

Article

Agency and Capabilities in Managerial Positions: Hungarian Fathers' Use of Workplace Flexibility

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Abstract

This article analyses the agency freedom of manager fathers in Hungary to claim work–family balance through corporate flexible working arrangements. Hobson's interpretation of Sen's capability approach (Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2011) is applied to appraise the effect of individual resources and organizational and national context on managers' work–family balance, as well as their influence on organizational culture. An interview-based case study was undertaken at the Hungarian subsidiary of a Scandinavian multinational company, wherein 43 personal interviews were conducted with fathers in managerial positions. The interviews were analysed according to structuring qualitative content analysis. Managers benefitted from corporate flexibility (home office and flexible schedule), but experienced power asymmetries in terms of access to and use of the former according to hierarchy and department. Even though the men in these positions are assumed to be change agents, the majority of them perceived limited agency freedom to convert flexible working into work–family balance, or to influence organizational culture. The privileged position of managers was detected at the level of their individual agency. Most managers could economically afford to maintain a male breadwinner model. Therefore, limitations related to securing parental and flexibility rights were due to traditional gender norms, and the strong sense of entitlement to work. Consequently, the extent and means of use of flexibility did not challenge deeply rooted assumptions about ideal employee norms.

Keywords

agency; capabilities; fatherhood; flexibility; managers; work–family balance

Issue

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1. Introduction

Flexible working—namely, employees having control over when or where they work—is usually considered a family-friendly arrangement that can be used as a capability-spanning resource to reconcile work and family demands (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Chung & van der Lippe, 2018). The national and organizational context strongly shapes who has access to these arrangements, and how flexible working affects employees' work–family balance outcomes (Chung, 2018; Chung & van der Lippe, 2018). When the state implements a lim-

ited amount of work–family policies, organizations play an even more significant role in promoting employees' work–family balance (Been, den Dulk, & van der Lippe, 2017). A supportive organizational culture produces norms that involve respect for employees' personal and family time and encourage the latter to use flexible working arrangements (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018).

Managers are critical to developing a supportive organizational culture and to the success of flexible schedules (Allard, Haas, & Hwang, 2007; Kossek, Ollier-Malaterre, Lee, Pichler, & Hall, 2016). Managers are believed to be change agents who can alleviate employee fear by

leading by example and making it salient to others that it is acceptable to prioritise personal demands over work (Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2011; Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017). Despite their high level of work autonomy, men in managerial positions are often subject to work–family conflict (Allard et al., 2007; Kossek et al., 2016). If privileged groups of professionals cannot benefit from such arrangements, this might shape the work–family outcomes of lower level employees and the organizational culture as a whole.

This article analyses the case of a Hungarian subsidiary of a Scandinavian multinational company considered to be family-friendly. Although the literature about the issue of flexible working is rich, and a growing number of studies acknowledge the gendered nature of organizations and management (Acker, 2006), fathers' work–family needs often remain invisible in organizational settings (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2012). Studies that focus on managers as fathers (Been et al., 2017; Burnett et al., 2012), especially in the post-socialist regime, are still lacking. As Lewis and Stumbitz (2017) argue, there is a need to expand the range of national contexts, as most work–family research focuses on affluent countries. Addressing this the research questions of this study facilitate an analysis of (1) how professional fathers perceive their agency in terms of reconciling work and family demands, and (2) how flexible working, as an institutional resource, is perceived and used for work–family balance purposes. The present article analyses fathers in management from two viewpoints: as employees, who try to achieve balance through flexibility, as well as change agents, who can influence the existence of a flexible organizational culture by their own behaviour. The cognitive level (Hobson et al., 2011)—the awareness of one's own agency—is crucial, as managers can help or hinder the development of a family-supportive organizational culture by acting as role models or gatekeepers (Alemann, Beaufays, & Oechsle, 2017; Allard et al., 2007). The capability framework of Sen (2008), as applied by Hobson and Fahlén (2009) and Hobson et al. (2011), is a valuable concept for studying whether and how men in managerial positions with a specific cultural and institutional background can convert flexible working as a resource into the capability to achieve work–family balance.

