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# Sense of entitlement to support for the reconciliation of employment and family life

*Suzan Lewis and Janet Smithson*

**ABSTRACT** This article explores young European women and men's expectations of support – from the state and employers – for reconciling paid employment and family life. It is based on a qualitative study employing focus groups with young women and men in Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Ireland and the UK. Drawing on the concept of sense of entitlement, derived from social justice theory, it was expected that the type of welfare state and 'gender contract' that young adults have experienced will influence their sense of entitlement to support for work and family life. Findings indicate that participants perceived their entitlement to state and employer support differently across national context. However this is moderated by gender, parental and occupational status, and particularly by awareness of provisions in other countries in the case of state support, while perceived entitlement to employer support varies according to the specific policy considered, gender and perception of benefits to employers. Some implications for public policy makers and employers are discussed.

**KEYWORDS** cross-national perspectives ■ entitlement ■ gender ■ work–family

## Introduction

With the expanding role of women in the workforce, changes in family structures and an ageing population, most people will combine employment with

family care responsibilities at some stage in the life cycle. Employers are increasingly being urged to develop what have variously been termed 'family friendly', 'work-family' or 'work-life' policies, including dependent care, family-related leave and other forms of working-time flexibility, to enable employees to balance multiple roles. There is a growing literature examining employees' needs for, and expectations of, such support (e.g. Lewis & Cooper, 1989; Brannen & Moss, 1991). However, the majority of research in this area has taken place in North America where there is little expectation of a role for the state (Gonyea & Googins, 1996). The situation in Europe is somewhat different.

Encouraging governments and employers to provide support for the reconciliation of employment and family life for women and men has been a major thrust of the European Union's drive for equal opportunities in the labour market and beyond (Holt & Thaulow, 1996; Moss, 1996; European Commission, 1999a, 1999b). This has generated a number of European Directives, such as the Parental Leave Directive and Part-Time Work Directive which national governments are required to implement. National responses to these Directives vary. Some governments have implemented these minimally, for example by providing entitlement to unpaid parental leave, while others, particularly in the Nordic countries, already had policies in place which went well beyond the minimum standards set by the European Directives; for example, paid parental leave and measures to encourage men to take up this leave (Deven & Moss, 2000). Employers, in turn, are required to comply with national legislation but while some do so reluctantly and minimally, others enhance statutory entitlements. Different levels of state support for reconciliation of work and family are therefore experienced across European states, while employer support may differ both between and within nation states.

The intention of the European Directives and national governments' responses, is to enable individual women and men to combine employment and parenting by expanding choices available. It is widely assumed that employer work-family policies can minimize work-family conflict and other negative outcomes and enhance the positive reconciliation of employment and family life but the evidence for these outcomes is mixed (Kossek & Oseki, 1999). The impact of work-family policies depends on how they are experienced by individual employees, and particularly on the extent to which they enhance feelings of personal control (Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Kossek & Oseki, 1999). This, in turn, is influenced by values and belief systems, in the workplace and beyond (Lewis, 1997). State and employer policies designed to support reconciliation of work and family and gender equity may have the potential to enhance individual feelings of control and

autonomy by extending choice of working and caring patterns. However, there is considerable evidence that take-up of statutory and workplace provisions for work–family reconciliation is often limited, particularly among men (Hochschild, 1997). Sense of entitlement to support of this nature does not necessarily reflect objective entitlements (Lewis & Lewis, 1997). Lack of take-up has been explained in terms of organizational cultural barriers and gender expectations (Haas & Hwang, 1995; Lewis, 1997) which influence the subjective meanings that individuals attach to work–family policies (Grover, 1991). These include, for example, perceptions of work–family arrangements as favours or entitlements, and as fair or unfair. However research on sense of entitlement and take-up of workplace work–family policies often neglects the impact of wider social values and policy. This study examines perceptions of fairness and entitlement to work–family support in relation to values and entitlements inherent in national social policy contexts. In so doing it integrates psychological and social policy approaches.

We argue that sense of entitlement to support for reconciling work and family may vary in different national contexts. Traditional gender expectations may be challenged as it becomes increasingly normative for women to combine employment and family roles, and more men are expected to increase their involvement in family as well as paid work (Aryee et al., 1998). It is therefore arguable that younger generations of workers may perceive work–family provisions as entitlements to enable them to combine these roles. However temporary employment contracts are increasingly common for this age group (European Commission, 1997) and this may affect sense of entitlement to employer provisions. The goal of the study reported here is to examine sense of entitlement to support for combining work and family roles from the state and from employers, among groups of young adults in five European welfare state contexts.

## Theoretical framework

Drawing on social justice theory, a distinction can be made between supports which are expected and regarded as entitlements or rights, and those which are regarded as favours that have to be negotiated and/or reciprocated. Sense of entitlement is a concept used to denote a set of beliefs and feelings about rights and entitlements, or legitimate expectations, based on what is perceived to be fair and equitable (Major, 1993; Bylsma & Major, 1994; Lewis, 1996). It is different from, albeit influenced by, actual legal or other objective entitlements (Lewis, 1996). A limited subjective sense of entitlement to

be able to work in ways that are compatible with family demands can create low expectations of employer, state or other support, over-gratitude for any support available and a reluctance to demand further changes (Lewis, 1996; Lewis & Lewis, 1997).

