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Workplace flexibility and communication flows: a structural view

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ABSTRACT

Informed by structuration theory, this study demonstrates how organizational structures – flexibility policies related to worker teleworking – shape communication flows of membership negotiation and activity coordination. Interviews with 53 employees from 2 large Finnish firms revealed that in the organization in which teleworking was permitted workers agentively structured their workdays to use the policy to serve both individual and organizational needs and easily adapted to coworkers' teleworking. By contrast, nearly the opposite was found in the organization that allowed teleworking only by exception; in fact, most did not value teleworking or desire additional flexibility. Through negative discourses about telework, an organizational culture that did not support flexible work was reproduced, maintaining the expectation and effect that organizational activity occurred only at the office. We conclude with practical insights concerning how differences in policies can enable co-creation of differing employee task performance and workplace relationships, and most especially employee views about work–life boundary management.

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Scholars have emphasized that more studies must simultaneously be grounded in theory while investigating practical organizational concerns to identify solutions toward improved organizational functioning, more supportive workplace relationships, and greater member satisfaction (e.g. Simpson & Seibold, 2008). Theoretically based studies focused on workplace flexibility policies have investigated how organizations accommodate their employees' work–life balance needs with flexible work options including job-sharing, condensed work schedules, part-time work (Hyman, Scholarios, & Baldry, 2005), telecommuting (Peters & Wildenbeest, 2012), maternity leaves (Buzzanell & Liu, 2007), and flexible hours (Myers, Gailliard, & Putnam, 2012). While many have touted the potential advantages of flexible policies (Burud & Tumolo, 2004; Myers et al., 2012), we know little about how policies structure organizational discourses, shape work/life boundary perceptions, and influence workplace behaviors.

Organizational policies are foundational to shaping employees' perceptions about work and personal/professional boundaries (Brebaugh & Frye, 2008; Ciulla, 2000). However, few

studies have examined how policies shape organizational culture and, in turn, interaction between employees and worker behaviors (e.g. Trefalt, 2013). One notable example, Kirby and Krone (2002), studied the power of coworker discourses in influencing whether and how employees utilized work–family policies. They showed the value of using structuration theory (ST) as a lens to understand how policies are produced and reproduced through discourse, which may lead employees not to use work–family benefits, despite existing policies that would allow it.

In this vein, we present empirical research on employees' use of workplace flexibility, framed by ST and McPhee and Iverson's (2009) theoretical sub-model that identified four flows of communication that constitute organizations. ST is touted as a useful theoretical frame to explain how structures shape interactions and behaviors that over time maintain or transform organizational communication and even the organization itself. Here, we focus specifically on how workplace flexibility, or the lack of it, enables or constrains flows of communication related to employee use of flexibility and the meaning of organizational membership. This communication shapes not only flexibility practices but also employees' desire for flexibility as they negotiate their membership. The study focuses on two Finnish companies with policies that reflect Finnish customs by allowing some temporal flexibility, but with differing policies related to the use of telecommuting. Finnish organizations provide an interesting context, given their general supportiveness toward various forms of flexible work (Pyöriä, 2011), and well-established supportiveness toward work–family policies for both genders (Eräranta, 2015). Next, we offer a brief overview of ST outlining its value toward understanding organizational interactions and flexibility.

Structuration theory

Seibold's application of ST has been wide ranging, including his collaborative work on influence processes and argument in group deliberations (Seibold & Meyers, 2007), organizational coordination and communication (Zackrisson, Seibold, & Rice, 2015), temporality in organizational workgroups (Ballard & Seibold, 2003), technology appropriation in organizational groups (Contractor & Seibold, 1993), and applied organizational communication research and engagement (Franken & Seibold, 2010; Seibold, 2016; Simpson & Seibold, 2008). Framed for this paper's concerns, ST aims to resolve the inconsistency between action- and choice-oriented ontologies of human agency, and deterministic, causal ontologies of communication behavior. ST instead posits a duality of enablement and constraint within multi-layered streams of social practice. These terms reconfigure the action/cause dichotomy as two complementary, mutually implicated aspects of social explanation. Instead of rigid contextual or cultural forces, it portrays social structure as rules and resources drawn on (but thereby constraining) competent agents in the course of communicative practices. ST defines 'rules and resources' broadly as bases of action, including material, cognitive, communicative, and relational factors in social life. Furthermore, a set of rules and resources can be schematized as sets that underlie particular practices carried out in specific types of bounded locales, or as exemplifying structural principles broadly organizing large-scale social systems. For instance, a rule forbidding telework might, as a constraint, influence an employee not to work from home, and to interpret a manager's directive to avoid telework as realistic. These possibilities can be