This article's contribution is that it integrates both management and gender dimensions into the research on flexible working and work–family balance within the understudied Central and Eastern European context. Contextual interrelations (Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017) are presented through the example of how a company with Scandinavian ownership and a family-friendly cultural background, embedded in a post-communist country with traditional gender norms and strong gender inequality, can reflect employees' work–family balance claims.

The next section introduces the capability approach as a conceptual framework applied to work–family balance. The section after this briefly summarises the in-

stitutional and cultural background of Hungary in terms of gender equality and family policy, as well as flexible working opportunities. This is followed by a description of data and methods, while the fifth section provides the results. The article ends with a discussion section that includes the interpretation of results and a conclusion.

2. The Logic of the Capability Approach

The capability approach is a dynamic, multi-layered tool for studying the impact of policies within their cultural context (den Dulk & Yerkes, 2016) by (1) locating individual agency in specific institutional settings, (2) acknowledging variation in resources and means, and (3) recognising the importance of the cognitive level of agency, i.e., whether one can convert resources—such as flexible working—into the lives individuals want to lead (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009).

Work–family balance is considered a 'functioning,' a quality-of-life issue that one has a reason to value (Hobson et al., 2011). The capability approach does not define an optimal way to combine work and family life. Instead, it relates to the possibility of converting resources into the ability to make choices—in this case, actual freedom to reconcile work and care demands. Individuals' access and ability to take advantage of work–family policies (den Dulk & Yerkes, 2016) depends on so-called conversion factors: These include individual-level factors (gender, age, social class, network, skills, etc.), institutional factors (legal rights, care and leave benefits, organizational policy) and societal factors (social norms, values, social movements, media, etc.; Hobson et al., 2011). Hobson et al. (2011) also put emphasis on the cognitive dimension, as actual agency must be preceded by a sense of entitlement to make demands. This is essential for "understanding not only what one does or would like to do, but also the ability to imagine alternatives" (Hobson et al., 2011, p. 174). The sense of entitlement is highly gendered (Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017). Fathers may feel less entitled to ask for workplace support for family purposes (Alemann et al., 2017) as this could contradict underlying convictions about the cultural value of work (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013).

2.1. The Gendered Nature of Agency

Those with more individual resources are less dependent on institutional and societal factors. Highly educated, middle-class men in leading positions can be considered a privileged group whose members have significant individual resources; therefore, they can be expected to have more agency freedom. On the other hand, they might be particularly exposed to taken-for-granted assumptions such as norms about the ideal employee (Acker, 2006)—an unencumbered devotion to work—or the dominant idea of masculinity (van der Lippe &

Lippényi, 2018). Hegemonic forms of masculinity are still associated with the uninterrupted, long-working-hours career model (Burke, 2000), especially in managerial positions, which require men to be irreplaceable at work. In the background is the unspoken message that men's careers are still regarded as more important than women's (Halrynjo & Lyng, 2013; Kvande, 2009). The gendered nature of organizations is difficult to perceive when the masculine values of work and management remain invisible and are thereby reproduced and reinforced (Burnett et al., 2012).

The traditional male breadwinner model accords with ideal employee norms, as it associates fatherhood with providing. Involved fathering—the idea of nurturing, caring men who are committed to family responsibilities—on the other hand is not something that may be understood within the frame of the ideal employee (Williams et al., 2013), due to the perception that care and career are mutually exclusive (Alemann et al., 2017). As a result, agency inequalities in men's work–family balance manifest in the form of limited possibilities for involved fathering (Hobson et al., 2011).

2.2. Flexible Working as a Resource

Institutional factors in the capability approach cover both the policy level, such as leave and childcare benefits, and the firm level, including the opportunity for flexible working and organizational culture in general. A workplace organizational culture that is sensitive to employees' work–family balance is a site for converting policies into work–family balance claims. Flexible working is usually seen as an indicator of an organization's responsiveness to employees' work–family concerns, but the actual uptake of the former is often low (Williams et al., 2013).

