

# WORKING PAPER

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## IDEAL WORKERS AND IDEAL PARENTS

**Working-time norms and the acceptance of part-time and parental leave  
at the workplace in Germany**

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which the use of part-time work and parental leave is accepted in German workplaces for women and men as well as various work positions and professions. Interviews were conducted with 95 employees and 26 experts in hospitals, police stations and industrial companies. The results indicate that the working-time norms not only vary according to gender, but to the position in the workplace hierarchy and profession. Moreover, working-time norms are shifting. Part-time work and parental leave is gradually more accepted in higher status position and for men. In addition to the norms, other factors – especially staffing issues and the behavior of management personnel – are decisive for acceptance, and thus for the work behavior of employees.



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# 1 Introduction

Working-time options strengthen employees' time sovereignty and therefore contribute to positive work outcomes. Employees who can adapt their working time to meet differing time requirements over the life course often have higher levels of well-being (Michel et al. 2011; Allen et al. 2013), better health (Ala-Mursula et al. 2004) and higher levels of motivation for their work (Gallie et al. 2012). Thus, life-stage oriented working-time options also yield benefits for employers – not the least of which is an advantage in recruitment and retention of specialists and professionals.

Employees often have recourse to options enabling them to reduce or interrupt their working time to better balance employment with other activities. However, studies originating primarily in Anglo-American countries show that employees frequently do not make use of these possibilities (Albiston 2007; Wharton et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2013). In particular, more highly qualified employees and men tend to refrain from interruptions to employment and working-time reductions (Williams et al. 2013). According to these studies, the lack of acceptance among their colleagues and supervisors is a significant barrier to the use of available working-time options (Williams et al. 2013). Employees who do interrupt or reduce their working time frequently face stigmatization and disadvantages in terms of their career prospects (Cohen, Single 2001; Kossek et al. 2005, p. 247), as use of these options constitutes a violation of prevailing working-time norms at the workplace. These working-time norms are part of broader workplace norms, i.e. the ideal worker norms and the ideal parent norm (Williams et al. 2013).

The dominance of such workplace norms has been demonstrated – but thus far primarily for liberal countries and almost always with regard to company-designed working-time options. Governmental support of working-time options, however, has been shown to be crucial for the uptake of these options (Brannen 2005; Kirby, Krone 2002; Wharton et al. 2003, p. 346). In contrast to company-designed options, use of legally guaranteed options is a universal right of employees and thus less dependent on economic concerns of supervisors (den Dulk et al. 2011). For this reason, use of legally guaranteed options could be less dependent on workplace norms and thus meet with greater acceptance. Although numerous studies (e.g. Anxo et al. 2007), have looked at career disadvantages for employees with reduced working hours in European countries with legally guaranteed options, the effect that workplace norms have on acceptance for reduced working times has often been neglected. This also applies to the rights granted by law for parental leave. As a result, there is a lack of empirical evidence that explains whether and in which way employees experience stigmatization and discrimination when making use of their legal rights to part-time work and parental leave.

To close this research gap, the current study examines the acceptance of career breaks and reduced working times in German organizations. Germany is an interesting case, because labor rights for employees were expanded in the first decade of the new millennium. In 2001 the legal right to

reduced working hours was established for the great majority of employees. In 2007 the legal right to career breaks for childcare (parental leave) was expanded to include wage compensation, and fathers were explicitly addressed with partner months. Part-time work and parental leave are among the most-used working-time options in Germany. 22.3% of all employees in Germany in the year 2014 worked part-time, of which more than two-thirds (78.1%) were women (OECD 2016). In 34% of couples whose child was born in 2012, both parents made use of parental leave and wage compensation, though the majority of men made use of these rights only for two months that otherwise would expire<sup>1</sup>(destatis 2014). It can also be seen that a shift in societal values is underway. Traditional gender roles are gradually losing importance (Scheuer 2013) and gender images such as the “new father”, who participates in childcare, and the working mother, who balances career and family life, are characteristic of the current public discourse. Alemann and Oechsle (2015) find that the social shift in the cultural representation of men and women and the change in gender images have fueled processes of organizational change with regard to how work is organized. To what extent these developments have changed workplace norms and led to acceptance for women’s and men’s utilization of working-time options, however, is unclear.

Moreover, the majority of the German studies either do not differentiate between different workplace positions – or they examine the acceptance of legally-granted options primarily for specific groups, especially women, men or highly qualified employees (Alemann, Oechsle 2015; Hipp, Stuth 2013; Pfahl et al. 2014; Koch 2008)–, despite the fact that the Anglo-American studies show that norms vary according to gender and workplace position (Williams et al. 2013). And finally, previous studies, German as well as European and Anglo-American, have failed to examine the role of ethical norms for specific professions in the acceptance of working-time options. Such ethical norms inform the work behavior of employees (Kratzer et al. 2015). They could influence the norms and in turn influence the acceptance of working-time options.

The present study thus answers the following research questions: Do the working-time norms that have been observed for liberal countries also apply to Germany, where working-time options for employees are based on rights granted and established by law? Do norms vary for women and men, different groups of professions and workplace hierarchy positions? What are the consequences of (the lack of) acceptance with regards to working (time) behavior of employees? The analysis is based on interviews with 95 employees and 26 experts in two industrial companies, two hospitals, and two police agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurzer Hinweis auf die gesetzliche Regelung 12 plus 2 Monate, die nicht Daddy leave sind sondern partners' months

## 2 Working time options – A concept clarification

Previous, predominantly Anglo-American studies (Moen et al. 2016; Munsch 2016; Williams et al. 2013) often examine “flexible working time”, a term that refers collectively to working-time arrangements such as flexitime and part-time (De Menzenes, Kelliher 2011). This can easily blur the distinction between different working-time options, e.g. in terms of their quality and employer’s acceptance (Leslie et al. 2012). A flexitime system that uses working-time accounts to keep track of variations in daily working times is a relatively inexpensive way for employers to support employees in balancing work and private life and to retain human capital (Weeden 2005) – without reduction or interruption of working time. In contrast to flexitime, longer career breaks and part-time work can lead to an additional burden for co-workers, especially when workloads and staffing are not adjusted accordingly. Flexible working times in the form of career breaks or reductions of working time can thus present much more of an acceptance hurdle than arrangements that simply allow a fixed number of working hours to be scheduled flexibly.