Research on sense of entitlement has consistently shown that men and women feel entitled to different outcomes in employment where, for example, women may feel entitled to lower rates of pay or other rewards (Bylsma & Major, 1994; Desmarais & Curtis, 1997) and in family life, where women often express satisfaction with an unequal division of labour (Major, 1993; Burgoyne & Lewis, 1994; Reichle, 1996). Explanations of this disparity are usually framed in terms of social processes (e.g. Major, 1993). However, most of the research in this area has been experimental and laboratory based (e.g. Bylsma & Major, 1994) or carried out in naturalistic but narrowly defined contexts (e.g. Burgoyne & Lewis, 1994) and has not directly explored the impact of broader social context on these processes. One way in which this can be achieved is via cross-national research. This provides opportunities to explore sense of entitlement to specific gender related outcomes in a 'living laboratory' of different national social policy contexts and the values that these reflect.

Sense of entitlement is theorized as determined by social comparison processes (Lerner, 1987), influenced by social context and ideology (Lewis, 1996) and constructed on the basis of social, normative and feasibility comparisons (Major, 1987, 1993; Lewis, 1996). Judgements about what is fair or equitable are made on the basis of normative comparisons with others who are assumed to be similar to oneself (Major, 1993; Bylsma & Major, 1994). For example, women's reporting of relative satisfaction with an unequal division of family labour has been explained by their tendency to compare themselves with other women, rather than with their male partners (Major, 1993).

Gender appears to be particularly significant in influencing what is perceived as normative, appropriate and feasible. If motherhood is constructed as a woman's primary role then employment is often constructed as something extra, which women take on for their own satisfaction and independence, even if their income is essential for the family (Lewis et al., 1999). In this context, fathers' participation in family care is constructed as help rather than a shared responsibility (Hochschild, 1997). Hence women with traditional gender expectations will feel less entitled to support to enable them to work when they have family responsibilities, and men less entitled to employer support for involvement in caring. Gender roles thus prescribe different entitlements for women and men in the home and in employment.

As European countries differ in the extent to which an ideal of gender

equality is institutionalized in welfare states, we argue that this will be reflected in individual sense of entitlement to non-gendered supports and outcomes. Specifically our hypothesis is that social context, as indicated by the type of welfare state experienced, will influence sense of entitlement to support from state and employers for the reconciliation of work and family life by determining what is constructed as fair, normative and feasible.

## Welfare state regimes

Sense of entitlement to support entails that someone else has an obligation to provide. There are national differences in who provides benefits and supports for workers and family members, related to the variety of welfare state models in different European regions. The welfare state systems of European countries have been related to assumptions about gender role (Meehan & Sevenhuijsen, 1991; Pfau-Effinger, 1994). For example, different systems endorse to a greater or lesser extent the male breadwinner model through taxation and social welfare policy (Lewis, 1992; Walby, 1994). Duncan (1996) argues that work–family policies and practices are based on the assumption of gender contracts – implicit social contracts between women and men about what their roles, obligations and entitlements are (Hirdmann, 1988). Den Dulk et al. (1999) similarly assert that ‘typologies’ of welfare states are based on differences in the division of tasks between women and men, ranging from more traditional to less traditional and egalitarian relations’ (1999: 2). For example, countries with a ‘traditional’ gender contract (such as Ireland) do not construct affordable and available childcare or other care as necessary as it is assumed that mothers do not undertake paid work, while countries with an ‘equality’ contract (such as Sweden) assume that both women and men will be carers and paid workers, and the welfare and work systems are structured accordingly (Nasman, 1999).

The five countries represented in the study discussed here are Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the UK. In the two Scandinavian countries characterized as having a ‘social democratic’ welfare state model (Esping-Anderson, 1990), the reconciliation of work and family is regarded as a collective responsibility (Siim, 1991), and state support is expected (Kugelberg, 1999). There are strict legal regulations on working hours and overtime, and high levels of publicly funded childcare and paid parental leave. (In Sweden, in particular, affordable good quality childcare has been a high priority.) Although there are distinctions between the various Scandinavian welfare states (Pfau-Effinger, 1994; Duncan, 1996), Norway and Sweden can both be said to have an ‘equality’ contract underpinning their welfare state systems

(Lewis, 1992). As such, we can expect that young women and men brought up in these countries will have a strong sense of entitlement to state support for reconciling work and family needs, which is also deemed normative and feasible; they will therefore feel entitled to corresponding support from employers.

Although there are many substantial differences between the UK and Portugal, they can both be characterized as being in a 'transitional' state between traditional and equality gender contracts. The UK is characterized by a 'liberal' welfare state model (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Forbes, 1991), and what Duncan (1996) terms a 'transitional' gender contract – that is, making the transition from a traditional contract towards an equality contract. Working time flexibility and work–life issues have traditionally been regarded as individual or corporate issues (Forbes, 1991). British social policy reflects the notion of individual rather than public responsibility for families (Brannen et al., 1997). Portugal has a very limited welfare state, and traditionally there has been a strong reliance on the extended family for support with childrearing, unemployment and old age (Kofman & Sales, 1996). There is a low rate of official unemployment in Portugal but a highly precarious labour market and high levels of non-permanent work, without access to social benefits. Salary levels in Portugal are among the lowest in Europe (Eurostat, 1997) and most men and women work full time, necessitating a rapid change from a traditional division of breadwinner/carer roles towards a more 'modern' society (Brannen & Smithson, 1998). Our hypothesis is that young women and men brought up in Portugal and the UK will have a lower sense of entitlement to support for reconciling work and family needs in gender equitable ways, and a stronger sense of individual or family responsibility for these needs than in Sweden and Norway and may therefore feel more ambivalent about expecting employer support.

