

Stream Number 5: Human Resource Management

Delivered Session

**Flexibility Stigma and Employee Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Flexible
Work Practices Usage**

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ABSTRACT: *Little is known about the effects of flexibility stigma on employee outcomes. Using stigma theory, this study investigates the effect of flexibility stigma on employee wellbeing and turnover intentions. This study also investigates a mediating effect of FWP usage in this relationship. Using survey data from 293 employees of an Australian for-profit organisation, this study finds full support for the hypotheses that flexibility stigma has a negative effect on employee wellbeing and positive effect on turnover intentions. Full support for a negative effect on employee FWP usage is also found. Moreover, the results also support the hypothesis that FWP usage partially mediate the relationship between flexibility stigma and employee outcomes. Theoretical, research and practical contributions are discussed.*

Keywords: Flexibility stigma, FWP usage, wellbeing, turnover intentions.

Workplace practices designed to assist employees to balance various domains of their lives have become a topic of considerable interest to both researchers and practitioners. Among various work-life practices (e.g. flexible work schedule, maternity leave, unpaid and paid paternal leave, adoption assistance, on-site child care, childcare resource and referral), flexible work practices (FWPs) are increasingly used by employers to assist workers in integrating their work and personal life commitments (Hill et al., 2008; Brough & O’Driscoll, 2010; Galinsky, Bond & Sakai, 2008). A number of studies from UK, USA and Australia have identified a distinct incongruity between the availability of FWPs in an organisation and actual usage (Blair-Loy, Wharton, & Goodstein, 2011; Skinner & Pocock, 2014; Tipping, Chanfreau, Perry, & Tait, 2012). According to Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI report, 2014) around 24% of the survey respondents did not request for any of the FWPs although they were not content with their current employment arrangements (p.43). Prior research has supported that employees might not always feel free to use various work-life policies formally written on the organisational documents (Blair-Loy, 2003; Blair-Loy et al., 2011). The term

flexibility gap is used by Chung (2018) to explain the gap between the demand and actual usage of family-friendly policies. One of the key reasons identified behind this flexibility gap is the stigma from co-workers and managers related to flexible working as well as the perceived negative career consequences experienced by individuals using various FWPs. (Chung, 2018; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Flexibility stigma was found to have a negative effect on employee health, wellbeing, job satisfaction, work-life balance and turnover intentions (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Cech & O'Connor, 2017; Chung, 2018). Stigma mechanism may affect employee outcomes via the usage of FWPs by employees.

This study advances the field of FWP literature in three ways. *Firstly*, using stigma theory (Jones et al., 1984) this study will explain the effects of stigma on various employee outcomes. *Secondly*, the indirect effect of FWP usage may elevate or reduce the effect of stigma on employee outcomes which is a missing link in the literature. *Finally*, the findings will stimulate awareness of hidden stigma in the workplace and thus facilitate organisations to create a favourable workplace culture for all employees.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Flexibility Stigma and Employee Outcomes

The term *flexibility stigma* is used to describe ‘negative sanctions toward employees who ask for or are assumed to need workplace arrangements to attend to family and personal obligations’ (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014, p. 89). This negative attitude arises from the concept of ‘ideal worker’ norm where the workers who use various FWPs are assumed to violate this norm (Perrigino, Dunford, & Wilson, 2018; Williams, 2000) and thus subject to stigmatisation. Ideal workers are expected to work long hours with total allegiance to the organisation and minimal interference from family responsibilities (Blair-Loy, 2003; Coltrane, Miller, Dehaan, & Stewart, 2013; Williams, 2000). Workers who use various FWPs for personal and family reasons are viewed as less committed, less productive and thus less professional (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Cech & O'Connor, 2017; Chung,

2018; Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Sauté, 1999) and subject to various penalties such as negative performance appraisals, lack of career progress (Casper, Weltman, & Kwesiga, 2007; Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009), hiring discrimination (Acker, 1990) and co-worker dissatisfaction (Golden, 2007). The perception of flexibility stigma in the workplace is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction, work-life balance, wellbeing, job engagement and increase work-life spillover, stress and other health problems (Boyce, Ryan, Imus, & Morgeson, 2007; Cech, 2018; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Cech & O'Connor, 2017).