Moreover, the majority of Anglo-American research deals with workplace or informal working-time arrangements, as opposed to legal rights of employees. When employees have the legal right to reduce their working time or interrupt their employment, as is the case in Germany, for example, this can result in greater acceptance in the organization in two respects. First, legal provisions grant universal rights that apply to all employees, that (at least in principle) are legally enforceable and which thus can enjoy greater acceptance. Second, legal rights to reduced working time and interruptions of working time can support a “discourse on ethics” in the organizations, according to which granting working-time options to working parents represents a moral obligation (den Dulk et al. 2011). New legislation thus might call into question prevailing workplace norms and lead to changes in the discourse involving those norms.

For these reasons, the current study uses the term “working-time options” rather than “flexible working times”. Following the concept of “guaranteed optionality” (Hinrichs 1992), these are legally granted options or choices. The current study thus excludes organizationally determined working-time models such as flexitime and examines the legal rights of employees in Germany to interrupt their working time (parental leave) and reduce their working time (part-time work) to care for children.

## 3 The acceptance of working-time options

The use of working-time options, and the consequences for employees who do so, has been studied mainly in private sector companies in the USA, Canada and Great Britain (den Dulk, Peper 2009), where companies are free to decide for themselves how and whether to offer shorter working times and career breaks for childcare. In these countries, employees are often reluctant to take advantage of the opportunities their organization

offers for interrupting and reducing working time (Weeden 2005). One key reason for this reluctance is the lack of acceptance in the workforce and among supervisors. The use of working-time options is often not accepted when it contradicts the prevailing model of work behavior that is considered ideal (Munsch 2016; Williams et al. 2013). Workers are considered ideal when they completely and fully dedicate themselves to their work and accord work priority over activities and responsibilities outside of work (Williams et al. 2013). Ideal workers are always at the disposal of their employer. They work full-time, are flexible, present and accounted for in the organization, and work overtime whenever necessary. Shorter working times and interruptions of working time for responsibilities and activities outside of paid work are interpreted as signs of a lack of work devotion and low organizational commitment (Albiston 2007; Wharton et al. 2003). Employees who violate the norms of the ideal worker are often stigmatized and have poorer career prospects, e.g. lower chances of promotion and income growth (Cohen, Single 2001; Kossek et al. 2005; Leslie et al. 2012).

However, it must be noted that the norms of the ideal worker do not apply with the same force to all groups of employees. In countries such as the USA, although it is highly qualified employees who most often have access to working-time options (Wharton et al. 2003) and schedule control (Williams et al. 2013), they also make the least use of the options available to them (Wharton et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2013). Highly qualified employees in particular are most often expected to devote themselves fully and completely to their work. For them, the “work devotion schema” (Williams et al. 2013) applies, according to which a high level of dedication to one’s work signals high social status. Managers are thus often pessimistic with regard to the career development prospects of highly qualified employees who make use of reduced working times and career breaks (Cohen, Single 2001). By contrast, lower qualified employees in Anglo-American companies are much less likely to be able to exert control over their work schedule. Employer-oriented flexibility determines their everyday work life. Nonetheless, for them reduced working times and employment interruptions are largely unproblematic (Williams et al. 2013). Personal devotion to work is not expected of them, even when they are employed as part-time employees who nevertheless often work full-time hours. Nor do they find themselves, as do highly qualified employees, on a career path that they must be careful not to disrupt. At present, less is known about employees whose qualification levels fall in the middle range. Williams et al. (2013) suspect that acceptance for employees with mid-range qualifications is similar to that for lower qualified employees.

The norms of the ideal worker also vary according to gender (Williams et al. 2013). In US companies men are stigmatized when they reduce their working time or have longer career breaks. Women are stigmatized when they do not – as soon as they have children – reduce their working time or interrupt their employment (or do so only briefly) to care for them. Here the norms of the ideal parents are decisive (Williams et al. 2013). Fathers are perceived as ideal when they provide for their family financially. The norm of the ideal father and the norm of the ideal worker are thus not at odds. A

high level of dedication to work by fathers is not only in the interests of the company, but is also seen as useful for the family, as greater dedication to work can lead to greater income and strengthens the father in his role as the main breadwinner. Mothers, however, are perceived as ideal when their foremost concern is caring for the family. This presents a dilemma for them – if they conform to the norm of the ideal mother, they violate the norm of the ideal worker, and vice versa.

The norms of the ideal worker can also vary according to profession, since professional ethical norms influence working behavior at German workplaces (Kratzer et al. 2015). For Parsons (1937), professions are characterized by an institutionalized altruism. For professionals, the ideal worker norm might even be stronger than for employees in ‘normal jobs’, since professionals “work for the common good” (Brante 1988). Moreover, “classic” professions, e.g. that of the physician, are often related to gender stereotypes (Gupta et al. 2009). Professions with power, prestige and authority (e.g., physicians) are generally regarded as men’s work, whereas affective work such as carework (e.g., nurse) is regarded as women’s work (Gupta et al. 2009). Parsons even defines affective neutrality and a specific technical competence as key characteristics of a professional whom he considers to be male (Brante 1988). Thus, especially for employees in “male” dominated professions – such as doctors, police officers, scientists and engineers – that are associated with power, prestige and authority, the ideal worker norms might be stronger than in professions with female stereotypical attributions. The influence of professional ethical norms on the acceptance of working-time options, however, has received little attention.