studied in particular practices, but they are also meaningful across, and related to fundamental principles underlying whole transnational divisions of labor. Constraining and enabling are complementary – being constrained from working at home also enables employees to rely on carpooling arrangements. This means, though, that flexible or inflexible rules both enable and constrain – more enablement of worksite choices might simultaneously constrain employee ability to count on coworkers to be present in the office for support, thereby constraining surveillance efforts. Finally, human agency leads to another feature of interaction, the duality of structuration: people are enabled and constrained both because they draw on structural resources as media of action (‘production’) and because they maintain or transform the structural resources in the very process of acting (‘reproduction’).

The duality of enablement and constraint has important implications for how ST portrays employees as communicators. The theory is well known for its analysis of agency, viewing people as neither constituted by symbolic discourses or environmental forces; not purely free agents able to do, mean, or interpret social events without limit. Rather, people rely both on ‘discursive consciousness’ to give and be guided by *accounts* of their activities and relations, and on knowledgeable ability as ‘practical consciousness’ to have a workable enough sense of their contexts to *reflexively* adjust appropriately to them.

Two other conceptions are added to these central tenets of ST. First is the fundamental insight that organizations are constituted by four analytically separable *flows* of communication – in what is called the ‘4 Flows Model’ (McPhee & Iverson, 2009; MCPhee & Zaugg, 2000):

assemblages of communication processes that may contribute to ‘flows’ of (a) membership negotiation, including especially processes that relate individuals to organizations as identifiable systems – such as role learning, power accumulation, identification and disidentification; (b) reflexive self-structuring, e.g. the processes of creating a broadly known membership boundary and determining its permeability, and of gathering information about and purposefully designing the relations among members; (c) activity coordination, i.e. especially processes of immediate, contextualized mutual adjustment to the activities of others in ways not totally guided by systemic self-structuring; and (d) institutional positioning, i.e. especially processes of individual communication that generate relations between any specified organization and its array of competitors, regulators, etc., and the more extensive institutional system – e.g. capitalism. (Schoeneborn et al., 2014)

The *membership negotiation* flow describes ‘a set of ongoing processes (intentional and unintentional) through which knowledgeable individuals and focal organizations engage, disengage, and accomplish reciprocal – but still asymmetrical – influence over the intended meanings for an individual’s participation in organizational functions’ (Scott & Myers, 2010, p. 80). It can concern many dimensions of membership (e.g. all hierarchic levels, task functions, and tenures; recognition, formal, and informal power resource distribution), and has results (conformity, promotion-seeking, and disidentification) that feed back into multiple flows. In Kirby and Krone’s (2002) study of work–family policies, participants noted how leave-taking was a membership practice that members ‘had to try to sell to [negotiate with] the rest of the crew’ (p. 62). *Reflexive self-structuring* includes formal documents and information-driven phenomena, but equally the self-structuring processes of organizational culture. Kirby and Krone reported that the ‘use versus abuse’ rule developed authoritative force as an informal but widespread ‘control

mechanism' to evaluate legitimacy of absences within the organizational culture. *Activity coordination* recognizes employee agency to creatively augment or even contravene organizational practices or even self-structures when collaborative tasks in specific contexts legitimate it. Again, Kirby and Krone found that members 'talked among each other' and 'worked out informally' whether a member's reasons for leave were legitimate – a qualitative question that no all-or-nothing rule could determine (p. 65). The fourth flow, relating the organization to other institutions, is relevant, for example, in how practices are conditioned by Finnish work culture. This issue goes beyond the limits of this paper, and is discussed only at the end. Each 'flow' can include events and practices that contribute to, or *disrupt*, processes that lead to specific membership or coordination, etc. Messages and interactions can be included in multiple flows, and any one flow can mediate others. Later, we examine how processes underlying work flexibility involve multiple intermediating flows.

Viewing workplace flexibility through a structuration lens offers insights into how flexibility policies can be regarded as both enabling and constraining. While workplace flexibility *enables* workers to perform work when, and often where, they feel they can be most productive (Fonner & Roloff, 2010), it may also *constrain* them from leaving work at the office (Ciulla, 2000). We know little about how differing flexibility policies co-act within organizational domains shaping employees' views and agency about flexibility.