Among other reasons for this are fears of flexibility stigma; namely, negative career consequences (wage penalties, lower performance evaluations, fewer promotions) due to the use of flexible arrangements. Although flexibility is formulated in a gender-neutral way, it implicitly targets women in particular as they are typically expected to become dependent second-income earners, or non-earners (Burnett et al., 2012). Men using flexibility to meet family demands often results in double stigma as it is considered a violation of overtime culture. Working long hours is seen as 'heroic activity,' a manly test of physical endurance. The successful enactment of this masculinity involves displaying one's exhaustion, physically and verbally, in order to convey the depth of one's commitment, stamina, and virility (Williams et al., 2013). The pull of the economic, social, and symbolic power associated with male management reinforces the individual's engagement in business (Bowman, 2007), especially in greedy organizations (Coser, 1974) that seek exclusive and undivided loyalty from their employees. As full-time employment constitutes the core of the male identity, pursuing an alternative way of life requires not only making a conscious decision against a professional

career, but also a reformulation of male identity (Liebig & Kron, 2017).

In addition, flexibility can have other controversial outcomes: Although higher-level occupational groups are more likely to have access to flexible working arrangements (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Hobson & Fahlén, 2009), they tend to use flexibility—and schedule control in particular—to increase their performance (Chung, 2018). Men are more strongly expected to use flexible working for performance-enhancing purposes rather than caring ones, which leads to the expansion of work (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Chung & van der Lippe, 2018). Organizations offer flexibility to fathers as a reward for high-level commitment, not as a social right (Liebig & Kron, 2017). Consequently, it can be better understood why men in managerial positions are often subject to work–family conflict (Allard et al., 2007; Kossek et al., 2016), and why employers may support flexibility for reasons other than enhancing work–family balance.

3. The Hungarian Context

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2018), Hungary, with Greece and Slovakia, ranks lowest in the European Union, scoring less than the EU28 average, for all aspects of gender equality (work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health). One of the most gender-unequal domains is related to time, especially the sub-domain of care activities, where women are taking on even more responsibilities than before.

This inequality can be better understood if we consider Hungary's historical socialist-era heritage. As a consequence of forced emancipation, female labour force participation was formerly high. Simultaneously, the state placed emphasis on motherhood by stressing women's responsibilities as mothers and granted them the right to carry out care duties (Kispéter, 2012). Following the socialist era, Hungary tried to reintroduce a traditional familization regime and restore the male breadwinner model and the related private-public division of gender roles (Hobson et al., 2011). Emancipation occurred in a way in which the participation of men in household duties was not even considered, and the dual burden of women's paid and unpaid work became a permanent feature of everyday life (Nagy, Király, & Géring, 2016). Even if generous state support for parental leave is framed in neutral terms, given the prevailing social norms and the structural conditions on the labour market women are still encouraged to take sole responsibility for household-related labour and care (Nagy, 2008; Nagy et al., 2016). Although the level of fathers' assistance through parental leave is remarkably low (Hobson et al., 2011) and is not promoted by state policy, slow changes have been recorded in men's attitudes toward fatherhood (Pongrácz & Molnár, 2011). As a result, fathers often face the ambiguous and contradictory expectation of securing their role as male breadwinners while

spending more time with children (Pongrácz & Molnár, 2011; Spéder, 2011).

Refamilization has increasingly been in the spotlight recently, as rectifying the demographic decline was specified by the prime minister as the most important challenge (Félix, 2015). The government made 2018 ‘the year of the family’ by promising support to families with three or more children (family housing loan scheme, student loan support, and family taxation allowance). Although an increase in funding for day-care and kindergartens is also promised, most of these policies affect poor and better-off families differently, putting the latter in a more favourable position. Moreover, this family policy neglects other related issues such as gender inequality and child poverty (Félix, 2015; Szikra, 2018).

As in other post-socialist countries, dual-earner households are prevalent. In Hungary, 73% of individuals active in the labour force live in dual-earner households, the highest rate among EU Member States (the EU28 average is 56%; see Eurofound, 2017). In 2019, the employment rate for men within the working age population was 77%, and for women 63% (OECD, 2020). Additionally, the labour market is characterised by a very low share of part-time employment (4%). According to Eurofound (2017) data, 68% of employees stated that their schedule was strictly defined by the company at which they worked, and they had no leeway to make changes (10 percentage points higher than the EU28 average). Forty-seven percent found it difficult to take an hour or two off to take care of personal or family matters during working hours (EU average 35%). Forty-nine percent of employees considered it rather difficult to reconcile paid work with their care responsibilities, compared to the EU average of 36%. These results indicate a strong link between the ability to take some time off work and the perceived fit of working hours with care and other commitments. Chung, Kerkhofs, and Ester (2007) categorised Hungary—along with other mostly southern European countries—as countries with a large share of low-flexibility companies. Another phenomenon typical of this group is the frequent presence of overtime. In Hungary, most companies do not offer many flexible or work–family balance options, but when they do, the former usually serve to meet the organization’s flexibility needs rather than employee demands.

