way in which stigma is communicated throughout society. Smith (2007) defined stigma as “a simplified, standardized image of the disgrace of certain people that is held in common by a community at large” (p. 464). In other words, stigma is socially constructed by society. Therefore, she focused her theorizing on the ways society communicates stigmatizing attitudes with others. Smith (2007) defined stigma communication as “the messages spread through communities to teach their members to recognize the disgraced (i.e., recognizing stigmata) and to react accordingly” (p. 464). In other words, individuals learn how to stigmatize others through socialization processes and interactions with others (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Smith, 2007). In turn, stigma communication leads to separation and status loss of stigmatized individuals, which is one of the final outcomes of Link and Phelan’s definition. The stigma communication process occurs in three steps – stigma messages, message reactions, and message effects – which will now be discussed further.

The first step is the stigma messages which has four attributes. First, stigma messages mark or distinguish people based on a stigmatizing attribute (Smith, 2007). Second, stigma messages label the stigmatized group. This labeling process draws attention to the stigmatized group, separates the stigmatized group, and differentiates the stigmatized group from others. Third, stigma messages imply responsibility or blame on individuals who are stigmatized. People believe that members of a stigmatized group choose their stigmatized condition and will be “punished” based on that perceived choice (Smith, 2012, p. 470). Responsibility is also focused on how much control the person has in eliminating their stigmatizing attribute. A person may not “choose” to have a stigma, but they have “control” of how to fix the danger associated with that attribute (Smith, 2007). The final attribute of stigma messages focuses on the perceived physical and social peril of that stigma. If a stigma is associated with higher levels of danger, more stigmatizing communication will occur (Smith, 2007).

Upon hearing these stigma messages, individuals will then react to those messages both behaviorally and emotionally which is the second step of the stigma communication process (Smith, 2007). Common reactions to and effects of stigma messages include feelings of disgust, anger, and fear; drawing upon stereotypes; developing stigma attitudes; isolating and removing the target; and sharing the stigma message with one’s social network (Smith, 2007).

The third step to this process is the message effects (Smith, 2007). In a study of a hypothetical infectious disease alert, Smith (2012) found that a change in stigma message content impacted cognitive and affective reactions to that stigmatizing message. These reactions then predicted the perceptions of the stigma and likelihood of sharing the

information with others. The higher the perceived danger indicated in the message, the more likely the stigma message would be shared. In another study, Smith and Hipper (2010) found that a stronger sense of discrimination toward a stigmatized group led individuals to encourage stigmatized loved ones to communicatively cope with the stigma through withdrawal from society or secrecy. In other words, the more stigma messages one was socialized into led them to encourage those with a stigma to hide the stigmatizing attribute to reduce the discrimination the stigmatized would face.

In sum, Smith's (2007) theory of stigma communication focused on the way stigma is constructed through societal messages. Stigma messages include marking, labeling, blaming responsibility, and associating peril with stigmatized individuals. In doing so, stigma messages induce negative attitudes of stigmatized individuals, separate the stigmatized from non-stigmatized individuals, and encourage others to share stigma messages with others. Like Link and Phelan, Smith's theory links a stigmatized mark with negative stereotypes which ultimately separate and discriminate stigmatized from non-stigmatized groups. Smith's theorizing focuses on the societal construction of stigma; however, it does not take into consideration how stigma is constructed by stigmatized individuals themselves. Meisenbach's (2010) model of stigma management communication builds on this theorizing by taking the stigmatized persons' perceptions of their stigmatized attribute into consideration in this construction process.

Meisenbach's Model of Stigma Management Communication

Meisenbach (2010) built off Smith's stigma communication model and focuses on the ways stigmatized individuals communicatively manage stigmatizing messages. Meisenbach argued that stigma management communication strategies can be organized

into six types (acceptance, avoidance, reducing offensiveness, reducing responsibility, denial, and ignoring) that are divided into four quadrants based on the individual's acceptance or denial of (a) the existence of the stigma and (b) the stigma's applicability to that individual. In other words, the self-perception of the stigmatized status becomes an important factor in SMC. These strategies are intended to represent the full range of ways individuals may respond to a stigmatizing message and impact different outcomes and consequences of the stigma message such as self-esteem, job turnover, health, and achievement. The SMC strategies will now be discussed as the communicative management of stigma influences the construction process of flexibility stigma.

The first communicative management strategy and quadrant in Meisenbach's (2010) model is acceptance of stigma. When using this strategy, individuals accept the stigma and its applicability to themselves. Acceptance sub-strategies include silence, displaying, apologizing, using humor, blaming stigma for negative outcomes, isolating the self, and bonding with stigmatized. For example, Turner and Norwood (2014) found that women who were pregnant during job interviews would often confess their pregnancy during the interview and accept the risk of discrimination associated with pregnancy in the workplace. Alternatively, due to the highly gendered stigmatized nature of being childfree, Remennick (2000) found that most women used passive strategies like isolating themselves to manage their childfree identity. For example, nonparent workers may isolate themselves from their coworkers who have children.

Second, individuals can use avoidance quadrant strategies by which they accept that the stigma exists but work to deny that it applies to themselves (Meisenbach, 2010). These strategies include choosing to hide the stigma attribute, avoiding stigmatizing

situations, eliminating the stigma attribute, distancing oneself, and making favorable social comparisons to others. For example, Durham (2008) found that childfree couples manage the stigma by concealing their childfree status from others. Expectant mothers would also repress their pregnancy during the interview to soften the awkwardness associated with pregnancy (Turner & Norwood, 2014). In another example, Park (2002) found that childfree individuals try to avoid the stigma by claiming that they have not had children yet, but plan to or by claiming to be infertile. As an example of avoiding stigmatizing situations, childfree workers may not come to work on days such as and a “bring your child day to work” day.

In the third quadrant, individuals can evade responsibility and reduce the stigma’s offensiveness by accepting that the stigmatized characteristic applies to the self even as they challenge the public understanding of the stigma (Meisenbach, 2010). Substrategies here include: claiming provocation, defeasibility, or unintentionality, along with bolstering/refocusing, minimizing, and transcending. For example, childfree individuals may focus on other personal or professional accomplishments to express fulfillment and worth without children (Rick & Meisenbach, 2017). Park (2002) also found that childfree individuals may present another, less stigmatized attribute such as being infertile or atheist, in order to displace the stigmatized, childfree identity.

The fourth quadrant of Meisenbach’s (2010) model suggests stigma denial strategies associated with a desire to change public opinion of the stigma and its applicability to them. Individuals using denial strategies can state that a stigma does not exist (simple denial), engage in logical denials (discrediting the discrediter, providing evidence against the argument, highlighting fallacious reasoning), and ignore stigma

communication. For example, Park (2002) found that VCF individuals sometimes “condemn the condemners” (p. 34) by calling out those with children as selfish and by elaborating on the many freedoms of childfree lifestyles. Similarly, Rick and Meisenbach (forthcoming) found that childfree individuals would deny the existence of the stigma in work contexts because they would not need to use flexibility policies. Alternatively, Turner and Norwood (2014) found that expectant mothers would ignore the pregnancy altogether in interview situations.

In summary, the definition of stigma is contested. Current flexibility stigma research is based entirely on Link and Phelan’s definition of stigma (Williams et al., 2013). However, in this section, I have shown how some scholars focus on the attributes of stigma (e.g., Link & Phelan), some focus on the social construction of stigma from society’s perspective (e.g., Smith), while others argue that stigmatized individuals also construct their stigmatizing experiences (e.g., Meisenbach). As discussed in Chapter 1, flexibility stigma occurs when workers use flexibility policies. This research has focused on the outcomes of flexibility stigma such as daily mistreatment and organizational rewards and punishments; however, little to no research has focused on the flexibility stigmatization process itself. Nor has attention been paid directly to how individuals might work to manage this form of stigmatization. This dissertation connects flexibility stigma research with communicative understandings of stigma to understand the process of constructing and managing flexibility stigmatization. Thus, my second research question is as follows:

RQ2: How, if at all, is flexibility stigma communicatively constructed by the missing middle?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The goal of the present study was to understand the communicative construction of workplace flexibility stigma. In order to achieve this goal, I adopted the assumptions of the discourse of dialogic studies (Deetz, 1996) and the transformative/postmodern paradigm (Creswell, 2013; Mumby, 1997) to conduct thematic and grounded theory analyses (Charmaz, 2006) of the process of flexibility stigma. In this chapter, I first explain my philosophical commitments and discuss why they are appropriate for investigating my research questions. Next, I provide an overview of grounded theory and highlight its usefulness for the initial goal of this dissertation. A detailed overview of the specific methods, procedures, and data analysis techniques follows where I incorporated both a thematic analysis of the data and a grounded theory analysis of the data. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the validation practices that were used to enhance the trustworthiness of this dissertation.

Philosophical Commitments

A researcher's ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions shape the way the researcher conducts research. First, ontological assumptions involve the researcher's stance toward the nature of being (Creswell, 2013). Like interpretive researchers, I believe there are multiple, subjective realities. Rather than believing in a single, objective truth that can be discovered, I believe there is no one "truth" as "truth" depends on the moment, the situation, and the person's experiences leading up to that moment of interaction. In other words, I believe that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through interactions. I also subscribe to a postmodern ontological perspective as I believe "knowledge claims must be situated within the conditions of the world and in

the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other group affiliations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 27). In other words, our identities shape our interactions, which, in turn, shape our socially constructed identities. Furthermore, I position myself within Deetz's (1996) discourse of dialogic studies, which understands being as socially constructed and highlights the partiality, or disunity, of reality. For example, most work-life research has focused on the reality of working parents whereas the discourse of dialogic studies would argue that this is an incomplete perspective as nonparents also make up the work force. This discourse also reveals the hidden points of resistance and complexity in our interactions rather than focusing on one supposedly unfragmented experience of being. Therefore, I assume that the reality of being is dependent on our identities, and our knowledge is only a partial perspective of reality as a whole. For example, my research program focuses on how conceptualizations of family and social class constrain and provide paths for resistance to work-life experiences. Accordingly, my goal in this dissertation is to understand how workers construct meaning of flexibility stigma, while highlighting the partiality of these experiences based on social class.

Epistemological assumptions concern how reality or being is known (Creswell, 2013). As an interpretive and postmodern scholar, I believe in more subjective ways of knowing rather than believing knowledge is objective. As a qualitative researcher, I construct my information from firsthand accounts from those who have experienced workplaces who offer flexibility policies. Thus, it is important to note that as I attempt to construct this understanding, I am influencing my participants' accounts of their experiences. Just as they are influencing my research, I am influencing the descriptions of their experiences through the interactions of the interview.

Axiological assumptions focus on the role of values in research (Creswell, 2013). I believe that values shape the type of research conducted, how research is conducted, and how data is analyzed. In other words, “biases are always present” in research (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). One goal of this dissertation related to this assumption about the role of values in research is to highlight the disunity of any one experience. Therefore, I need to respect my participants’ values and experiences surrounding flexibility policies as well as interrogate the inherent values associated with those flexibility policies. As Deetz (1996) noted, the discourse of dialogic studies strives to transform the world through the “recovery of marginalized and suppressed peoples and aspects of people” (p. 203). Thus, this dissertation will start to question the taken-for-granted assumptions about flexibility policies and the D/discourses surrounding these policies. In order to meet this goal, I conducted a grounded theory project in order understand the communicative construction of flexibility stigma by the missing middle.

Grounded Theory

In order to answer the second research question, I conducted a grounded theory of flexibility stigma for this dissertation. Grounded theory has been used and respected in social science research for decades (Tracy, 2013). Sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) first established grounded theory as a way of developing theory that is grounded in (i.e., emerges from) qualitative data rather than using data to confirm a priori hypotheses. Grounded theory is designed to explore and analyze complex processes (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For this project, I was interested in the process of how flexibility stigma is communicatively constructed. Using this methodology, I determined what process people follow to create organizational norms that stigmatize those who use

flexibility policies. Thus, grounded theory was an excellent fit for exploring the flexibility stigma process.

Two grounded theory approaches have emerged as the methodology has evolved. First, the objectivist approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss, 1987) is in line with a positivist paradigm of thought. An objectivist grounded theory “assumes that data represent object facts about a knowable world. The data already exists in the world; the research finds them and ‘discovers’ theory from them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131). In this version of grounded theory, social context, the researcher, and the interactions between participant and researcher are erased. Alternatively, the constructionist approach (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) is rooted in the interpretive paradigm. The constructionist approach seeks to understand how participants construct meanings in specific contexts and is grounded in the researcher’s interpretation. For this project, I followed a constructionist approach to grounded theory as it is more in line with my philosophical assumptions (as discussed above). This approach allows me to acknowledge my own subjectivity and involvement in the construction and interpretation of data.

Researcher’s Standpoint

Creswell (2013) argued that a researcher cannot be separated entirely from their subjective biases. Therefore, my biases affect my analysis of the data. As an instrument in qualitative research, my location as the researcher is a valuable part of the interpretive process. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge my position in this research by explaining how my background and interests have the potential to impact the data collection and analysis processes.

I grew up in a household where both of my parents held working class jobs. My father is an electrician who worked Monday-Thursday and my mother is a nurse who worked Friday-Sunday. Thus, my family is part of the missing middle. Though both my parents worked full-time, I never went to daycare as one of my parents was always home when I was not at school or activities. My parents never had to worry about a sick child disrupting their work schedules or daycare being closed because they had flexibility in their schedules in that they could work compressed workweeks. One parent was always home in case of emergencies or sickness. My parents never worked from home as they worked very scheduled and segmented jobs. It was not until college and working myself that I realized what a luxury growing up this way was. After college, I worked for a large technology company where I worked the traditional 8-5 job with little to no flexibility in when or where my work got done. It was incredibly frustrating for me to be unable to take time off for doctor's appointments or unexpected family emergencies. I also saw how many of my coworkers and family members struggled to navigate the demands of work with the demands of raising their children. It was through these experiences that I became interested in work-life fit and understood more of the range of experiences workers face in today's American workforce. It was also through these experiences that I realized how individualistic work-life fit is. What works for one person will not necessarily work for another. Everyone has unique experiences, values, and identities that shape the work-life fit equation.

As a married, heterosexual female, I have been subject to the pronatalist ideology in society. I believe this ideology is particularly strong in the Midwest, which is where I am from and where I have lived all my life. I currently identify as childfree, and I have

had to explain to my family why I do not want children. My parents and siblings understand my decision and were not surprised by it; however, my husband's family, our extended families, and friends are constantly asking us when we will have children. I have started to deflect this question by explaining we have not decided yet or how we are waiting to decide until I am finished with my education. I have received stigmatizing messages about this decision and understand how this decision has affected my ability to create flexible working arrangements.

Because of these personal experiences, these are potential biases that I believe are important for me to be aware of. In framing my research questions and interview protocol, I sought to be open to unexpected experiences related to flexibility policies. In doing voluntarily childfree (VCF) research in the past, every participant has asked me about my decision to have children. I did not disclose this information unless asked by participants. I wanted them to be open with me about their experiences and did not want my VCF status impacting their willingness to share their experiences. If asked, I explained how my husband and I are still having these conversations but we are leaning toward not having children now.

My personal experiences surrounding flexibility in the workplace as well as my VCF identity has led me to question how others experience flexibility and flexibility stigma in the workplace. More importantly, when considering the current research in the area of work-life, it became apparent that most of this research has focused on professional workers. Therefore, this study was developed to understand the process of flexibility stigmatization by the missing middle. Next, the process for collecting data will be discussed.

Methods

This dissertation employed qualitative methods to collect and analyze the data to understand the construction of workplace flexibility stigma. This section will specifically lay out the methods used to accomplish this dissertation's goals. First, I discuss the recruitment strategies and sampling procedures to recruit my participants. Next, I explain the interview process and protocol. Then, I discuss my analytic procedures for data analysis. I end this section with a discussion about my validation techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

Interview Procedures

The most common method of data collection in grounded theory is intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Intensive interviews use open-ended questions to understand the participants' interpretation of their experiences. These interviews are semi-structured as there is a list of interview questions that have been designed to elicit meaningful, focused responses (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013). As a researcher, I understand the process of interviewing through the metaphor of a traveler (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). That is, through these interviews, I was exploring the experiences of others through my "road map" of my semi-structured interview protocol. I entered the interviews having conversations that elicited detailed accounts from my participants regarding their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about workplace flexibility policies (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Most of my participants were recruited from my personal network on social media. I posted my link to a social media website and many other contacts also shared this link. In other words, network and snowball sampling techniques were implemented

for this dissertation. Potential participants were directed to a survey through Qualtrics where they filled out demographic information and basic questions about the flexibility options offered by their organization. They then indicated their willingness to be interviewed for this study and I emailed participants to schedule a time to be interviewed based on their responses in the questionnaire. Eighteen participants were recruited via social media and 12 participants were recruited via snowball sampling from initial participants.

I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews across what became two rounds. I interviewed 15 full-time employees initially. At this time, I did not ask whether or not my participants self-identify as part of the missing middle as the missing middle was not the initial focus of this dissertation. The interview process itself helped clarify what was and was not the missing middle. I considered participants to be part of the missing middle based on the intersection level of education, type of job, and income-level. Therefore, to be part of the missing middle, participants must have met two of the three following criteria based on previous literature. First, participants must make between the poverty line for a four-person household (\$24,600) and the 75th percentile for income of a four-person family (roughly \$65,000) in the United States. Second, they could hold no higher than a bachelor's degree as the missing middle is slightly educated (Skocpol, 2000). Third, they must be career-track employees in blue-collar and/or routine white-collar jobs (Williams et al., 2013).