Workplace flexibility

Myers et al. (2012) theorized that workplace flexibility emerges from discourse that permeates four domains: organizational policies and arrangements, workplace norms and practices, worker–supervisor relationships, and an individual's sense of agency. We use this framework to structure our discussion. In most organizations, the discourse that emerges from each of the domains introduces contradictions that perpetuate competition between work and life (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). While organizations set policies, the onus for negotiating flexibility that extends beyond those policies is placed on individual employees (Myers et al., 2012). But despite existing policies, the individual employee might not use them, as they may be constrained by organizational cultures that restrict their use (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Flexibility policies do not exist in a vacuum, but are a form of structure that is produced and reproduced by individuals in interaction with others. Therefore, it is important to study how workplace flexibility, or lack of it, enables and constrains flows of communication, which ultimately define organizational membership related to flexibility use.

In this study, we focus on how variance in policy differently structures discourses within organizational areas including supervisor–employee negotiations, practices, and worker agency. This study examines the confluence of the flows relevant to these domains, as they enable and constrain worker interactions and behaviors. Specifically, we study three flows of communication – membership negotiation, self-structuring, and activity coordination – related to workplace flexibility to determine how they are manifested in flexibility-relevant personal and social practices. We propose the following two-part research question:

RQ1: How do the three flows of communication related to workplace flexibility enable and constrain (a) supervisor–subordinate communication and (b) workers’ agentive understandings, workplace norms and practices?

Methods

Research design

We conducted interviews in two Finnish organizations chosen because their policies enabled differing levels of flexibility. In line with Finnish norms, policies at both organizations gave employees some temporal flexibility (the ability to adjust work hours). The first organization’s policies generally supported all types of flexible work, while the second was less open to flexibility, requiring most work to occur at the office.

Organization 1 is a large Finnish telecommunication company (NTOP, pseudonym). It employs 3400 employees with 1600 employees in the regional headquarters where we collected our data. According to NTOP’s formal flexible work policies: ‘The aim of flexible work is to improve the organization’s flexibility and competitiveness, to enhance the employees’ ability to manage their work, and to facilitate self-directed pacing of work.’ Their formal flexible work guidelines define flexible work as ‘work in which the working time and place can be selected individually.’ Managers are asked to discuss flexible work practices with their subordinates once or twice per year, demonstrating the manager’s support of flexible work and ensuring awareness of the supportive culture. Hence, most employees varied their hours and teleworked a few days a week.

Organization 2 is a large Finnish transportation company (FTC, pseudonym). It employs about 7000 employees worldwide, but mainly in Finland. The data collection site houses 900 employees. In contrast with NTOP, FTC has an ‘in office’ organizational culture, where work is mostly performed at the office. Although some supervisors worked outside the office, they rarely offered such flexibility to their charges. FTC also had formal policies around telework including a ‘telework agreement’ that constrained telework negotiations between supervisors and employees. The agreement reads: ‘telework can be agreed upon for employees whose work doesn’t require immediate presence at the office ... The worker decides himself/herself the place for the telework, however so that he/she can arrive at the office within reasonable time,’ signaling the importance of office presence. In addition, ‘the supervisor defines the work to be done remotely and the scope of it,’ indicating that employees have little ability to customize flexibility to fit personal needs. As a consequence, work from alternate locations was rarely supported in FTC, although supervisors could allow it.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection at both organizations began with the researchers familiarizing themselves with the work environments. We read formal company documents describing the companies’ organizational charts, structures, and work policies regarding flexibility. Interview participants were chosen with a stratified sample to cover a range of roles, organizational units, and tenures, but with the common notion that all were knowledge workers and in

roles that technically did not require their physical presence in the office to perform their duties. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews (average = 62 minutes, from 43 to 90 minutes) were conducted at NTOP offices and 27 semi-structured interviews (average = 61 minutes, from 36 to 77 minutes) with FTC employees at their offices (see Table 1 for participant demographic information). We asked participants to talk about their experiences related to flexible work, how they negotiated flexibility with their supervisor, and what practices they had in their workgroup related to flexible work, among other topics. Interviews (in total 54 hours) were conducted in the interviewees' native language, transcribed verbatim (630 single-spaced pages) and preliminarily analyzed as they were conducted, informing subsequent interviews.

After conducting all 53 interviews, we analyzed the interviews using procedures described by Huberman and Miles (2002). Our primary focus was to uncover patterns of communication flow that denoted the enabling and constraining of flexibility perceptions and behaviors among participants. We used an etic coding scheme (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) with the initial code categories informed by the flexibility domains described by Myers et al. (2012). Next, guided by our research question, we also categorized the data based on the flows of communication as described by McPhee and Iverson (2009) noting that participants' responses fit with the flows related to membership negotiation, self-structuring, and activity coordination. Next, we examined the text to detect potential patterns that reflected enabling and constraining membership perceptions and behaviors that could be traced to flexibility policy.

