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Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research 2012 18: 45

DOI: 10.1177/1024258911431050

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Transfer
18(1) 45–54
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DOI: 10.1177/1024258911431050
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Summary

This article discusses the practical basis of judgements about social justice, focusing on the quality of work-life balance in contemporary labour markets. After describing the main European and Italian work-life reconciliation policies, the article presents the results of qualitative research on young adult 'flexible' couples in Italy. Taking Amartya Sen's 'capability approach' as the starting point, it analyses the ways in which external flexibility affects capabilities concerning the freedom to choose the balance between family, job and overall working life. The article concludes with some reflections on social justice in a resources-capabilities perspective, evaluating the effect of Italian work-life balance policies on the lives of flexible employees and providing some proposals for the effective enhancement of individual capabilities in this regard.

Résumé

L'article examine les fondements pratiques des jugements portés sur la justice sociale, en se focalisant sur la qualité de l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée sur les marchés du travail contemporains. Après avoir décrit les principales politiques menées en Europe et en Italie pour concilier travail et vie privée, l'article présente les résultats d'une recherche qualitative concernant des couples de jeunes adultes « flexibles » en Italie. En prenant comme point de départ l'approche par les capacités proposée par Amartya Sen, il analyse la manière dont la flexibilité externe affecte ces capacités pour ce qui concerne la liberté de choisir un équilibre entre famille, travail et parcours professionnel. L'article conclut par certaines réflexions sur la justice sociale dans une perspective axée sur les ressources et les capacités, en évaluant l'impact des politiques italiennes d'équilibre travail-vie privée sur la vie des travailleurs flexibles, et en présentant des propositions d'amélioration effective des capacités individuelles à cet égard.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der praktischen Grundlage zur Beurteilung sozialer Gerechtigkeit und insbesondere mit der Qualität des Verhältnisses zwischen Berufs- und Privatleben auf den Arbeitsmärkten von heute. Nach einer Beschreibung der wichtigsten europäischen und

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italienischen Maßnahmen zur Förderung der Vereinbarkeit von Arbeits- und Privatleben werden die Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Forschungsarbeit über junge "flexible" Erwachsenenpaare in Italien vorgestellt. Ausgehend vom Ansatz der Verwirklichungschancen im Sinne von Amartya Sen wird untersucht, wie sich externe Flexibilität auf die Verwirklichungsmöglichkeiten in Bezug auf Wahlfreiheit bei der Vereinbarung von Familienleben, Beruf und dem Arbeitsleben insgesamt auswirkt. Der Beitrag schließt mit Überlegungen zur sozialen Gerechtigkeit aus der Perspektive der Verknüpfung von Ressourcen und Verwirklichungschancen. Die Auswirkungen italienischer Maßnahmen für eine bessere Vereinbarkeit von Berufs- und Privatleben auf flexible Arbeitnehmer werden bewertet, und es werden Möglichkeiten vorgeschlagen, um die individuellen Verwirklichungschancen in diesem Bereich zu stärken.

Keywords

Work-life balance, capability approach, flexibility, child care

Introduction

Work and family life have always been interdependent, but the passage from Fordist capitalism to late modern capitalism has rendered this interdependence both more visible and more problematic (Rossi, 2006; Crompton, 2006). In particular, the issue of 'reconciliation' (OECD, 2005) is the result of many factors characterizing postmodern society. First, the increased participation of women in the labour market and, therefore, the lower availability of women for caring tasks. This is reflected in the increase in the number of households in which both partners are working and must therefore combine employment and looking after one or several children, leading at the same time to the erosion of the traditional male breadwinner model in favour of the dual-earner model, which has changed the gender division of labour (Crompton, 2006). This, in turn, explains the shift toward 'modernized' care arrangements (Pfau-Effinger, 2005) and the various solutions based on state, market or partner cooperation.

Furthermore, the transformation to a flexible market economy has brought about a shift from a 'standard' employment scenario to a 'non-standard' one. The first generally refers to a situation in which an employee has one employer, works in a permanent, full-time position, enjoys extensive statutory benefits and entitlements and expects to be employed until retirement (Poli, 2008). Any work arrangement differing from this definition is referred to as 'non-standard'. Flexibility, irregularity, unpredictability and insecurity in labour markets (Bauman, 2005) have blurred the boundaries between different spheres of everyday life, including between family life and work. Within families these tensions are built into the mosaic of lived lives, often experienced as a work-family imbalance, meaning that there are not enough hours in the day to carry out what is expected at work and, at the same time, to meet demands for caring in the family (Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). Besides, the recent economic crisis has affected all EU national labour markets, generally leading to rising unemployment and part-time work in all sectors and for all workers, but particularly for young people and women.