The edges of what constitutes the missing middle are blurry; thus, it is a hard concept to operationalize. Therefore, I also used my interviews to help determine if someone was part of the missing middle. For example, I interviewed two registered

nurses (RN). An RN would not be considered a blue or routinized white collar worker; however, the way they discussed workplace flexibility was similar to the rest of my interviews. Thus, they stayed in my sample. Similarly, I interviewed two participants who worked in the food service industry. I consider them as part of the missing middle as they both have bachelor's degrees and they both were searching for a job more within their career track. Therefore, I kept them in my sample. Alternatively, based on the intersection of education, income, and type of job, one of the original 15 interviews did not fall within with working class and her interview was not used in this dissertation. She is a professional worker who had a master's degree, made over \$65,000 a year, and worked as a student affairs professional. Thus, I did not consider her to be part of the missing middle, and interestingly, the way she discussed workplace flexibility was qualitatively different than my other participants.

During this first round of interviews, it became obvious that my participants were unfamiliar with flexibility policies. Therefore, I started to focus more on how they define flexibility policies. In these conversations, I realized that missing middle conceptions of flexibility is different than what I (and the literature) considered to be flexibility. Therefore, during these initial interviews my interview guide adjusted to accommodate more time for these participants to talk about flexibility in general before moving into flexibility stigma. You can find this interview protocol in Appendix A.

After initially coding these interviews, I then followed up with 15 more semi-structured interviews. During this round of interviews, I used theoretical sampling in which participants had to identify as working class – a more colloquial term closely related to the missing middle – to qualify for this study. It is important in grounded

theory to interview participants who theoretically are important to the guiding questions. Thus, I asked specifically for workers who identified as the working class who could add to my theorizing of this process. Questions in this round focused on the gaps within my initial interviews such as the ideal worker norm and when flexibility use becomes acceptable (or not). These interviews also focused more on how they defined flexibility and on hypothetical situations about how they would respond to co-workers using flexibility. You can find the protocol for this round of interviews in Appendix B.

Ten interviews were held at a location of the participant's choosing; for example, a bar or a coffee shop. I conducted the remaining 20 interviews over the phone as we were unable to meet in person. Interviews lasted from 15-68 minutes with an average of 35 minutes. Interviews were shorter than I originally expected. I believe these interviews were shorter as many of my participants would be considered body workers. Text work refers to work that places emphasis on communication, textual labor, often words or writing, while body work refers to work that places emphasis on physical labor and deemphasizes communication (Dougherty, 2011). According to Dougherty (2011), text workers emphasize the communication within their work and are often more verbose within their daily communication. It is important to note that the text/body work should be viewed as a continuum instead of an either/or distinction. On my demographic survey, I asked participants questions to determine if they were text or body workers based on a scale I previously developed (Rick, Zerilli, & Brandhorst, 2016). Based on those responses, I then looked at the length of each interview. The participants who identified as more text workers had an average of 41 minute interviews where my participants who identified closer to body workers had an average of 23 minutes in interview length.

I conducted interviews until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation occurs when no new properties emerge in one's theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2014). Once I had theoretical saturation, I conducted two more interviews in which no new information was found. As each interview was completed, it was transcribed by a hired transcriptionist and verified by me. This process resulted in 478 pages of single-spaced text. Participants received pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed from the data to protect the identity of my participants.

Participants

For this dissertation, I interviewed 29 workers who fall within the missing middle. All participants worked full-time in an organization that offers at least one type of flexible working arrangement so that they could speak to their experiences surrounding flexibility policies. Participants on average were 35 years old (range 22-59) and were predominantly female ($n = 20$) over male ($n = 9$). Twenty-five participants self-identified as White/Caucasian participants; two identified as Latino/a and Caucasian, one identified as African-American, and one identified as Latino/a, Asian, and Caucasian. Thirteen participants were married or in a domestic partnership, 12 participants identified as being single and/or never married, three identified as divorced, and one identified as being a widow. Thirteen of the participants had children and sixteen did not. Participants came from eight different states (KY, MN, MO, ND, NE, NY, OH, and WI); however, all participants grew up in the Midwest.

In terms of education, one participant had a GED, 10 participants had some college credit, 7 participants had a two-year degree, and 11 had a four-year degree. Participants earned a variety of incomes ranging from \$15,000 per year to \$65,000

(median income was between \$30,000 and \$40,000). Participants worked a variety of industries including agriculture, banking, construction, education, food service, health care, human resources, manufacturing, public service, and retail. You can find all participants and their individual characteristics in Appendix D.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used two analysis techniques as the focus of my dissertation shifted throughout the data collection process. To answer the first research question, I conducted a thematic analysis to understand the multiple levels of discourse that influence how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility stigma. I then used grounded theory to answer research question two about the process behind workplace flexibility stigmatization. The specific methods for each approach will now be discussed.

Thematic analysis. To answer research question one, I used Tracy's (2013) iterative approach to thematic analysis. After transcribing each interview, I engaged in first-level or descriptive coding of the data (Tracy, 2013). This process occurred when I was initially coding my data for the grounded theory analysis. Thus, I used Charmaz's (2006) approach to line-by-line coding. I engaged in line-by-line comparisons as I focused on how flexibility policies are constructed by the micro, meso, and macro level D/discourses. The detailed line-by-line coding allowed me to understand the micro-level discourses as they are understood by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000). Through the initial coding process, I generated 320 initial codes. Examples of initial codes included: "being a hard worker," "taking advantage of the system," "having an understanding boss," and "scheduling in advance."

I then sought to understand broader contextual meso-discourses. Despite being unable to obtain policies from my participants, I looked on all of the company websites where my participants worked and pulled all of the information I could obtain about work-life and flexibility policies. I used this information to shape my interviews and asked my participants about things I found on their websites. For example, if I found information about workplace flexibility online, I would ask something like “I saw on the website that your organization offers [blank], have you used this policy?” After this mid-range understanding of the data, I moved toward analyzing the macro-level of Discourse by asking structured questions during the coding processes. Structured questions are used to understand the specific connections across micro-level talk as they can point to societal level macro-Discourses (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). For example, as the ideal worker Discourse began to emerge, I specifically asked structured questions such as “how is the ideal worker being communicated?” within the data set to shape my analysis of macro-level Discourses.

The next step to Tracy’s (2013) iterative approach is second-level coding. During this step, I organized and categorized the first level of coding to explain, theorize, and synthesize the data. This process is different than the focused coding of grounded theory because I had already been thinking of macro, meso, and micro-levels of D/discourse instead of letting a theoretical perspective emerge from the data. Thus, the iterative approach to data analysis allows me, as the researcher, to go from theory, to the data, to my interviews, and back to my sensitizing theory constantly. This process was used to answer my first research question.

Grounded theory analysis. Grounded theory analysis requires the researcher to analyze data as data collection is occurring to understand the process of flexibility stigmatization. The data analysis process requires the researcher to be close to the data at all times and focuses on finding codes and eventually categories that represent the best fit for the data (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory analysis involves two main components: memoing and coding. To facilitate the analysis, I used the qualitative analysis software package MAXQDA.

Memoing. Memo-writing is a way for researchers to develop ideas or ask questions of the data as they try to make sense of it (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz argued, “memo-writing provides a space to become actively engaged with your materials, to develop your ideas, to fine-tune your subsequent data-gathering, and to engage in subsequent reflexivity” (p. 162). In other words, memos are the methodological link through which the researcher transforms the data into theory (Charmaz, 2014).

I used memoing in this dissertation as a way of identifying and understanding the relationships between codes and categories. As I was coding each interview, I wrote memos of my reactions and questions about participant comments. As bigger ideas came to me during this process, I also wrote memos about emerging themes. It was during this process that the specific nature of the process of workplace flexibility stigmatization began to emerge. Ultimately, I used memos to work through and organize my ideas, reactions, and questions about the data to find connections between participants’ experiences. I wrote roughly 75 memos in the qualitative software program MAXQDA.

Coding. Coding is “a way of naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz,

2006, p. 43). The aim of coding is to make analytic sense of the data by asking what the data is about and consistent with grounded theory's emphasis on emergence, codes emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2014). There are several ways to code data in grounded theory analysis. For this project, I adhered to Charmaz's (2006) two-stage method of initial and focused coding.

Initial coding. Initial codes should be simple and focus on *what* is happening in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2014) encouraged scholars to code data as actions to avoid labeling the participants as types of people and to avoid using extant concepts. This process requires a constant comparison of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which compares data with data in order to find the code that best fits what is happening. This initial coding occurred when I conducted my first level of coding in the thematic analysis as described above.

Focused coding. After completing the initial coding, I moved into focused coding. Focused codes are more "directed, selective, and conceptual than word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident codes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). It consists of comparing the codes from the initial coding process and choosing which initial codes make the most analytic sense (Charmaz, 2014). The goal of focused coding is to raise these codes into conceptual categories that become woven together into a theoretical story.

In order to see the connections within my initial codes as part of my focused coding, I exported my coding system from MAXQDA, printed it off, cut it up, and physically separated my initial codes into different piles. These piles became my focused codes that helped me shape my theorizing on the process of flexibility stigmatization. For

example, the initial codes of “viewing work as a priority,” “doing your job,” and “being a hard worker” became the focused code of “drawing from the ideal worker norm.”

Charmaz (2014) argued that memoing is one of the best ways for researchers to work through focused coding. Through the process of memo writing and conversations about the data, I ultimately constructed the process of workplace flexibility stigmatization. Drawing on perceptions of flexibility and conversations with co-workers and supervisors, the missing middle communicate a fine line between acceptable and non-acceptable uses of workplace flexibility. Thus, use of workplace flexibility becomes stigmatized when it is deemed a non-acceptable use of the policy.

Peer debriefing. During the analysis process, I also engaged in several conversations with my advisor and other colleagues. Peer debriefing sessions are typically used to validate one’s findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), but these conversations served as a vital component to my analysis process. These peer debriefing sessions served as an external check to my research, with the debriefers serving as “devil’s advocates” that “ask[ed] hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). First, I met several times with my advisor where I sketched out my ideas and thought more in-depth about the process of workplace flexibility stigma. During these conversations, the process I explicate in Chapter 5 shifted and changed to its current form. Second, I presented my initial interpretations of and conclusions about the data and asked my peers whether my findings were coherent and valid. During this process, I realized that my original macro, meso, and micro descriptions of my findings did not fully encapsulate what I was trying to say in terms of the process of workplace flexibility stigmatization. Therefore, through these conversations I shifted my focus to how the

perceptions of flexibility, perceptions of the individual worker, and organizational norms of acceptability interplay with one another to create stigmatizing conditions around flexibility use. In other words, these conversations helped me find and develop the fine line between flexibility use and abuse.

Validation

Creswell (2013) recommends that researchers engage in at least two validation strategies to assess the reliability of the findings. In this dissertation, I engaged in two validation techniques: rich description and member checking. First, rich, thick description involves providing detailed information about the themes or cases under investigation (Creswell, 2013). By providing rich details in the write up of the findings, readers can make decisions on their own about the transferability of my findings.

In addition to rich, thick description, I also engaged in member checking. This process involved taking my analysis, findings, and interpretation back to my participants in order to assess whether they view them as valid (Creswell, 2013; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I emailed a short description of my analysis to 16 of my participants to elicit their feedback about the accuracy and credibility of my account of their experiences. Seven participants emailed me back with their feedback. This process allowed me to get my participants' voices back into the analysis process and point out the areas I missed in my analysis (Creswell, 2013). All participants agreed with my assessment of their experiences with workplace flexibility. Several of my participants reiterated how important workplace flexibility was to their ability to find work-life balance and two emphasized how workplace flexibility was dependent on whether they work directly with customers. During the member checking, I learned that several of my participants had

since changed jobs since our interview. I included that information in my results in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to study the process of workplace flexibility stigmatization I engaged in a grounded theory project that drew on dialogic and transformative ideals about how interviews should be conducted. I interviewed 29 members of the missing middle using semi-structured interviews. I argue that this research methodology and its methods positioned me to make claims about how the missing middle communicatively construct workplace flexibility and the stigma surrounding these policies.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The goal of this chapter is to present the results of the grounded theory analysis of the missing middle's constructions of workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma. Workers from the missing middle were asked during semi-structured interviews to talk about their thoughts and experiences about workplace flexibility. During my initial interviews, it became clear that my participants viewed workplace flexibility differently than what I anticipated. Thus, my interviews started to focus on how they communicatively constructed workplace flexibility as well as how they constructed flexibility stigma. I will first explain how they communicatively constructed workplace flexibility through macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. In doing so, the missing middle constructed acceptable and non-acceptable uses of workplace flexibility. I will then turn to how the missing middle communicatively constructed a line between flexibility use and abuse. The abuse of workplace flexibility was stigmatized; thus, there is a fine line between workplace flexibility use and stigmatization.

Constructing Workplace Flexibility

Research question one asked *how, if at all, do the missing middle communicatively construct flexibility policies via macro, meso, and micro levels of D/discourse?* Analysis of the data suggested the missing middle constructed workplace flexibility by drawing upon macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. In this section, I will first talk about two macro-level Discourses – the ideal worker Discourse and family first Discourse – that shaped how the missing middle viewed workplace flexibility. I will then turn to how meso-level discourses, via formal and informal organizational policies and organizational cultures, influenced how the missing middle communicatively

constructed workplace flexibility. Finally, I will turn to how communication with supervisors and coworkers, two micro-level discourses, shaped how the missing middle viewed workplace flexibility. I will begin with how macro-level Discourses shaped norms around flexibility stigma.

Macro-Level Discourses

Macro-level Discourses are the large-scale, societal-level, assembly of discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). First, the ideal worker Discourse shaped the missing middle's communicative construction of workplace flexibility by privileging organizational interests ahead of personal interests. Second, the family first Discourse shaped the construction of workplace flexibility by privileging family (i.e., children) over organizational concerns. Thus, the missing middle constructed workplace flexibility as falling within the tension between these two Discourses.

Ideal worker Discourse. The missing middle drew upon the ideal worker Discourse to frame their conceptions of workplace flexibility (and in turn flexibility stigma). Acker (1990) defined the ideal worker as a worker who puts the organizational needs ahead of their personal needs. During my initial interviews, my participants naturally articulated the ideal worker in their talk about workplace flexibility. Thus, I started probing deeper into how they defined the ideal worker and how this Discourse shaped their understanding of workplace flexibility. I will first explain how my participants defined the ideal worker, then explicate how this ideology influenced their definitions of workplace flexibility.

My participants defined the ideal worker very similarly to the way organizational scholars (e.g., Acker, 1990; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Wieland, 2010) have defined

this Discourse. For my participants, an ideal worker was a worker who is dependable, stays busy, and cares about their job. First, the ideal worker is dependable. For example, Adrienne (56, administrative assistant) defined the ideal worker as “one that follows all the rules in place, gets to work on time, gets their work done, meets the deadlines that are, um, before them in their position.” Amera (27, administrative support) defined the ideal worker as “hard working, um, determined, um, goal oriented, punctual.” Similarly, Abby (29, bank teller) defined the ideal worker as:

Someone who gets everything done that needs to get done in the time period it needs to get done in. So whether that's, you know, this is a rush order kind of thing and needs to be done, you know, by end of business day today, you get it done then. If it's, "This needs to be done by next week," you make sure it's done by next week.

It is interesting to note that as my participants talked about being dependable, they articulated dependability as related to time. Thus, getting to work on time and being done in a timely manner changed the perception of the worker as an ideal worker.

Second, participants also defined the ideal worker as someone who constantly stays busy. Tom (54, assistant manager at a building supply retailer) explained that a good worker “does what they are employed to do, and I guess if, if you get those tasks done, to look for more work to do...Stay busy.” Similarly, Mitch (53, electrician) explained:

What makes a good worker? Someone who shows up every day, is dependable, willing to learn what you're trying to teach them, is the things I just...Well, I just want somebody to try. And stay busy and willing to learn something. If they just

come and they want a check and they expect, you know, everything and not have to put anything into it, then they don't survive very long with me.

According to Mitch, a good worker stayed busy and earned their paycheck. They were constantly looking for something to do and are willing to constantly learn new things.

Third, an ideal worker cared about their job and their performance. Lucas (2011) argued that one way to have dignity in a job is in the quality of the job performed. This idea was also echoed by my participants. For example, Larry (28, window washer) explained, “I guess, you always do your job well no matter how shitty it is. Um, just because you don't like your job doesn't mean you shouldn't do it well.” Denise (24, phlebotomist) defined an ideal worker as:

Somebody who cares about, like, what they're doing, what their responsibilities are at their job, and, like, not only cares, but is really, like, involved in what they're doing. Like, healthcare, for instance, like, their patients, like, not just go there, you know, for the paycheck. To really, like, want to help- help the people.

Thus, the ideal worker took pride in their work, did a good job, and truly cared about the people they work with. In other words, the ideal worker had dignity in their job. In summary, my participants defined the ideal worker as someone who is dependable as defined as getting things done in a timely fashion, stays busy, and has dignity in their work. I will now turn to how the ideal worker ideology shapes perceptions of workplace flexibility.

The ideal worker ideology heavily influenced my participants' definitions of workplace flexibility. My participants tended to privilege work's role in their lives when discussing flexibility. Janie (25, health care administrative support) defined workplace

flexibility as “just being flexible with people’s lives and schedules. But realistic to know that you have a job, you promised that you’re supposed to be there.” Renee (36, human resource assistant) echoed this sentiment by explaining “I think though, you know, you have to be here when you’re expected to be here and get what you need to done.” In this way, Janie and Renee privileged the work over non-work. Thus, they put the organization’s needs ahead of their own needs. In doing so, workplace flexibility is perceived to benefit the organization as it allows workers to be more productive. At the same time, organizations can only become so flexible before workers need to complete their work.

The ideal worker Discourse, as defined by my participants, focuses on getting things done in a timely fashion. In turn, this definition of the ideal worker influenced a few of my participants’ understanding of workplace flexibility as focusing on the best ways to get things done for the organization. For example, Gabby (23, healthcare administrative support) explained that she had flexibility in the process of documenting conversations with clients. Her coworkers hand wrote everything before typing it out on the computer; however, Gabby preferred just to type as she is talking with clients. She stated, “I think it's really important to be able to have that kind of flexibility to be able to change things for yourself that need to be done, instead of having to be micromanaged or having everything to be done one way.” Gabby believed that workers are more productive because they have flexibility in how they get work done and everyone can find the best way for themselves.