Table 1. Participants.

NTOP			FTC		
P	Age	F/M	P	Age	F/M
A1	32	F	B1	39	F
A2	37	F	B2	32	M
A3	50	M	B3	49	F
A4	35	F	B4	38	F
A5	26	F	B5	50	F
A6	39	F	B6	54	F
A7	44	F	B7	50	F
A8	28	M	B8	38	M
A9	47	F	B9	44	F
A10*	47	M	B10	61	M
A11	31	F	B11	49	F
A12*	36	F	B12*	57	M
A13	36	M	B13*	43	F
A14	40	M	B14	47	F
A15	44	M	B15	36	M
A16	49	M	B16*	42	F
A17	26	M	B17	27	M
A18	57	F	B18	39	F
A19	42	F	B19	46	F
A20	39	M	B20	57	F
A21*	45	M	B21	57	F
A22*	47	F	B22	30	M
A23*	40	M	B23	40	F
A24*	57	M	B24	36	M
A25*	37	F	B25*	52	M
A26*	48	M	B26*	45	F
			B27*	35	M

Note: F/M = Female/Male, * = Supervisors, P = Participants.

Results

Our research question asked how the three flows of communication related to workplace flexibility enable and constrain (a) supervisor–subordinate communication and (b) workers’ agentive understandings, workplace norms, and practices. We present the findings organized within these domains and discuss the flows of communication that enable and constrain flexibility behaviors, and also co-create the meaning of organizational membership. Flexibility policy worked to shape expectations about when and where work was to be performed. However, this flow clearly crosscuts the activity coordination and membership negotiation flows to generate differences in employee perceptions about the need for flexibility and work–life boundaries.

Supervisor–worker communication

Supervisor–worker communication exemplified a reflexive structure that can clash with traditional notions of hierarchy by diminishing supervisory control based on flexibility policies. We discovered that clashes between supervisors and workers were avoided at NTOP while the rigid telework policy ameliorated vertical relations at FTC. But while one might expect that broader work-scheduling agency for workers would lead to less control for supervisors, the actual results are more complicated.

NTOP supervisors felt that there was a structural prescription to *promote* flexible work options, by informing employees and by conveying trust. All NTOP participants mentioned that their supervisors spoke about flexible work options during team meetings, to ensure all were aware of the policy. Employees informed their supervisor, often the day before or even the same morning, about their intent to telework. A4: ‘I have never had to ask [for permission], but it is based on trust [from supervisor] and my independent evaluations, about how, where and when I get work best done ... as long as you are reachable during normal work hours.’ Supervisors commonly shared this view of mutual trust. Supervisor A21 explains this: ‘You have to have mutual trust. These people have such high work morale that they sure do their work. The most important thing is that the task gets done, no matter where and how it is done.’ This view of organizational membership supported and conveyed trust, giving workers agency to make personal choices.

In a few cases, when supervisors were not entirely supportive of flexible work, employees relied on organizational policy and coworker relationships to make personal choices. A9 discussed how members of his workgroup practiced flexwork according to the organization’s guidelines to ensure their supervisor remembers how flexibility can work in their organization and about employee options. He repeated one of his coworkers who said:

Now let’s teach him, like I don’t have to telework today, but I want to once per week so that he remembers that I am allowed to and we ask him ‘we want to utilize flexwork, our company’s policies allows that opportunity, how would you like us inform you about it?’

This example illustrates how employees with unsupportive supervisors use their agency to shape organizational membership, and successfully use flexible work when organizational policies and culture supports it.

Unsupportive supervisor attitudes were, however, a rarity at NTOP. Some supervisors even admitted that they frequently check on employees to remind them to balance work with their personal lives and draw boundaries for their organizational membership. They

also saw flexibility as something that could *constrain* employee work–life balance. Supervisor A21 confessed that she does not worry about employees slacking off, but the opposite: ‘I’m more worried about that they are so ambitious, they focus on their career. I need to tap on their shoulder and encourage them to take care of themselves ... and the other part of life.’ This and similar examples demonstrate how mutual flexibility was visible in supervisor–employee discourse, and as a result, employees perceived their supervisors’ trust and supportiveness of their use of flexibility. Home–work boundaries were relaxed with employees feeling capable of establishing when and where they worked, demonstrating how organizational boundaries are shaped through workplace discourses.