In Ireland, with a 'conservative' welfare state model (Esping-Anderson, 1990), also termed a 'strong male breadwinner' model (Lewis, 1992), the care of dependants is presumed to be a matter for the family, and mainly for women within those families (O'Connor, 1998). There is correspondingly low state provision, especially for childcare. Irish women, although highly educated, have the lowest labour force participation in Europe, although this is rising rapidly. Based on the earlier hypothesis, in this 'traditional' model, we expect that young Irish men and women will have a very low sense of entitlement to support from the state or employers for the reconciliation of work and family life in ways which depart from the male breadwinner model.

To summarize, we have argued that sense of entitlement to gender related work–family outcomes should be examined within the broader social policy context and that welfare state regimes may contribute in different ways

to sense of entitlement to support for the reconciliation of employment and family life. In respect to the five countries in this study we have argued that: (a) employees in Sweden and Norway may have higher sense of entitlement to reconcile the two domains, in relatively gender equitable ways, with support from the state and employers; (b) women's and men's sense of entitlement to state support for reconciliation of work and family will be lower in Portugal and Britain than in Sweden and Norway and that this will be reflected in low sense of entitlement to employer support, and (c) that sense of entitlement to be able to reconcile work and family in non-gendered ways will be lowest in Ireland where the welfare state reflects the most traditional gender contract.

This study extends the work–family literature by employing the concept of sense of entitlement inherent in welfare state regimes to explain differences in expectations of work–family support, generating qualitative data with a cross-national sample.

## Method

Our methodology sought to extend understandings of sense of entitlement that have been previously gained through quantitative approaches, including surveys and experiments. We used an in-depth qualitative, cross-national approach which grounds theory in experiences, accounts and local contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 1993) in this case, especially in the varied social, cultural and economic contexts which impact on sense of entitlement. Most cross-national research is based on large surveys that provide insights into trends but lack the richness of qualitative data. This study sought to understand the impact of contemporary trends by generating rich qualitative data on the values, experiences and perceived entitlements of groups of young Europeans, from their own standpoints.

A total of 312 young people, 172 women and 140 men between the ages of 18 and 30 took part in the study, in 70 focus groups in the five countries. The purposive sample included unemployed young people, those in precarious employment,<sup>1</sup> lower skilled workers, highly skilled workers, university and vocational students from each country (see Table 1). Participants were recruited by contacting employers, universities, training organizations and outreach organizations who advertised for volunteers to take part, anonymously, in a study looking at work and family expectations. Most did not yet have family responsibilities and therefore an important feature of this research is that most of the participants are anticipating, rather than currently experiencing, issues of work–family integration.

**Table 1** Focus group participants

	UK	Ireland	Portugal	Sweden	Norway	Total (%)
Total participants in all groups	83	42	84	76	27 <sup>a</sup>	312
Women	50	26	38	46	12	172 (55)
Men	33	16	46	30	15	140 (45)
<i>Age groups</i>						
19 and under	26	15	20	18	13	92 (29)
20–25	25	20	51	33	14	143 (46)
26–30	32	7	13	25	0	77 (25)
Members of ethnic minorities	16	0	7	3	1	27 (9)
<i>Occupational status</i>						
Working in permanent job	16	9	10	17	5	57 (18)
Working in temporary job	15	0	16	17	4	52 (16)
University student	23	8	37	13	5	86 (28)
Vocational student	13	22	14	16	13	78 (25)
Unemployed	16	3	7	13	0	39 (13)
<i>Highest level of education reached</i>						
University degree <sup>b</sup>	46	19	45	25	9	144 (46)
School/training to age 18	16	18	24	51	18	127 (41)
School to age 15/16	21	5	15	0	0	41 (13)
Parents	16	5	10	8	3	42 (13)
Married	5	3	7	3	1	19 (6)
Cohabiting (approx.)	20	3	2	19	4	48 (15)

<sup>a</sup> There were fewer focus groups in Norway; all were among the under-25 age group as the research was carried out in the context of an ongoing research project.

<sup>b</sup> Including those currently enrolled on degree courses at university.

Focus groups were used because of their potential to examine research questions from participants' own perspectives, including how they related issues to their daily lives and concerns (Myers, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). A semi-structured focus group guide was developed collaboratively by the researchers in the five countries. The focus groups, which lasted about one and a half hours, discussed current and future employment and 'career' paths, relationships and expectations of, and feelings of, entitlement to support for work and family roles from a range of sources. The groups were audio-taped, transcribed and thematically analysed. A characteristic of focus group data is that groups, rather than individuals within groups, are the unit of analysis (Kreuger, 1998; Morgan, 1988). Using focus groups gives some

insights into the 'public' discourses on a set of issues, through views expressed among peers (Kitzinger, 1994). The data are not intended to be generalized to all young people within these countries, but as generating opinions, views and debates that people demonstrate in a group discussion on work and family issues (Smithson, 2000).