4. Method and Sample

The Hungarian subsidiary of a large Scandinavian service sector company was chosen as the case for analysis. Qualitative case studies, by definition, take context into account and therefore serve as an appropriate method for exploring the interconnections embedded in an organizational and social background. The focus on several contextual layers can contribute to challenging gendered assumptions about work and family roles (Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017). The origin of the present case study company is important, as Scandinavian societies are well

known for their longstanding policy legacy of promoting gender equality and work–family balance (O’Brien, Brandth, & Kvande, 2007). This factor was thus expected to influence organizational culture. The reason for investigating a large, service-sector company was the greater potential for identifying formal work–family and flexible initiatives.

According to Géring (2014), only 5% of medium- and large-sized companies in Hungary find it important to represent their engagement with corporate social responsibility on their websites. The case study company belongs to that small minority of firms that use family-friendliness as an identity-forming feature. Among the range of work-life balance opportunities they promote part-time and flexible working options. According to the website, the company invests heavily into employees’ human capital, health, security, and working conditions.

An interview-based case study was conducted within this company in the form of 30-minute (average duration) semi-structured managerial interviews. The target group was middle and top managers with small children (younger than 10 years old). Female managers were also included in the research as a control group (the focus of this article, however, is not making a gender comparison, thus the article does not cover the analysis of the female sample). Only Hungarian managers were interviewed, since managers from abroad might have been differently socialized and have a different cultural background. Managers were directly approached using a list of potential interviewees the HR Department prepared based on the given selection criteria. All potential interviewees received an invitation e-mail that briefly described the purpose of the research and suggested a potential date for the interview. Forty-three men agreed to participate out of the 50 who were approached (86% response rate). Interviews were conducted within the company in one of the meeting rooms during work time. The meeting room was a private but also natural environment for the interview. Only one interviewee refused to permit audio recording. Fieldwork lasted from 3 March 2015 to 13 April 2015.

In terms of employee positions, the sample consisted of 22 team leaders, 13 heads of department, six directors, and two C-level executives. Mean age was 39 years, with two children on average. With one exception, all respondents were married. One-third of men lived in a dual earner couple, with the partner occupying a full-time position. Another third of male interviewees had a wife who worked on a part-time basis or was self-employed. One-third of male manager’s wives were on maternity leave at the time of the research. Almost all respondents had a degree, as did their partners. In terms of the professional field the respondents were involved in, there was great diversity, from finance and marketing to customer service and sales.

The interview guideline covered the following broader themes: definition and perception of work–family balance; sources of work–family conflict; coping

strategies and boundary management between work and private life; formal and informal types of support with an emphasis on flexible working arrangements; and feelings, values, and responsibilities in relation to being a father and manager. The interview transcripts were analysed with the use of NVivo10 software in line with a mixed, alternative form of the structuring type of qualitative content analysis called content structuring, or theme analysis (Mayring, 2014). This involves a deductive first step of category assignment—i.e., the latter are pre-defined based on theories and previous research—followed by inductive category formation. The three types of work–family conflict (time, strain, behaviour) defined by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) are examples of deductive category creation based on the literature. Other themes, such as the understanding of work–family balance, needed further category development based on the answers. After coding the first 10 interviews, the categories and coding guideline were revised before working through the whole material. The final step involved analysis of these categories by summarising the content, checking category frequencies, and interpreting contingencies.

5. Results

This section starts with an introduction of the interviewees' perception of their work–family balance situation, focusing on the source of tension between the two life spheres. This is followed by a summary of how capable managers feel in relation to claiming and achieving balance, and whether there is a sense of entitlement concerning the ability to prioritise family over work. Finally, I describe how flexible working—among other types of resources—is perceived and used for work–family reasons.