By contrast, at FTC, the policy largely reproduced rigid organizational boundaries through unsupportive supervisor subordinate communication. The majority of employees reported that flexible work required extensive negotiation. Supervisor B12 described the organization as a culture that did not support telework: ‘It has never been an accepted way of working ... I’m not sure if it’s about attitude, or control, but it just haven’t been permissible. And I think the old fashioned culture has remained; this practice just doesn’t exist within [FTC].’

With no common workplace flexibility policy, employees tried but were unsuccessful in negotiating with their supervisor about flexible work. Many mentioned a lack of trust, and supervisors who are stubborn or fear change as possible reasons. Employees reported an environment that privileged rules over employees’ personal needs and a lack of awareness that workplace flexibility could be a viable option. Discourse furthermore condoned distrust toward co-workers’ telework. The following quote by B4 is illustrative:

I have to say that every time someone stays home to telework, someone always throws in the air that ‘oh its holiday time again.’ It [flexible work] has this reputation that you do laundry, cook food and clean your apartment, while doing a little bit of work on the side.

B17 shared these perceptions: ‘In my team, it’s always the people with managerial status that teleworks a lot ... I have to say that it feels like these telework days are holidays.’

As a consequence of the negative discourse surrounding flexible work, an organizational culture that did not support flexible work was reproduced in discourses over and over again. While a minority of employees hoped for a more supportive relational environment, most employees did not consider flexible work options, because policies and discourse asserted that work occurs at the office, creating a perception that organizational membership equated to presence at the office. Thus, the policy and communication was focused on maintaining the organization, as opposed to a focus on the members’ agency to shape what it meant to be a member in the organization, as in NTOP. Most FTC participants were not comfortable making decisions that went against the organizational culture.

Worker agency

At NTOP, the self-structuring flexibility policy was reproduced in employee’s work behaviors, their attitudes about flexibility, and their perceptions of organizational membership. The policy was broad enough, and the *social* agency demands important enough, to think of this communication as activity coordination – not just policy implementation. First, the flexwork policy trusted them with broad agentic power in discursively negotiating their

work presence based on task demands, their own scheduling needs, their coworkers' needs, and also their own personal responsibilities and preferences. They rarely asked for permission, but informed their supervisor and colleagues about their plans to telework and were sensitive to negotiate work location to coordinate with others' needs and work demands. As they coordinated activities with colleagues who also drew on flexibility policies, they frequently followed four norms: (1) adjusting their own office-presence schedule to accommodate others' needs, (2) planning meetings to facilitate telework by absent members, (3) informing others of time-space constraints so that agentic adaptation could occur, and (4) trusting others' expressed needs to know when to avoid telework. A11 described how norms had an impact on meeting planning:

No we are not all here, also today, in the afternoon we have a meeting ... it will be me, my colleague and our supervisors there and, my colleague works from home, and I have included the phone number in the meeting invitation ... because I have the idea that my colleague's boss may have already left the office since it is late in the afternoon. Hence he can dial in from his car when he is on his way to get the children from daycare ... because it is a short half-hour meeting.

Accommodating others' needs was part of the activity coordination that also worked as a reflexive self-structuring process transforming workgroup norms. Another worker, A20, explained how he informed his colleagues that he typically works remotely by mid-afternoon:

I have marked in the calendar that I am working early and will pick up my children from daycare at the end of my workday at 2 PM. So based on that the time slots [for meetings] can be reserved. Of course in exceptional cases I can adapt and arrange my time differently.

While this is another example of structuring of workgroup norms, it also demonstrates employees' willingness to forego their individual preferences to meet workgroup or organizational needs. This reflected an intersection of membership with activity coordination: employees deeply internalized practices of coordinating, shared by their colleagues, that although they had the agency to choose to telework, they could trust one another to prioritize work. For instance, according to A1: 'If I have thought to have a teleworking day, and if something comes up that would be better taken care of face-to-face, then I come to the office instead ... The work always comes first.'