The analytic strategy was initially to examine each transcript in terms of what kinds of support young women and men perceived they were entitled to expect and what factors appeared to shape the ways in which young adults viewed their future choices relating to work and family. The researcher(s) in each country first examined the transcripts and identified themes, similarities and differences of view and the discourses within which these were situated. The transcripts were then analysed by the members of the research team cross-nationally, permitting multiple perspectives. The analysis was then 'fed back' to some of the participants for respondent validation (Silverman, 1993). Within each country some variation of views emerged. But there were also discernible themes, many of which reflected national social and economic context, which form the basis of our discussion later in this article. While focusing on clear themes in the data we also paid attention to the different views expressed by participants, including 'negative cases'.

The findings presented here draw on themes that young adults raised and discussed in the focus groups, illustrated in this analysis by quotations or by sequences of quotations. The aim was not to make the themes 'representative' of the sample, but to reflect a picture of the issues surrounding sense of entitlement for support for the future management of work and family, and to consider the hypotheses that different welfare state regimes may contribute in different ways to sense of entitlement to support.

## Results and analysis

When the participants discussed what they wanted and needed in respect to current or future work and family the notion of a balanced life, in terms of both satisfying work and also a high quality non-work life, emerged as a common theme in many of the groups, both in the present, and at a future stage when they might have more family responsibilities. In this article we focus on expectations and sense of entitlement to support from the state and employers for this ideal of a balanced work-family life.

Entitlements to external support for work-family balance were often discussed in relation to notions of individual and family responsibility and self-reliance. Consistent with other recent research (Evans & Furlong, 1997;

Furlong & Cartmel, 1997), the valuing of individual responsibility, independence and self-reliance were apparent in the views of young men and women in all the countries. It is debatable whether this 'individualization' discourse correlates with an actual increase in individualism suggested by some researchers (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994), or with notions of personal risk and uncertainty (Bauman, 1998; Nilsen, 1999). Nevertheless, notions of individual choice and responsibility did appear to be important for the young adults in our study (see also Nilsen, 1998), and impacted on sense of entitlement to various supports; these notions had different meanings within different national contexts.

Expectations of state support for reconciling work and family

Sense of entitlement to state support for reconciling work and family, for example, childcare, parental leave and the right to work hours that are compatible with family life varied across the five countries, as expected, and also within the five countries.

### ***Cross-national differences in expectations of support and constructions of self-reliance***

National differences reflected the different national social policy contexts already described briefly – and the assumptions upon which these rest – and therefore actual provisions and entitlements. The focus group discussions of the young adults in countries with social policies underpinned by an 'equality' gender contract suggested the strongest sense of entitlement to state support for reconciling work and family commitments in gender equitable ways, while those experiencing policies influenced by a 'traditional' gender contract had the lowest sense of entitlement to this support.

This can be illustrated in relation to sense of entitlement to state support for childcare. In Sweden and Norway a sense of entitlement to state support for childcare was regarded as compatible with, and necessary for, self-reliance and also as essential for gender equality. State support for childcare was expected and taken for granted in the two Scandinavian countries:

The municipality should (be responsible for running nurseries), every municipality should be responsible for that . . . there is lots of private day-care too, but I don't really think individuals should be responsible for these things . . . you must pay to have a kid in the nursery . . . but the public authorities should be responsible for building and running them.

(Norwegian woman, aged 19,<sup>2</sup> in vocational training)

In Sweden and Norway, not only childcare provisions but also family policies on parental leave and leave to look after sick children, which are comparatively generous, were taken for granted and considered fair by young people in these countries. If anything there was an expectation that parental leave rights should be extended and childcare provisions enhanced. There had been recent cuts in provisions in Sweden and the Swedish groups were concerned about this. The sense of entitlement to such supports empowered many of the young people to feel that they had a range of choices about how they would reconcile work and family:

You have paternal leave and maternal leave, and . . . so there is really no . . . they have made it easy for people to work and have children.  
(Norwegian man, aged 20, shipyard worker)

Elsewhere notions of self-reliance excluded expectations of non-familial support for childcare. In Britain and Portugal this was framed in a gender neutral discourse (Smithson, 1999), but often implied greater responsibility for mothers and this was explicit in the Irish discussions (O'Connor, 1998). The UK groups were the most likely to stress individual responsibilities in discussions about childcare. There was a strong emphasis on personal choice accompanied by a view that if they chose to have children they were not entitled to expect support from anyone beyond the family:

To me, having children is a choice and if you take that choice you've got to take the responsibilities that is.  
(UK woman, aged 27, community worker)

In this context it was not considered fair or legitimate that the state should provide childcare. Despite a low sense of entitlement to this type of support, however, some considered that there was a limited role for state support in terms of providing a safety net for families or monitoring quality of childcare services.