## 4 The German case

Den Dulk et al. (2011) show that in European countries with legal rights to working-time options, such as those in the Netherlands and Slovenia, the norms of the ideal worker are less dominant than in liberal countries. In the two countries mentioned, the norms of the ideal worker stand in contrast to ethical discourse in which the support of working parents is seen as morally right.

In comparative research on welfare states, Germany is seen as the prime example of a conservative welfare state with weak employment participation by women and a dominant model of the male breadwinner (Esping-Andersen 2006; Sainsbury 1999). This typology is primarily characteristic of western Germany, where workforce participation by women generally was, and still is, lower than in eastern Germany (Cooke 2011). Although women’s participation in the workforce has grown steadily since the 1970s, most of the growth has been seen in part-time work. Legislation passed in 2001 (Teilzeit- und Befristungsgesetz) granted all employees who work in organizations with 15 or more employees the right to reduce their working time regardless of the reason they want or need to work shorter hours. Many employed mothers, however, use the right in order to provide childcare following the birth of a child. The introduction of parental leave with the part-



ner months in 2007 aimed to increase participation by women in the workforce, improve the ability of employees to combine work and family life, and support childcare by fathers. And indeed, the proportion of fathers who interrupt their work for childcare has risen since the introduction of parental leave (Pfahl et al. 2014). A shift in societal norms can also be observed. Traditional gender roles are gradually losing ground (Scheuer 2013) and gender images such as the “new father” as caregiver and the working mother who successfully combines work and family life have become common in public discourse. The extent to which these developments have resulted in acceptance for the use of working-time options by women and men in the German workplace is unclear, and is thus the subject of the current study.

## 5 Empirical strategy

Both public sector and private sector workplaces were included in the study. Specifically, there were two police departments (“Police Urban” and “Police Rural”), two previously public and now privatized hospitals (“Hospital North” and “Hospital South”), as well as two private-sector industrial companies (“Industry East” and “Industry West”). This allows cross-sectoral tendencies to be observed, as well as those pertaining to specific professions. An industrial company in eastern Germany was included in the sample in order to take into account differences in working behavior and gender role attitudes in eastern and western Germany (Cooke 2011; Scheuer 2013). All of the workplaces have fully continuous work processes (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) and shift work for part of the employees. The use of working-time options can be more difficult in the context of shift work and lead to lower acceptance. Also, each organization has a variety of work and functional departments and has employees of both genders. The organizations examined were large, to enable interviews of both women and men in various departments and positions within one organization. As large organizations in Germany are, as a rule, co-determined (Baumann, Brehmer 2016), all the organizations that were studied have a work council. This has likely led to a positive bias in the results, in that the acceptance of working-time options may be higher in co-determined workplaces. This is critically considered in the interpretation of the results.

In total, 121 people in six organizations were interviewed, of which 95 were employees (13 to 18 per organization) and 26 were experts from human resources administration, management, and work councils or staff committees. In organizations where there was an equal opportunity officer, this individual was also interviewed. Selection of employees for interviews was based on a theoretical sampling. For the experts of an organization, selection of interviewees was conducted using predetermined criteria (gender, ethnicity, age, household type, position in the workplace hierarchy, functional departments in the organization and experience with working-time options). This selection process was conducted in stages, i.e. employees were not brought on board as interviewees all at once, but after the first series of interview were conducted. Sampling in stages like this permitted

better control over selection based on the predetermined criteria and also made it possible to take into account initial empirical results, from interviews already conducted, for the sampling. Interviews were conducted with an equal number of women and men, as well as with employees of varying age groups, all hierarchical levels and household types (Table 1).

All interviews conducted were guided interviews. The employees were asked to report on their work situation, private life and experience with working-time options. Elements of play (i.e., cards for interviewees to lay out) concerning life course so far and the significance of different areas of a person's life were included to elicit further narrations. The guided interviews of employees were supplemented by short socio-demographic questionnaires. The experts supplied information on the organization itself (financial situation, work organization, use of working-time options, etc.). Hypothetical scenarios provided the opportunity for them to reflect on how the organization, in terms of human resources, dealt with the employees' wishes concerning working time, as well as on the implementation of working-time options. The interview material was fully transcribed, anonymized and evaluated with the aid of a computer program (Atlas TI) and various methodological tools (postscripts, brief portraits of the interviewees, as well as portraits of the organizations that were studied). In addition to the interviews in the organizations, the results of team discussions of individual cases and of the organizational portraits, conducted in order to validate interpretations, were also an important factor in the evaluation. For evaluation purposes, positions in the workplace hierarchy were grouped in categories: lower level (semi-skilled employees), mid-level (qualified employees, as a rule with degree-level technical or professional qualifications) and upper level (qualified employees with academic degrees or management tasks, and employees with post-graduate degrees and management tasks).