Most NTOP employees shared that their colleagues supported their choice to teleconference when working offsite. Several emphasized that they were reached at home as easily as at the office, and their work was as effective as – practically identical to – work performed at the office. Such arrangements distanced work and organizational membership beyond office boundaries to nontraditional hours and variable locations. A confluence occurred between membership and activity coordination because when employees worked from alternate locations or shift work hours, their absence from the workplace was easily accommodated by their coworkers; both sedimented their membership style and reproduced typical coordination practices. Simultaneously, most knew that offsite work *constrained* their office interactions. In-office work was considered foundational for their membership negotiation, specifically to develop working relationships that could sustain activity coordination beyond formal role stipulations. As A1 reported: 'All work can as well be done from home. It would only be a problem, if I never would come here [office]. I can well communicate virtually with my co-workers since I know

them.' To maximize face-to-face interaction, employees discussed how they frequently inquired about their coworkers' telework plans to guide their own telework decisions. A1 described her habits:

A moment ago I asked my colleagues if someone planned to come into the office tomorrow. And when you got more nos [than yeses], you start to look at your calendar that neither do I need to be at the office tomorrow, so I probably stay home ... since the reason to come to the office is to see people and make small talk with them.

Processes such as this one allowed employees to fulfill their membership roles while in or out the office. As A11 reported, coworker supportiveness was perceived to be important and coworkers' successful flexwork gave her the courage to do more flexwork. Thus, employees' discourse with their coworkers shaped agency in using it.

Agency in using flexibility policies also facilitated employees' sense of oneness with the organization. Employees pointed out in line with A5 how 'the fact that I am given flexibility and am trusted to be a good worker, it does make me feel that I am one with the company' and A1: 'If my employer is flexible, I am also flexible in return.' Employees at NTOP considered flexibility practices foundational for their membership including their well-being, work-life balance, and performance. While employees admitted working more hours than required (a potential constraint of flexibility), many compensated for their late hours. A18 reports: 'If I have worked on a Saturday due to a deadline, I have taken a day or a half day off in the middle of the week. These things are handled very flexible.'

NTOP workers' membership and felt agency contrasted sharply to membership practices and perceptions of FTC employees. FTC's flexibility policy created an organizational structure that severely constrained employees' telework choices and ability to negotiate their membership roles. In essence, it constrained their agency, despite a written policy giving employees the right to negotiate flexibility. Interestingly, employees reported that previously they and whole workgroups had attempted to negotiate for more flexibility, but these negotiations failed – practices did not change and eventually employees accepted their current routines. Work and organizational membership equated to being in the office. Participants acknowledged that technology would enable them to work and participate in meetings remotely, but they felt constrained because the option was not accepted by management. Beliefs supporting the formal policy emerged: only a few believed that collaborative tasks could be achieved when one or more members of the team teleworked. Several spoke about their preference to be present for face-to-face meetings with views similar to B8: 'If you have a meeting you have to come to the office. If you need to collaborate with a person, it does not work if you are at home.' Without teleworking, employees had less need to coordinate presence in the office. FTC's activity coordination practices presumed and enabled coordination based on co-presence.

In rare cases when FTC members asked to telework, they usually found their supervisors resistant. A few employees reinterpreted the need to ask for permission as a demand for (explicitly negotiated) proof that one could be trusted to work offsite. Supervisor B12 explained: 'Of course you need to negotiate beforehand ... It's a question of trust.' FTC employees were allowed to telework when they could clearly demonstrate a need to their supervisor. This was inefficient because it required an extra level of coordination and many employees found this type of negotiation stressful. According to B18:

It's always on a need basis, and that is burdensome, to always have to ask. It would be much easier if there would be a clear general approach, that would ease the employee who is in the middle of a heavy workload, to know that it's okay, that I am allowed to ... and plan to do all the peaceful thought-demanding work then [during telework]. It would definitely ease my time use. And in the end, benefit the organizational effectiveness.

Examples like these demonstrate how policy aimed to prioritize the organization over the needs of employees. The rigid policy constrained employee flexibility agency and their ability to negotiate their work–life boundaries, frequently linked to stress among workers. On a daily basis this appeared to produce longer lasting effects – employees accepted their current routines and that membership equated to presence in the office. In line with B1, most members did not consider flexible work options: 'I have always thought that it does not concern us, like I have never even thought that it [flexible work] would be possible.' Although some in supervisory roles at FTC performed work-related tasks after hours, employees reported that the lack of support or common practices around flexible work led them to not desire flexibility, to have no need or want for telework. For them, negotiated membership that included time-space constraints *enabled* them by offering protection for their personal space and personal time. They explained that they prefer separating work and leisure time and that the office was more conducive for work. B17 appreciated structures that he and many colleagues felt protected them:

We don't want it [flexwork]. We [department name] want to clock in on time cards, because that protects us, so that it is not expected from us that we would work all the time. Because we have families. We want continuity ... We have been offered to abandon the time cards to get more freedom, but as others too told me, 'keep the time card ... that's what protects you.'