Part of being an ideal worker is being able to adapt to your environment to still get your work done. Karen (59, nurse) viewed workplace flexibility as being able to go with the flow. For example, when asked to define workplace flexibility she explained:

Karen: Flexibility...Geez, we're always flexible.

Jessica: How so?

Karen: Um...Well, the thing is, is we can plan to organize our day, but there's always going to be those interruptions. There's always gonna be that patient that's having chest pain or needs something pulled out a tube, or, or you know, needs a pain med. There is, it's...we have to constantly be flexible. Um, our days are never the same. Our days are chaotic, (laughs), majority of the time. And you just, you kinda, you gotta learn to go with the flow.

As a nurse, Karen's job was never predictable. She never knew what her workday would be like when she walks in the door. Thus, for her, workplace flexibility was being able to go with the flow with the day's events and she later explained that those coworkers who cannot adjust to that type of flexibility tend to burnout and leave the organization. It is interesting to note that for Karen, flexibility is not something that her organization offers – as she said, "I've never heard of it." Rather, flexibility is located within the individual to be able to go with the flow and those who are unable to adapt are not productive workers. Thus, an ideal worker adapts to the changing environments in their workplaces to still be productive and dependable workers.

The ideal worker Discourse also influenced workplace flexibility as it focuses on finding the best time and place to be the most productive worker. Abby (29, bank teller) explained:

Like I said with the ideal worker, I think if you get what you need to get done in the time that you're allotted for that, then you're being successful. And I think with flexibility, it can allow you, if used properly, to be more successful in potentially a shorter time period. That's in my experience because I can get more things done when it's quiet, and so if I can go to those offsite places or work from home or, you know, come in early, I can get more done than, and potentially move up that timeline and have something done earlier than if I didn't have that flexibility and I would get distracted by, you know, other people coming into the office and trying to talk to me about who knows what.

Abby believed she is more productive because her job allows her to come in early and get things done. Her primary role was a bank teller but she also worked in the audit department. The audit department allowed her to come in early and have more of the traditional flexibility I was expecting to see from all my participants. She was one of only two participants who described flexibility as having the option of where and when she gets her work done. Regardless of how she defined it, workplace flexibility was inherently tied to the ideal worker Discourse.

It is important to note that the ideal worker Discourse inherently benefits the organization as it is tied to how productive workers are. Thus, on one hand, workplace flexibility is all about producing quality and dependable work for the organization. Workers do not necessarily benefit from this aspect of workplace flexibility. In the ideal worker Discourse's version of flexibility, workplace flexibility fully benefits the organization. However, my participants also discussed how work is not the only thing in

their lives. For example, Brandon (33, customer service representative) thought of workplace flexibility as:

Pretty much to me, it's just a job where an employer that realizes that they are not the only aspect of your life. Whether they acknowledge that by, you know, being open to, you know, schedule changes or, you know, whether it's just showing a recognition for things that you, you know, have to do outside of work. Just, just plain and simple saying, "We know we're not the most important thing to you." Because it's places like that that make you want to stay there, make you want to do more because you don't feel like you're trapped. You don't feel like you're being forced to work.

In defining flexibility, Brandon starts to counter the ideal worker Discourse by explaining that there is something other than work in his life. Thus, in constructing workplace flexibility, the missing middle also drew from other societal-level Discourses. Specifically, workplace flexibility was also shaped by family first and prenatal Discourses.

Family first and prenatal Discourses. The missing middle also defined workplace flexibility by focusing on how their families came first in their lives and took priority over organizational concerns. The family first Discourse reflects cultural assumptions that family demands undivided attention and that family should be the central focus of one's life (Hays, 1996; Mescher et al., 2010). I did not ask participants to define this Discourse, but it became part of the conversation in every interview. Specifically, children were essential to their understanding of workplace flexibility as most examples of who uses flexibility were someone with children. Thus, pronatalism –

the ideal that encourages having and raising children – also was an important Discourse when defining flexibility. I begin by providing a few exemplars of how family becomes prioritized over work, demonstrating how my participants drew upon the family first Discourse. I will then move into how the pronatalism Discourse influenced how these workers defined workplace flexibility.

Many of my participants described times when workplace flexibility allowed them to prioritize family over work demands. Most of these times occurred when there was an emergency in their families. Tom (54, assistant manager at a building supply retailer) explained, “It’s just tough, to, you know, miss work, but you gotta take care of your family first, I guess.” Many of my participants specifically talked about putting their family first for a variety of reasons. For example, Amera told this story about her grandfather’s illness:

The company I work for now is extremely flexible. I mean, two years ago my grandpa had a stroke and me, being the only family member that lives in [city], I was on his emergency call list, meaning I had to leave work if he had another stroke or had a heart attack, anything like that, and I had to go So, [my company is] very flexible and even when my grandpa died I, I emailed my boss and he's like, "Oh, take your time. When you come back to work no rush"...So it's very, you know, family orientated and you need to do in your, you know, for your family is priority over work.

For Amera, her grandfather’s illness was a reason she had to miss work. She said at the end of this story that “family is priority over work.” It is interesting to note that she was the only participant who included a story of prioritizing family that did not involve

children and/or childcare. For every other participant, family equaled children. Thus, when my participants were talking about family as a priority, they drew upon the pronatal Discourses embedded in American society. In doing so, having children is considered a valid reason to use workplace flexibility policies. Workers without children, then, must justify their use of workplace flexibility because they do not have children as a discursive resource to use when requesting to use these policies. This will be discussed further below.

Aligning with previous research on work-life policies (e.g., Hoffman & Cowan, 2008), the missing middle's perceptions of organizational policies discussed family concerns as being childcare concerns. For example, Larry (28, window washer), who does not have children, when asked if there was anything else that I needed to know about workplace flexibility, explained:

I know it's extremely helpful for people who are a parent, well if Mom and Dad work. Because, uh, it definitely saves on, like for my brother with his wife, it saves on childcare quite a bit. Someone can start earlier, take care of the kid in the morning. And then the other one comes home earlier and picks them up from school so they don't have to go to daycare for an hour or so.

Throughout the interview, Larry struggled thinking of times when he used flexibility because, for him, workplace flexibility is particularly helpful for those workers who have children. He does not have children; thus, he did not use workplace flexibility in his eyes. It is interesting to note that his interview occurred while he was working, and we could talk on the phone while he washed windows. I would have considered that flexibility but

he did not. Thus, his limited view of workplace flexibility helping those workers with children limited his definition of and ability to use workplace flexibility policies.

Larry's understanding of putting children first in terms of workplace flexibility was not an uncommon stance. For example, Hallie (29, barista), who recently became a parent herself, stated, "the people that have kids need a little bit more time off than the people that don't have kids. For sure." Hannah (22, health care administrative support) thought that "the bosses are usually more understanding for parents to take time off, than they are for people who aren't." Thus, having children became a more accepted reason to be able to use workplace flexibility. In turn, this Discourse can shape policies surrounding workplace flexibility and the conversations workers have with their supervisors and coworkers. Anna (23, health care administrative support) reflected on her experiences by stating:

Anna: I don't think anybody is treated differently except maybe, slightly, with, um, one of the ladies that I work with who has the young kids... She's been taking time off for FMLA. So she just had a lot of time lately, and I think just knowing those personal things that how she needs that, she might be, you know, let off the hook easier than someone else, maybe who doesn't really need it.

Jessica: Okay. What do you mean they don't really need it?

Anna: I don't know. Who just wants to have it off for no reason.

Jessica: Okay, so you think certain excuses are more valid than others?

Anna: Yeah

Anna articulated childcare as being a more valid reason for using flexibility policies than people who "don't really need it." She did not have children, but she started to privilege

coworkers with children as having more valid reasons to take time off than other people. Janie (25, health care administrative support) echoed this sentiment by questioning why people without children use flexibility policies. She questioned, “It's like, why, why aren't you here? You have no one else to worry about but yourself, so you can't have that much unexpected things come up in your life when it's just you.” Earlier in the interview, she explained:

People that, people that have...that don't have children, to me, don't understand the difficulty maybe of life's happenings. If you don't have other things, if you don't have children, you don't have every unexpected things come up. But if you do, then you have however many little humans to take care of.

For Janie, and many of my participants, children were unpredictable; thus, parents had more things that come up unexpectedly that require workplace flexibility. It is interesting to note that parents are perceived as being more likely to have things come up. However, unexpected events happen in everyone's life, not just parents. As my participants discussed the unexpected events that happen in their children's lives, they started to reinforce the idea that nonparent workers do not need workplace flexibility. Thus, those workers must navigate different expectations placed on them.

It is important to note that a few of the participants saw workplace flexibility as more nuanced when it came to pronatal ideologies. The workers who saw flexibility as something more than childcare primarily did not have children themselves. They still privileged childcare as a more valid reason, but also articulated other definitions of workplace flexibility to be more inclusive. For example, Sadie (37, healthcare administrative support) stated:

Um, I would say, I know the people that I work with, um...The few that don't have kids, they don't tend to flex their hours as much. So...Um...But I would say, that's just a matter of personal choice. If they chose and some people just don't feel the need to do it. Like their kids are out of their house, they, um...They prefer to just be working anyways. Or the, the shifts that they chose, they don't really interact with their, um, their home life. So...Um...Yeah, I would say more people that have kids, um, at least in my position, tend to use their flex time more often.

Sadie started to argue that it was her choice to use these policies at all. Some people choose to use workplace flexibility while others do not. She believed that people who have children use workplace flexibility more often, but they choose to do so. Abby also started to articulate this idea of choice behind workplace flexibility by stating:

I think, and this is just, ... coming from someone who doesn't have kids, I feel I have more flexibility in my flexibility in that, you know, if I wanna work a different shift every day, I can work a different shift every day. If I want to go downtown one day, work from an offsite one day, work from home one day, I can do that, and I'm the one making that decision. As opposed to I think for those with children, their flexibility can be a make it or break it. For, you know, them keeping their positions because they're going to need time off for sick children. They're going to need time off for those soccer games, but it becomes much more of a, the flexibility is based around the child. And so, you know, for me I can say, "Oh, well I'm gonna, I don't know, meet friends every night this week, so I'm gonna be done with work by 3:30." But that's because I'm choosing that as opposed to, "Well, my kids get out at two today and three tomorrow and two the

next day, so that's when I have to be out." You know, they're kind of getting assigned how to use their flexibility then.

She did not discount the need for her coworkers to use workplace flexibility for childcare, but she saw herself as having more choice in how she used workplace flexibility. Her schedule – both in and outside of the workplace – was not dictated by children, but rather, she had flexibility in her workplace flexibility to be able to navigate a broader range of her work and non-work demands.

It is interesting to note that the workers without children saw workplace flexibility as more of a choice whereas workers with children saw it as a necessity. Janie (25, health care administrative support) explained:

People that, people that have...that don't have children, to me, don't understand the difficulty maybe of life's happenings. If you don't have other things, if you don't have children, you don't have every unexpected things come up. But if you do, then you have however many little humans to take care of.

Similarly, Tracy explained, "I have no choice [to use or not use workplace flexibility to take care of a child], because she's not old enough to stay by herself" The missing middle had to take care of their children, drawing from the family first Discourse. If they did not take care of their sick child, who would? Workers with children were controlled by the family first Discourse in material ways as childcaring is a material concern. Young children cannot take care of themselves. Thus, if a child is sick, someone – often a parent – must take time off to care for their child. This material reality became a discursive resource as my participants were able to use childcare as a reason to use workplace

flexibility. In this way, the ideal worker and family first Discourses enable and constrain the missing middle's communicative construction of workplace flexibility.

In summary, the family first ideology influenced the missing middle's definitions of workplace flexibility as many of my participants thought family should be a priority over work. Workplace flexibility allowed workers to put their family first; however, it also forced them to put their family first when family emergencies occurred. For example, when taking care of family demands, workers often had to miss work. They perceived themselves as having no other choice, whereas some of my participants without children talked about having more choice about when and how to use workplace flexibility. The missing middle felt a tension between the ideal worker and family first Discourses as they pull the workers in different directions. As a result, my participants communicatively constructed workplace flexibility as being able to balance these different Discourses.

Balancing the tension between the ideal worker and family first Discourses.

To conclude how macro-level Discourses influenced the missing middle's communicative construction of workplace flexibility, it is important to iterate how workplace flexibility occurred within the tension between work and non-work priorities. My participants also expressed this tension in their definition of workplace flexibility. Tracy (49, housekeeper) explained:

So you've got, you've got to have some sort of balance there to where the management says, "yes, I know you have a life outside of work. Yes, I know you have kids. Life happens. "Stuff you can't control messes with you, but you're here to do a job." "I hired you to be a part of this team, to do a job. I didn't hire you to

constantly be late and be on the phone and have every other day off to do this, that, and whatever." That's what your days off are for. If you need time off for something, "Hey, I have no other time. I need to leave early to go to the dentist, to get my license renewed, to whatever." "I have no other time to do this because they're not open late." Then yeah, I understand, but you're here to do a job and I need you here to do that job. So you got to have a little... You got to have a little bit of both.

Workplace flexibility needed to have a balance between the ideal worker Discourse and the family first Discourse. Tracy expressed this concern by addressing how employers need to find a balance between "yes, I know you have a life outside of work. Yes, I know you have kids. Life happens" and "but you're here to do a job and I need you here to do that job." Workplace flexibility needs to be a balance of both work and family priorities. In viewing workplace flexibility as a balance between the ideal worker and family first Discourses, it allowed workers to find the balance between having a job to do and taking care of children, renewing a license, or going to the dentist. Renee similarly argued:

I think [the ideal worker and workplace flexibility] relate a lot because sometimes workers have to be flexible with their personal time. And I have definitely, in my career, had to compromise my own vacations and my own holidays with my family to get things done. Um, wish I hadn't to but so you know, sometimes it is a blessing to pop in on the weekend and do a few things or put a few hours in. Um, so I think flexibility goes both ways but when I want to leave at 4:00, as long as everything's taken care of, I'd like to know that that comes back to me.

Renee's definition of workplace flexibility was a give and take relationship. She understood that if her organization is being flexible with her non-work responsibilities, she also needs to be flexible to get her work responsibilities accomplished. When she gave to one area of her life, she would eventually receive it back in the other area. Thus, workplace flexibility allowed workers to manage the tensions workers face between the ideal worker and family first Discourses.

I also want to briefly address the issues of materiality within these macro-level Discourses. Two of my participants addressed that their ability to find balance between these Discourses was directly tied to being able to afford to do so. These workers worked to pay for things in their lives. Thus, they discussed how the income they made allowed for workplace flexibility because they could afford to take time off to do non-work things. For example, when asked about a time when he struggled to balance work and non-work, Mark (57, manufacturing line worker) explained, "I didn't have uh too much income when I was working at the golf course and stuff and in the in the winters and you didn't have work, so it got to be a trying sort of thing." He later talked about how difficult it was to be able to afford his hobbies – hunting and fishing – when he did not have a steady income year-round. Now that he has year-round income, he was able to afford to take days off here and there to accommodate his hobbies. Thus, part of workplace flexibility is being able to afford to use workplace flexibility. Similarly, Katrina (26, extruder/line worker) explained:

I guess, uh, moreso when I worked at [big box retailer]. Umm, I wasn't really making as much money and then I'm being asked to showing up to work but I never really could um, go out and do fun things, like go to the movies all the time

or go shopping and get whatever I feel like. [pause] I had to kinda pick and choose what I could do.

By being flexible, Katrina was often called into work; thus, she was unable to do what she wished to do. It is interesting to note that in this definition of workplace flexibility, she is having to be flexible in her non-work life to accommodate her organization.

Katrina didn't make enough money, so when the opportunity arose to work more hours, she had to take those hours. She moved to a new company which pays significantly more and she is now able to do more fun and social things because she makes enough income to do so. In this way, workplace flexibility was more than just being accommodating to worker's lives, it was also the workers being accommodating to the organizational needs. In this way, the organization retains control of a worker's non-work life as it starts to colonize another aspect of the worker's lifeworld (see Deetz, 1992).

In summary, the ideal worker, family first, and pronatalism Discourses shaped how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility. Drawing from ideal worker and family first Discourses, participants defined workplace flexibility by balancing the demands of work with the demands of their non-work lives. However, when discussing non-work lives, participants privileged putting their family (i.e., children) first. Material concerns also influenced the construction of workplace flexibility. On top of drawing from macro-level Discourses, the missing middle also drew upon meso-level discourses to communicatively construct workplace flexibility.

Meso-Level Discourses

Meso-level discourses move the discussion of D/discourses to the organizational level (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). The interviews identified two meso-level discourses

that the missing middle drew upon when communicatively constructing workplace flexibility. First, formal and informal organizational policies surrounding workplace flexibility were communicatively constructed surrounding planned and unplanned time off. These policies, then, shaped how the missing middle constructed workplace flexibility. Second, the organizational culture shaped how the missing middle constructed workplace flexibility.

Organizational policies. One type of meso-level discourse used by the missing middle to learn about workplace flexibility was the formal and informal organizational policies surrounding workplace flexibility. Participants discussed formal and informal policies for both planned and unplanned flexibility needs in distinct ways.

Interestingly, only five of my participants talked about formal documentation and policies when talking about workplace flexibility, despite being specifically asked about these formal written policies. For a few of my participants, workplace flexibility was not something they had heard of prior to our interview. For example, when asked how he first learned about workplace flexibility, Martin (43, food service) replied, “Workplace flexibility? I had never heard of it in our department.” Similarly, when asked to define workplace flexibility, Kathy (46, nurse) responded:

Kathy: Like hours?... I’ve never seen a policy. Are they really writing flexibility policies now?

Jessica: Yes, some companies are.

Kathy: Holy god, that is awesome. Ha. It’s about time.