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics and working times of interviewees (N=95)

	Percent/ Average*
Age	42.7*
Women	52.6
Immigrant background	6.3
Eastern Germany	18.9
<b>Position in organizational hierarchy</b>	
Semi-skilled employees	8.4
Qualified employees	43.2
Qualified employees with management responsibilities	17.9
Qualified employees with a post-graduate degree	9.5
Employees with post-graduate degree and management responsibilities	21.1
<b>Household types</b>	
Couples with children	54.7
Single parents	6.3
Living-apart-together	6.3
Couples without children	28.4
Singles	4.2
<b>Working time (current)</b>	
Part-time	20.0
<i>percentage thereof that are men</i>	5.2
Shift work	36.8
<i>percentage thereof that are men</i>	45.7
<b>Experience with working-time options and care</b>	
Parental leave	50.5
<i>percentage thereof that are men</i>	33.3
Part-time during eligibility for parental leave	10.5
<i>percentage thereof that are men</i>	50.0
Experience with care	31.6
<i>percentage thereof that are men</i>	36.7

## 6 Results

### 6.1 “So when do you plan to start working normally again?”<sup>2</sup> – The ideal worker norms

The norms of the ideal worker affect the working environment in the six organizations studied. Employees should work full-time and show flexibility in adapting to the work and time requirements of the employer. “Flexible enough to say that, OK, if the work is going to take an hour longer today, then I’ll stay an hour longer to get it done” (Ms. Grunert, mid-level, Industry West). Thus, ideal workers in Germany, too, work overtime and are at the disposal of their employers’ demands. In the private-sector companies in eastern and western Germany as well as in the police stations, employees with reduced working times are seen as “time-deviants” (Williams et al. 2013). It is not unusual for part-time employees to be expected to manage a workload that corresponds to a full time job “I think my supervisors have the expectation that, even though I work part-time, I get the same tasks as full-time people [...]” (Ms. Brenner, lower level, Police Rural).

Since part-time violates the full-time norm and signals obligations or interests outside of work, it often causes hostility among co-workers. Part-time employees are accused of being disloyal to their co-workers. “Hey, nice to see you here once in a while! Or – I wouldn’t mind a set-up like that, are you leaving again already?” (Ms. Adler, mid-level, Police Rural). The hostility toward part-time is especially great when part-time employees are promoted. “It’s just not right that the man doesn’t get a promotion because there’s a woman [who did get a promotion and] who’s sitting around at home the whole time” (Mr. Dorfler, Police Urban). There is often a lack of awareness that there is usually a reason for part-time (Ms. Emmerich, mid-level, Police Rural) and that part-time employees earn less than full-time employees (Ms. Kennerjahn, upper level, Hospital South). Parental leave is generally more accepted than part-time, as parents do not permanently violate ideal worker norms – especially when they avoid longer career breaks and quickly return to full-time.

The norms of the ideal worker are of particular relevance to employees in the upper levels of the hierarchy. “I think it’s pretty clear that the company expects me to be reachable at any time during the hours that my superiors also work. [...] I just don’t happen to be in the office from 8 in the morning to 8 at night. That means making sure I’m reachable in other ways, by phone or cell phone, always within reason, of course” (Ms. Glaser-Koch, upper level, Industry West). For these employees, there is a strong tendency to identify with and to subjectify their work. Full-time and long working hours are the norm for highly qualified employees. This expectation also finds expression in the working time policies of the organizations. Overtime hours worked by police officers in management roles, by doctors at Hospi-

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Mirabell, upper level, Hospital North

tal South and by engineers and employees with managerial tasks of Industry East and West are simply not recorded. At Hospital North, a long tradition of unionization and strong co-determination account for the fact that doctors' overtime hours are logged there. Being as the norms of the ideal worker are at their most dominant for employees in the upper levels of the hierarchy, for such employees acceptance for part-time and parental leave is also the lowest. In practice, employees in management positions can make only limited use of these working-time options.

At mid-levels in the hierarchy, the norms of the ideal worker have less impact than at the upper levels. They are less likely to be expected to be reachable around the clock and work overtime. Full-time and long working hours are thus less the norm than for highly qualified employees and management personnel.

Whereas employees at mid and upper levels of the hierarchy do have schedule control to a certain extent (e.g., to leave earlier in the afternoon so as not to miss a daughter's violin recital, as in the case of Ms. Glaser-Koch, upper level, Industry West), at lower levels of the hierarchy employer-oriented flexibility is dominant. Workers at the lower level are expected to be always on call to serve their employer's interests. Overtime hours and availability to meet the needs of the organization are also the norm here. However, in contrast to employees at mid and especially upper level, they generally receive a compensation for their overtime work – at least in co-determined organizations.

When it comes to work performed mostly by women, and where the employer wants to benefit from the cost and flexibility advantages of reduced working times, the norm is part-time rather than full-time for employees at lower levels of the hierarchy. This is because part-time work gives an organization more flexibility in the use of labor resources. “ [...] when you work part-time, you also might get called more often [...]” (Ms. Kennerjahn, higher level, Hospital South). At lower levels of the hierarchy part-time work is not an option, but a “take it or leave it” offer by the employer, i.e. the jobs are only available as part-time positions for a certain, in principle fixed, number of hours.

Two tendencies can be observed, however, which affect the predominantly hierarchy-specific work expectations. First, the rigid employer-oriented flexibility in some of the organizations studied is not just limited to the lower levels of the hierarchy, but is increasingly found at mid-levels – driven by rationalization measures and cost cutting. In the hospitals, staff shortages are causing employer-oriented flexibility to spread beyond the lower levels of the hierarchy. For nursing staff in the hospitals, qualified part-time employees are used as a flexible resource. “In nursing, this system has developed to where, basically, it will only work with part-time employees, because that's the only way you can fill the gaps” (Mr. Wacker, member of the work council, Hospital North). The second tendency observed is the extension of the subjectification of work also at lower workplace levels. Semi-skilled employees at Industry East and West identify with their work and

sometimes work overtime of their own accord. “For example, when we have an out-of-the-ordinary situation in logistics, like these short weeks [due to several public holidays falling in one month], then we might well decide on our own to work a little longer, so that ... when we see that an order has to go out, that we need the space, and so on” (Mr. Iffland, lower level, Industry West).