5.1. Conflict between Work and Family Demands

Managers defined work–family balance in various ways. What is more important, however, is whether they felt able to function in their preferred way. Based on their level of satisfaction, three, equally large, distinct groups of respondents emerged: (1) manager fathers, who considered their current work–family balance to be satisfying—mainly those who were maintaining the traditional breadwinner role and living in line with their self-concept (Alemann et al., 2017); (2) those who faced temporary problems on a cyclical basis; and (3) those who were critical about their work–family balance in the long term—mostly managers living as part of a dual-earner couple. Both temporary and lasting problems stemmed primarily from workload: Many managers found this to be extreme, including tight deadlines, overtime, working in the evenings, and even at weekends and on holidays. Some directors argued that the secret of the company's performance was to make employees undertake more work than would normally be expected of them: "This is a strong expression, but in fact we exploit peo-

ple. Strongly. And all the [other] things [i.e., organizational support] we try to do stay rather on the surface" (Director, 40 years old).

Consequently, the most frequent type of work–family conflict was time-based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), involving work preventing interviewees from spending as much time with their families as they wanted. This time squeeze emerged not only in relation to physical absence from home, but also as a lack of psychological and mental involvement. This feeling of being in "constant stand-by mode" often resulted in anxiety and strain-based conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985):

My wife often tells me that it's totally useless to go with me on holiday, because I'm not present with my family mentally, only in body....I have to create a life strategy regarding this [challenge] if I don't want to be killed by stress at 50. (Director, 42)

To a lesser extent, conflicts arose from attempts to fulfil both a traditional breadwinner role and a more emotional, caring father and partner role: "It's a strange paradox, and many of my male companions face it, that we should earn much more but also be home a lot! Well, it's not possible" (Head of Department, 35). This type of conflict was due not only to the contradictory expectations the environment raised, but also by the internal motivation of the men and their sense of entitlement towards involved fatherhood:

I put bread on the table, and that's where my fatherly responsibilities end. But obviously it's not good. I would like more than this. I don't know....I would like to raise happy people, and I want to play a role in that. (Head of Department, 40)

5.2. Capabilities and the Cognitive Level of Agency

Most of the managers emphasized their own responsibility for creating the work–family balance they wished for. They believed that it would be naïve to expect the company to consider their work–family balance a top priority, since the company's aim is to make a profit. The company offers a framework for flexibility, with options such as home office and flexible working hours, but it depends on the individual how they take advantage of these opportunities. Consequently—and as responsible adult individuals—everyone is provided with the autonomy to define their own priorities and act accordingly. Respondents added that this requires self-awareness about where to define the limits of work:

I have lots of colleagues who don't understand how I can resist checking my phone on the weekend....And, funny or not, the main reason for this is having a private life which doesn't allow you to work constantly. If I didn't have a family and I were single, I would surely work much more. But having children means

that you can't really think of anything else. (Head of Department, 33)

Significantly fewer managers highlighted the company's role in maintaining a work–family balance. One executive interviewee and the head of the human resources department had the impression that more employees expected the company to solve their work–family balance issues than the interviewees admitted:

Everyone expects us to create a new culture of meetings, or to tell them that everyone has to go home at 5 p.m. We can try, but life is not like this—only you [employees] can draw the lines regarding what work to undertake and what not. By the way, I wouldn't like to be told not to work after 6 p.m., because it might be important for me to finish a task. (Head of Department, 40)

The majority of interviewees spoke from the position of employees and only rarely referred to their role as managers in the organizational culture. This fact was also captured in observing what the interviewees said they would change to achieve better work–family balance. Almost all the managers spoke about the personal changes they could make to their attitude or level of efficiency (for instance, developing time management skills, waking up earlier, moving closer to the workplace to save on commuting time, etc.). All this suggests that most respondents take the working environment as given, and do not feel they have much influence on working processes or corporate culture. Ideas about attempting to change working conditions arose rarely: One example included an overworked manager sharing his difficulties with his superiors (who, in response, hired more people for the relevant group to ease the pressure on individuals). In most cases, however, interviewees accepted their working conditions and did not appear to feel that they had agency in this regard. Team leaders especially considered themselves to be insignificant, placing themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy of managers, and acting according to this perception. Not only did they perceive a lack of agency in relation to their ability to claim work–family balance, but they also did not take into account their own impact on their colleagues. Only top managers expressed their own responsibility for other employees' work-life balance and their role in corporate change:

We talked with the CEO about how it looks when he works on the weekend and sends e-mails or calls me about some question....With one single e-mail he drags in 4–5 people....Since we agreed [found a solution] about this two and a half years ago, he hasn't written and we haven't needed to work on the weekend. (Executive, 43)

They realized that their own work–family balance strategies and own routines might drag others into work:

Sometimes I work on Saturday at 2 a.m. It happens that, somehow, I'm in the flow, I have creative energy. Some weeks ago, I told my group that I would like only one thing: that they don't answer anything [any communications] from Friday 5 p.m. until Monday morning. It [the response] was very interesting; it had the psychological effect that employees couldn't stop themselves replying. Ergo, I started to work offline. (Director, 40)

5.3. Conversion Factors

Managers mentioned four types of resources they could rely on to achieve balance: (1) familial support (first of all, help from partners, and second, grandparents); (2) organizational support (flexibility and managerial support); (3) their own skills (time management, prioritisation, boundary management); and (4) paid help (babysitters or cleaners). Flexible working and managerial support belong to the firm level of institutional factors. The other factors are used as individual resources, although familial support—due to gender norms—may be classified as a societal factor. Boundary management was mentioned as an individual skill that can be improved. On the other hand, it can also be understood as the perception of agency itself:

You might sulk, of course, if a meeting doesn't work out as you had wished....But you don't always have to be part of that. There are battles you have to fight, and there are battles you don't. You have to define your priorities. (Team Leader, 29)

Perceived control over boundaries (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012) is strongly related to how managers experience flexibility: whether they see it as a tool of autonomy or a tool for exploitation. Those with high perceived control over boundaries (regardless of whether they prefer to separate work from home, or enjoy the blurred borders between spheres) usually see the positive side of flexible arrangements (even if these are used for productivity enhancement and not for family purposes). In the case of weak control over boundaries, flexibility is perceived to generate even more work. This can mostly be explained by internal motivation—a fear of lagging behind. Employees are seemingly not called to account for using flexible working for family reasons, although personal presence and constant availability are believed to be a way of expressing commitment and be rewarded by the company:

There were cases when those who went home at 7 p.m. received acknowledgment. It didn't matter that they [an employee] were [was] playing on their computer from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. He really was playing. But he was held up as an example because he stayed so long. (Team Leader, 43)

5.3.1. Flexible Working and Organizational Support

The general evaluation of the organizational culture at the company was positive, many understanding it as the influence of so-called Scandinavian culture, which they describe as having an informal, people-oriented, and democratic approach—characteristic of the Norwegian model (Brandth & Kvande, 2019)—which was usually considered as being an example worth following. Critiques were therefore not directed at Scandinavian culture, but rather at the inadequate adaption of Hungarians to this ‘foreign’ culture:

In Scandinavian countries they start the morning with the gym, they get up early and arrive at work early, but at half past five they leave, whatever happens. They live in an incredibly structured way. While in Eastern Europe the normal culture of work was ruined under socialism, and after the 1990s this new world burst into our lives, and my generation had no one to learn from about the working culture of this type of business life. Typically, we work in a less structured way, more ad hoc. Our daily agenda is not managed, we are swimming in work, we stay late, therefore we are tired the next day and we don’t go to the gym...and the spiral continues. (Executive, 43)

Various initiatives were mentioned by the interviewees that were designed to improve employee satisfaction, but flexibility was the most significant among these. This covers two things: the autonomy to organize one’s schedule and working from home (home office). Many fathers in the sample used flexible work for family reasons; for instance, to take their children to school, or to stay at home with them when they were sick: “Today, for example, my youngest son insisted that I take him to nursery, because it’s been a long time since I was able to. So I took him. And it felt very good” (Director, 42). The fact that a male director or an executive uses flexibility for family purposes can mediate the message to employees that it is acceptable to prioritise fatherhood-related responsibilities over work-related ones. At the moment, however, these scattered and occasional examples do not challenge preexisting ideas about work.