This quote further demonstrates how employees had negative feelings associated with flexible work, believing that they needed to guard their personal time. The distrust employees felt constrained their openness to telework and was associated with distrust of the company concerning attempts to intrude on their personal time.

Conclusions

Overall, employees' perceptions about flexibility were linked to communication with supervisors and coworkers that shaped their agentic powers, behaviors, and relationships. In both organizations, policies were supported by discourse that framed values and norms that supplemented the policy. This informal self-structuring led employees to be cooperative in making coordination arrangements consonant with the policy. NTOP's more flexible policies enabled frequent flexwork, negotiations of coordinated presence when needed, and practices of coordinated activity to make flexibility work possible and effective. Organizational membership was inherently focused on the member. For example, much of the discourse was crosscutting between self-reflexivity and activity coordination contributing to member agency and their membership negotiation. This contributed to constituting the organization as member-focused with more individualized and work-group specific practices. FTC's low-flexibility policy focused on maintaining the organization and meant reduced agentic power to choose telework, but also fewer demands to negotiate co-presence and to guard against their employer's intrusions in their private life. Flows of communication reproduced practices that did not enable flexwork to be

part of organizational membership. Because self-structuring was clear and rigid enough, it reduced the need for coordination and overt membership negotiation.

Discussion

This study demonstrates how the effect of structure in the form of flexibility policy produced differing flows of communication in membership negotiation, reflexive self-structuring, and activity coordination. In the organization with the more flexible policy, communication flows centered on reflexive self-structuring and activity coordination, and shaped organizational membership that was inherently focused on organizational members. In the organization with a more rigid policy, organization communication flows maintained the policy and membership equated to presence at the office, which altered and constrained members from negotiating this aspect of their membership.

We offer several theoretical and practical implications. First, this study answers calls by Poole and McPhee (2005) and others to empirically examine how structures are produced and reproduced according to principles outlined by ST by examining flexibility policy within organizations. We identify ways that flexibility policies and practices are solidified and also transformed through interaction between subordinates and supervisors and also among employees themselves. In doing so, this study supports theorizing by Myers et al. (2012) who argued that flexibility is located in organizational policies and arrangements, workplace norms and practices, worker-supervisor relationships, and an individual's sense of agency – and is useful in understanding how flexibility policies become co-located within those areas of organizations through flows of communication. All four domains co-worked to enable and constrain worker behaviors as well as perceptions and interactions in and out of the office; these factors then altered the meaning of organizational membership. This demonstrates the value of studying the four domains together, and provides additional insight into the mutual entwinement of enablement and constraint. For example, we found that the reproduction of rigid organizational boundaries through employee discourse and workplace norms inherently shaped employees' non-desire for flexibility. In other words, when rigid boundaries are emphasized through flows of communication, rigidity permeates into various flexibility domains, which co-act to have powerful impacts on worker behaviors and perceptions related to flexible work. This counters resistance tendencies as described by McPhee, Poole, and Iverson (2014). Instead, norms encouraged employees to reproduce an organizational structure that was unresponsive of flexible work practices.

Related, this study also identifies processes for structuring workplace presence/absence that differ from those reported by Kirby and Krone (2002) who found that flexibility in policies allowing workers to be present versus absent – a binary choice – led to significant conflict, frustration, and social pressure among workers, often around questions of membership and policy fairness. With the telework flexibility at NTOP, there were multiple degrees and quantitative profiles of onsite/telework. Negotiation was more legitimate and wide ranging, effectively increasing it. There was more activity coordination, as workers faced the multidimensional issue of aligning schedules to allow for meetings and face-to-face collaboration, when needed. In this situation, conflict could more frequently arise due to personal styles and practices, but in this study, we did not find

evidence of this. Instead, we saw how more individualized and work group customized work practices were acceptable.

In addition, this study demonstrates ST's power to serve as a framework when studying communication surrounding workplace flexibility and its enactment, for example, to investigate perceptions of what constitutes organizational membership. Kirby and Krone (2002) identified the organizational discourse that discouraged members from utilizing recently implemented family leave policies. Workers were aware of the newly created formal structure (the paternal leave policy), but informally sanctioned expectations regarding who should and should not use it, as well as under what circumstances, and thus diminished the influence of those structures. While elements of our study contrast with Kirby and Krone's findings, our results demonstrate that policy can shape perceptions and behaviors of membership. That FTC workers had little desire for flexibility while the opposite perceptions existed at NTOP can be traced back to how workplace flexibility is produced, reproduced, and transformed through flows of communication. At a practical level, this finding has implications for management who should be guided to monitor how flexibility and other policies shape perceptions about organizational membership and how policies compete or coincide with work-life boundaries.