## **6.2 “You have a baby – what are you still doing here?”<sup>3</sup> – The ideal parent norm**

The norm of the ideal parents are characteristic for the organizations that were studied. Mothers are more likely to be expected to interrupt and reduce their working time to care for children. For women, pregnancy and child rearing are a “natural” part of life. “That’s how life works. People see it as completely normal” (Ms. Ardenau, mid-level, Police Rural). Ms. Fuchs (mid-level, Police Urban), who wished to return to work quickly following the birth of her child, was not taken seriously by her superior. “Right from the start, I said that I would be coming back to work part-time after my child was born. My boss grinned and asked me if I was serious. He said maybe I should wait until the baby was born and see how I felt then. [laughs] But I came back to work, just as I planned to do” (Ms. Fuchs, mid-level, Police Urban). The norm of the ideal mother means that part-time and (longer periods of) parental leave are more accepted for women than for men. Indeed, a mother’s choice to return to full-time work following childbirth causes bewilderment. Dr. Vogelberg (upper level, Hospital North) finds herself dealing with the expectation that, as a mother, she will work shorter hours. “Just recently I was talking to my boss and it came up again, how surprised he is, how strange he finds it to see me working so much. And often, and I know he means well, he’ll come up to me and say: You have a baby – what are you still doing here?” (Dr. Vogelberg, upper level, Hospital North). After returning to her workplace, Dr. Vogelberg felt that she had to work extra hard for her superiors to take her seriously despite her motherhood.

The ideal mother norm did not formerly apply to mothers in higher workplace positions. Ten years ago, Ms. Glaser-Koch, an employee with academic credentials and management responsibilities at Industry West, was expected to return to full-time work directly after taking the 14 weeks of mandatory maternity leave required by law. More recently, in the case of Ms. Hohensee, also a highly qualified employee at Industry West, the norms of the ideal worker had become less stringent for highly qualified women with young children. This was due in part to the company’s efforts to implement policies in human resources that would attract highly qualified employees, especially engineers, to work in a rural region. These policies include provisions for part-time work with nearly full-time hours, with the aim of retaining highly qualified women in particular. At the time of the interviews, there were already several cases of mothers in the upper hierar-

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Vogelberg, upper level, Hospital North

chy of Industry West working part-time with nearly full-time hours. Because the norm of the ideal mother is now present in the upper hierarchy, a corresponding weakening of the norms of the ideal worker has only slightly occurred. Ms. Hohensee, for example, must still deliver 100% performance in fewer hours of working time. As the examples of Dr. Vogelberg and Dr. Mirabell show, it is largely up to the women themselves to balance the conflicting demands of the ideal mother, who is there for her children, and the ideal worker, who delivers full performance. Mothers are expected to take enough time for their child (Dr. Vogelberg, upper level, Hospital South), but then return to work “properly”, i.e. full time (Dr. Mirabell, upper level, Hospital North). It appears that we are in a transitional period, in which acceptance for the use of part-time options, also by highly-qualified employees, is gradually becoming more common, while at the same time there are cases of inflexibility, where there is a lack of acceptance and the use of the options is discouraged.

For fathers, the birth of a child is much less of an issue at work. The perception of employees is that “it’s usually women who do that, when they’ve had a baby” (Ms. Ardenau, mid-level, Police Rural). Men are expected to work full-time and not to interrupt employment for longer periods to care for children. Nonetheless, for fathers the norm of the ideal parent has also undergone change in recent years. In job interviews, young men ask about “workplace policies that support families” (Ms. Silber, human resources manager, Industry East). Since the introduction of parental leave with the two months’ partner leave, it has become relatively common for fathers to take two months of parental leave in the organizations that were studied. This normalization has occurred with surprising speed over the past years, and stands in stark contrast to the experiences of the first men to take parental leave, who reported meeting with significant resistance from co-workers, especially in male-dominated work areas such as production at Industry East and Industry West. Despite the general normalization, the uptake of parental leave is still very problematic for managers and physicians.

Even so, ideal fathers are expected to restrict themselves to a period of parental leave not significantly longer than two months, and to take into account their employers’ needs and interests. Thus the “new” ideal father signals interest and dedication to his family by means of using a short parental leave, while not losing sight of his employer’s interests. Such expectations of one’s superiors are particularly evident when fathers violate this norm. “Yes, I said I was going to take those two months, and I would have liked to have taken even more time off, if they hadn’t made such a big stink about it. And then there was a bit of conflict, with them asking me if I really needed to do it. And whether I couldn’t do it at a different time. [...] maybe in October and November, when nobody wants to go on vacation” (Mr. Seidel, mid-level, Industry East). The ideal father also knows not to lose sight of his career development. “And then came my wife’s pregnancy, and I said I thought I’d rather postpone it [pursuit of a university degree] for a while. My superior told me that the right time wouldn’t come around again, and that I should either do it now or forget about it” (Mr. Dachs, upper level,

Police Urban). Still, employees can “get lucky” and receive support from their superiors, as in the case of Mr. Franzler, who has a higher-level position in law enforcement. “I have the good fortune to work for [Police Urban], where my superiors are just great and are really open-minded about it. [...] it was just a question of from when to when are you going to be here and from when to when are you not going to be here? And when are you going to start working part-time for your parental leave, and when are you going to return to full-time? And how are you going to make sure that this all works? And after we had discussed and organized everything, it was no problem” (Mr. Franzler, upper level, Police Urban).

