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## **Perceived Family Responsibility Discrimination: A Growing Concern An interview with Lindsey Trimble O'Connor**

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While the roles of men and women have changed over the past few decades, the workplace is still structured around the notion that work and family responsibilities are separate. Family care responsibilities remain a particular challenge for workers and their employers because they often pull workers out of their jobs unexpectedly. Family responsibility discrimination (FRD) is a type of employment discrimination based on one's role as a caregiver.

Lindsey Trimble O'Connor, an assistant professor of Sociology at California State University Channel Islands, and her colleagues Julie A. Kmec and Elizabeth Harris from Washington State University wanted to know which types of family care responsibilities led workers to perceive FRD and whether certain organizational features were related to perceived FRD.

FRD is an area of growing concern for workers with caregiving responsibilities or those who request flexible work accommodations; because they fear they will be viewed as uncommitted workers and experience stigmatization at work. This fear is with good reason; workers in this situation are at an increased risk of being fired, passed over for promotions, or receiving fewer hours or assignments at work. For employers, the growth of employment discrimination cases filed with the EEOC and recent awards in favor of workers that have averaged approximately \$100,000 suggest that the courts are starting to view this type of discrimination with increased scrutiny.

### **Research Questions and Design:**

Specific research questions examined were:

1. What family care responsibilities led workers to perceive FRD?
2. To what extent is organizational context related to a worker's perceived FRD?

The research team explored these questions through a secondary data analysis of the 2008 National Study on the Changing Workforce (NSCW). The team looked at what types of caregiving responsibilities were more likely to lead to perceptions of FRD and the types of organizations in which these workers were employed. Of particular interest to O'Connor and her colleagues was how organizational culture and level of support for their family lives affects whether or not caregivers perceive themselves to have experienced FRD. To do this they analyzed the responses of those respondents who indicated that they worked for someone else and who were the primary



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caregivers of (1) a child under the age of 18 years, (2) an older relative or in-law, or (3) both a child and an older relative or in-law. Most respondents worked in organizations that employed 50 people or less.

### Research Highlights

The research explored what specific family caregiving responsibilities were associated with a survey respondent's indication that he or she had experienced FRD and what organizational characteristics were associated with whether or not a worker perceived FRD. Of particular interest to O'Connor and her colleagues was whether those respondents who reported more intense caregiving responsibilities were more likely to report FRD than those who did not, by examining the association between family-to-work spillover and measures of specific care responsibilities (e.g., time spent on care) with perceived FRD.

Finally, the team was particularly interested in examining whether working in an organization that practiced meritocracy impacted perceived FRD among workers with family caregiving responsibilities. O'Connor articulates the concept further as, "If workers think that their workplace is a pretty fair place, [then] if . . . some negative treatment happens [the worker will be] less likely . . . to perceive it as FRD because their employer seems so fair." Features of a meritocratic organization were measured through the degree to which workers indicated their organizations had the following:

Organizations that were considered more meritocratic (1) offered cash-incentives tied to performance, (2) had managers who were perceived as honest and ethical, (3) were larger, or (4) were in the public sector.

The following results emerged from the data:

- Respondents who were engaged in caregiving for a child *and* an elder were more likely to perceive FRD than respondents' caregiving for *either* a child *or* an elder family member.
- There were no significant differences in likelihood to perceive FRD between those who cared for a child and those who cared for an elder.
- Caregivers with high levels of family-to-work interference perceive more FRD than caregivers with low family-to-work interference.
- The more time childcare providers spend on caregiving a day, the more likely they are to perceive FRD, however having young children or multiple children in the household does not significantly predict perceived FRD.
- When workers felt that it was easy to take time off for a family reason and they wouldn't be penalized, they were much less likely to perceive FRD. Workers who felt their supervisors were supportive of their family responsibilities were less likely to perceive FRD.



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- People who perceived their managers as honest and ethical were much less likely to perceive FRD than those who perceived their managers as dishonest and unethical.

### **Implications of the Research for Organizations and Individuals**

Workers with more complex, visible, and demanding family care responsibilities are at greater risk of perceiving family responsibilities discrimination and feeling backlash in the workplace. Yet, with the support of an organization that values its workers through a family-friendly workplace culture and family-supportive, honest and ethical supervisors, workers are less likely to feel stigmatized or penalized for taking time away from work to attend to family responsibilities.

For workers, the research suggests that workers with highly visible caregiving demands such as the care of multiple older adults should be aware of their rights so that they can recognize FRD when it occurs and take appropriate action. Only 8% of survey respondents indicated they had experienced FRD, and O'Connor finds this low number troubling. She states that it is, "difficult to know whether people are not reporting FRD because they are not experiencing it, or because they are experiencing it but not labeling it FRD." To better manage work-life issues, workers should seek employers with known reputations for being supportive to caregivers. O'Connor and her colleagues suggest using [www.glassdoor.com](http://www.glassdoor.com) (a website designed to give an 'insider's look' at work organizations), and discussing workplace culture with people in their network as a means to determine employers' work environments.

For employers, workplaces can lower the risk of litigation by ensuring their flexibility policies and practices are available to all employees and their commitment to family supportive practices is communicated to managers. Workplaces can also work to change organizational culture so that it values all aspects of employees' lives including caregiving. Employers can start to do this by making changes to the way that work is accomplished and how work is rewarded by moving away from measuring performance through time spent at work and instead focusing on results. Supportive cultures can be created by ensuring that mandatory meetings are scheduled during and not after school hours, supporting flexibility in place of work so that workers with family caregiving responsibilities can meet both work and caregiving demands, supporting flexibility in time so that workers can leave work to participate in child and elder activities without using vacation and paid time off.

### **Implications of the Research for Future Exploration**

The findings from this study suggest some areas for further exploration.

- Are workers with family caregiving responsibilities not perceiving FRD because they do not experience it or because they do not recognize it as such?
- Do workers know about their rights as family caregivers, and how does knowledge of rights affect perceived FRD?



## Research Links

Below are links to other researchers examining FRD:

- Joan Williams  
<http://www.uchastings.edu/academics/faculty/facultybios/williams/>
- Stephanie Bornstein  
<http://www.uchastings.edu/academics/faculty/facultybios/bornstein/index.php>
- Tamar Kricheli-Katz  
<http://www2.tau.ac.il/Person/law/researcher.asp?id=aefflgedd>
- Erin Kelly  
[https://www.soc.umn.edu/people/kelly\\_e.html](https://www.soc.umn.edu/people/kelly_e.html)

Links to special issues on flex stigma and redesigning work:

<http://www.spsa.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=1850>

<http://wox.sagepub.com/content/41/1.toc>