Increased labour market flexibility, the growing employment of women, rising hours of work for all family members and trends toward longer working time or inadequate family income have highlighted the difficult balance between work and family life (Bailyn et al., 2001). Consequently, more attention is being paid to reconciliation measures and work-life balance issues. Reconciliation measures include all strategies aimed at sustaining the combination of paid work and caretaking responsibilities and reconciling conflicting demands on time (Scisci and Vinci, 2002: 123).

Work-life balance, understood empirically as the trade-off between time and money in respect of commitments to employment or care (Crompton, 2006), concerns people's degree of control over when, where and how they work. Such a balance is achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as a norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society (Employers for Work-Life Balance, 2005). In view of the complexity of contemporary life, it is important to examine the effectiveness of work-family life reconciliation tools and to investigate new individual strategies and opportunities.

Work-family life reconciliation policies: European and Italian context

Nowadays, in most EU countries the achievement of a work-life balance is a key objective in order to produce optimal results for states and families in respect of economic efficiency, gender equality and child welfare (European Commission, 2002). The tendency is toward an integrated consideration of social protection and employment policies, so that attention is shifting from labour market issues to the balance between working and private life, as well from assistance to women as the target social group for support policies to more complex targets, including male workers. In this framework we find the 'Roadmap for equality between men and women', issued by the European Commission in 2006 in order to boost the implementation of family-friendly policies, conceived as an important component of economic and societal progress, promoting increased employment rates, secure sources of income which further increase household spending, child well-being, individual independence and gender equality (OECD, 2002). Currently, there are four major categories of work-life balance and family-friendly initiatives in the European context (Gray and Tudball, 2003): (i) flexible work arrangements, (ii) paid and unpaid leave arrangements, (iii) dependent care services and (iv) access to resources or services, such as employee assistance programmes.

The Italian welfare state model is characterized by the subsidiary role of the state and a 'family-oriented' conception of work-life reconciliation policy (Esping-Andersen, 1990), based on solidarity involving the 'extended family' (with several generations living in close proximity) in care and economic support. The effectiveness of such policies, while viable in a stable labour market and sustainable when gender relations are asymmetric and families almost invariably adhere to the principle of solidarity, must be re-evaluated in the face of continuously changing social conditions. Indeed, recent government actions seem to have taken into consideration cultural and social changes in the form of labour market precarity, changing models of the family and gender equality. More specifically, Law 53/2000 provides for new options for both men and women with regard to taking leave from work to take care of children and to assist the elderly, as well as training opportunities for updating professional skills after periods of parenthood. More recently, Law 30/2003 provides for paid maternity leave also for precarious workers, as well as sickness benefit – to be paid by the National Social Security Institute (INPS) – and training opportunities. As a result, Italy now has three main instruments of work-life reconciliation:

- (i) Parental leave, of which there are three main types (Cordón, 2009). Maternity leave (*Congedo di maternità*) is available to mothers only before, during and immediately after childbirth. It is compulsory, its length is 20 weeks and the payment is 80 percent of earnings, with no ceiling. Paternity leave (*Congedo di paternità*) is for fathers only, permitting employed fathers to take three months' leave following childbirth, although only in specific circumstances (if the father is sole carer). Finally, parental leave (*Congedo parentale*) entitles either parent to take up to six months' leave to take care of children up to three years of age, following maternity leave. If the

father stays away from work for at least three months, he is entitled to a ‘daddy quota’ of one more month. The parental leave is extended by an additional six months for each parent, with income-tested benefit in the amount of 30 percent of earnings.

- (ii) Child-care services, more specifically pre-school services (children under six years of age). In Italy, child-care centres (*asilo nido*) are publicly funded and care for children between three months and three years of age, charging income-related fees (Columbia University, 2011) but they are capped at a maximum of 18 percent of the cost. Infant schools (*scuole dell’infanzia*) are for children from three to six years of age. Attendance is free in state and municipal services (except for meals and extra services). The cost of private child-care services is approximately €800 per month for full-time attendance and €600 per month for part-time attendance.
- (iii) Child and family allowances are cash payments to families with children. Such benefits are available to relatively few families: for example, in the early 1990s, family allowances for upper income earners were abolished.