It is up to the parents to look after the children. Definitely. It's got nothing to do with the government if you decide to go off and have a baby. But, there should be something there. Say you are working and you've had a baby and then you lose your job, there should be something there for that person to fall back on.  
(UK woman, aged 26, care worker, cohabiting, two children)

An awareness of the possible negative consequences of lack of support for

childcare in extreme circumstances thus enabled them to conceive of situations where state support in relation to childcare would be legitimate, but it was not perceived as normative or feasible to provide state support for those who were constructed as able to be self reliant.

For most of the Irish participants external support for family responsibilities was seen as a last resort, not as something to be chosen. The ideal of the mother at home with young children was so strong that there was no sense of entitlement for any form of support for them to work outside the home. On the contrary, a popular – although contested – idea in Ireland was to pay women who stay at home to look after their family.

I think there is (a need for the state to support mothers at home) because children need to be brought up properly. And if they are just going to be moved from one childminder to another then they will get confused. And they won't know what a proper family life is.

(Irish woman, aged 24, postgraduate trainee)

### ***Within country differences: the role of experienced needs and social comparisons***

Among the Irish and UK women, those who were already mothers were more likely to support a notion of some state help for childcare to enable them to sustain employment, perhaps because they were experiencing an actual rather than anticipated need. However, although they tended to perceive the current situation as inequitable, the type and level of support envisaged from the state was minimal and sense of entitlement to be able to expect this support was low:

I think childminders don't get paid a lot for what they do, but we can't afford to pay them what they are really worth, I think the government should support them, you know they get what about under two pounds an hour for minding a child.

(UK woman, aged 25, unemployed, two children)

Getting back to the whole thing of should the government subsidize you if you're working I think totally they should. If I was allowed to keep my . . . baby-sitting allowance I'd work I'd never give up work.

(Irish woman, aged 26, unemployed, married, one child)

Thus even personal experience of the need for work–family support had a rather limited impact on sense of entitlement to support. Awareness of

state policies in other countries however, appeared to expand notions of what was feasible and of what might therefore be expected. While social comparisons and judgements about feasibility, acceptability and normativeness of state supports were usually made in relation to their experiences within their own country, there was some evidence that the wider European context was providing broader social comparisons for reconciling work and family for some young Europeans, notably in the transitional and traditional countries:

If you look at countries like France they will have excellent crèche facilities provided by the state whereas in Ireland they don't.

(Irish man, aged 22, retail sales trainee)

Britain's the only country in Europe now without proper paternity leave.

(UK woman, aged 29, white-collar worker)

The ability to make these social comparisons was associated with a greater sense of entitlement to such support. However, most participants, and particularly the less educated men, were unaware of the policies and practices elsewhere in Europe (and often in their own country) and therefore had not made these comparisons.

Thus sense of entitlement to state support for reconciling work and family related to a large extent to national social policy, but parental status and associated need for support could increase feelings of unfairness when state support is low. However, the likelihood of feeling entitled to expect more statutory support than is actually available was greatest when there was an awareness of state policies elsewhere and therefore broader social comparisons are available.

### Sense of entitlement to support from employers

Four themes emerged in discussions about entitlement to expect work-family support from employers: sense of entitlement to employer support because it is socially or morally right (the social case), sense of entitlement to employer support only if it is perceived to be in the employer's economic interests (the business case), a sense of injustice that employers are undermining statutory entitlements by the use of non-permanent employment contracts, and gendered sense of entitlements. Although expectations of employers were generally lowest among participants in countries with less regulation this was moderated by gender, the type of policy under consideration (childcare

support, flexible working arrangements, family leave), and participants' perceptions of an economic or business case for work–family support.

***The social case: Entitlement to employer support because it is socially or morally right***

This view was most prevalent among Swedish and Norwegian participants in discussions about flexible working arrangements. With welfare states based on equality contracts, and well-established provisions for statutory parental leave provisions, including the right to paid 'family emergency' leave, both young men and women felt that it was right for employers to support work–family balance. Although there were some gender differences in sense of entitlement to longer periods of parental leave, there was a strong sense of entitlement among men as well as women to be able to take emergency family leave. Perhaps because these young people saw that it was feasible for employers to be sufficiently flexible to manage these short-term and often unplanned leaves, and that it was normative for parents to be able to make use of them, they had stronger expectations than their counterparts elsewhere that employers would be flexible:

It (combining work and a family) . . . well it is up to yourself too, but employers should do something as well . . . make it easier for people . . . [Moderator: What could employers do then?] Well . . . there are some here who have special agreements . . . they can come in a little later, and they can work shifts if they want to and things like that. That's good I think if they can be more flexible.

(Norwegian man, aged 20, shipbuilding worker)

Although the Swedish and Norwegian participants displayed the strongest sense of entitlement to employer flexibility, legitimated by state support for gender equitable role in both spheres, this did not extend to a social case for employer support for childcare. Although some employers in the Nordic countries do provide support for childcare, including some workplace nurseries in Norway (Brewster & Hegewisch, 1994), in response to both institutional and economic sources of environmental pressures (Goodstein, 1994), the strong sense of entitlement to state support for childcare appeared to negate any expectations from employers in this respect.

However, the participants in Ireland, Portugal and the UK – with, arguably, greater need due to a paucity of state-provided childcare – did not expect or feel entitled to employer provision or assistance with childcare:

I don't think it's anything to do with the company you work with. It's your own business to get your kids sorted . . . They don't want to hear that you got up in the morning and the child is sick and you had to ring in sick. They don't want to hear that.