Flexibility is also a means of productivity enhancement:

For me, flexibility is opportunity. For others, it is responsibility, but for me opportunity. I would encounter many problems if there was no flexibility....Let’s say I had a little cold, I was feeling a bit sick, or coughing, I wouldn’t go to work. Then I would need to go see a doctor, take sick leave, and officially I couldn’t check any e-mails, I couldn’t handle my tasks, and decisions would not be taken. (Team Leader, 29)

Either used for family-related purposes or productivity reasons, the majority of male managers perceived

flexibility to be employee-driven; an arrangement beneficial for themselves. They also associated flexible arrangements with the attitudes of their bosses, and those who felt trusted by their superiors tried to foster such behaviour amongst their own team members. Consequently, the role-model effect trickled down. Fewer managers highlighted the disadvantageous way in which flexibility could act as an instrument by which companies can exploit employees:

It is very useful that [there] is no card-punch, although I think that this [situation] is more useful for the company than me. So the company gives us flexibility, but most probably due to this flexibility I’m putting more into it voluntarily than I should. (Head of Department, 39)

Only a small minority expressed any objections towards flexible working due to concerns about productivity. Consequently, negative perceptions related to flexible working stem primarily from weak agency in relation to accessing it or using it for one’s own benefit (perceiving it as employer-driven instead of employee-driven), rather than from productivity concerns. Even if using a home office and flexibility are formally supported, the company’s everyday functioning and the organization of work can restrict the agency required to take advantage of flexible opportunities. The culture of meetings regularly prevents managers from benefitting from a home office. Although technology is available for online meetings, real presence is preferred and expected: “I tried many times to cut back on the number of meetings, skipping some, but the organization resents this. It’s a very interesting thing that in this culture delegation is not accepted” (Head of Department, 35).

More interestingly, the corporate building was originally designed with the concept of home office in mind: There are fewer places in the office than the number of employees based on the assumption that some employees will work from home. In certain departments, such as property management and customer service, use of a home office is even more infrequent since employees in these areas always have to be available and ready to act:

She [the customer service director] was extreme; she would call the heads of department on Saturday at midnight without a problem....So, unfortunately, even if we have a flag outside saying that this is a family-friendly company, this doesn’t work at above team-leader level. This flag is bullshit. (Team Leader, 43)

Differences were found not only in terms of department, but in relation to hierarchy too. Although a higher-level position is associated with more control and autonomy, this also requires that individuals in these positions be more present and visible due to the importance of their role in decision-making processes. Top managers are not only faced with longer working hours, but a high level of

responsibility too, which makes them more vulnerable to psychological pressure:

I don't think that a director or CxO [C-level manager] has to tolerate a bigger workload during working hours or in terms of kilojoules, but the workload is different; it's rather stress[ful]....The emotional load is definitely bigger, there's no question, since we have to make decisions about others' fates, not only ours. (Director, 40)

5.3.2. Familial Support and Paid Help

As expected based on the national context and previous research, the men in this sample could completely rely on the support of their wives in achieving work–family balance. Couples usually divide responsibility for work in line with traditional gender roles, especially when they have young children and their wives stay at home for a long period of time: “My wife works six hours per day. We agreed that someone has to care for the child. It's impossible that the children should be raised by grandparents or a babysitter because this is not a healthy thing” (Head of Department, 33).

In the sample, none of the fathers had taken more than the standard five-day period of paternity leave. It often transpired that wives were working in similar professional positions before they took maternity leave. A few had decided not to go back to the same sector after their maternity leave, but rather chose more flexible work that was complementary to their husband's wage-earning activity:

The enterprise is ours....It's rather a toy, it's not about the money, but it's there to produce, to produce value....She [my wife] told me in 2005 that she didn't want to go back to the bank to work, instead she wanted to play this role. And I celebrated the idea. So she is not sitting at home being a housewife and cooking stew, but she is occupied, she can express herself...so she feels useful. (Director, 40)

Very few men realized that the share of unpaid labour within their relationship was unequal, or were able to reflect on their own contribution self-critically. An exception included the following statement: “I can see that she would like to go back to work. But the option to build a career is already gone. And I think it's because she sacrificed it for me” (Team Leader, 44).