To observe the effectiveness of Italian work-life balance policies we shall examine the results of qualitative research focusing on inequality with regard to access to resources and opportunities, which determines a person’s degree of freedom of choice.

Empirical research: objectives and methodology

The research analysed job transitions in parallel with starting a family in order to examine whether, and how, labour market flexibility and instability influence young adults’ choices with regard to private and family life. More precisely, the research investigated how external flexibility influences workers’ capabilities in terms of quality of family life (freedom to undertake projects, such as getting married, buying a house or having children) and work-life balance (the strategies adopted by parents to combine family and working life). Research questions included how, and to what extent, individual resources, individual motivations and institutional and other conditions affect professional paths and family choices and lifestyles. Do flexible workers who become parents have access to effective work-life balance policies or are they compelled to rely on informal and family networks to care for children?

These issues have been analysed from the perspective of Sen’s framework of capabilities and agency (Sen, 1984, 1985; Nussbaum, 2000), according to which a woman’s strategies for reconciling family life and employment are highly interactive with her partner’s attitudes to fatherhood and his economic situation and cultural assumptions (Duncan, 2005), as well as the broader policy and discursive context supporting partners’ ability to engage in care and achieve a work-life balance (Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). Consequently, the focus is on the conversion factors that make it possible to translate formal rights and freedoms into real rights and freedoms, underlining the importance of social responsibility in the creation of opportunities, as well as whether the latter represent substantially enhanced choices. In terms of the capability approach, work-life balance is a quality of life issue, based on ‘substantive freedoms – the capabilities – to choose the life one has reason to value’ (Sen, 1999: 74). Policies are aimed at promoting equality of such capabilities, reflecting individual freedom to lead one type of life instead of another. Based on these assumptions, the research explores how these capabilities develop or decline depending on daily circumstances with regard to (family) life and work, analysing other measures of well-being beyond material ones, such as earnings.

The research involved 20 young adult (aged between 25 and 45) ‘flexible’ couples in Italy (40 subjects): that is, couples of which one partner or both are in temporary employment (or one

of the partners is temporarily unemployed), married or cohabiting, with or without children. In order to analyse various individual, situational, biographical and contextual factors, we focused on reconstructing personal trajectories combining working and family lives, interviewing the two partners separately (on a semi-structured basis) in order to avoid possible mutual influence. Although lacking in statistical representativeness, 'snowball sampling' (selecting some starting interviewees corresponding to an ideal profile – that is, with the typical characteristics of a 'flexible' couple – and later asking them to identify similar respondents – see Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004) can be useful based on the criterion of 'typological representativeness' (Gobo, 2004). Thus, the number of interviews was not planned at the beginning of the research, but was decided *in itinere*, according to the 'theoretical saturation principle', in order to maximize the heterogeneity of the profiles. To this end, the interviews were continued until the amount of new information being provided diminished discernibly (Bertaux, 1998).

'Flexible couples': working and family trajectories

In accordance with the aforementioned methodology, the qualitative sample comprises mainly persons aged 28 to 35, well educated (with no gender differences) and employed primarily in services. In 11 couples only one partner has a 'standard' job; in three couples the man is unemployed; and in the others both partners have a flexible contract. Six couples have children (four of them two babies) and in two cases the woman is pregnant.

Turning to the question of how flexibility influences the work and family trajectories of these couples, a progressive diffusion of fragmentation processes as regards working biography emerged, for both men and women. Most young adults experience long periods on temporary contracts, generally remaining in the same sector but changing employers several times. Second, employment instability makes emancipation from parents difficult, so that it is very common for young people who have uncertain and underpaid atypical jobs to remain in the parental home for a long time, postponing entry to 'real' adult life. This state of affairs is further promoted by the prolongation of education and training, combined with difficulties with regard to labour market access and achieving stable employment. No wonder the parental home is regarded as a kind of 'safe haven', a protective cushion against difficulties and risks. Remaining with one's parents is one of the main strategies for achieving higher education/training and financial objectives. Thus, the parental home, besides traditional care and economic support, functions as a special kind of economic agent (Zucchetti, 2002), supporting young adults in making work choices, providing security in periods of unemployment and sustaining the investments of its members. Consequently, we can observe a progressive increase in the age at which people get married or cohabit, corroborating the continuous postponement of family formation. Finally, many of the couples interviewed lived in a house with other young people for a long period before commencing cohabitation as a couple because at that time they could not afford to pay the rent, even by combining their wages. This confirms the increase in the alternative trajectories followed before forming a family (Rossi, 2006) but, in the case of our sample, it is also connected to the impossibility of acting otherwise, given precarious employment.