(Irish woman, aged 24, white-collar worker)

***The 'business case': Sense of entitlement to employer support only if it was perceived to be in the employer's economic interests***

This theme emerged among the Portuguese, Irish and particularly the British participants, in discussions about childcare and flexible working arrangements. Although there was no sense of entitlement to employer-provided childcare as a social right there was a belief among some men and women in the countries with low levels of state support for work and family that it was in the interest of employers, especially large organizations, to provide childcare:

. . . something like an NHS employer has a massive workforce of mainly young people . . . would actually benefit from having a crèche that employees had to pay for, because . . . they're gonna have people who don't have to rush away and . . . don't give up their jobs and um they'll also be making money.

(UK woman, aged 27, doctor)

When the firms have daycare centres I think that it's an incentive for people to want to work there. They know that their child is there and they can even spend their lunch time with the child.

(Portuguese woman, aged 23, white-collar worker)

Those who subscribed to this argument felt more entitled to expect employer-provided childcare than others. It was not regarded as a favour and childcare provision was regarded as feasible. If employers could benefit from providing childcare it became more legitimate to expect them to do so. But others who perceived childcare as a cost to firms had little sense of entitlement to such support:

I think day care centres are a good idea although few companies would agree with it because having a day care centre would mean higher costs, more staff, and nowadays it's exactly the opposite of what they looking for.

(Portuguese man, aged 20, management administration student)

Similar cost–benefit attributions were applied in discussions of working-time flexibility, non-standard work and parental leaves, which were less likely to be expected if they were constructed as costs rather than benefits to the employer:

But whether (flexibility is available) because we work in the public sector, and we've got the resources to back it up . . . if we worked in private industry we wouldn't be able to afford to do that.

(UK man, aged 27, clerical worker)

Employers were often expected to be flexible up to a point, but the young men and women in these countries did not expect to be given flexibility unless they could argue that it was practical. It appears that these young adults accept the public discourse prevalent in these countries, of individual choice and responsibility in regards to having and caring for children (Brannen & Smithson, 1998). There was much less emphasis on economic factors in Sweden and Norway but even here some participants recognized that work–family arrangements such as parental leave might be more difficult for employers in some circumstances:

A small company might need more money and if you are away for a week it might be difficult.

(Swedish man in permanent employment)

However, the Nordic participants were more likely to suggest that government may be able to help employers in some ways rather than to deny their own entitlement to support.

Where sense of entitlement stemmed from state support and a social/moral discourse, sense of entitlement to support did not appear to vary by occupational grouping. Elsewhere however, where legitimization depended on business arguments the lower skilled workers had an especially low sense of entitlement. In the UK, for example, there was a prevalent view that 'family friendly' policies were aimed only at professional workers, and a group of Irish women also felt that managers were more likely to be able to make the business case:

You do the work they tell you or they get someone else. They're not bothered about your real life, they just want their profits. That's all they want nowadays their profits. The world is now a profit margin. [Moderator: All these things like employers who advertise family friendly policies, do you think they're just saying it?] You're probably better off

dead. They're looking for highly skilled people, that's another kettle of fish. Talk about average workers, they're not bothered.

(UK man, unemployed)

You don't want them to feel that your family is encroaching on your work.

It depends on how important you are to your employer. If you are in middle management and you have a good job then you can call the shots so to speak, depending on your position there you could say 'personally we can do a better job for you, so it is in your interest to provide it for me'.

(Irish women, aged 22–25, business trainees)

Thus while legitimization for work–family support came from the state in the countries with equality contracts, elsewhere it often came from perceived economic consequences. The British participants were the most likely to evoke this as a justification which may be because the business case for gender equality and work–family support had been widely promulgated in the UK (Bevan et al., 1997). In Portugal and Ireland, where there had been less public discourse on the business case, work–family supports were more likely to be constructed as costs to employers, and favours rather than entitlements.

### ***Sense of injustice that employers are undermining statutory entitlements: The role of non-permanent work***

Despite an acceptance by those in the transitional and traditional welfare states that a business rationale would be necessary to justify employers offering support beyond statutory entitlements, there were limitations to this prioritization of employer needs. A theme emerged in all the countries: that a focus on short-term profits and denial of employees' family needs was unjust when employers were undermining statutory entitlements such as maternity, parental and family leave. Consistent with previous research (Andersson, 1996), this sense of injustice was reflected in cynicism about employers' motivation, particularly in Ireland and Portugal, and in low expectation of employer support:

I think that employers in our country are extremely closed minded 'I am investing today because I want profit tomorrow'.

(Portuguese woman, aged 21, white-collar worker)

(If they had a choice, employers) wouldn't even bother with people who have children, they just want single people.

(Irish woman, aged 24, trainee)

In particular the increase in contractual flexibility and non-permanent work among this age group in all the countries except Norway (European Commission, 1997) was interpreted as a means of avoiding costs associated with various entitlements which created resentment:

More and more jobs are going down to short-term contracts, and the employers attempt to get round the cost, like maternity cost and redundancy payments and the rest of it. And I think that's really destructive.