For some of my participants, the lack of having (or knowing) about formal documentation shaped their construction of workplace flexibility because they had to use

other D/discourses to construct flexibility. Thus, when talking about workplace flexibility policies, I am drawing from Canary's (2010) broader definition that defines policy as policy texts, actual practices and procedures or plans that organize action. Workplace flexibility policies, then, include both formal and informal policies.

It is important to note how the lack of formal, written policies shapes how workers communicate about workplace flexibility. Without formal, meso-level discourses, workers must draw from macro-level Discourses surrounding workplace flexibility to communicatively construct flexibility. Similarly, in order to communicatively construct workplace flexibility, workers must also draw upon micro-level discourses and conversations in order to fill the gap of not having written workplace flexibility policies. Thus, the meso-level discourse of the written policies themselves are highly influenced by broader, macro-level Discourses and micro-level conversations.

Those participants who did talk about formal policies explicitly talked about how the documentation shaped norms surrounding workplace flexibility. For example, when asked about how he first learned about workplace flexibility, Mitch (53, electrician) explained, "They had everything wrote up. They give you a whole great big book and how they, you know, what they have and benefits and what they're, you know, what they expect." Similarly, Dana (28, paraprofessional) "read the policy and procedure manuals" to learn about her workplace flexibility options.

It is important to note that not everyone wanted a formal workplace flexibility policy. In fact, several of my participants explained that they have more flexibility now than they would with a policy. Renee (36, human resources) summarized this sentiment by stating:

So I would say that, you know, in some respects would I like an official policy written? You know, yeah, maybe it would make us more comfortable when that wouldn't be so gray. But the other, on the other hand, if our company comes out with a policy, it can't really be so flexible because we have those people in those other departments who need to be answering the phone and sitting at their desks for certain hours.

Renee felt that she was benefiting from workplace flexibility more now than she would if there were a formal policy because it would have to be a blanket policy across all departments. Her current position allowed her to work when and where she chooses. However, if it was a blanket policy, she believed she could lose some of that flexibility because the policy would need to fit everyone. Some of her coworkers work directly with customers and Renee believed they would have less flexibility to always make sure someone was working to take care of their customers. Therefore, she would have less flexibility to accommodate all workers' situations within her company.

By drawing from formal and informal policies, the missing middle communicatively constructed planned and unplanned flexibility needs in distinct ways. I will now turn to how my participants communicated these different flexibility needs. First, planned time off included using policies such as FMLA, vacation, and requesting days off in advance. For example, when Janie (25, health care administrative support) explained what policies her workplace offer, she explicitly referenced planned needs and related policies:

We get paid time off. We get 10 hours a month, paid time off. With ten and a half paid holidays. Paternity leave. You can take twelve weeks of FMLA, six of which

are paid under short-term disability. Um, as far as scheduling, not very flexible. You basically work 8:30 to 5. But you can take time off. Um, can't leave early unless you have it approved the day before by 5 pm. Um, you can take a break when it's scheduled. There's scheduled breaks, same every day, 19 minutes, 59 seconds.

When discussing workplace flexibility, Janie described planned time off. She knew she had holidays off. She knew how much vacation she accrued. She knew her breaks were the same time every day. Thus, workplace flexibility was about scheduling in advance. She also explained that the day-to-day scheduling was not flexible but she could plan around the structured schedule.

Janie worked 8-5 Monday through Friday as did about half of my participants. The other half of my participants worked a variety of hours and shifts depending on the week. Many of them explained how they can request a day off without having to take paid time off (PTO) because they could make up their hours another day of the week. Therefore, scheduling in advance became important in their constructions of workplace flexibility. For example, Karen (59, nurse) explained how she could make her own flexibility by explaining:

[I work] the days that I wanna work. I mean, requesting certain days off and then working the other days. I mean, like okay, I was very, I made my own flexibility when my kids were in sports and I wanted to see their games, so I would work other days and other shifts so I could make sure I could get to their games. So that's how we make our own flexibility. You know, you're scheduled a certain

way, but yet, in return, um, you can request certain days off, so you know, that, that, that makes it easier, too.

By using her organization's scheduling policies, she was able create her own workplace flexibility by working the days she wanted to work. She could request days off in advance to accommodate her life and family demands. Similarly, Hannah's (22, health care administrative support) schedule is posted three weeks in advance. She can then schedule appointments and get errands done during her time off. However, she also explained, "requesting time off four weeks in advance? It's hard to make that work. You don't always know when things will come up." On one hand, this type of workplace flexibility is helpful for the missing middle, but it also made navigating life's unexpected emergencies difficult. Thus, not only do the missing middle draw on organizational policies for planned flexibility needs, they also draw on those policies for unplanned flexibility needs.

Unplanned time off occurs when life's interruptions happen. My participants articulated a variety of policies relating to workplace flexibility for unplanned time off. For some of my workers, using unplanned time off was not a big issue as they could make up the work another day. Alternatively, some of my participants discussed the consequences of missing work for unplanned reasons. Most of my participants discussed being written up for missing work. For example, Janie (25, health care administrative support) explained her company's policies:

Um, you get so much time allotted, per year, of unplanned time off. Once you have 56 hours unplanned time off, per year, you get on a verbal warning. After 80

hours, you get on a written warning. After 96 hours, there's further disciplinary action.

Janie then explained that she has had further disciplinary action “because [she] has kids and kids are unpredictable.” As a result, she lost out on quarterly bonuses and company parties and picnics because of missing unplanned time off. Despite claiming “it’s a lot of time off,” Janie faced repercussions for missing work due to unplanned time off. She met all of the requirements for her quarterly bonuses (e.g., customer satisfaction, productivity goals) but missed out on the bonuses because she had unexpected life things come up. Interestingly, Janie could “buy” an extra week of time off from her company. Every January, employees could take small paycheck deductions in order to pay for an entire extra week of time off. In other words, when Janie needed to take unexpected time off she had already paid for that additional time off. However, even with that additional time off, she had to take additional unplanned time off and missed out on quarterly bonuses.

It is important to note that despite wanting to be able to take time off, the workers who were working often had to work harder to cover their coworkers’ work when they called in sick. A lot of my participants talked about how being short-staffed was a drawback of flexibility. Specifically, participants who worked in retail and health care, where they have direct contact with clients, customers, and patients, felt the effects of being short staffed. For example, Hannah (22, health care administrative support) explained that “the people that showed up for work really had to suffer from [flexibility]” because they were always short staffed at her previous position in retail. Karen (59, nurse) explained, “flexibility makes our job harder. Our patients need to be taken care of so flexibility puts a bigger and a higher workload on the ones that are working.” In health

care, not showing up for work could have life or death consequences. Being short staffed could mean patients are not getting the care they need. Kathy (46, nurse) stated, “If we can’t find a replacement for that nurse, who’s going to take care of that resident?” Thus, in these customer-facing jobs, workers often get called in on their days off of work to cover shifts for coworkers who are using flexibility policies. Many of my participants expressed frustration when they were called into work to cover someone else’s shift. Not only does this happen for unplanned time off, but Karen later explained, “there are some people that haven’t been able to take a vacation in years because their floor is so short staffed that they haven’t been able to provide a vacation.” Thus, workplace flexibility is constructed from formal and informal organizational policies surrounding planned and unplanned time off as well as the consequences of these flexibility needs.

Organizational culture. Though only discussed by a few of my participants, organizational cultures were a large part of how those participants understood workplace flexibility. From a cultural perspective, organizations are systems of beliefs, values, and taken-for-granted norms that guide everyday behavior (Martin & Siehl, 1983; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). Therefore, the beliefs, values, and taken-for-granted norms of the organization shaped how the missing middle viewed what was and was not acceptable uses of workplace flexibility. For example, Renee (36, human resources) explained:

So my company...one of our core qualities and things that we say we offer is flexibility for our clients...And I think that that quality rings true all the way down from our owners to the managers, to the employees that we say we're flexible with our clients but we're also flexible with ourselves. And it's important

to our culture. You know, in our, in our company meeting one of our owners gave a little story and was talking about grace, and that all of us deserve grace. And it's understood that we're going to make mistakes and we deserve grace. And everywhere else I worked we didn't, we were not given grace. And we were not given flexibility. So it's core to this culture but if it's not core to other companies' cultures. Then just up to the manager and it's just up to the, what day of the week it is.

Renee worked in a company where flexibility was one of their core values for their customers and this value reverberated across the organization in multiple ways. One of these ways was having workplace flexibility for their workers. This organization valued flexibility and grace where her previous employer did not have the same values. She did not have as much flexibility there as she currently does at this organization. Thus, organizational values shaped how her organization viewed workplace flexibility. In turn, this meso-level discourse shaped and was shaped by the Discourses surrounding workplace flexibility (e.g., family first and the ideal worker Discourses).

Part of organizational cultures also includes the people who work there. For some organizations, being short staffed (see discussion above) was a huge issue. Thus, they were forced to keep workers who are perceived to not be good workers just to keep the organization staffed. This is a material concern as health care facilities are required by law to have a certain number of staff working based on their number of patients. Thus, if an organization let go their bad workers, they would not have the staff to keep their doors open. When asked about what happens when people do not show up to work, Karen (59, nurse) explained:

They'll get talked to. And then after like so many, like they usually give three, three warnings or whatever, and then after the third one, they have the chance of, you know, letting them go. But like I said, we're so short that to fire somebody, they're not gonna do it. So we keep staff that we shouldn't be keeping. You can't depend on them.

By keeping staff that her organization cannot depend on, the abuse of workplace flexibility was wide spread in Karen's organization. In fact, within a few weeks of our interview, Karen left that healthcare organization due to the staffing issues after working there over 30 years. In follow up communication, I asked Karen if the lack of workplace flexibility shaped her decision and she agreed that it was a big part because if she cannot take the time off she needed, she did not want to cover for people who were not showing up for work. Therefore, the culture of the organization shaped Karen's perceptions of workplace flexibility.

In summary, organizational policies and organizational cultures were powerful meso-level discourses that shaped perceptions of workplace flexibility. Only five of my participants discussed formal organizational policies; however, all my participants were able to discuss informal policies surrounding planned and unplanned flexibility needs. The ability to take time off was a huge influence on how my participants discussed workplace flexibility. Alternatively, organizational cultures also shaped workplace flexibility by drawing on organizational values, workers, and norms.

Micro-Level Discourses

Micro-level discourses are the discourses produced in everyday life (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Specifically, conversations with supervisors and coworkers heavily

shaped how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility. I will begin with a discussion of how communication with supervisors shaped my participants' conceptions of workplace flexibility.

Communication with supervisors. Supervisors were a large influence on the missing middle while they were learning about workplace flexibility. The relationship with the supervisor became the lynchpin in how my participants could use different flexibility policies. Rather than focusing on knowing formal written policies as mentioned above, many of my participants believed getting to know one's manager was the best way to be able to use flexibility policies because it is often up to the manager when one can use workplace flexibility. Thus, this micro-level discourse often was more salient than the meso-level written policies.

To begin, many of my participants learned about workplace flexibility by asking their manager. For example, Zeke (25, farm hand), explained:

I guess I just...I talked to [my boss] about it one time, and then I kind of got...I started working there longer, and I got comfortable with him, so, you know? I just texted him one day and said, "Hey, I can't come in," and explained what happened.

Zeke is one of three farm hands for a small farmer. He did not have any formal policies, so when it came to needing workplace flexibility he just asked his boss about it. He explained that at first, he did not take any days off, but as he got to know his boss, he became more comfortable asking for the time off and workplace flexibility. Later in the interview, Zeke also pointed out that he never had paid time off before. However, he asked his boss about getting a week of paid time off for vacation. His boss agreed that he

could be paid for that week allowing Zeke to have flexibility with his vacation days. Without having paid time off, Zeke could not have afforded to take the week off. Not only was his boss the way he learned about workplace flexibility but his boss determined Zeke's flexibility options.

Zeke's experience was unique in the fact that he did not have any organizational policies or documents about anything. However, his experience was not unique when understanding how the relationship with one's manager was incredibly important for the missing middle. When asked, Anna (23, health care administrative support) was not able to think of formal policies; rather, she explained, "I don't know if it's a policy thing or if it's more of just a delegated up to the supervisor thing. That's what it would seem to me." Anna's experience with workplace flexibility is fully at the manager's discretion. Seth (24, customer service) agreed, "The supervisor's pretty much, pretty much in charge of all of [flexibility]." Similarly, Tom (54, assistant manager at a building supply retailer) echoed this sentiment by stating:

Well, I, ah, I really, when I first started working out there and stuff, it, it wasn't like that. It just seemed like it, it developed into that, into that, ah, I think a lot it has to do with the different managers I had...I think a lot of it has to do with, the type of manager you have. Plus, we have a lot smaller store than a lot of them do. And I think a lot of it has to do with the size of the store...I don't think it's really a store policy. It's just, you know, maybe the manager's - just the way he kind of runs the store I guess.

For many of the missing middle, workplace flexibility was not necessarily something offered universally in policies, it was fully dependent on one's relationship with their supervisor.

Talk with and about supervisors as key to constructing workplace flexibility also stems from how the relationship with one's supervisor looks different for different employees. Thus, my participants described stories where their managers played favorites by allowing different coworkers to use workplace flexibility. Renee (35, human resources) shared this story:

I've never worked any place that has an official work/life balance flexibility policy.... Nothing has ever been written down for me. And so it's always been a trial of, you know when you start the job, "How does it work around here?" Asking a peer. Or asking the manager, "What happens if I have a doctor's appointment?".... And in fact, places I've worked, not here, not where I currently work, but different employees have been treated differently. Um, so one, I had one manager who let other people come and go but a few of us, she was down our throats if we have a doctor's appointment and made us make up double-time if we wanted to leave. So it's never been written. It's just about catching on.

Jessica: Okay. So what was it about those other workers that they were able to come and go but you were not able to?

Renee: Um, I think popularity. And you have some dynamics of people of different sexes liking each other. And so that's why that relationship within the ma- with the manger then becomes really important. Because if they like you, it's fine, and if they don't, you're going to have to work that double-time.

Renee worked in an environment where her manager treated people differently based on if they liked them or not. Not only did she learn about workplace flexibility from her manager, but she also saw people being treated differently for use of workplace flexibility based on popularity or personal relationships within the workplace. Thus, Renee felt confused about when and why she could use different workplace flexibility policies. If the policy was up to the manager's discretion, she never knew when things would or would not be approved. In this way, the micro-level conversations shaped how the meso-level policies were interpreted.

Two stories stuck out in my mind about the importance of the relationship with one's manager. First, Martin (43, food service) told me this story about a time he was sick:

Martin: So, one time it was like, "Well let me take your temperature." Right. You, you-

Jessica: They wanted to take your temperature to prove you were sick?

Martin: Right. [My supervisor] pulled out this old rusty thermometer uh, alcohol padded, everything, you know, the ones they put on your tongue. So, I, I was like, okay this is going to be the first time and the last time. Trust and believe.

(chuckles) So I, she put it underneath my tongue, it was, I'm looking at the number because I can see it and it's 101. And then she was like, "Oh, you need to go home." I was like, "I ain't going home. I'm going to the doctor" (chuckles)

This happened even though Martin claimed "people said I was her favorite" though he did not agree with their assessment. Despite being a "favorite," he still had to prove he was sick by having his temperature taken by his manager. He later explained that he was

not likely to say he was sick in the future and would just show up to work so he did not have to deal with his manager. In other words, a manager's behavior and reactions to using workplace flexibility changes how those policies will be used moving forward.

The second story that stuck out to me was Sarah's. Sarah (26, line worker) has three children, one with special needs that requires a lot of extra time and attention. She initially explained her relationship with her supervisor in this way:

Well, my supervisor and I get along very well...When I told him I wanted to take FMLA, and I was thinking about it, and I told him what was going on in my life, he goes, "I really had no idea. Like, how do you do it?"

The first half of the interview, all she did was explain how great her supervisor was to her unique situation and how he could work with her when she needed to use FMLA to take care of her daughter. However, when she wanted to take vacation or was sick, it became a different story. She explained:

He goes, "Really? Do you really need it off? Because you don't really need it off. We need you here." Or, like, if you call in sick, you will always feel like he is, um, what do I want to say, like, he sort of hates you for a while. He takes it out on you...Like, he will give you a shitty job, or he'll tell you you're not working hard enough, or you know, like, I, for a while there, was...Right after my FMLA, and the factory was going to crap, and I had...I ended up getting sick, and I called in two days in a row, and when I came back, he basically told me, "Oh, well, you can go do this shitty job," which requires you to take off clothes off of a huge plate and put them back on, which is just this sweaty, murky...Climb onto of a big, tall machine and redress it.

For missing work because she was sick, she was forced to do a “shitty” and dangerous job in the factory. She also told me that she was not the only one who had to do this. Other coworkers also had to do “shitty” jobs when they came back from being sick. Through these experiences, Sarah realized that she could use workplace flexibility to take care of her children – especially her child with special needs. However, when she was sick, she was still expected to come to work or there would be negative consequences. In other words, she was stigmatized for her use of workplace flexibility policies. At the end of our interview, Sarah asked me for advice on how to handle her manager. She struggled with workplace flexibility due to her up and down relationship with her manager.

It is also important to note that many of my participants also had good relationships with their managers. Many managers took time to learn about their workers’ personal experiences to know what to expect from their workers. For example, Anna (23, health care administrative support) explained:

My immediate boss is really good about, um...she kind of gets to know everybody so she knows how exactly...like, what exactly might need belief, so some people have young kids and they need to leave when their kids are sick, stuff like that. She makes a point to know those things about you so she can be ready for that type of stuff. I think that's a way that it really helps us be able to balance that because she knows how to help us with it.

Anna was working in an environment where her manager has tried to get to know each employee to help them with workplace flexibility. Thus, this relationship was not all bad. It could work in favor of workers as well.