### 6.3 The role of professional ethical norms

The norms of the ideal worker vary in strength for different professions. For law enforcement officers on the police force, professional ethical norms intensify the norms of the ideal worker. “Being a police officer part-time doesn’t cut it. You’re a police officer full-time, at least from the standpoint of our professional ethos” (Mr. Christ, upper level, Police Rural). Society’s image is that of the male police officer, who is always on duty and has taken an oath to serve his community. The norms of the ideal worker are thus also very strong for law enforcement officers in mid-level positions. “Well, I do have the expectation with regard to each of my fellow officers – that if I call at three in the morning and say we have an emergency situation, that they will all show up. I expect that from them. Because that’s our job” (Mr. Franzler, upper level, Police Urban). The professional ethos of police officers also includes team loyalty. “When you work for the police, your unit represents something very much like a family” (Mr. Adomeit, upper level, Police Rural). On the police force, there is also strong awareness of legal rights, or a “sense of entitlement” (Alemann, Oechsle 2015). “[...] the law is the law” (Mr. Christ, Police Rural). Exercising one’s legal rights is thus a matter of course. “To be honest, I don’t judge whether it’s good or bad. The law lays out these possibilities, and I would advise everyone to they make use of the rights they have by law” (Mr. Dachs, upper level, Police Urban). On the contrary to this ethical norm this awareness of the law creates a workplace environment where working-time options such as family-related part-time work and parental leave are granted as a matter of course. The strong professional ethos with regard to team loyalty, on the other hand, means that at the same time there is a great deal of resentment. Part-time employees in police work are often seen as “useless” (Ms. Felder, mid-level, Police Urban) and “bad” (Mr. Bender, upper level, Police Rural). Part-time employees are explicitly stigmatized for deviating from working-time norms. This is evident, for example, in the term “sunshine officer”. “When we leave at two-thirty or three o’clock in the afternoon, they say, Oh look, the sunshine officers. But they don’t mean anything by it. Everybody’s really great about it” (Ms. Brenner, mid-level, Police Rural). There are times when the tone is clearly more hostile towards part-time police employees. Some male law enforcement officers complain about “part-time bitches” (Teilzeitschlampen) (Ms. Adler, mid-level, Police Rural). This disrespectful



German expression (*Schlampe* connotes both loose morals and slovenliness, and is used primarily to refer to women) makes the violation of the full-time norm a breach of morals and thus labels part-time work as inferior in two respects: female and immoral. Part-time workers are denigrated to a lower status. “And then when I worked half days, too, people acted like I wasn’t really pulling my weight anymore” (Ms. Carius, mid-level, Police Rural). For example, part-time workers are often assigned clerical tasks usually reserved for “losers” (Mr. Carstens, upper level, Police Rural) and thus have few opportunities for advancement. There are also strong reactions to the use of parental leave. “I have colleagues who wrinkle their noses and roll their eyes. Yes. And they gripe and complain about it” (Ms. Adler, mid-level, Police Rural). It should be noted that in the context of police work, resentment toward part-time and parental leave is closely related to severe staffing shortages in the police force. Reduced working times and interruptions of employment mean more work for one’s co-workers in chronically under-staffed workplaces like police departments, but also in hospitals, where staff shortages have also been considerable in recent years.

The situation for doctors is similar to that of the police, in that society’s image is that of the male doctor, who is always there for his patients. “Well, we’re doctors, so of course, we’re always expected to be completely dedicated, and that for our patients ... I mean, it’s just, like you said, when you work with people you can’t always just leave” (Dr. Mirabell, upper level, Hospital South). Moreover, junior doctors are expected to be ambitious and career-focused, and to work hard in their free time. “My old boss here, he used to say: A doctor with a 40-hour workweek? No way. And basically, that’s true” (Prof. Voss, upper level, Hospital North). In contrast to the police force, among doctors the legal rights of employees are seldom or never referred to or discussed. Moreover, a chief physician or a director of a clinic has a position of great influence. Compared to all other workplace positions, it is thus doctors for whom part-time work and even brief parental leave taken by fathers are the most severely sanctioned or even prevented. Dr. Vogelberg (upper level, Hospital North) reports that her husband’s boss refused to accept more than one month of parental leave. “We had actually planned to split it almost 50-50. But it happened to be just when he was about to be promoted to senior physician. And his boss was very clear about it: No way. One month at the most. So he took all of his vacation days for that year and stayed at home for two-and-a-half months” (Dr. Vogelberg, upper level, Hospital North). Whereas parental leave for fathers in the other workplaces has become commonplace, doctors still have to put up with condescending remarks from their colleagues. Some chief physicians see parental leave as a personal affront. When Dr. Mehringer (upper level, Hospital South) became pregnant, her superior reacted “angrily” and did not speak to her for several months. The use of parental leave can have a chilling effect on the working relationship with one’s superiors. Ever since her husband took two months of parental leave, the working relationship between Dr. Mirabell (upper level, Hospital South) and her husband’s boss has been unpleasant. The latter has refused to greet her since then. Dr. Kroog (upper level, Hospital South) reports that a colleague’s superior started to ignore him after he applied for parental leave. Moreover, some

female junior doctors were given to understand that pregnancy or parental leave would be the end of their careers (Dr. Mirabell, upper level, Hospital South).

Acceptance for the use of part-time work and parental leave thus depends on the “good will” of one’s superior and is a matter of luck for the employees. At Hospital North, though, there are agents of change who are helping to improve the acceptance culture. Chief physician Prof. Weber takes an active approach to reduced working hours and interruptions of employment and includes expected absences in his personnel planning. Chief physician Prof. Villa supports female doctors with children and makes one employee’s pregnancy to the whole clinic’s pregnancy. “When somebody’s pregnant, we like to say: We’re pregnant!” (Prof. Dr. Villa, upper level, Hospital North). It must be noted, though, that both of these chief physicians manage clinics that are connected to wards in the hospital that are associated with women’s health and/or where the doctors are primarily women. With such a staff structure, there is a greater need to deal with issues concerning the reconciliation of work and family.