Stigma theory (Jones et al., 1984) is used as a framework to predict the relationship between flexibility stigma and employee outcomes. Stigma is defined by Ragins, Singh, and Cornwell (2007) as 'socially undesirable, deviant or repulsive characteristics that discredit or spoil an individual's social identity (p. 1104).' According to Jones and colleagues, stigma initiates the attributional process, in which an individual's behaviour is interpreted and responded by others based on their stigma related to that behaviour. Stigma shapes an individual's identity, cognitions and behaviours in the workplace and other social environments (Levin & van Laar, 2006; Miller & Major, 2000; Ragins et al., 2007). Stigma theory seeks to explain how certain characteristics or experience is perceived by others as a stigma in a particular environment and the psychological and interpersonal effects of such stigmatisation (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Stigma generally stimulates negative attribution about an individual which leads to discrimination and devaluation. The effect of such stigma is twofold: *firstly*, employees will feel strained as they are unable to manage the personal and family demands. *Secondly*, they might put on an extra effort to signal their commitment and devotion to work. In both situations, there is a consequential negative effect on their wellbeing and positive effect on their intention to quit the stressful environment.

Past empirical evidence suggests that perceived stigma in the workplace has negative effects on employee satisfaction, engagement, work-life balance, general health and positive effect on turnover intentions (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Cech & O'Connor, 2017; O'Connor & Cech, 2018). Thus it is proposed:

Hypothesis 1a. Flexibility stigma is negatively associated with employee wellbeing.

Hypothesis 1b. Flexibility stigma is positively associated with employee turnover intentions.

Evidence from prior research suggested that both men and women value workplace flexibility equally but are reluctant to use FWP policies because of the fear of career damage, lower earnings and lower performance evaluations (Blair-Loy, 2003; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013). Perception of flexibility stigma in the workplace discourages employees to utilise such practices because of the fear of marginalization and devaluation. The presence of flexibility stigma in the workplace acts as a deterrent to FWP usage even though such practices are available in national and corporate policies (Chung, 2018). The use of various work-life policies and schedule control by an individual itself is not stigmatised rather the reason why individuals use such policies triggers the negative sanction. Individuals who seek work-life accommodations for family reasons are stigmatized more than for managing individual and business needs such as personal health and to increase work performance (Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012). FWP usage, especially for family or personal reasons, is viewed as a violation of ‘ideal worker norm’ and attracts career repercussions and stigmatization from managers and co-workers. Awareness of stigma makes the work environment stressful for the employees who require schedule arrangements for balancing work and non-work demands (Cech & O’Connor, 2017). As a result, they are unlikely to take advantage of various FWPs even though they are entitled to because of hidden and subtle stigma (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Prior empirical evidence conceptualised *stigmatisation* focusing primarily on the individual experience of penalties associated with various FWP usage and thus restrain individuals from using such practices (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Perrigino et al., 2018). Thus it is proposed:

Hypothesis 2. Flexibility stigma is negatively associated with FWP usage.

Mediating Role of FWP Usage

Past research has not tested the mediating role of FWP usage in the relationship between flexibility stigma and employee outcomes such as wellbeing and turnover intentions. However, because flexibility stigma is associated with FWP usage, it serves as an important mediating mechanism between flexibility stigma and employee outcomes. Individuals who perceive stigma related to the usage of FWPS, will not take advantage of such practices which will negatively affect their wellbeing and positively affect their intention to quit the organisation. Flexibility stigma, of course, may impact employee outcomes through other mechanisms such as managerial support, co-worker use, parental status, gender (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung, 2018; Chung & van der Horst, 2018). Thus it is proposed:

Hypothesis 3a. FWP usage partially mediates the relationship between flexibility stigma and employee wellbeing.

Hypothesis 3b. FWP usage partially mediates the relationship between flexibility stigma and employee turnover intentions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

METHODS

A cross-sectional research design was used to test the predictions. Data were collected through an employee survey administered in 2019 in a renowned Queensland organisation which operates in the financial and insurance service industry.

Sample and Data Collection

The population of the study comprises employees of for-profit organisations in Australia. The initial sample frame was 2300 employees of the participating organisation. The study samples all employees from all 11 business divisions of the respective organisation. In mid-January 2019, an online survey link was sent to the HR representative of the organisation to forward to all employees.