To summarize this sub-section, supervisors are incredibly important to the missing middle's knowledge and perceptions of workplace policy. From my participants' perspective, it is often up to the manager when one can use workplace flexibility. To end this section on supervisors, I want to give this quote from Renee (36, human resources) who nicely summarized the importance of one's manager in navigating workplace flexibility when she explained:

So I mean, I know your survey's on policy but when it comes down to it, it's really about who you work for. You know? Because, um, your manager is such an important part of your work dynamic and your team. And your manager sets the tone for the team, sets the respect level, the flexibility. And you know, you could have a great manager one day, and you could have turnover and everything could go to chaos because that person isn't trusting or they're not, they're not cracking down on abuse. You know it could go with- it could swing either way. Um, in some points I work for a company but in more points, I work for a manager.

Communication with coworkers. Finally, the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility through communication with their coworkers.

Communication with coworkers included learning about the policies themselves as well as learning about acceptable and non-acceptable norms associated with the policies. For example, Gabby (23, health care administrative support) explained, "you learned [about flexibility] from someone and then you can pass that on to new workers." For Gabby, she learned by asking one of her coworkers and, in turn, could pass along the knowledge to new workers as well. Seth (24, customer service) learned about the flexibility policies before he even joined his company. He stated:

Well, my friends actually told me about [company], um, and that's why I applied there. And, uh, she said that it was really flexible, um, because it was a call center and there was a lot of people working there so you kinda got your, kind of pick of hours just because there were so many people.

In other words, the missing middle started to become socialized into the norms of workplace flexibility before they even joined the organization. My participants also learned about workplace flexibility by watching others using policies. Lacey (28, bank teller) explained “I have never experienced the policies, but I learned basically from when it happened to a coworker. I found out what the policy was because they benefited from it.”

Not only did the missing middle learn about the existence of workplace flexibility from their coworkers, but they also learned acceptable reasons to use the policies. For example, when asked if she had heard of negative reactions when a coworker canceled or called in sick for a shift, Kathy (46, nurse) explained:

Kathy: Oh, absolutely. Every time.

Jessica: What do people say?

Kathy:Um, you know, it, it, you know, don't, “what happened? Why didn't you call in? You made life miserable for us. You know, you can't call in sick all the time.” You know, if, if it gets to be a pattern, they're pretty good about that.... I'll tell you, they, they start policing their own. ...I mean we do, we have a disciplinary process of course. And we'll work that, but 9 times out of 10, they'll, they're going to take care of themselves, you know.

The organization did not have a formal disciplinary process about calling into to work, but through this version of concertive control (see Barker, 1993) the system of power and control (i.e., coworkers policing their own) was far more persuasive than the formal policies would have been. The workers themselves created strict norms of workplace flexibility, and, in turn, policed themselves in a strict way. In other words, the micro-level comments from coworkers created an organizational culture – a meso-level discourse – of policing one’s own. In turn, this culture also led to more conversations and comments about people missing work.

My participants also explained how they would overhear gossip that would clue them into what they could and could not do in terms of flexibility. For example, Dustin (24, customer service) explained:

Yeah, there's definitely gossip that happens that did kind of, um, clue me in on like what is frowned upon definitely, and um, when the employees would...the ones that notice the repeat offenders, what they would say would kind of also clue me into what they really don't like or what, um, people can get away with.

Dustin learned what he could “get away with” by listening to the gossip he heard about coworkers who would call in sick. People talk and this talk led to learning about the norms of workplace flexibility. Similarly, Anna (23, health care administrative support) explained that through the gossip, she could assume who was calling in. She stated:

Like, when I first started I kind of was...getting- getting to know everybody, and getting to know everybody's like, type of work ether, I guess. And people would say things, people would imply things, and I'd be picking up on it. No one would be specific, but we'd all kind of already know, or they would and they would be

like, "Yeah, it's probably blah, blah, blah."... cause there were certain people that, um, some people would tell me are really slow or they go through, um, like all of our steps as slowly as possible so they don't have to check as many people in, um, but I feel like most of the time, it was someone called in, everybody seemed to already know who did.

In this example, the gossip going around the workplace tended to stigmatize an individual who tended to call in frequently to work. "Everyone" already knew who called in before it even happened; thus, that person became stigmatized. I will discuss this stigmatization further in the next section. It is also important to note that through this gossip, new workers are socialized into acceptable and non-acceptable norms of workplace flexibility. In sum, coworkers were an important source of micro discourse talk for the missing middle to construct workplace flexibility.

Intersection of D/discourses

Throughout the discussion above of macro, meso, and micro D/discourse, I noted instances where these levels intersect. Though I initially covered them individually, it is important to note that the analysis of the data also revealed how macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses intersected to help the missing middle communicatively construct workplace flexibility. For example, when asked about typical responses she would hear when a colleague used workplace flexibility, Amera (27, administrative support) explained:

I know in my office personally sometimes well I wonder if their kids are sick or did their daycare have to cancel. That's typically what we say.... I know some

offices it's like "Oh somebody had too much fun partying the night before so they got to call in sick" but mostly we are just concerned everything is ok.

In this example, Amera drew from the family first macro-level Discourse in justifying the micro-level discourses she hears when a colleague uses workplace flexibility. The everyday talk surrounding workplace flexibility drew upon macro-level Discourses to help create acceptable and non-acceptable norms surrounding workplace flexibility. In turn, the micro-level discourses (re)produce macro-level Discourses.

Similarly, the macro and meso levels of D/discourse also intersected. For example, when asked why and how workplace flexibility policies are created, Valarie (44, health care administrative support) thought:

Now that both mom and dad have to work, um, there's got to be some kind of flexibility, so somebody can pick up the children. So people are looking more and more for, um, jobs that offer them some kind of advantage, that, be it that they pay well enough they can pay for day care, or they have flexibility, they can work from home if they need to and still get their work done.

Valarie drew from the ideal worker Discourse by explaining that workplace flexibility policies allow for the work to still be accomplished. She also drew from the family first Discourse when explaining that children sometimes need to be the priority and need to be picked up. For Valarie, workplace flexibility policies were created to help workers navigate work demands (i.e., ideal worker Discourse) and family demands (i.e., family first Discourse).

The meso and micro-level discourses also intersected as workers communicatively construct workplace flexibility. For example, the formal and informal

policies shaped the everyday talk surrounding workplace flexibility. Katrina (26, extruder/line worker) explained the difference between two of her past jobs by stating:

Katrina: I guess people could say one thing about a company versus another...

For example, like [employer] that they don't allow people to be late. If you want to go work at [big box retailer], they might say, "Oh well those people, they allow you to be at least, up to 10 minutes late, but after that you're in trouble."

Jessica: Okay. So how would that change then like how people respond to their coworkers being late?

Katrina: I guess one, the like say if you know [employer] might be more negative if they're, just you know like two minutes late, and [big box retailer] is more, eh, they'll eventually be here. Something like that.

It is interesting that how a policy was written would shape how workers talk about said policies as demonstrated by Katrina's story. Though she specifically was talking about being late, many of my participants saw being a few minutes late as being part of unplanned time off flexibility. At her current employer, if she was a minute late, she could be written up for it, but at her previous employer, you were not counted as late until you were at least 10 minutes late. The workers started talking about the policy in the same way as the policy was written. The everyday talk when someone was late to work was more of an issue for the organization that had stricter formal policies than for the organization that allowed workers up to a 10-minute grace period. Thus, the micro-level comments reinforced the meso-level policies about workplace flexibility and being late to work.

Finally, I suggest that all three levels were frequently articulated as intersecting all together. It is important to note that the ideal worker Discourse is also present in Katrina's story. The ideal worker is someone who gets to work on time. The organizational policies on tardiness are an organizational manifestation of the ideal worker Discourse. Thus, when talking about someone who is late to work, workers are drawing from both macro and meso-level D/discourses in their everyday micro-level talk. In other words, Katrina's story demonstrated how the macro, meso, and micro-levels of D/discourse all intersect when communicatively constructing workplace flexibility. They draw upon each other to help workers understand workplace flexibility.

In summary, research question one asked how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility. The missing middle learned about the norms of workplace flexibility through macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. Macro-level Discourses included the ideal worker and family first ideologies. Meso-level discourses included organizational cultures and formal and informal policies. Micro-level discourses included communication with supervisors and coworkers. These D/discourses also intersected in the communicative construction of workplace flexibility, and in turn, the stigma behind abusing workplace flexibility.

Stigmatizing Workplace Flexibility

Research question two asked *how, if at all, is flexibility stigma communicatively constructed by the missing middle?* Analysis of the data suggested that simply using workplace flexibility was not stigmatized because everyone would use workplace flexibility at some point. Rather, workplace flexibility became stigmatized by the missing

middle when it was perceived to be abused. I will start this section by discussing how all workplace flexibility was not stigmatized before moving to when it became stigmatized.

All Use of Workplace Flexibility Was Not Stigmatized

The missing middle did not perceive all use of workplace flexibility as a stigmatizing experience. The ways the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility meant that everyone uses these policies. Hannah (22, health care administrative support) explained, “We all have lives outside of work.” Similarly, when asked who typically uses workplace flexibility policies, Katrina (26, extruder/line worker) replied, “Well, I mean I guess any and every employee at the company. I would assume that all rules are applied to everybody that works there.” Katrina argued that everyone uses workplace flexibility because everyone needs to follow the same rules. Hallie (29, barista), alternatively, argued, “Everyone uses it at different times...So it’s more of, it’s kind viewed as, yeah you’re using it today but I’ll be using it next week, type of thing.” Every worker used workplace flexibility. If not today, then they would use it in the future. Therefore, my participants did not perceive all uses of workplace flexibility as stigmatizing. Rather, workplace flexibility was constructed as stigmatized when people were perceived as abusing the formal and informal policies.

It is important to note that my participants viewed themselves as ideal workers who use, not abuse, workplace flexibility policies because they are ideal workers. For example, Valarie (44, health care administrative support) explained, “I would put myself at a 9 out of ten [in terms of an ideal worker] because nobody can do a 100% a 100% of the time.” Similarly, Ava (25, case worker) explained:

I bust my butt at my job. Um, so I think I stack up pretty well. Especially considering we work within, you know, certain laws and-, and rules and, uh, systemic issues that affect these people's lives. It makes my job helping them very hard.

As an ideal worker, Ava must work within certain laws and rules, including organizational policies. She communicated that she was an ideal worker because she followed the rules. Hannah (22, health care administrative support) also stated, "I mean, I follow my work's policies and when I have to be at work doing my job." As an ideal worker, she would use, not abuse, the policies in place.

Several of my participants also discussed instances where they were stigmatized for using workplace flexibility. For example, Sarah explained a time where she was given dirty and dangerous jobs from her supervisor because she missed work for taking care of her child. In other words, there is more to this stigmatization process than just being perceived as a good worker. I argue that there is a disconnect between how my participants use the policies (i.e., they always have a justification in doing so) and how they perceive others as using these policies. For example, Janie and Hannah worked in the same health care facility. Hannah thought she was an ideal worker who used the policies appropriately. However, Janie specifically explained that Hannah was one of the "abusers of the system." Thus, personal perceptions and public perceptions shape how workers become stigmatized for using workplace flexibility policies.

Perceived Abuse of Workplace Flexibility Was Stigmatized

Every single participant brought up the perception of flexibility abuse in their interviews without being prompted. Thus, the perception of workplace flexibility abuse

was a common experience for the missing middle. For example, when asked if she thought people become stigmatized for using workplace flexibility, Valarie (44, health care administrative support) replied, “I don't think so. They do if they abuse them.” This stigmatization occurred when a worker is a) perceived to be a lazy worker, b) perceived to be using flexibility too frequently, and c) perceived to have a non-acceptable rationale for using flexibility. I will first discuss how the process of flexibility stigmatization fits communicative definitions of stigma before discussing each of the three ways workers become stigmatized for abusing workplace flexibility.

Smith (2007) defined stigma as “a simplified, standardized image of the disgrace of certain people that is held in common by a community at large” (p. 464). My participants described a standardized image of the disgrace of those who abused the policies. Abuse of workplace flexibility came up in every interview without being prompted. Thus, there was something about policy abusers that was held in common by the missing middle regardless of their age, occupation, or organizational affiliation. In this section, I will argue that flexibility stigma revolved around the moral taint of abusing flexibility policies. That is, the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility stigma around the perception of abusing the policies. Good workers would not abuse the policies; thus, this stigma was also heavily influenced by the ideal worker Discourse.

The purpose of stigma communication is to teach members to recognize the stigmatized and react accordingly (Smith, 2007). Stigma communication messages in the data consisted of four parts, aligning with Smith's theorizing. First, stigma messages mark or distinguish people based on a stigmatized attribute. When asked about who

abuses these policies, Sarah (26, manufacturing line worker) responded by saying, “lazy people.” Thus, stigma messages related to flexibility marked people as embodying a stigmatizing characteristic, in this case laziness that violates the ideal worker norm. Second, stigma messages label the stigmatized group. For example, Kathy (46, nurse) explained how “[other nurses] get a label that, you know, she is lazy and doesn’t like to come into work or he, he likes to call in sick on Saturdays or, you know.” In this example, we see how the communication labeled the workers who abuse flexibility policies as labels often includes the mark itself (Smith, 2007). In another example, Gabby (23, health care administrative support) shared this story:

A lady that I worked with, let’s call her B. She called in a lot. She always had some kind of issue...So you would come in and you would see that she is not at the front desk, turn to your coworker and say, “Hey, where’s B?” “Oh, she called in.” “Oh, that makes sense. I figured she was going to call in today.” So things like that, you would hear because it was very consistent, [pause] “Yeah, big surprise. B’s not here.”

In Gabby’s example, B is marked and labeled in the way her coworkers talked about her. It was not a surprise that she did not come into work because she was labeled as a worker who would usually call into work.

Third, stigma messages imply responsibility or blame on individuals who are stigmatized. This process often occurred as my participants would blame their coworkers for being lazy, using workplace flexibility too frequently, or using workplace flexibility for unacceptable reasons. I will discuss the three ways workers are blamed for abusing

workplace flexibility in greater detail, before moving to the fourth stigma communication message attribute.

Perception of being a lazy worker. The first way that the difference or line between using and abusing workplace flexibility was communicatively constructed drew heavily from the ideal worker norm. Ideal workers used the policies, but workers who are not ideal workers abused the policies. Thus, the type of worker one is perceived to be at work influences whether they would become stigmatized for using workplace flexibility policies.

Specifically, workplace flexibility stigma often consisted of using workplace flexibility in combination with a reputation as a bad worker. For example, when asked about how workers become stigmatized for using flexibility, Lacey (28, bank teller) explained, “Well it's always the same people kind of benefiting from it, then you perceive them as being lazy, or not maybe caring about a job, or the company.” Dana (28, paraprofessional) echoed this belief by stating, “I think it's usually dependent with their behaviors, and personalities, cause the people that are abusing it, at least in the schools, are usually like bad teachers. They're the poor teachers.” Both Lacey and Dana both pointed to lazy and bad workers as being the workers who were more likely to be abusing the policies. Thus, these workers were considered less than ideal workers and became stigmatized when they used workplace flexibility. In other words, the use of workplace flexibility triggered the stigma associated with them being bad workers.

Perception of using flexibility too frequently. The second way the fine line between abuse and misuse was communicated revolved around the frequency of workplace flexibility use. As discussed above, everyone used workplace flexibility

occasionally; however, when it was perceived that a worker was using too much workplace flexibility, they would become stigmatized. When asked if she had ever heard negative comments about people calling in late – one way my participants enacted unplanned workplace flexibility – to work, Katrina (26, extruder/line worker) replied:

Katrina: I guess it all depends upon if they're never late or if they're a type of person who's always late.

Jessica: So let's first go with the person who's usually never late. What would you typically hear, what would people tend to say if they're not usually late?

Katrina: Um, I guess I would just hear people like well where is so-and-so and somebody should call or text them and see where they're at. That they seem I don't know I guess just more so concerned about that type of person.

Jessica: Okay. Now how about the other side, what about those people who are late all the time? Then what would people say?

Katrina: Just be a lot of I guess eye rolling or sighs and uh people just saying oh, they're always late and now that means I have to do more work and just things like that because they've had to pick up the slack for the person who's missing.

The reactions Katrina would hear about someone using workplace flexibility depended on how often their coworkers was late. Similarly, Dustin (27, customer service) explained that the reactions are different for people who are the repeat offenders. He stated “[my coworkers] show their dissatisfaction about the repeat offenders. Like “I’m not surprised” or something like that.” Thus, this line was frequently communicated by my participants. They often had and heard different reactions based on the different workers and how

often they were late. In other words, the micro-moments of stigmatization were heavily influenced by how often a worker used workplace flexibility policies.

Interestingly, my participants were not able to articulate when this line would become crossed. For example, Abby (29, bank teller), questioned:

Is there a magic number where I...once you use [workplace flexibility] this many times, this is when we start judging you? Probably not. Because ...like that first day or two, it's totally fine. But then it seems like once it happens every week or like the third time in a month... Because it feels like there's some sort of number. That it's like, "This...Before this you're fine, and we understand, but after this, we don't understand, and you're using it excessively."

There was no clear number from when workers went from flexibility use to abuse, but my participants clearly explained there is a frequency element to it. When asked about where this line is drawn, Ava (25, case worker) provided this example:

I guess it's the combination of frequency and then as compared to the strain of workload...There was a time, and this is so horrible, you know, but [my boss] left for paternity leave and he took three weeks. And it was like, of course, he deserves to be on paternity leave. It's, like, his child was just born. And then he came back and, like, that Friday and Thursday he took off again. And it, there was like no real obvious reason why. It seemed like he was just taking more vacation days. And I think it was, you know, had we not been having such a stressful time with clients, maybe my internal thought dialog would've been less hard on him...And (laughs) and so, I remember, like, occasionally just that internalized feeling of like, uh (laughs)! Like, he's taking off again? He's supposed to be our

leader, you know. Um. But then I'd like, check myself and be like, no, of course, he deserves to be off. It's like, he just had a baby, you know... Maybe taking three weeks of paternity leave and then taking two vacation days right after is the line that shouldn't be crossed (laughs).