In the industrial companies in western and eastern Germany, resentment toward part-time work and parental leave is lower than for police or doctors. Team loyalty there is also much weaker for highly qualified employees than it is on the police force. Personal development and self-realization take the place of the responsibility felt by doctors and police for highly qualified employees in industrial companies. Here, society’s image of the traditionally male scientist and engineer, whose passion for research and product development causes him to throw himself head over heels into his work, plays a central role. In the industrial companies, employees in the upper levels of the hierarchy are expected to be high performers, to put their careers above all else, and to be driven to professional, i.e. personal, advancement. “Well, the ideal, the totally ideal employee, is of course the one who also takes personal responsibility for his own development. That’s something that we do expect, [...], but then he also needs to do things to start maintaining or cultivating his network and not just wait to have things handed to him on a silver platter” (Ms. Hermann, human resources manager, Industry West). Mr. Tuck, a manager at Industry East, who is always and willingly at his company’s disposal, has a similar view: “... so that I continue to have opportunities to pursue the things that interest me, to achieve my personal goals and not get boxed in. [...] The company is always giving us lots of opportunities. But you do have to keep your eyes open, you have to show some interest and you can’t just sit around resting on your laurels” (Mr. Tuck, upper level, Industry East). The highly qualified employees of the industrial companies are strongly identified with their work, to which they devote a great deal of time and energy. “When I see something that I don’t understand, then I work hard to learn about it” (Mr. Tuck, upper level, Industry East). The specialization in one area of work leads to an exclusivity mindset and the over-emphasis of one’s own work. “It’s not easy to find engineers like that” (Dr. Issel, upper level, Industry West). However, this exclusivity mindset stands in contrast to the human resources policies of

the organizations, which will seek to find a replacement, also for such a position, in the case of a longer absence.

In contrast to the other professions, society's image of nurses is traditionally female. "To me, nursing is still a women's profession" (Ms. Vollmer, mid-level, Hospital North). As a traditionally female profession, part-time work and longer parental leaves are normal in nursing. "Hospitals are the queen of part-time employers. I think we have more part-time than full-time employees" (Mr. Weiler, director of nursing, Hospital North). Moreover, employers are generous in approving part-time employment, as the increased flexibility it brings helps them compensate for the shortage of staff in nursing. Thus, in contrast to the police departments, where the combination of staff shortages and strong ideal worker norms leads to a strong stigmatization of part-time employees, part-time is broadly accepted in nursing. This does not, however, apply to management positions, which also in nursing are full-time positions. Also here, at the mid-level in the hierarchy, part-time work turns out to be a barrier to promotion to head nurse of a ward (Ms. Kennerjahn, upper level, Hospital South). Society's image of the nurse is that of a woman who makes sacrifices to help others. In the hospital, nurses help patients, but also their co-workers. "If there's a situation where the workload is increasing, nurses are very quickly willing and able to reorganize things so that even with fewer people, things basically work like they're supposed to [...]" (Mr. Wacker, member of the work council, Hospital North). Even managers (head nurses) will take on menial tasks, to make up for staff shortfalls in their ward.

The professional ethos dominant in nursing is beneficial in terms of staff shortages and employer-oriented flexibility. "And if three people on the ward are sick, then the other three will just buckle down and work for six weeks straight, doing without days off and whatever else, because they say the ward has to function somehow" (Mr. Wacker, member of the work council, Hospital North). Similar behavior is observed among doctors and police. The professional ethos of doctors means that the work gets done, despite the shortages of staff (also with regard to doctors) that are found in the Hospitals North and South. "A hospital without overtime wouldn't work" (Dr. Mirabell, upper level, Hospital South). This phenomenon can also be observed for the police. The drastic staff shortages in the police force are made up for by police officers who have a sense of obligation toward their fellow officers and a sense of duty to society.

#### **6.4 Consequences for employees' work (time) behavior**

In the observed organizations two strategies are dominant when employees face limitations or a lack of acceptance: compensating for the norm violation and refraining from the use of working-time options. Women, because of their care responsibilities, often cannot refrain from the use of longer parental leave or part-time work, and often choose the compensation strategy. This is particularly evident with the police, where resentment toward part-time employees is especially strong. Ms. Fuchs shows high work dedi-

cation in order to be accepted by her co-workers. “And even as a part-time employee, I’m in demand” (Ms. Fuchs, Police Urban). Part-time employees sometimes work more “than somebody who’s full-time” (Mr. Eller, mid-level, Police Urban). The flexibility of part-time employees is a “sign” (Ms. Cullmann, mid-level, Police Rural) that they are “dedicated employees” (Mr. Eller, Police Urban) despite working part-time. Employees “earn” acceptance for their part-time work. They often make it possible for their co-workers to have flexible working times. “Because I can often squeeze in an extra shift here and there” (Ms. Emmerich, mid-level, Police Urban). In addition to enabling flexible scheduling possibilities, part-time employees on the police force often take over undemanding and unpopular work from full-time employees. This relieves some of the pressure on their full-time colleagues. “That I was able to take some of their workload and to work at times that are generally inconvenient. So nobody had to drive to the office in the middle of the night. I was able to take care of it relatively easily from home” (Ms. Fuchs, mid-level, Police Urban). Part-time employees thus permit a more flexible organization of work. The advantages that part-time employees bring to their teams are sometimes recognized. “I see it as an asset, because you can often ask a part-time employee to help you out when you’re in a pinch. Hey, I’d really like to have off at such-and-such a time so that I can go to this wedding I’ve been invited to. And they can do that outside of their regularly scheduled hours” (Ms. Adelt, mid-level, Police Rural). However, the negative outcomes for part-time employees such as overtime hours and work intensification (results of the compensation strategy) very often go unacknowledged. Furthermore, the devaluation of part-time work, with its female connotation, remains undiminished.