Data collection was conducted for 3 weeks from mid-January to the first week of February. The final sample is 293. The survey response rate is 12.74% including only fully completed responses. Partly completed responses (198 in this case) were not included. The low employee response rate can be attributed to factors such as over-surveying of employees which results in survey fatigue (Baruch & Holtom, 2008; Weiner & Dalessio, 2006), sensitivity of the research topic (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007) and possible non-relevance of the study topic for many employees (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

Measures

Predictors

Flexibility stigma was measured using three items scale developed by Cech and Blair-Loy (2014) with a reported reliability of 0.66. The Cronbach's alpha for the current study is 0.67. A representative item of the scale is "Female employees who have young or school-aged children are considered to be less committed to their careers than colleagues who are not mothers." Responses were reported on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The mean of the responses to the three items indicated the level of perception of perceived stigma in respondents where the higher score demonstrated higher levels of stigma.

Outcomes

Employee wellbeing was measured using three items scale to represent *distress* developed by Nomaguchi, Milkie, and Bianchi (2005). Distress includes three items asking employees, for example, "How often are you bothered by minor health problems such as headaches, insomnia, or stomach upsets?" Responses were categorized on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very often*) to 5 (*never*). Cronbach's alpha for these three items was 0.74 for the original study and 0.78 for the current study. The mean of the responses to three items indicated the level of wellbeing of a respondent where higher score refers to greater wellbeing.

Employee turnover intentions was measured using a three items scale used by Brough et al. (2014) with a reported reliability of 0.85. The Cronbach's alpha for the current study is 0.89. A

representative item of the scale is “ How often do you actively look for jobs outside your current job?”. Responses were measured on a 5- point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The second item of the scale is “how likely are you to leave your job in the next six months?” which was coded using 1(*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*). The mean of the responses to three items indicated the level of turnover intentions where the higher score demonstrated higher levels of turnover intentions in respondents.

Mediator

Usage of FWP was measured using 12 items. Eight items such as flexitime, part-time work, casual work, compressed work-week, part-year work, job sharing, teleworking, voluntary reduced time were borrowed from Kossek and Michel (2011). Four items such as flexible holidays, purchased leave, ad hoc flexibility and time off in lieu were added as per the participating organisation’s FWP policy which was designed according to the national policy. Respondents selected the types of practice they have used in the past 12 months. The response options were yes (1) or no (0). An FWP usage score was calculated by adding the total number of “yes” responses for each item. The maximum score for usage is 5 while the minimum is 0.

Controls

The analyses controlled for the effects of several demographic variables such as age, gender, salary, tenure, partner status, caring responsibility and managerial responsibility which might have an effect on employee FWP usage and work outcomes (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Lambert, Marler, & Gueutal, 2008; Leslie et al., 2012; Richman, Civian, Shannon, Hill, & Brennan, 2008). Several dummy variables are created for gender (0=male, 1=female), partner status (0=no partner, 1=with a partner), managerial responsibility (0=no managerial responsibility, 1= with managerial responsibility) and caring responsibility for anyone other than own children (0=no, 1=yes). Tenure is a continuous variable measured in years. Age is a categorical variable used to create two dummy variables: age under 35 years and age over 45 years. The reference group is 35 years to 45 years. Two dummy

variables for salary are also created for a salary under 55k and salary over 100k while 55k to 100k is the reference group.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients for all variables. There is low to moderate correlations between the variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

We used hierarchical multiple regression to test H1a, H1b and H2. To test H1a, employee wellbeing was regressed on control variables and flexibility stigma (see Table 2). The results indicate that flexibility stigma has a significant negative effect on employee wellbeing ($B = -.133, p < .05$). Thus, H1a is fully supported. To test H1b, employee turnover intentions was regressed on controls and flexibility stigma (see Table 2). The results indicate that flexibility stigma has a significant positive effect on employee turnover intentions ($B = .188, p < .05$). Thus, full support for H1b is found. To test H2, FWP usage was regressed on control variables and flexibility stigma (see Table 2). The results indicate that flexibility stigma has a significant negative effect on FWP usage ($B = -.141, p < .05$). Thus, H2 is fully supported.