There were a lot of things going on in Ava's story. First, it was interesting to see how Ava struggled with acceptable and non-acceptable uses of workplace flexibility. She wanted to think it is acceptable for her boss to take several weeks off work, but she was upset when he took off additional days of work for vacation. Ava explained how her boss (by taking additional days off) triggered the assumption that work was not his first priority, and she started to stigmatized him for it. To summarize, my participants were unable to provide a specific number for when workplace flexibility crosses the line from use to abuse, but it was clear that the frequency of workplace flexibility use became part of the flexibility stigmatization process.

Perception of having a non-acceptable rationale to use flexibility. The third way the fine line between use and misuse was communicated stemmed from the rationale behind using workplace flexibility in the first place. I discussed above that family, especially children, issues were acceptable reasons to use workplace flexibility. However, there were also non-acceptable reasons to use workplace flexibility. If the worker was perceived to be using workplace flexibility for a non-valid reason, they were more likely to become stigmatized.

Several of my participants talked about workers who would "play hooky" from work. Playing hooky would be an instant indicator that the worker would become stigmatized. For example, Mitch (53, electrician) explained:

In the old days, there were people that I knew were perfectly healthy that wouldn't, just didn't want to come in. Oh, I'd tell him the next day what I thought of it....You know, to me, you left us hanging, and it's bullshit. You just didn't want to come do it because you know what we were doing and you didn't, you didn't do it.

Mitch was very upset with his coworkers who did not come into work because they just did not want to come in and did not want to work that day. Valarie (44, health care administrative support) also talked about coworkers who would play hooky. She stated, "I think that it would also depend on why they are missing work. If they are missing work because they are just playing hooky, I'm assuming that they probably will, get stigmatized for it." In other words, using workplace flexibility just to play hooky is not an acceptable use of workplace flexibility even if they have the PTO built up to take it. Using workplace flexibility, regardless of the reason, triggers a perception that work is not the worker's priority. Thus, workers become stigmatized for it.

Another way people become stigmatized for using workplace flexibility is if they were caught in a lie about why they needed the day off. Valarie also explained when asked about how workplace flexibility goes from use to abuse:

Usually it happens because they are um, they're-they're having uh imaginary illness. And then telling their friends at work. So, I mean, if they take too much time off people start wondering where you've been, you're going, "What?" And then...I live in a very small town and uh, people know each other everywhere. Like a really, really small town. So if there's, um, if you're taking the time off, okay, "Today's my day off," and you request that, today off as well because you

said that you were very sick having a headache and I just happen to come across you at the movies. Then, then that's not going to be good....

It is one thing to use workplace flexibility for a valid reason, like being sick, but if you are caught in a lie about it, people will distrust you moving forward. For example, Tom (54, assistant manager at a building supply retailer), shared this story about a few of his coworkers:

There are a couple certain individuals ...that I know have abused it because there, there is a certain individual that does call in sick every once and a while. And then you find out a little later on that they went and did something else that day and just said he was sick.... I've heard this from other coworkers that he, you know, he gets talked to later and he says "you know I didn't want to do that that day so I just called in sick." I know it gets abused too.

When workers get caught in a lie about why they used workplace flexibility, others will assume they are abusing the policies moving forward. Thus, it is the perception of the worker that becomes vital to the flexibility stigmatization process as the perception of the worker starts the stigmatizing process. More about this will be discussed below.

It is also important to note that new information can also change people's perceptions about a coworker. Karen (59, nurse) shared with me a story about a coworker who was stigmatized for calling into work a lot. She never offered a rationale for missing work, she just called in. Karen stated:

I can tell you one situation where we had this one gal that I worked with, and she'd call in ill quite a bit. Finally, the manager says, "I want you to come in right

now. I need to see you." And she was black and blue. Her husband beat the crap outta her, so that's why she was always calling in. She was embarrassed.

In this situation, she was caught in a lie, but the new information provided a rationale for her using workplace flexibility. She moved from being perceived as abusing workplace flexibility to being perceived as using the policies because it was now known that she had a good reason to use the flexibility policies. In summary, my participants suggested coworkers were stigmatized when they were blamed for being lazy, using workplace flexibility too frequently, or using workplace flexibility for unacceptable reasons

The fourth stigma message attribute focuses on perceived physical and social peril of that stigma. For some of my participants, the physical peril associated with missing work meant that patients were not being taken care of. Kathy reported that she typically hears things like "you called in again. You know, why are you even here if you can't show up to work because you're hurting it, you're hurting our residents?" when people miss work. As a nurse, there can be life or death consequences when workers use workplace flexibility. For other workers, there was a social peril associated with others having to take on more work to cover for their coworkers who used workplace flexibility. Sadie (37, administrative support) explained:

Um, I know I would say that there's definitely a stigma with people calling in, um, like calling in sick... Ugh, like I get that they're sick and that really sucks, but now I have to be here an hour late because we have to catch up on the work that was missed because they weren't here.

Flexibility stigma has a social peril that puts more work on coworkers when someone missed work. Workplace flexibility, then, becomes stigmatized at least partly because

more work falls on other workers. When a worker perceives themselves to be an ideal worker, they do not think they should have to pick up other non-ideal workers' slack. If an ideal worker gets all of their work done, an ideal worker would not let their work fall on others.

This social peril caused several of my participants to not use workplace flexibility because of the tension and strain it puts on their coworkers. For example, Sadie also explained:

Um, at a past position, when I was a security guard, um, if I didn't work it, someone else, um, would have to be there, like one other person pretty much would have to be there. So, he would be pretty much required to get that overtime. So, I would say that that causes a little bit of, um...tension, because I know if, if I call in, the plans that he has today, he might have to work an extra 8 hours of overtime. Um, and pretty much ruin his plans. So, I only had to do that once, but it did cause tension.

There was a social, and at times physical, peril when using and abusing flexibility policies because some participants believed that their workplace flexibility could be taken away due to others abusing the policies. For example, Tom (54, assistant manager at a building supply retailer), discussed:

[Flexibility]'s there I guess for when you need it. Don't take advantage of it because then it's gonna hurt, it might hurt the other people that have been there longer.... You guys are abusing these or people think that they are taking too many days off or calling in and stuff from now on. From now on it has to be planned or else we are just not going to do it or you are going to be penalized and

I guess for me, it wouldn't be fair to the people who have been there longer that don't abuse it as opposed to you know maybe someone who is new and bends the rules might take advantage of it.

Tom thought that his workplace flexibility could be taken away because others in the organization abused the policies. Thus, he linked those who abused the policies to the social peril of losing workplace flexibility. In other words, he could lose his flexibility because others abuse it and as an ideal worker, Tom does not believe his workplace flexibility should be put in jeopardy because others are not ideal workers.

In summary, the missing middle was not stigmatized just for using workplace flexibility. Rather, they become stigmatized for the perception of abusing workplace flexibility. A large part of this process focused on the perceptions of an individual worker and the talk about them. My participants communicated a fine line between workplace flexibility use and abuse that focused on perceptions of a) being a lazy worker, b) using flexibility too frequently, and c) having an unknown or non-acceptable rationale for using flexibility. In turn, these perceptions trigger the assumption that work is not the most important thing in one's life. Thus, a worker becomes stigmatized because they are not conforming to the ideal worker norm. In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings further in relation to the process of workplace flexibility stigma.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to present the results of my grounded theory analysis of the missing middles' constructions of workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma. I first articulated how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility from macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. Workplace

flexibility is placed at the intersection of competing societal level Discourses (e.g., the ideal worker and family first Discourses). Meso-level discourses included formal and informal organizational policies and organization cultures. Communication with supervisors and coworkers were micro-level discourses that shaped this conception. I then discussed how the perceived abuse of workplace flexibility becomes stigmatized. The missing middle communicated a fine line between use and abuse of policies that focused on a) the perception of being a lazy worker, b) the perception of using flexibility too frequently, and c) the perception of having an unknown or non-acceptable rationale for using flexibility. In the next chapter, I will explicate the flexibility stigmatization process as well as discuss theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This project explicated how the missing middle communicatively constructs workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma. This chapter analyzes my findings and discusses their contributions to theoretical and practical problems. I begin this chapter by discussing how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility. Next, I explicate how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility stigma. I then discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my project. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the project's strengths, weaknesses, and possible future directions.

Communicative Construction of Workplace Flexibility

My first research question asked *how, if at all, do the missing middle communicatively construct flexibility policies via macro, meso, and micro levels of D/discourse?* Macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses interacted with one another to shape how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility and its acceptable uses. These norms of acceptability will become important in the process of flexibility stigmatization. However, I will first talk through the macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses that shaped how my participants constructed workplace flexibility. It is important to note that these D/discourses intersected and shaped one another. For the sake of clarity, I am discussing them as separate entities. However, in the previous analysis I discussed how they may reinforce and contradict one another as well.

Two important macro-level Discourses the missing middle drew from were ideal worker and family first Discourses. Previous research has defined the ideal worker as someone who possesses full-time availability, mobility, high qualifications, and a strong

work orientation (Acker, 1992). My participants similarly constructed the ideal worker as someone who is dependable and gets work accomplished in a timely fashion, stays busy, and cares about their work. Thus, on one hand, my participants communicatively constructed work as their priority which privileged the organizational interests over their personal interests. Deetz (1992) argued that organizations are colonizing more and more of the lifeworld. My participants echoed this sentiment by privileging organization interests over their life and family interests. In turn, the ideal worker Discourse became the most salient Discourse when discussing workplace flexibility and its attending stigma. One becomes stigmatized when they are perceived to not be an ideal worker. However, the ideal worker Discourse was not the only societal level Discourse my participants' talk revealed as constructing workplace flexibility.

My participants also drew from the family first Discourse to prioritize family when communicatively constructing workplace flexibility. It is important to note that family was narrowly defined as children. Children were the most valid reason to miss work; thus, my participants also drew heavily from pronatal Discourses. Despite roughly half of my participants not having children, children were communicatively constructed as one of the most important components of one's non-work lives by privileging childcare as the most acceptable reason to use workplace flexibility. Thus, the family first and pronatalism Discourses were just as controlling of my participant's constructions of workplace flexibility as the ideal worker Discourse. Those participants who did not have children often discussed the difficulty in using workplace flexibility because of these Discourses.

It is interesting to note that a few of my participants communicatively constructed workplace flexibility as a give and take relationship. When discussing macro-level time flexibility, Cowan and Hoffman (2007) described that some of their participants described a longer-term approach to flexibility, where work hours are not totaled by day or week. Some of my participants discussed this longer-term flexibility as well. On one hand, they might give more time and effort to their families at the expense of their working hours. On the other hand, there were times where they might give more to work and spending less time outside of work. They expected that when they put in more hours at work one week, they eventually will gain that time back for their families and vice versa. This longer-term workplace view of workplace flexibility primarily occurred for my participants who had more control over when and where they get their work done. Therefore, for some of my participants, workplace flexibility was viewed as a longer-term construct rather than a shorter-term flexibility that focused on the day-to-day aspects of time flexibility.

When viewing workplace flexibility as a longer-term construct, my participants started to disrupt the common assumption that work and life are two separate, competing entities. A number have scholars have articulated how work and family domains are in conflict (e.g., Kirby, Wieland, & McBride, 2014; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). However, Golden (2009) argued that work and family do not need to be in conflict with one another. In fact, they can work together to help an employee find proper fit between work and family lives. A practice or discourse of adaptability, suggesting the ways that organizations and workers mutually adapt to each other's changing needs, might be more organizationally

acceptable for work-life policies than workplace flexibility (Myers et al., 2012). Myers and colleagues (2012) argued, “the discourse of adaptability supersedes workplace flexibility and transforms workers’ needs and the organization’s objectives into a system of worker autonomy that incorporates fluidity in achieving both personal and organizational goals” (p. 195). Thus, adaptability might be better suited in understanding longer-term workplace flexibility as it incorporates both organizational and individual goals.

At the meso-level, the missing middle also learned about workplace flexibility norms from their organizational policies and organizational cultures. Interestingly, only a few of my participants discussed the formal policies and documentation of workplace flexibility despite being directly asked about it. Going into my dissertation, I was expecting workers to know about workplace flexibility policies as was discussed in previous research on work-life policies and flexibility among different populations than the missing middle (e.g. Bond & Galinsky, 2011; Cowan & Hoffman, 2007; Eikhof, 2016). However, I was initially surprised how many of my participants were unfamiliar with workplace flexibility. I believe this confusion occurred because my participants were thinking only of formal, written documentation as constituting workplace flexibility policy. For example, when asked about specific policies, many of my participants discussed how they had never seen a policy; however, they were all able to discuss the informal practices surrounding workplace flexibility policies. Canary (2010) broadly defined policies as the policy texts, actual practices and procedures, or plans that organize action. When looking at workplace flexibility policies from this broader perspective, it is

clear how formal and informal policies were important for communicatively constructing workplace flexibility among the missing middle.

Similarly, organizational cultures were rarely discussed in my interviews, but they were important indicators of the norms of workplace flexibility for the missing middle in the rare instances when they were mentioned. Initially, I proposed a study within one organization to dive deeper into the way organizational culture shaped how workers communicatively constructed workplace flexibility stigma. However, as my project changed focus, it was hard to get at the meso-level discourses. For those who did discuss organizational cultures, it was clear that this is an important discourse when constructing workplace flexibility. For example, Renee's company culture of flexibility and grace for the customer had implications for how the workers discussed flexibility within the workplace. More research needs to be done to fully understand the ways organizational culture and other meso-level discourses influence the communicative construction of workplace flexibility and its attending stigma.

Micro-level discourses were much more salient in the interviews. Specifically, conversations with supervisors and conversations with coworkers were important discourses that shaped norms surrounding workplace flexibility. My participants learned what was (not) acceptable by asking and watching those around them. It is interesting that many of my participants viewed workplace flexibility as being at their manager's discretion as many of my participants were not aware of any formal documentation. Thus, being able to take planned and unplanned time off was described as the manager's choice, not controlled by bureaucratic norms, at least not in a way that most of my participants could see or choose to describe. This perspective often led to the perception

of potential unfair treatment by the manager. Canary, Riforgiate, and Montoya (2013) posited that the relationship with one's manager is one of the five factors that influence policy communication. As I will discuss in the implications section, a worker's relationship with her manager is vital to her understanding of workplace flexibility. This relationship is the most important relationship for the missing middle as they communicatively constructed workplace flexibility. In summary, macro, meso, and micro D/discourses shaped how the missing middle viewed workplace flexibility. These D/discourses surrounding workplace flexibility influenced when and if it became stigmatized.

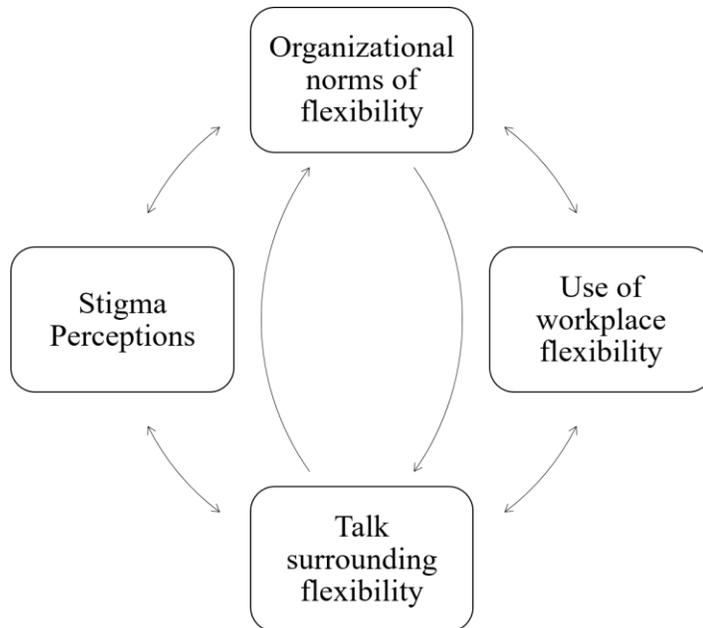
The Communicative Construction of Flexibility Stigma

My second research question asked *how, if at all, is flexibility stigma communicatively constructed by the missing middle?* Contrary to the theory posited by Williams and colleagues (2012), all use of workplace flexibility did not become stigmatized by the missing middle. According to my participants, everyone uses these policies at some point because everyone has unexpected events occur. Rather, the abuse of these policies becomes stigmatized. Like Kirby and Krone's (2002) participants, my participants articulated a fine line between use and abuse. My participants explained how they *used* these policies but others abused them. Abuse of workplace flexibility is highly tied to the ideal worker Discourse. Thus, it is a communicative phenomenon. This fine line between use and abuse was influenced by the ways workers defined workplace flexibility as well as by macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses.

I will now turn to the process of communicatively constructing workplace flexibility stigma. Theorizing on flexibility stigma has focused on outcomes of this

stigma (e.g., Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Dodson, 2013; Williams et al., 2013); however, this dissertation is the first project to my knowledge focusing on the process of the stigmatization of workplace flexibility itself. Specifically, I draw from stigma communication theorizing (see Link & Phelan, 2001; Meisenbach, 2010; Smith, 2007) to ground this process. I argue that flexibility stigma occurs through the communicative interactions among a) organizational norms surrounding flexibility, b) the use of workplace flexibility, c) talk surrounding flexibility, and d) stigma perceptions. This process is visualized in Figure 1. I will start my discussion with organizational norms surrounding flexibility.

Figure 1: Communicative Construction of Workplace Flexibility Stigma



Organizational Norms of Flexibility

To begin, analysis of my data indicated that organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility and its attending stigma are constructed through a variety of macro, meso, and micro D/discourses. Three norms surrounding acceptable uses of workplace flexibility emerged from the data. Workers were perceived to be abusing workplace

flexibility policies if a worker was a) perceived to be a lazy worker, b) perceived to be using flexibility too frequently, and/or c) perceived to have a non-acceptable rationale for using flexibility.