Children or no children? The choice of becoming parents in light of the relevant risks and opportunities

Labour market flexibility undoubtedly influences decisions about whether to have children, strongly affecting people's freedom of choice. The main obstacle to parenthood is financial difficulties due to low wages and employment discontinuity, which tends to leave people in a

situation in which they only '*just make it to the end of the month*'. This adds to the difficulty of buying a house because, generally, large Italian cities have high housing costs and precarious workers have meagre access to bank loans. Help for 'flexible couples' inevitably comes from the parental families.

Flexible workers frequently face uncertainty with regard to the renewal of their contracts, leading to a sort of 'fatalism' concerning the possibility of obtaining a 'standard' job. This underlines the extent to which, both for men and women, flexibility is a condition imposed by the market rather than a personal choice: if young people do not want to remain unemployed they often have no other choice than accepting a non-standard position. Moreover, for women, flexible contracts represent an impediment to the project of having children because they fear losing their job if they become pregnant, something they will have witnessed happening to colleagues (employed in private firms on flexible contracts). On the other hand, in couples in which the woman is the breadwinner, when the man is unemployed or on a flexible contract, he tends to have '*strong feelings of inadequacy*'. Often, also, the woman has a strong desire to have a child, but the man postpones the project until he attains some sort of work stability.

Generally, 'flexible couples' with children are the oldest (the woman is between 34 and 45 and the man between 36 and 44); one of the partners usually has a 'standard' job or both partners are self-employed. Regarding the choice of having children, one sentence that is representative of many stories is: '*I cannot wait for a standard contract to have a child*'. A good and reasonable time, in terms of working stability and adequate economic resources, scarcely seems to exist anymore. In couples in which one partner does have a 'standard' job, their contract represents a 'warranty', 'a safety net': if the flexible partner loses their job, the other still has a secure wage.

For everyone the lack of care services is a major problem hindering a good work-life balance. Italian public child-care services are too meagre in relation to the number of children who need them, so not all families with two working parents have access. The alternative is private day nurseries but they are very expensive: it is very difficult (if not impossible) for those whose income is approximately €1 000 per month. Moreover, the times at which care services are available are still tailored to the bygone era dominated by 'normal' employment and have not adapted to increasing flexibility and working time variability. The difficulties arising from the lack of child-care services underline the importance of the availability of support from family networks: most of these couples confirmed that they can rely on their parental families for economic and practical support. Our analyses show, in particular, that grandparents are key sources of day care for children: often they go to take young children to nurseries and pick them up or young children stay with their grandparents during the day, while their parents are working. This is reflected in the tendency to buy a house as near as possible to one's parents in order to make such arrangements easier. For these couples, family support, of course, helps to reduce anxiety but, at the same time, increases guilt or frustration due to a lack of autonomy and independence, despite having reached adulthood.

Turning to the attitudes of employers, mothers underlined the problem of shifting to part-time work after childbirth: many employers are reluctant to permit this, with obvious negative consequences in terms of work-life balance.

Finally, a notable gender disparity has emerged in the use of parental leave, which is taken mainly by women. Interviews showed that parental abstention from work for child care is still regarded as the task of women. Furthermore, employees taking advantage of this programme are perceived by managers and co-workers as having lower commitment, a perception which subsequently affects the allocation of rewards, including advancement opportunities and wage increases (McDonald et al., 2005). There is also a view that employees exercising this option are always seeking help and they sometimes encounter fairly hostile or at least frosty attitudes. In other words,

the main reason for the strongly gendered adoption of parental leave is status, in light of 'prevailing values in the employment world, where taking a career break brings serious consequences in terms of prestige, loss of practice, professional assessment' and so on (ECOSOC, 2003: 183).