Insert Table 2 about here

To test the mediation hypothesis H3a and H3b, we used the Process macro (Hayes, 2018) which uses ordinary least square regression including the bootstrap method for inferences. The simple mediation model (Model number 4) of the process macro was used to test H3a and H3b. The analysis controlled for gender, age, partner status, salary, tenure, managerial responsibility and caring responsibility. Table 3 presents the results of the analysis with detailed total effects, direct effects and indirect effects. The results indicate that flexibility stigma had a significant negative effect on

employee wellbeing via FWP usage ($B = -.021$, LLCI $-.053$, ULCI $-.001$). The results also indicate that flexibility stigma had a significant positive effect on employee turnover intentions via FWP usage ($B = .035$, LLCI $.004$, ULCI $.076$). As the 95% bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5000 samples did not include a zero, it can be said that FWP usage partially mediated the negative relationship between flexibility stigma and employee wellbeing as well as the positive relationship between flexibility stigma and employee turnover intentions. Thus, full support for H3a and H3b is found.

Insert Table 3 about here

DISCUSSION

The main objectives of this study were to investigate whether: flexibility stigma is negatively associated with employee wellbeing and positively related to turnover intentions, flexibility stigma is negatively associated with FWP usage, and FWP usage mediates the relationship between flexibility stigma and wellbeing and turnover intentions. The findings of this study provide some evidence for these relationships.

Direct Effects

This study found full support for a negative relationship between flexibility stigma and employee wellbeing was found. The findings of this study contribute to the work-life literature by advancing the knowledge of the effects of workplace flexibility stigma on employee outcomes. The results indicate that employee wellbeing will be negatively affected if they perceive stigma regarding the use of various FWPs. This result is consistent with prior research that found a negative relationship of flexibility stigma with stress, minor health problems, sleep quality, negative work-life spillover and psychological health (Boyce et al., 2007; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Crocker, 1999; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002).

This study also found full support for a positive relationship between flexibility stigma and employee turnover intentions. The findings of this study will extend the scholar's understandings of the effects of the workplace flexibility stigma on employee outcomes. The results indicate that employees who perceive flexibility stigma will be more likely to consider leaving the job. This result is consistent with previous research that found a positive relationship between flexibility stigma and employee turnover intentions (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Stone & Hernandez, 2013).

This study found full support for a negative relationship between perceived flexibility stigma and FWP usage as hypothesized. The results of this study again advancing knowledge of the effect of flexibility stigma on employee FWP usage. The result indicates that employees who perceive the existence of stigma at the workplace are feeling discouraged to use such practices. The use of FWPs will be viewed as a signal of low commitment by managers which will lead to negative career consequences. Employees who use FWPs for family or personal reason is assumed to violate idea-worker norms and thus attract career penalties. As a result employees will be demotivated to take advantage of such practices. This result is consistent with prior studies that found a negative relationship between flexibility stigma and FWP usage (Kirby & Krone, 2002; Leslie et al., 2012; Perrigino et al., 2018)

Mediation Effects

This study found partial support for the mediation effects of FWPs. The results of this study provide pioneering evidence for the effects of flexibility stigma on employee outcomes: negative effect on wellbeing and positive effect on turnover intentions via FWP usage as a mediator. In other words, flexibility stigma determines FWP usage which in turn leads to higher employee wellbeing and lower employee intention to quit the organisation. Although no prior research has tested such mediation effects, the findings are consistent with some past research that found negative effects of stigma on employee usage of FWPs. Employees, especially men, are reluctant to use FWPs although they need and are supportive of the policies (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Vandello et al., 2013).

Theoretical Contributions and Research Implications

The results of this study have various theoretical and research contributions. The findings support the argument of stigma theory (Jones et al., 1984) which explains the effects of stigmatisation of certain behaviour in an organisation and its subsequent effects on employee outcomes. FWP usage is viewed by others as deviant behaviour. The study's finding extends the stigma theory by suggesting that all employees who use FWPs are subject to negative sanction irrespective of their motive for such usage (Cech & O'Connor, 2017).

This research will advance the understanding of the complex dynamics of work redesign and the effects of various contextual factors. Additional contextual factors such as length of FWP usage, nature of FWPs used, co-worker usage, tenure, managerial responsibility, employee gender and lifestyle can help to understand whether these models differ in various organisational and cultural settings (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Lambert et al., 2008).