(UK woman, aged 30, white-collar worker)

Feelings of subjective job insecurity were widespread among all the groups, including those in so-called permanent jobs (Smithson & Lewis, 2000). However, those in fixed-term or precarious jobs were the most acutely aware of the undermining of statutory entitlements. The level of non-permanent employment was particularly high in Sweden, a country that enjoyed considerable economic stability in the recent past and this insecurity undermined the impact of statutory regulations. For example, Swedish precariously employed women explained that in temporary jobs it was vital to be reliable, for example not taking leave to care for sick children. The women talked about how difficult it was for them to sustain employment after having a baby, unless they had a permanent job:

But a permanent job – that's something to go back to when you have stayed at home (after maternity leave).

Yes you feel that way. If you have a child you won't have a job to return to, I don't think so.

(Swedish women, aged 22–25, temporary employees)

Because they compared themselves with those in permanent jobs and with previous generations who had easy access to family leave these young women regarded their own situation as unjust. Their sense of entitlement to support was violated. Similarly, although there were fewer rights in the UK, the British women had a strong sense of entitlement to maternity leave. Despite the identification with the business case in respect to other provisions, women felt that employers were being unfair in what was constructed as using temporary contracts to avoid providing maternity benefits:

'Cos I'm on a fixed term contract it means my maternity rights are kind of kaput basically. Even though I've been here for over five years in the same job . . . it means that my maternity rights are virtually non-existent. And I don't think that's right, I think I should have the opportunity to, you know have the full benefits that somebody would have if they had a permanent post to start off with.

(UK woman, professional, aged 30, contract worker)

The situation was more complex in Portugal where economic conditions often prevented mothers from taking more than a minimal maternity leave and there was a perception that parental leave and taking leave to look after sick children could actually damage all women's employment prospects. In this situation even sense of entitlement to basic legal entitlement was reduced because of issues of perceived feasibility of taking leave and sustaining employment.

### *Gendered sense of entitlement*

Consistent with other research (Hochschild, 1997; Lewis 1997) we found that sense of entitlement to employer support was highly gendered, though changing in contexts with the highest incidence of dual-earner couples (Aryee & Luk, 1997; Aryee et al., 1998). Men in all the countries had a much lower sense of entitlement than women to take up parental leave (a statutory paid provision in Sweden and Norway, a statutory unpaid provision in Portugal, and no statutory provision in Britain or Ireland at the time of the study). Only in Sweden and Norway, where one month of parental leave was exclusively for fathers, was parental leave for men considered a realistic possibility. Elsewhere many men said they hoped to be able to spend time with their children but doubted if that would be possible:

It would place my career at risk. But it would be ideal, at least personally, I would like to dedicate some of that time to the child.

(Portuguese man, white-collar worker)

The Swedish, in contrast, felt that as more men took up parental leave entitlements, sex discrimination might be reduced and discrimination against parents substituted instead:

Now there have been so much talk about paternity leave that they [employers] have started to ask men as well. Before only women were penalized for having children. Fathers were people who went out and

in through doors. They shouldn't stay at home with sick children – now fathers are equally often at home.

(Swedish woman, unemployed)

Gender differences also cut across national social and economic context in relation to discussion about part-time work, which was widely available in Sweden, Norway and the UK (mainly to women) and quite rare in Ireland and Portugal. Where part time was normative most of the women said they would prefer to work part time if they have children. Although many said they would also like their partners to be able to work part time, and many of the men, especially the more educated, also hoped to be able to do this, few women or men thought it would be feasible for men to work part time:

Many women I work with are offered part-time work three days a week and it works very well, it's, I think we're still a long way from offering that to men.

What, the same offer's not made to men?

Well, there's two things, the men aren't, probably asking . . . and management has a long way to go before they recognize that that's important.

(UK men, aged 25–29, white-collar workers)

Most men compared themselves with other men rather than with women and felt little sense of entitlement to reduce working time for family reasons. In Portugal two full-time incomes were regarded as essential because of low wages, while in Ireland some reduction in working hours was seen as desirable for women, but only feasible if linked to a business case.

## Discussion and conclusions

The research demonstrated that sense of entitlement to support for reconciling work and family varied among the participants in different national contexts, reflecting the gender contracts underpinning welfare states and the gender-related values on which they are based. Overall, participants in Sweden and Norway, where welfare states are based on an equality contract, demonstrated a higher sense of entitlement to support from the state and for employer flexibility in terms of working hours. Conversely, most participants in Ireland, Portugal and the UK expected less from both the state and

employer, emphasizing instead self or family reliance. Sense of entitlement to support for reconciling work and family was particularly low among the Irish groups, where public policy reflected the most traditional values in relation to work and family and especially motherhood. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Reichle, 1996; Hochschild, 1997), sense of entitlement to work and family support remained gendered among these young adults, but less so in Sweden and Norway where there is strong state support for men as well as women to combine work and family roles.