Second, this study demonstrates two significant effects of structural policies related to task performance and workplace relationships. With FTC's rigid structural policies, work, and presence in the office become synonymous with organizational membership. In recent years and thanks to enabling technology, many organizations offer policies that allow employees the ability to perform work at various times and locations (Burud & Tumolo, 2004). This counters the longstanding view of employee productivity declining without management's direct oversight and control over workers (Harrington & Ruppel, 1999). However, we found that employees frequently choose to prioritize work during non-work hours and at home, but also, they compensate by taking time off another time. While we found that workplace flexibility produces mutual gains for employees and employers, this potential calls for renewed concerns about the possible negative effect of flexibility, such as employee stress as a result of too much blending of work and home spheres. In other words, employees such as those at FTC may have a valid cause to protect private time.

Third, these findings have implications for the fourth communicative flow – institutional positioning. In FTC, we theorize that traditional industry constraints may have produced structures that translated into differing flexibility policies. Historically, transportation companies required employees to be co-located for access to specialized equipment, but also to serve customers in face-to-face transactions. By contrast, office workers at telecommunications companies were rarely required to perform face-to-face interactions with customers, nor did they need specialized equipment housed in a centralized location. Thus, differences in how customers are served and the use of technology may have resulted in policies rooted in the principle that work is most important and location does not matter. This implication demonstrates how organizations communicate reflective of their institutions and is consistent with institutional theory which specifies that organizations within an industry share many similarities, more so than with organizations outside their respective industries (Lammers & Barbour, 2006). Lammers and Barbour concluded that investigations into organizational practices often require a historical approach to trace

their founding and evolution within an industry and can best be evaluated using comparative data.

Fourth, this study illustrates how one flow of constitutive organizational communication can be intertwined with the others. For instance, the *self-structuring* discourse implementing flexible or inflexible work arrangements became transformed either into practices supporting schedule coordination or perceptions that coordination involving telework was impossible. A second example involves the flow of trust: trustworthiness as a *membership* trait – the foundation for flexibility at NTOP – led employees to be trusting and supportive of everyone's telework efforts and also to a general trusting *structural* management style. At FTC, distrust of members by management led employees to distrust other teleworkers as 'on holiday', blocking *coordinated* work between office and teleworking members. In sum, these flows of communication based on structural elements such as flexibility policies are constitutive of employees' behaviors, relationships with supervisors and coworkers, and perceptions about their agency and performance as organizational members.

Finally, these findings offer practical implications for management about the power of communication flows and how employees perceive and enact their membership in relation to policies. First, the findings demonstrate how, even in Finnish society that touts the value of work–life balance, employees frequently prioritize work. This may be especially true when they are given agency to define boundaries of their membership. Second, management should be concerned with how policies such as flexibility policy enable and constrain feelings of trust, perceptions of membership, and the extent that employees effectively manage their work–life boundaries. While policies that inhibit flexibility can prioritize the organization and distance between employees and management, problems also emerge when employees see little distinction between work and personal time potentially setting themselves up for burnout and turnover. Management should continuously support employee work–life balance (Hyman et al., 2005), even when policies seem to enforce flexibility limitations. Third, the strength of communication flows may be particularly apparent when policy changes are implemented. Existing discourses work to sediment current perceptions and behaviors, even when policy changes are meant to promote employee well-being. Management must promote discourse and communicate in ways that enable workers to have agency to negotiate their membership, reflexively self-structure, and coordinate their activities.

Limitations and future directions

This study is not without limitations. First, the study site was limited to two Finnish organizations. Hence the findings may not apply to organizations in other countries or even in other organizations within Finland. Second, the findings likely are limited to knowledge workers and may not apply to workers in all roles. Future research should explore flexibility structures and communication flows in other countries, industry sectors, and occupations. We acknowledge that the worker discourses could be shaped by the fact that some employees self-select an organization that matches their desire of flexibility. However, the average employment tenure was 9 years in NTOP (SD = 8.9) and 12 in FTC (SD = 10.6), after which several changes in workplace flexibility had taken place in both organizations. This is also a sufficient time for organizational culture to have an impact on the

perceptions of the individual employee. Finally, future research should examine these effects before and following the introduction of flexibility initiatives in a longitudinal study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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