Practical Contributions

This study has several practical implications as well. The findings will assist employers to understand the significance of the hidden stigma in the workplace which prevents the usage of available work-life policies by employees. This knowledge will help to foster a favourable work climate for all employees (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). Additionally, employers can understand how stigmatisation affect work behaviour and the coping strategy of the stigmatised individual (Boyce et al., 2007) which will help in effective utilisation of the employees (Chung, 2018). On the other hand, employees who are not currently utilising any FWPs and thus not affected by or aware of any stigma in the workplace but intend to use them in future can advocate for favourable workplace culture.

LIMITATIONS

This study has a few limitations. *Firstly*, the analysis relied on cross-sectional data which is a threat to causality (Eaton, 2003). Longitudinal data may provide a different result as the length of policy use can reduce stigma (Cech & O'Connor, 2017). *Secondly*, the study did not take into account the parental status of the respondents which is strongly related with flexibility stigma as evident from prior research (Chung, 2018) although there are strong counter-argument that flexibility stigma affects all employees irrespective of gender or parental status (Cech, 2018; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Cech & O'Connor, 2017). *Finally*, this research did not take into account a few demographic factors mentioned in stigma literature such as race, ethnicity as well as various organisational factors such as managerial support, organisation size and type which may influence the relationship between flexibility stigma and employee outcomes differently (Van der Lippe, Van Breeschoten, & Van Hek, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illustrate the importance of understanding the deep-rooted cultural values of work devotion which explains the underutilisation of FWPS in an organisation. The flexibility of work itself is not stigmatised rather the perception of its use for family or personal reason is. The findings of this study will serve as an example that silent and often ignored workplace culture may have serious consequences for everyone. To get the expected benefit of various FWP policies, this silent but important workplace characteristics should be considered by the organisations.