In contrast, men in dual-earner relationships experienced work–family conflict more frequently, except when the couple employed a babysitter or cleaner. Paid help, however, was rarely used since it was found to be too expensive. Economically, it was not considered a rational option, especially when wives fulfilled these caring and household roles. In some cases, the wives themselves acted as gatekeepers and showed resistance to the idea of having extra help. It is important to add that

managers tended to think about paid services in terms of help for their wives, not for themselves: “I would be very comforted if part of the housework was done using such help [using a cleaner], and we could do something more meaningful instead. This results in conflict because I back out of doing housework” (Team Leader, 39).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Just as previous research (Allard et al., 2007; Kossek et al., 2016) argues, men in managerial positions may be vulnerable to work–family conflict in a high performance environment, even though the organizational culture is believed to be family-friendly. This can be partly explained by the observation that “those with the most autonomy often have jobs that place the most demands on them” (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009, p. 223).

Although flexible working at the case study company was regarded a resource for promoting better work–family balance, the conversion of this into capabilities was hindered. One reason for this implementation gap (Kossek et al., 2016) is the difference in accessing flexible working provisions. The managers of some departments (property management, customer service), as well as middle managers, experienced a lower level of access and had weaker capabilities to apply flexible working. The use of flexibility seems to be de-gendered in the sense that fathers were actually able to benefit from it and to some extent satisfy their need to devote time to their families. Although—at least on the discursive level—managers rarely acted as gatekeepers of flexibility, other types of power asymmetries prevent flexible working from becoming a ‘community of practice’ (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018) involving a shared understanding of problems and solutions.

The other reason for the growing pressure is that flexibility was often used for the purpose of productivity-enhancement, rather than the fulfilment of family demands. Productivity-related concerns and flexibility stigma were rarely perceived, mostly due to the gift-exchange mechanism (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018), meaning that managers experienced and reproduced work intensification to express commitment to the company and show gratitude for the opportunity of having flexibility. Hence, limitations related to securing parental and flexibility rights were less derived from economic concerns—which is the case of the general Hungarian population (Hobson et al., 2011)—but rather arose due to a strong sense of entitlement to the masculine values of work, career motivation, a fear of lagging behind, and the perception of being irreplaceable at work (Halrynjo & Lyng, 2013). Consequently, the means and extent of the use of flexibility mainly involved organizing work so that it still allowed the fulfilment of basic caring obligations (Liebig & Kron, 2017). This approach does not challenge deeply rooted ideal employee norms and ideas about how work should be carried out (Williams et al., 2013).

The gender norms in Hungarian society limit fathers' sense of entitlement to involved fathering and strictly define how resources are converted into capabilities. The Scandinavian background of the Hungarian case study subsidiary has only a moderate impact on the latter, and a more gender-equal approach was not transmitted. Even if some modern elements of fatherhood exist, and fathers feel the need to spend more time with their children, the traditional separation between paid and caring roles is still prevalent. The majority of respondents' wives created a supportive background for their husband's managerial jobs, even at the cost of neglecting their own careers. The privilege of a managerial position appears in employees' ability to maintain a male breadwinner model without economic concerns—especially in the first years of parenthood, which are supported by state provisions concerning parental leave. The coping strategy of respondents therefore matches more closely the demands of organizations rather than family needs (Allard et al., 2007), while it also reproduces and maintains gender inequalities. Men in dual-earner relationships, however, experience conflict more frequently, except when other individual resources (such as paid help or support from grandparents) can be converted into capabilities for reconciling work and family demands.

As a result of the low level of consciousness and reflectivity regarding agency, working conditions and organizational culture are taken as given. This reinforces the operating mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism, whereby the role of corporations and the state in maintaining work–family balance remain invisible and the status quo is unquestioned, and responsibility is pushed down to the level of individuals. When work–family balance is taken as an individual responsibility, employees only focus on individual resources and blame themselves for lacking these, or not being able to convert them into balance (Alemann et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2007). Raising awareness of these hidden mechanisms and promoting role models that involve managers taking up flexible working for family purposes (Alemann et al., 2017; Chung & van der Lippe, 2018) could strengthen the sense of entitlement to work–family balance, make fathers more visible within organizations (Burnett et al., 2012), and enhance employee-driven forms of flexibility, instead of a productivity-enhancement focus.

The main limitation of this research is its use of a single case study, since findings naturally cannot be generalised to the whole population. On the other hand, taken as an example it can enrich empirical findings and contribute to the hitherto insufficient material about Hungarian men and work–family balance, and might also serve as a basis for future research.

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Conflict of Interests

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