First, organizational norms are constructed about what it means to be an ideal worker and, in turn, what it means to be a lazy worker. My participants defined an ideal worker as a worker who is dependable, gets things done in a timely manner, stays busy, and cares about their job. Ideal workers do not use workplace flexibility policies unless they need to use them for one of the acceptable uses already discussed below. For example, an ideal worker would only use workplace flexibility if they were very sick, a child was sick, or if there was another emergency that needed to be taken care of as their personal interests are secondary to organizational interests. If they schedule vacation, these workers do so way in advance to make sure their work and clients are covered while they are gone. They also make sure their vacation days do not overlap with other coworkers so the burden of their work can be distributed to more people. Good workers are perceived to only use workplace flexibility if they absolutely need it. Less than ideal workers are perceived to also use workplace flexibility in less than ideal conditions. Thus, there are organizational norms surrounding what type of workers typically use workplace flexibility.

Second, and relatedly, ideal workers use workplace flexibility infrequently. If they start to use these policies frequently, they are no longer seen as good workers and are likely to be viewed as abusing workplace flexibility policies. It is important that workers remember “they have a job to do” and only use workplace flexibility occasionally so they are not perceived as putting other areas of their lives ahead of their

work. Thus, drawing from the ideal worker discourse, organizational norms are also constructed about the frequency one uses workplace flexibility.

Third, the missing middle communicatively constructed acceptable and non-acceptable reasons to use workplace flexibility. Consistent with previous research on work-life balance (see Cowan & Hoffman, 2007; Hoffman & Cowan, 2008), family is perceived to be one of the most valid reasons for using workplace flexibility. Children are viewed as a valid reason for using workplace flexibility because they are very important and as Janie explained, “children are unpredictable.” Drawing from family first and prenatal Discourses, the missing middle privileges missing work for family (i.e., childcare) concerns. Things that are not considered valid reasons for missing work include shopping, leisure activities, and playing hooky. Thus, acceptable rationales for using workplace flexibility policies are discursively constructed.

To summarize, drawing from a variety of discursive and material resources, organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility are communicatively constructed. My participants communicatively constructed a fine line between use and abuse based on a) perceptions that good workers are “good” about using workplace flexibility; b) the frequency of workplace flexibility use; and c) the rationale for using workplace flexibility. Thus, organizational norms of acceptability are discursively created for using workplace flexibility.

Everyday Talk Surrounding Workplace Flexibility

Staying on the inside loop of this process from Figure 1, organizational norms surrounding flexibility stigma shape and are shaped by everyday talk surrounding workplace flexibility. Most of my participants could not think of formal policies – which

they viewed as written, formal documentation – surrounding workplace flexibility. However, when asked how they learned about workplace flexibility, they talked about watching and asking others in their workplace about it. In other words, everyday talk surrounding workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma become important discursive resources in this process. Specifically, conversations with supervisors and coworkers help communicatively construct norms surrounding workplace flexibility.

First, the relationship with one's supervisor is vital to this process of stigmatization. Many of my participants emphasized how important it is getting to know one's manager as it was that perceived the manager would be accepting or rejecting one's request to use workplace flexibility. Managers were also important sources of information about what workers can and cannot do regarding workplace flexibility. A few of my participants believed that their managers had favorites who were more likely to get their time off requests granted. Alternatively, if their manager did not like them or their reason behind workplace flexibility, their manager could be distrustful and workers could face negative repercussions for using workplace flexibility. In other words, the workers would become stigmatized for failing to conform to organizational norms of acceptable workplace flexibility policy.

The behaviors of the managers also impact the communicative construction of workplace flexibility stigma. For example, some of my participants discussed times where the manager assumed a certain coworker was going to call in sick to work and use workplace flexibility. In other words, because a worker was labeled and stigmatized as someone who likely would abuse workplace flexibility, the manager pre-emptively scheduled more workers, assuming at least one would call in to use unplanned workplace

flexibility. This way, if everyone came to work, they could distribute the work and help other departments or floors. Or, if the manager was correct and someone did not show up to work, they would have enough staff to cover for the missing worker. Preemptively covering someone's shift only happened when a coworker was labeled as someone who called in a lot or was perceived to be a lazy worker. Thus, the worker who was assumed to be abusing workplace flexibility was stigmatized and the other workers then learned non-acceptable behaviors surrounding workplace flexibility.

Second, the everyday talk and behavior of coworkers also helped communicatively construct workplace flexibility stigma. One of the first places new members turn to learn about the norms surrounding workplace flexibility and its attending stigma is their coworkers. Not only do individuals learn from their coworkers, but these conversations also shape what are acceptable uses of workplace flexibility. My participants discussed how conversations with their coworkers were the primary way they learned about coworkers who abused these policies. By being labeled in this way by their coworkers, the worker becomes stigmatized and the new member learns what not to do within the workplace. In other words, workers are socialized into acceptable norms surrounding workplace flexibility.

Drawing from structuration theorizing (e.g., Canary, 2010; Giddens, 1984), it is important to note the recursive relationship between organizational norms and everyday talk and behaviors surrounding workplace flexibility. Organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility and its attending stigma enable and constrain the everyday talk surrounding workplace flexibility. Alternatively, everyday talk reproduces and transforms

organizational norms. I will now turn to the part of the stigmatization process when a worker uses workplace flexibility policies.

Using Workplace Flexibility

To become stigmatized, workers must first use workplace flexibility policies and in turn, be perceived as someone who abused workplace flexibility. As described earlier, the norms surrounding workplace flexibility are continuously being communicatively constructed by macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. Within these norms then, when a worker takes planned or unplanned time off to balance work and life, their manager and coworkers will talk about this person's use of workplace flexibility. If the worker falls within the acceptable range of workplace flexibility, they are not stigmatized for using workplace flexibility. Even though they are not stigmatized for using workplace flexibility, the talk surrounding the use of flexibility feeds into the organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility. Thus, this is also a recursive relationship.

Organizational norms shape the use of workplace flexibility and using workplace flexibility produces and reproduces organizational norms.

Stigma Perceptions

As described above, a worker becomes stigmatized if there is a perception the worker is abusing workplace flexibility. This abuse can occur in three ways based on the organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility. First, a worker becomes stigmatized for using workplace flexibility if they are perceived to be using flexibility for non-acceptable reasons. Second, a worker becomes stigmatized for using workplace flexibility if they are viewed as a lazy worker. Third, a worker becomes stigmatized for using workplace flexibility if it is a reoccurring thing.

Again, it is important to note the recursive nature of this process. Organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility and everyday talk about both workplace flexibility and individual workers influence whether someone is stigmatized for using workplace flexibility. A few of my participants discussed ways that they can overcome this stigmatization by either changing their behaviors at work or if new information emerges about their personal life. Everyday talk surrounding the stigmatization of abusing workplace flexibility then (re)produces organizational norms of workplace flexibility. These norms then signal to other employees acceptable and non-acceptable uses of workplace flexibility.

In summary, I argued that flexibility stigma is communicatively constructed through a) organizational norms surrounding flexibility, b) the use of workplace flexibility, c) talk surrounding flexibility, and d) stigma perceptions. Specifically, macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses create organizational norms and everyday talk about workplace flexibility. These norms then shape whether a worker uses workplace flexibility. When a worker uses workplace flexibility, people talk about it and a worker may become stigmatized based on a) the rationale behind using workplace flexibility; b) what type of worker they are when at work; and c) the frequency of using workplace flexibility. When a worker becomes stigmatized for abusing workplace flexibility, the conversations surrounding the stigmatized worker reproduces and/or transforms the organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility. Organizational members continually construct a fine line between flexibility use and abuse.

Implications for Flexibility Stigma Research

This dissertation has implications for flexibility stigma and stigma communication research in three ways. First, this project contributes a grounded theory model of the process of how the missing middle constructs flexibility stigma. Second, by interrogating this process, this dissertation has implications for how workers communicatively manage this stigma. Third, the findings from this project have implications for how work-life scholars approach middle class workers' experiences of workplace flexibility.

First, this dissertation contributes to the recent calls for a stronger focus on understanding stigma as a communicative process while adding to the theorizing on flexibility stigma by looking at the process of the stigma. The flexibility stigma literature tends to focus on the outcomes of the stigma instead of how one becomes stigmatized (see Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Brescoll et al., 2013; Dodson, 2013). I have argued that a communicative definition of stigma is a helpful way to continue to develop theorizing on flexibility stigma. A constitutive definition of stigma helps scholars understand how flexibility stigma is constructed by individuals, coworkers, supervisors, formal policies, and societal norms. I argue that stigma is constructed through the interplay of multiple discursive levels. Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) framework of multiple levels of D/discourses helps scholars understand how the multiple levels of D/discourses communicatively construct workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma. Above, I argued that by moving up the "discursive ladder" of D/discourses from the micro (i.e., everyday conversations), meso (i.e., organizational policies), and macro (e.g., ideal worker, family

first, pronatalism) D/discourses, scholars can understand the multifaceted experiences of both flexibility stigma and other stigmas.

This project builds upon Meisenbach's (2010) theorizing that highlighted and called for more research on how stigma is constructed through societal discourses and material factors. In doing so, this model also offers paths for undoing the stigma associated with workplace flexibility abuse. For example, organizational policies shape the construction of workplace flexibility stigma. Thus, if organizational policies became more inclusive of a variety of workers' non-work lives, the D/discourses surrounding workplace flexibility would also start to shift to create broader use of workplace flexibility in a variety of contexts. The stigmatization of workplace flexibility, then, would also be reduced as more reasons for using the policies would become accepted organizational norms.

This dissertation also contributes to flexibility stigma research by shifting the focus of flexibility stigma from the outcomes associated with the stigma to the process itself. By interrogating the process, researchers can start implementing interventions to reduce flexibility stigma instead of focusing on what happens when people are stigmatized. For example, more research is needed on how workers communicatively manage flexibility stigma. Where low-wage workers can quit one low-wage job for another job because of this stigmatization (see Coltrane et al., 2013; Dodson, 2013), many of the missing middle are in a career track. Thus, they cannot quit their jobs over flexibility stigmatization. Meisenbach (2010) argued that one way for individuals to communicatively manage moments of stigmatization is by avoiding the situation. Low-wage workers can avoid moments of stigmatization by quitting one low-wage job for

another low-wage job. However, the missing middle does not have that luxury and must communicatively manage moments of stigmatization in another way. More scholarship is needed to understand how missing middle workers communicatively navigate flexibility stigma.

Finally, the findings from this project have implications for how work-life scholars approach middle class workers' experiences of flexibility stigma. There is a lack of empirical data on the missing middle's experiences of workplace flexibility; thus, prior research on flexibility stigma only theorized about the missing middle's experiences of flexibility stigma. Williams and colleagues (2013) posited that the missing middle experience flexibility stigma similarly to low-wage workers. These authors argued that low-wage workers experience flexibility stigma because family caregiving requires frequent job absences, tardiness, or unavailability for certain shifts. On one hand, the missing middle do not define flexibility use as being stigmatized for occasionally missing work for family caregiving concerns. However, the perceived abuse of such policies does trigger a strong flexibility stigma. In other words, this stigma is hard to trigger when the perception of using workplace flexibility policies is acceptable, but it is a strong, moral stigma when they are perceived as abusing such policies. Williams and colleagues (2013) noted, "it seems likely that the missing middle encounters less blanket moral condemnation as irresponsible employees than low-wage workers" (p. 218). I would agree that these workers are not all being stigmatized as irresponsible workers for using workplace flexibility; however, I would argue that this moral judgement may be stronger for the missing middle than low-wage workers. Building off of previous research (Dougherty, Rick, & Moore, forthcoming; Gist, 2014; Noltensmeyer & Meisenbach,

2016) of interwoven stigmas, I believe that these workers are experiencing interwoven stigmas amplifying their stigmatizing experiences. For example, when abusing workplace flexibility policies, the missing middle are stigmatized for abusing workplace flexibility, being a bad worker, and, depending on the situation, other gender and social class stigmas. Thus, the stigmatizing experience becomes amplified and they receive more moral judgment based on a variety of stigmas.

In sum, this dissertation has implications for flexibility stigma and stigma communication research in three ways. First, this project contributes a grounded theory model of the process of how the missing middle constructs flexibility stigma. Second, by interrogating this process, this dissertation has implications for how workers communicatively manage this stigma. Third, the findings from this project have implications for how work-life scholars approach middle class workers' experiences of workplace flexibility.

Implications for Flexibility Policy Research

This project also has implications for flexibility policy research in three ways. First, this project contributes to the scholarship on the ways D/discourses shape the enactment of organizational policies. Second, this dissertation has implications for scholarship seeking to understand the role of supervisors in helping the missing middle use workplace flexibility. Third, this project calls into question the language work-life scholars use that privilege certain families over other life concerns.

First, the project challenges the role policies have on worker experiences of workplace flexibility. Meisenbach, Remke, Buzzanell, and Liu (2008) argued that workers can use bureaucratic policies to help them take a maternity leave. Even in

instances where their manager rejected their requests, these pink-collar workers –defined as women who work in service or nonprofessional positions – could draw upon bureaucratic policies to arrange their maternity leave. Alternatively, most of my participants were unaware of the bureaucratic policies surrounding workplace flexibility. A few of my participants discussed FMLA as being part of workplace flexibility, but they still viewed it as being dependent on their managers. In other words, the missing middle are less likely to use formal policies and are more likely to rely on their manager’s discretion. Interestingly, many pink-collar workers would fall within the missing middle; however, their use of bureaucratic policies differs from the way my participants discussed workplace flexibility policies. I believe this difference occurred because, though it may be one form of workplace flexibility, FMLA is a federal policy where most workplace flexibility policies are organization specific. Thus, workers have more legal leverage to fight manager decisions for federal and state laws than they do for organization specific policies.

Another contribution of this study is in its identification of the clear and powerful role of the supervisor in helping the missing middle understand the policies, rules, and norms when it comes to work-life policies. These findings support previous studies that have found that managers and supervisors are one of the most important parts of flexible working arrangements (Kirby, 2000; Sabattini & Crosby, 2016; Sprung et al., 2015; ter Hoeven et al., 2012) as formal policies can be overturned based on a manager’s discretion. In turn, groups of workers may become marginalized and discriminated against as their individual characteristics may not match D/discourses of workplace flexibility. For example, Rick and Meisenbach (2017) found that childfree workers

become discriminated against in the workplace for not having children in cultures that promote a pronatalism discourse. Ultimately, my current findings support Miller, Jablin, Casey, Lamphear-Van Horn, and Ethington's (1996) theorizing that although policies can be used as a baseline, both managers and workers can adapt workplace policies to accommodate individual interests. In other words, a manager can grant more flexibility for individual workers or they can make it much more difficult to enact flexibility policies.

Finally, this project has implications for work-family and work-life scholars by calling into question the language we use as researchers that privilege family over other life concerns. By continually calling this tension work-family (vs. work-life for example), we are inherently privileging family over other life concerns (Golden et al., 2006). Drawing from the pronatalism Discourse, my participants also privileged family (i.e., rearing children) over other aspects of one's personal life. Thus, this research offers evidence that organizations need to consider how they can make organizational policies to reflect all their workers' lives (e.g., family, volunteering, hobbies, health) instead of one section of a worker's life. This research also offers evidence that, when defining family, organizations need to consider family as broader than just children. Specifically, I turn to Lucas and Buzzanell's (2006) definition of family:

Family should be defined as those people who are (inter)dependent with regard to the paid employment of another individual. This includes but is not limited to (inter)dependence of resources generated by employment, the negotiation of employment-related decision making, and the sacrifices

and consequences related to career, such as promotions, relocations, and job loss (p. 344).

This definition of family includes broader communicative constructions of family members. By broadening work-family policies to include many types of family members, workers will be able to communicatively construct workplace arrangements where they can navigate all aspects of their lives.

In sum, my project has many theoretical contributions for workplace flexibility policy research. First, this project contributes to the scholarship on the ways D/discourses shape the enactment of organizational policies. Second, this dissertation has implications for scholarship seeking to understand the role of supervisors in helping the missing middle use workplace flexibility. Third, this project contributes to the language work-life scholars use that privileges certain families over other life concerns.

Implications for Practice

My project carries value for any organization that offers workplace flexibility. First, I will provide suggestions for human resources personnel in effectively communicating about workplace flexibility. Second, I discuss the importance of managers establishing relationships with their subordinates. Finally, I argue that workers need to become more familiar with flexibility policies and establish relationships with their managers.

First, this study has two important practical implications for human resource personnel: creating a variety of workplace flexibility options and clearly communicating workplace flexibility policies. My findings suggest that organizations need to offer a smorgasbord of workplace flexibility policies that individual workers can pick and

choose. For example, my participants with children talked about wanting more unplanned sick and leave time to take care of unexpected childcare concerns. Specifically, Janie explained how she could “buy” an additional week of vacation. Alternatively, other workers wished they could take more vacation for leisure and rescheduling their working hours to accommodate other life demands (e.g., classes). Thus, I suggest that organizations create policies that can be used in a variety of ways by a variety of workers to best find the balance they desire.

Besides creating clear workplace flexibility policies, these policies need to be clearly communicated. Few of my participants knew about formal documentation. Thus, HR personnel need to do more than just provide the policies, they need to clearly communicate about these policies. I recommend that during new hire orientation, HR personnel specifically talk about work-life issues and the policies surrounding them. I also encourage HR personnel to have regular meetings with workers, especially if policies are changing. HR meetings are one factor of policy communication (Canary et al., 2013); thus, workplace flexibility policies need to be clearly communicated by HR departments.

Second, my study has implications for managers. It is important that managers are aware of all organizational policies surrounding workplace flexibility so that they can be fair in how they discuss these policies. In doing so, it is also important for managers to realize that workplace flexibility may be needed for more than family concerns and family concerns encompass more than child-rearing. Workers have complex lives. With that complexity, comes a lot of stress on workers. If a manager tends to favor family or child caregiving reasons for workplace flexibility, they can set organizational norms that

stigmatize workers for wanting to use flexibility for non-family reasons. Therefore, it is important that managers create fair expectations for their workers who wish to use workplace flexibility for a variety of reasons.