This supports our hypothesis, that different welfare state regimes affect sense of entitlement to work–family support. Nevertheless, two salient factors impacting on sense of entitlement within these national contexts were the ability to make comparisons with social policy in other European countries, and the perception of economic benefits of workplace work–family arrangements to employers. Both can be explained by their impact on perceptions of feasibility of work–family supports, a crucial aspect of the social comparison process (Lerner, 1987). Awareness of supportive social policies in other countries permits social comparisons that demonstrate the feasibility of such provisions and also highlights the fact that such policies are normative in some contexts. Perception of economic benefits to employers, or the ‘business case’ for ‘family friendly’ workplace policies (Galinsky & Johnson, 1998) also enhances perceptions of feasibility and enables participants to construct employer supports as entitlements rather than favours. The impact of the ‘business case’ on sense of entitlement in some contexts suggests that many of these young adults took the employer’s perspective, even to the extent of privileging employers’ assumed needs over their own. However the sense of injustice expressed by women in Sweden and the UK when they felt that their maternity leave entitlements had been undermined by temporary employment contracts, suggests that when sense of entitlement to statutory support is well established, employer interests become less salient in the construction of what are rights or favours. Thus economic and labour market factors interact with social policy context to influence sense of entitlement to work–family support.

Employee expectations of employers are often discussed in terms of the psychological contract, that is the perception of what employers and employees owe each other, which operate informally over and above the formal contract of employment (Rousseau, 1995). The use of sense of entitlement as an explanatory framework in this article broadens discussion of employee–employer expectations by the focus on processes of social comparison within the wider social context of gender contracts implicit in different welfare state models.

Some caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings reported

here. The research revealed the ways in which these young adults talked about work and family issues and their perceived entitlements to support from their own standpoints. However, the study dealt with expectations of the future, and young people's views may change as their family situations change. There may also be discrepancies between what people say they feel entitled to expect, and what they will actually put up with (Smithson, 1999). Earlier studies have demonstrated that the area of work and family expectations is often fraught with inconsistencies (Condor, 1986; Wetherell et al., 1987). Longitudinal research, following young workers through the transition to parenthood and beyond in different national contexts, would help to elucidate the impact of social policy on sense of entitlement to work-family support and actual strategies for integrating work and family.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of this study extend previous largely quantitative research by indicating the importance of looking beyond immediate environments in examining and explaining sense of entitlement to support for work and family life. Social comparisons and perceptions of feasibility and norms are clearly not made in a vacuum and future research on sense of entitlement could expand our understanding of wider contextual influences not only in relation to work and family, but also with respect to, for example, gender relations and employment outcomes, which have tended to be the focus of previous research on sense of entitlement.

The findings have a number of potential implications for both public policy and employer policy and practice on work-family issues. European policy aims to empower those with family responsibilities and extend choice of work-family strategies. There is some evidence from this study that national social policies can indeed contribute to enhanced feelings of personal control in relation to the reconciliation of work and family. There is also evidence to suggest that communicating well-established policies such as child-care provisions and progressive parental leave regulations to those in countries with fewer provisions may increase sense of entitlement. As violation of perceived entitlement can motivate changes in behaviour, awareness of public policies elsewhere in Europe may lead to demands or campaigns for more state supports for work and family in countries with fewer state supports. Campaigns to change policy must be made in tandem with campaigns to change societal values, as state support both contributes to and is affected by the cultural construction of the gender contract. Efforts such as a highly visible campaign on long working hours, organised by a British voluntary organization, *Parents at work*, in 1995, may be useful and should be evaluated in terms of their contribution to raising awareness of, or perhaps

challenging, the assumptions and values underpinning current expectations and sense of entitlement in relation to work and family.

In the workplace, the business case is usually advocated as a way of persuading employers to implement family friendly policies and practices (Galinsky & Johnson, 1998; Bevan et al., 1999). The results of this study suggest it may also play a significant role in enhancing employees' sense of entitlement to demand or take up such policies, particularly in contexts where legitimization of work–family balance does not come from the state. The impact of communicating the business case for work–family policies could be the subject of further research. In addition, further research might examine variations in the implementation of work family benefits across firms in the same welfare state (Goodstein, 1994; Forth et al., 1997), and how perception of these impact on the sense of entitlement of employees.

While this may be an argument for the articulation and wider communication of the business case, the results also indicate two weaknesses of this argument. First, the effects are selective; less skilled workers who consider themselves least valuable to the organization benefit the least from this type of thinking. And second, in the context of globalization employers are increasingly seeking flexible labour forces, transferring risk from the organization to employees by non-permanent, contingent employment contracts, and undermining rights and expectations (Smithson & Lewis, 2000). Statutory rights, as they become internalized as sense of entitlement, however, have the capacity to reduce the impact of the business case in the construction of entitlements and rights and therefore have the potential to empower a wider range of employees.

European Directives have gone some way towards harmonizing social policies across member states, but many national differences remain. However, as welfare states as well as employing organizations are increasingly downsized (Gonyea & Googins, 1996; Quilgars & Abbott, 2000), national differences in social policy support for reconciling work and family may become increasingly irrelevant. A challenge for policy makers at European, national and organizational levels in the future will be to identify circumstances under which employees with family responsibilities can develop and sustain a sense of entitlement to the supports they need to fulfil the demands of both work and family roles, in the context of prevailing discourses of individualism and uncertainty.

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## Notes

- 1 A total of 17 percent of the participants were in temporary jobs, which is typical for young adults in this age group across the five countries (European Commission, 1997; Lewis et al., 1998).
- 2 We include age of speakers where this is possible, but this is not always possible because of the difficulties in identifying all individual speakers in focus group tapes.

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