Men taking parental leave are also observed using compensation strategies. Dr. Issel (upper level, Industry West) made up for his two months of parental leave by working ahead to prepare. Among doctors, fathers on parental leave are sometimes reachable. “We also have a chief physician, who actually took two months of leave each for his two children, although he did a lot of extra work from home ... basically he wasn’t even really away. Just officially on leave” (Dr. Vogelberg, upper level, Hospital South).

However, since fathers are less expected to give high priority to carework, men often refrain from using working-time options. This is especially true with the police, as a result of strong team loyalty and staff shortages. “How can I let them down? Then there’s nobody there to do my work. I can’t think of a specific example. But I know there have been some who have done it. I mean I also thought about it, should I take parental leave or just take time off or however it is you arrange it” (Mr. Dorfler, mid-level, Police Urban). Fathers also refrain from longer employment interruptions so as not to jeopardize their career development. Mr. Dachs (upper level, Police Urban) decided to forgo his parental leave in the interests of his career plans and on the advice of his superior. Against his superior’s wishes, Mr. Seidel (mid-level, Industry East) was able to organize two months of parental leave directly following the birth of his child, but he refrained from taking a longer leave. In a hospital, where resistance and sanctions are to be expected, doctors often forgo (longer) employment interruptions. Fathers are

wary of using parental leave. Mothers, too, forgo the use of working-time options. After one-and-a-half years of working part-time, which she would like to continue, Dr. Mirabell (upper level, Hospital South) gives in to pressure from her superior and returns to full-time. Dr. Kuhn (upper level, Hospital South) adjusts the gender roles in her household (she is the main breadwinner, her husband works 20 hours a week) and no longer pursues her desire to have more time for her daughter.

At Industry West, the risk of losing one's position, which in many cases one has worked hard to attain, leads employees to forgo parental leave. This applies to both women and men. "[...] if somebody takes a year off now, their position will not be waiting for them when they come back. I mean, let's be honest about it, that's the way it is. And that's the way it was nine years ago, too. The job that I have, for example, we're just not able to ... there aren't five jobs like this here, this is the only one. And that means that if I had taken time off, I would have had to take another job when I came back, that's the way I see it. That was the reason" (Ms. Glaser-Koch, upper level, Industry West). Dr. Issel (upper level, Industry West) also took only two months of parental leave – for "fear" of losing his position and out of a desire to avoid breaching his employer's "trust" in him. "And my situation was that I had just recently been given this position and this trust, and then not long after that I wanted to [...] Then we made this compromise, one month of vacation and then the two months of parental leave" (Dr. Issel, upper level, Industry West).

## **7 Conclusion and discussion**

As a consequence of workplace norms – the norms of the ideal worker and the norm of the ideal parent – co-workers, colleagues and superiors often do not accept the use of available options for reduced working time and employment. This is known to be the case primarily for company-designed working-time options in the USA, Canada and Great Britain. The current study has shown that, also in Germany, where employees have legal rights to these options, workplace norms result in stigmatization of employment interruptions and reduced working times. The lack of acceptance can lead employees to either forgo the options available to them or compensate for violating the norms. However, the study has also shown that workplace norms are reinforced by professional ethos and the norms it entails, according to which working full-time (plus overtime) is seen as necessary for employees who wish to act with dedication and responsibility. Additionally, the interplay between workplace norms and acceptance for the use of working-time options depends on an employee's position in the organizational hierarchy and gender.

It should be noted, though, that workplace norms, in particular those of the ideal parents, are shifting gradually. This is making it easier to use working-time options, especially for highly-qualified employees and men, for whom reduced working times and employment interruptions were previously not possible. For men, the introduction of parental leave with partner months

has contributed significantly to a normalization of employment interruption for the purpose of childcare. However, parental leave taken by fathers is understood within the organization as “symbolic” dedication to the family without lowering work performance. For highly qualified women, too, the norm of the ideal parent exerts great force, which slightly changes the norms of the ideal worker for highly qualified women with young children. However, while the norm of the ideal parent is shifting, there has thus far been no accompanying substantial shift in the norms of the ideal worker. Employees must cope with the contradictory demands of these different norms themselves, which not infrequently leads to physical and mental health problems (Allen et al. 2000). The contradiction between these conflicting demands is much more intense for women. Since fathers are only expected to take symbolic parental leave, they experience much less strain from conflicting demands than do women, who are supposed to be ideal mothers and ideal workers as well – two demands that are mutually exclusive.

Therefore, the shift in norms has stalled at the halfway mark, for the norms of the ideal worker are (as yet) unchanged (they are only weakened in some places). There is still a need for new definitions of what is normal in the workplace to replace the norms of the ideal worker, and workplace policies and procedures must be adapted so that they support employees in the use of working-time options. The current study has shown how powerfully human resources policies, staffing, and the behavior of superiors affect the use and acceptance of part-time work and parental leave. In spite of this, human resources practices and managers that facilitate the use of working-time options – by reorganizing tasks, arranging cover or stand-ins for employees in innovative ways, and delegating tasks and responsibilities – often did not exist on the organizations that were observed.

The limitations of the study should also be mentioned here. As acceptance for the use of working-time options was studied in six German organizations, no general conclusions that would be valid for all organizations in Germany can be made. Moreover, acceptance was analyzed only in co-determined organizations, i.e. larger organizations. Acceptance for part-time work and parental leave may be different in small and medium-sized organizations with fewer staff members. In addition, co-determination strengthens employees’ rights in an organization and can therefore lead to greater acceptance. For these reasons, future research must focus on the use and acceptance of working-time options in different types of companies. Nevertheless, the study clearly highlights how powerful the influence of workplace norms and professional ethos is on the acceptance of part-time work and parental leave, as well as its consequences for the working behavior of employees. While workplace norms in Germany may be shifting – attributable in no small part to the introduction of parental leave –, the organizations that were studied are still a long way from exemplifying an unqualified acceptance culture.

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