Relatedly, I recommend that managers foster strong relationships with their workers. Many workers reported learning about flexibility from their managers. How a manager talks about workplace flexibility influences how a worker thinks about flexibility. I also argue that it is important for managers to get to know their workers and understand where their workers are coming from. Getting to know more about their personal lives, hobbies, and interests can foster strong relationships as well as help managers prepare for unexpected events. For example, if you know a worker is actively involved in a volunteer organization, knowing that a major event is happening can help prepare the manager for the worker's need of workplace flexibility. Alternatively, if a manager knows a worker is taking care of their elderly parents, knowing more about their caregiving responsibilities can demonstrate that they are empathetic to their workers as well as promote a higher morale within the workplace.

Finally, my study points to recommendations for individual workers. First, it is important for workers to find more information about the formal written policies in place about workplace flexibility. Only five of my participants expressed that they knew about the formal documentation about workplace flexibility. Workers need to be more proactive about searching for these policies while also realizing policies are broader than formal, written documentation (see Canary, 2010). The workers who did know about the organizational policies were able to draw from those policies when requesting for workplace flexibility. Others relied on their manager's discretion when using workplace

flexibility. Thus, it is also important for workers to establish a strong relationship with their manager as this relationship is the cornerstone to workplace flexibility.

Strengths & Limitations

Like any scholarly endeavor, this dissertation project has strengths and limitations that affect my analysis as well as the implications that can be drawn from the data. Strengths of this project include an empirical analysis of the missing middle, the communicative focus on the project of workplace flexibility, and the diversity of participant occupations. Limitations of this dissertation project include the changing focus of my data collection, the challenges of understanding how D/discourses intersect through retrospective interviews, and the minimal focus on materiality.

First, previous research on flexibility stigma only theorized the experiences of the missing middle (Williams et al., 2013). Thus, the empirical focus on the missing middle was a strength of the current study. Brekhus (1998) argued that scholarship tends to focus on the marked while leaving the unmarked as both undertheorized and viewed as the normal. In work-life research, the professional class and low-wage workers are often marked and of interest to researchers. This dissertation filled a gap by addressing the concerns and experiences of the missing middle. The missing middle encompasses over 50% of the American workforce; thus, they are an important group to research to gain a more holistic picture of how Americans navigate work-life balance, and specifically, workplace flexibility policies. In other words, this dissertation gave voice to a group of people who are often ignored in policies (Skocpol, 2000).

Relatedly, the focus on the communicative process of flexibility stigma by the missing middle is also a strength of this project. As discussed above, previous research on

flexibility stigma (e.g., (Dodson, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Vandello et al., 2013) focused on the outcomes of the stigma rather than understanding how it occurs. My dissertation offers a communicative perspective to understand how organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility enable and constrain the talk about flexibility stigmatization. By understanding how the stigma is communicatively constituted, we can offer solutions to re-constitute and transform it to create better, more positive work-life experiences for the American workforce.

The diversity of participant occupations was also a strength of this study. I interviewed participants from a variety of occupations ranging from health care, education, construction, manufacturing, and human resources. Despite a lot of different occupations and geographic locations, my participants all experienced workplace flexibility stigma in similar ways. For example, every single interview discussed flexibility policy misuse as a stigmatizing experience. Thus, despite organizational context and occupation, the abuse of flexibility policies seems to be a universally stigmatizing experience for the missing middle.

While this research has several strengths, there are also limitations that should be addressed. First, the focus of this project shifted several times and the focus on the missing middle came during data collection. Though my participants who were interviewed in my second round of interviews all self-identified as part of the working class (another name for the missing middle; Skocpol, 2000), my initial participants did not self-identify as such. As such, I had to use indicators such as income, occupation, and education to determine social class positioning despite arguing that social class is hard to define using those indicators.

Second, the shifting nature of this project also meant that I was unable to fully see how the micro, meso, and macro-level D/discourses intersect to construct workplace flexibility. Although I could gather some data pointing to meso-levels of analysis, drawing participants from several organizations meant it was hard to systematically analyze this level of discourse. Through my interviews, I could see hints of how this discourse interplays with the micro and macro-levels, but more research is needed within one organization to fully see the intersection of all levels of discourse.

Finally, organizational scholars have argued to bring the material back into organizational communication (Ashcraft & Harris, 2014; Ashcraft et al., 2009). Despite seeing hints of materiality in the data, the material realities of workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma were not a focus of my interviews. More research is needed to fully understand the material concerns of this communicative construction.

Future Directions

This study represents the first step in a long process in understanding the communicative processes surrounding workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma. Below, I summarize some potential future directions for research. I articulate how different contextual, theoretical, and methodological approaches could further enrich the study of alternative organizing.

First, this study focused on how the missing middle communicatively constructed workplace flexibility and flexibility stigma; yet more research needs to be done to get multiple voices into our understanding of workplace flexibility. Although there is some research demonstrating how these populations experience flexibility stigma (e.g., Dodson, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013),

more research needs to be done comparing and contrasting how professional workers and low-wage workers communicatively construct their experiences surrounding workplace flexibility. In doing so, multiple voices and perspectives help us understand the holistic picture of how Americans experience workplace flexibility stigma. Specifically, I believe more research needs to be done to fully understand flexibility stigma as a communicative phenomenon as this is the first study to my knowledge addressing it from a communicative standpoint. Once we know more about the communication behind this process, then researchers and practitioners can start making policy implementations for improving the working conditions for working Americans.

Second, and relatedly, more research is needed on how workers communicatively manage moments of flexibility stigmatization. We know that a flexibility stigma exists. Both previous research (e.g., Williams et al., 2013) and this project demonstrate that workers become stigmatized for using (or abusing) workplace flexibility. However, I argue that more research is needed drawing from Meisenbach's (2010) stigma management strategy typology to provide recommendations to workers about navigating these stigmatizing moments.

Finally, I encourage more scholarship from a variety of methodological backgrounds on workplace flexibility. For example, more empirical and quantitative research needs to be conducted to fully understand the cause-effect relationships between definitions of workplace flexibility and outcomes associated with that stigmatization. Alternatively, I would also recommend more scholarship take up ethnographic methodologies to fully understand how this process occurs within one specific context. By studying the workplace flexibility process in a specific organization, scholars may be

able to start articulating this process from actual everyday conversations instead of retrospective or hypothetical accounts.

Conclusions

In this study, I analyzed the communicative construction of workplace flexibility and stigma flexibility. I sought to explore how the missing middle communicatively construct workplace flexibility via macro, meso, and micro-level D/discourses. These D/discourses help shape organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility, which in turn, influences workers' use of and talk surrounding flexibility policies. The missing middle communicatively constructed a fine line between use and abuse of workplace flexibility. If a worker is perceived to be abusing flexibility policies, they become stigmatized. In turn, the talk and behavior surrounding flexibility stigma reproduces the organizational norms surrounding workplace flexibility.

My findings reveal how cultural Discourses manifest in everyday talk and behaviors surrounding workplace flexibility. These findings have implications for flexibility stigma literature by adding to the scholarly knowledge about how the missing middle experience workplace flexibility stigma. My study also helps scholars understand how workplace flexibility is communicatively constructed. These findings also contribute to the growing attention in organizational communication surrounding workplace flexibility policies. More importantly, my study offers practical implications for human resource personnel, managers, and individual workers to re-constitute and transform organizational norms of workplace flexibility.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT SURVEY

1. What gender do you identify with?
2. What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
3. How old are you?
4. What is your relationship/marital status?
5. What is your sexual orientation?
6. How many people in your household are partially or completely dependent on your work income (including yourself)?
7. Do you have children?
 - a. What are their ages?
 - b. How many children do you have living at home?
8. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (If currently in school, highest degree received?)
9. What is your employment status? (employed full-time, employed part-time, unemployed but looking, unemployed and not looking, retired, etc.)
10. What is your occupation?
11. How long have you worked at your current organization?
12. What is your annual personal income?
13. What is your annual household income?
14. What types of flexibility policies does your organization offer? (open box)
15. What types of flexibility policies have you used? (open box)
16. What types of flexibility policies does your organization offer? (Check all that apply)
 - a. Flexible work schedules - This includes flexibility in the scheduling of hours worked, such as alternative work schedules and arrangements regarding shift and break schedules.
 - i. Flexible start and end times
 - ii. Flexible break schedules
 - iii. Compressed work weeks
 - b. Predictable work schedules – This includes providing work schedules with as much advance notice as possible and minimizing changes to work schedules once assigned.
 - c. Reduced hours – This includes flexibility in the numbers worked such as
 - i. part-time work
 - ii. job sharing
 - iii. phased retirement
 - iv. part-year work
 - d. Alternative location – Flexibility in the place of work, such as working at home, coffee shop, or at a satellite location.
 - i. Telework

- ii. Alternative work sites
 - e. Results only work environment (ROWE) – This includes having flexibility in terms of where and when you work as long as you are producing results.
17. What types of flexibility policies have you used? (Check all that apply)
- a. Flexible work schedules - This includes flexibility in the scheduling of hours worked, such as alternative work schedules and arrangements regarding shift and break schedules.
 - i. Flexible start and end times
 - ii. Flexible break schedules
 - iii. Compressed work weeks
 - b. Predictable work schedules – This includes providing work schedules with as much advance notice as possible and minimizing changes to work schedules once assigned.
 - c. Reduced hours – This includes flexibility in the numbers worked such as
 - i. part-time work
 - ii. job sharing
 - iii. phased retirement
 - iv. part-year work
 - d. Alternative location – Flexibility in the place of work, such as working at home, coffee shop, or at a satellite location.
 - i. Telework
 - ii. Alternative work sites
 - e. Results only work environment (ROWE) – This includes having flexibility in terms of where and when you work as long as you are producing results.
18. How often do you use these flexibility policies?
19. Are you interested in participating in an interview to discuss your experiences surrounding flexibility policies?
- a. Name:
 - b. Email:
 - c. Phone number:

APPENDIX B: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Jessica Rick and I am a doctoral candidate in the department of communication at the University of Missouri. I am interested in learning more about your thoughts about the workplace flexibility policies. All your answers will be kept confidential. No identifying information will be included in any reports in this study. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation at any time. This interview should take approximately one hour. Do you have any questions before we begin?

The interview has three major sections: a) your understanding of work-life balance; b) your experiences and opinions about flexibility policies; and c) your experiences and opinions about the flexibility policies at your workplace.

- 1) Kickstarter on work-life balance – Write a story/write about a time in that you struggled finding work and family/life balance.
- 2) Work-life balance
 - a) How do you define balance?
 - b) How do you find balance?
 - i) What strategies do you use?
 - c) How does your organization help or hinder you in doing that?
 - d) What would be your ideal work-life policy or program?
- 3) Work-life flexibility policies
 - a) What does workplace flexibility mean to you? How do you define it?
 - b) How do you feel about these policies?
 - c) What are strengths of these policies?
 - d) What are weaknesses of these policies?
 - e) Describe a person who typically uses flexibility policies.
 - f) How would that change if it were [different gender, social class, or parental status]?
 - g) When bringing up abuse:
 - i) Why do you think the abuse is happening?
 - ii) Where have you heard about that person?
 - iii) Do you see this in the media? In the org? From a coworker?
 - iv) Where did you learn this story?
- 4) Personal Experiences with Flexibility Policies
 - a) What policies does your organization have?
 - i) How is this similar or different to what you just described?
 - ii) How did you hear about this policy?
 - iii) What have been your experiences using this policy?
 - b) Tell me about a time when you have used flexibility policies.
 - c) What was your supervisor's/boss's reaction to you using flexibility?
 - i) How did you respond?
 - d) What was your coworker's reaction to you using flexibility?

- i) How did you respond?
 - e) What were your client's reaction to you using flexibility?
 - i) How did you respond?
 - f) Have you seen anyone experience a negative reaction (i.e., stigma) for using one of these policies?
 - i) How are people stigmatized for using these policies?
- 5) Final clearinghouse: Anything else that you'd like to share about flexibility policies, reactions to these policies, or understanding of flexibility policies?
- a) Was there anything you thought I would ask you about that I didn't? If so, what was it?

APPENDIX C: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Jessica Rick and I am a doctoral candidate in the department of communication at the University of Missouri. I am interested in learning more about your thoughts about workplace norms and policies about flexible hours and other alternative work arrangements. All your answers will be kept confidential. No identifying information will be included in any reports in this study. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation at any time. This interview should take approximately one hour. Do you have any questions before we begin?

- 1) Kickstarter on flexibility – tell me a story about a time when you struggled balancing work and non-work responsibilities.
- 2) What makes a good (ideal) worker?
 - a. What kind of worker do you want to be?
- 3) Flexibility policies
 - a. What does workplace flexibility mean to you? How do you define it?
 - b. What are strengths of these policies?
 - c. What are weaknesses of these policies?
 - d. What policies does your organization offer?
 - e. What kinds of flexibility policies do you wish your organization had?
 - f. How did you learn about these policies?
 - g. How do you think flexibility policies get created?
- 4) Describe a person who typically uses flexibility policies.
 - a. How does this relate to the ideal worker you described above?
 - b. How would that change if person does/does not have children?
 - c. How would that change if they were a salaried worker?
 - d. Why do you think this is a typical person?
 - i. Where did you hear about it?
 - ii. Where did you see it?
 - iii. Media/organizational communication/coworker
- 5) Hypothetical 1: A coworker just called in sick.
 - a. What do your coworkers tend to say about that person and situation?
 - b. What does your boss tend to say?
 - c. What do you tend to say?
 - d. Do you think there would be any repercussions for missing work?
 - e. If not explained above: how would it change if this was a regular thing or a rare occurrence?
 - f. When does “it’s ok” to “they are playing hooky” happen? Where is this line drawn?
- 6) Hypothetical 2: Your company just hired some new employees. You are in charge of training one of them and showing them the ropes.
 - a. What do you tell them about flexibility?
 - b. What do you tell them about calling in sick/PTO/ etc.?
- 7) Thinking about flexibility policies: How, if at all, are people stigmatized for using these policies?

- a. Why or why not?
- 8) Final clearinghouse: Anything else that you'd like to share about flexibility policies?
 - a. Was there anything you thought I would ask you about that I didn't? If so, what was it?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Age	Sex	Children	Education	Occupation	Industry	Salary
Abby	29	Female	No	4-year degree	Bank teller	Banking	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Adrienne	56	Female	Yes	2-year degree	Administrative support	Public Service	\$40,000 to \$49,999
Amera	27	Female	No	4-year degree	Administrative support	Construction	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Anna	23	Female	No	2-year degree	Administrative support	Health Care	\$20,000 to \$29,999
Ava	25	Female	No	4-year degree	Case worker	Public Service	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Brandon	33	Male	No	2-year degree	Customer service	Retail	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Dana	28	Female	Yes	4-year degree	Paraprofessional	Education	\$20,000 to \$29,999
Denise	24	Female	No	Some college	Phlebotomist	Health Care	\$20,000 to \$29,999
Dustin	24	Male	No	Some college	Customer service	Retail	\$15,000 to \$19,999
Gabby	23	Female	No	Some college	Administrative support	Health Care	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Hallie	29	Female	Yes	4-year degree	Barista	Food Service	\$15,000 to \$19,999
Hannah	22	Female	Yes	2-year degree	Administrative support	Health Care	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Janie	25	Female	Yes	Some college	Administrative support	Health Care	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Karen	59	Female	Yes	4-year degree	Nurse	Health Care	\$60,000 to \$64,999
Kathy	46	Female	Yes	4-year degree	Nurse	Health Care	\$60,000 to \$64,999
Katrina	26	Female	No	Some college	Line worker	Manufacturing	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Lacey	28	Female	No	2-year degree	Bank teller	Banking	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Larry	28	Male	No	4-year degree	Window washer	Manufacturing	\$40,000 to \$49,999
Mark	57	Male	Yes	Some college	Line worker	Manufacturing	\$20,000 to \$29,999
Martin	43	Male	No	4-year degree	Cook/Dishwasher	Food Service	\$15,000 to \$19,999
Mitch	53	Male	Yes	Some college	Electrician	Manufacturing	\$50,000 to \$59,999
Renee	36	Female	No	2-year degree	Administrative support	Human Resources	\$40,000 to \$49,999
Sadie	37	Female	No	4-year degree	Administrative support	Health Care	\$40,000 to \$49,999
Sarah	26	Female	Yes	Some college	Line worker	Manufacturing	\$40,000 to \$49,999

Name	Age	Sex	Children	Education	Occupation	Industry	Salary
Seth	24	Male	No	Some college	Customer service	Retail	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Tom	54	Male	Yes	2-year degree	Customer service	Construction	\$40,000 to \$49,999
Tracy	49	Female	Yes	Some college	Housekeeper	Health Care	\$20,000 to \$29,999
Valarie	44	Female	No	4-year degree	Administrative support	Health Care	\$30,000 to \$39,999
Zeke	25	Male	Yes	GED	Farm hand	Agriculture	\$30,000 to \$39,999

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VITA

Jessica M. Rick (M. A., Speech Communication, North Dakota State University, 2013; B.A. Communication Studies, International Studies, & Spanish, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010) has been interested in the communicative construction of identity and stigma since taking a social identity theory class as an undergraduate. In her master's program, she was (quickly) disappointed to find that scholars have already examined how social identity theory manifests itself within organizations, but she moved on in her interests of identity and stigma. Her research throughout her doctoral work has examined the communicative constructions of identity and stigma amidst gender, social class, and family diversity discourses, particularly as experienced within work-life contexts. Previous research projects have looked at how female engineering students experience their gender identities in a masculine dominated field, how voluntarily childfree workers communicate about that identity in the workplace, how unemployment stigmas changed based on social class positioning, and how stay-at-home dads communicate the changing nature of fatherhood. For her future research, Jessica hopes to continue developing theoretical frameworks to explore how workers commutatively experience a variety of work-life identities. Jessica will be joining the faculty at the University of Southern Indiana as an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies starting Fall 2017.