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Figure 1: Research Model

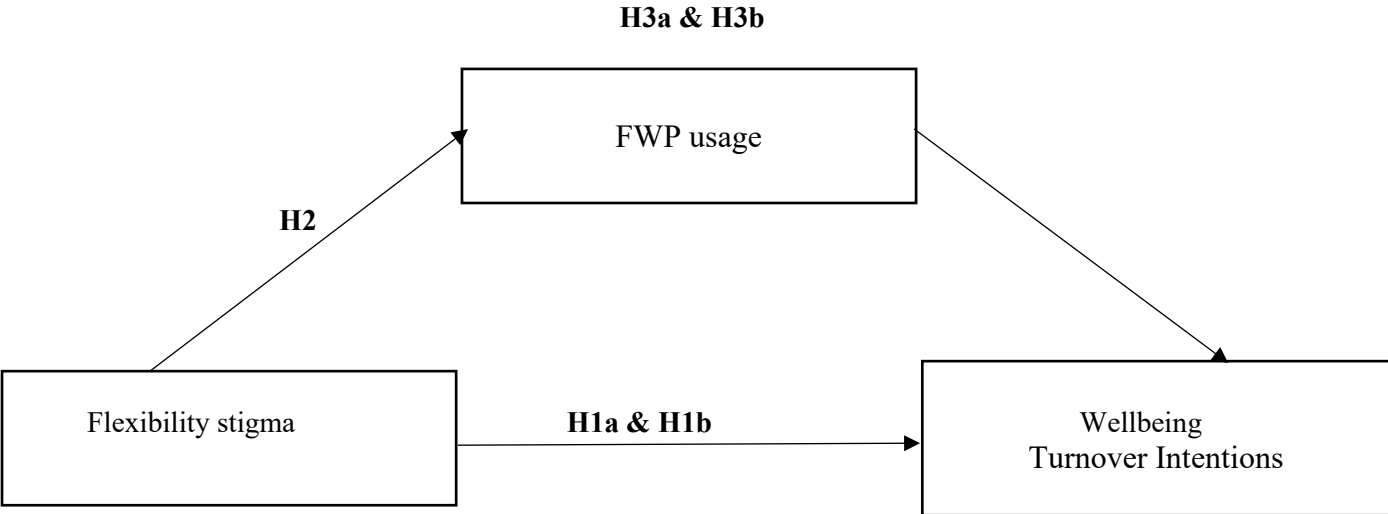


Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations^a

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Controls														
1. Partner status	.81	.39												
2. Gender	.70	.46	-.01											
3. Age under 35 years	.31	.46	.06	.01										
4. Age over 45 years	.35	.48	.05	-.02	-.49**									
5. Salary under 50k	.16	.36	-.12*	-.08	.06	.08								
6. Salary Over 100k	.31	.46	.02	.23**	-.25**	.07	-.29**							
7. Managerial responsibility	.18	.39	.19**	.06	-.15*	.07	-.21**	.41**						
8. Tenure	6.72	6.62	.08	-.02	-.26*	.40**	-.10	-.09	.06					
9. Caring Responsibility	.08	.28	-.01	-.00	.02	.12*	.15*	-.06	-.05	-.03				
Predictor														
10. Flexibility Stigma	2.55	.81	-.02	-.01	.01	-.05	.012	-.06	-.04	.05	.02			
Mediator														
11. FWP Usage	1.24	1.01	-.06	-.05	-.01	-.11	-.13*	.33**	.13*	-.07	-.18**	-.13*		
Outcomes														
12. Wellbeing	2.97	.89	-.07	-.18**	.14*	-.14**	.04	-.13*	-.06	.08	-.04	.14*	-.15**	
13. Turnover Intentions	2.59	1.07	-.01	.07	.11	-.09	.06	-.12*	-.12*	.01	-.11	.15**	-.23**	.37**

^a2-tailed; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2: Regression Results for Flexibility Stigma and Employee Wellbeing, Turnover Intentions and FWP Usage -H1a, H1b and H2

Variables	Wellbeing			Turnover Intentions			FWP Usage		
	B	t	p	B	t	p	B	t	p
Controls									
Partner status	.15	1.13	.26	.03	.19	.85	-.17	-1.20	.23
Gender	.31	2.76	.01	.22	1.62	.11	-.28	-2.29	.02
Age under 35 years ^a	-.19	-1.45	.15	.14	.85	.40	.09	.61	.55
Age over 45 years ^a	.25	1.91	.06	-.12	-.76	.45	-.21	-1.45	.15
Salary under 50k ^b	-.08	-.56	.58	.15	.82	.41	-.05	-.29	.78
Salary Over 100k ^b	.05	.38	.70	-.17	-1.09	.28	.79	5.51	.00
Managerial responsibility	.02	.13	.90	-.20	-1.12	.26	.00	.01	.10
Tenure	-.02	-2.46	.01	.01	.66	.51	.00	.22	.83
Caring Responsibility	.10	.53	.60	-.49	-2.15	.03	-.53	-2.63	.01
Predictor									
Flexibility stigma	-0.13	-2.13	0.03	0.19	2.47	0.01	-0.14	-2.09	0.04
Model Summary									
<i>R</i> ²	0.10			0.08			0.18		
<i>F</i>	4.52*			6.10**			4.36*		

n=293.

Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported; **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01.

^a Dummy coded, Age 35 to 44 years is the reference group.

^b Dummy coded, Salary \$55k to \$100k is the reference group.

Table 3: Regression Results for Simple Mediation- H3a & H3b

	Wellbeing			Turnover Intentions		
	B	t	p	B	t	p
Total Effect						
Total effect of flexibility stigma (c) <i>Controlling for partner status, gender, age, salary, managerial responsibility, tenure, and caring responsibility.</i>	-.134	-2.126	.034	.188	2.470	.014
Direct Effect						
Direct effect of flexibility stigma (c') <i>Controlling for partner status, gender, age, salary, managerial responsibility, tenure, caring responsibility and FWP usage.</i>	-.112	-1.793	.074	.153	2.045	.042
Indirect Effect						
<i>Controlling for partner status, gender, age, salary, managerial responsibility, tenure, and caring responsibility</i>						
Indirect effect of flexibility stigma via FWP usage	Effect	LLCI	ULCI	Effect	LLCI	ULCI
	-.021	-.053	-.001	.035	.004	.076

n= 293. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.

Bootstrap sample size = 5000 bias corrected; LL = lower limit, CI = confidence interval, UL = upper limit, level of confidence 95%.