Towards an evaluation of Italy's work-life balance policies: developments and challenges

The research underlines the positive aspects as well as the limitations of Italian work-life balance laws. Undoubtedly, they have contributed to a new culture of reconciliation of working and family life, promoting concrete action on three levels:

- (i) On the cultural level, they strongly promote paternal involvement in family management and responsibilities, incentivising the use of parental leave as an entitlement of both parents, especially with fathers' 'daddy quota' (Riva, 2009).
- (ii) They give local authorities financial support to improve public service availability, making it more flexible and meeting family needs (Rossi, 2006).
- (iii) In the private sector, funds are allocated to firms which take 'positive actions' aimed at introducing new working time options or services which can be qualified as 'family friendly'.

On the other hand, some drawbacks must be underlined. First of all, the research highlighted the lack of public child-care services in Italy and their inadequacy from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view. A direct consequence of this is the significant involvement of grandparents in child care, which has become more and more important as a substitute for or in support of formal services, since such help is flexible in terms of time and free of charge. In terms of the capability approach, grandparents can be considered the main *resource* helping flexible workers to balance their work and personal lives. Grandparents provide not only care, but also economic support, especially for couples who are flexibly employed and receiving the low wages typical of non-standard employment. Consequently, the parental family is a major resource for flexible couples. However, not all young adult couples can rely on this kind of support: in response, the availability of *asili nido* should be developed, rejecting the idea which nowadays seems to be prevalent that public child-care services are complementary to the 'free service' provided by grandparents.

Besides increasing the availability of public *asili nido* and reducing the fees of private centres, it is necessary to diversify services in order to meet different family needs, paying attention to the flexible professional conditions of many young working parents. Adequate intervention should be provided to help young adult workers to manage their efforts to attain a higher level of well-being – in its various dimensions – enlarging their freedom of choice and widening their capabilities. The constraints preventing younger adults from exercising their rights seem to be related to management attitudes, aimed at reducing stable employment and scarcely attracted by workers over 30 years of age. Management often takes flexibility to mean avoiding the costs involved in 'normal' employment; at the same time, government measures scarcely protect the most precarious workers. Inevitably, under such conditions the work and personal life of younger families are reconciled through the help provided by parents and family. In other words, government intervention is needed to apply the 'flexicurity principle' properly: its link with work-life balance issues is evident, since 'flexicurity should support gender equality, by promoting equal access to quality employment for women and men and offering measures to reconcile work, family and private life'

(European Commission, 2007). The challenge is to design policies which take into account the particular situation of women and men with regard to each component of flexicurity, in order to protect the growing number of atypical workers, overcoming the idea that security is possible only with a long-term contract. Indeed, flexicurity seems to be the main solution to the diffusion of precarious employment and of the overall uncertainty that nowadays amounts to a sort of ‘generation effect’ for young adults in the post-Fordist labour market. At the same time, family care will increasingly involve Italian society as a whole, especially in the near future when young adults will have to take care not only of their growing children but also of their parents as they grow older (Poli, 2008).

Reconciliation policies must be designed on the basis of three key concepts (Millar, 2006): (i) care: caring for children and the younger generation by increasing the provision of services, enhancing their adaptability to different contexts; (ii) cash: financial support for families in hardship by means of direct aid or tax relief; and (iii) time: better management of family time by introducing longer parental or sick leave and compulsory parental leave for fathers by implementing measures to organize working time differently. However, this is a particularly difficult issue in a workplace perspective, in a work culture in which time spent at work is used as a measure of work commitment. In this sense, flexible work schemes may produce less rather than more freedom of agency when they are designed to enable employers to maximize profits rather than to promote work-life balance (Fagan et al., 2008). The low ‘social quality’ of jobs often forces individuals to work longer hours: labour market precariousness weakens their ability to reduce hours. This highlights the fact that any investigation of social justice in a resources-capabilities perspective must consider all situations in which there is a gap between formal and substantial justice, weakening social actors’ capabilities. To conclude, work-life balance must be examined from a societal (rather than an individual or an organizational) perspective, since fostering people’s self-responsibility is achievable only if adequate means and opportunities – that is, the implementation of collective responsibility – are defined and supplied (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2003). Legal and industrial relations developments are needed to ensure that work-life balance policies and practices are not only provided but are also fully accessible and taken up by employees.

Funding

This work was supported by the CAPRIGHT project – Integrated Project No. 028549-2 under the European Union’s Sixth Framework Programme [contract number: CIT4-CT-2006-028549].

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