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# (Un)deserving of work-life balance? A cross country investigation of people's attitudes towards work-life balance arrangements for parents and childfree employees

Silvia Filippi <sup>a,b</sup>, Mara Yerkes <sup>b</sup>, Michèlle Bal <sup>b</sup>, Bryn Hummel <sup>b</sup> and John de Wit <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization, Università degli Studi di Padova, Padova (PD), Italy; <sup>b</sup>Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

Work-life balance (WLB) represents a fundamental part of people's well-being and is a key policy priority at national and organizational levels in many industrialized countries. Yet a significant gap exists in our understanding of employees' ability to use WLB arrangements, particularly employees without children. We address this gap by exploring the perceived deservingness of childfree employees to use WLB arrangements in Italy and the Netherlands. Using a 2 × 2 experimental design, we study the perceived deservingness of childfree people to use organisational work-life balance arrangements compared to parents, with a particular focus on gender and country differences. We further investigate the attribution of priority to make use of work-life balance arrangements across these same groups. While we find no significant differences in perceptions of deservingness, the results do show significant differences in who is considered to need priority in using WLB arrangements in the workplace. Respondents attribute greater priority to female employees with children than female employees without children. The attribution of priority for male employees does not differ between parents and childfree employees. This interaction effect was only found in the Italian sample. We discuss the implications of our results for our understanding of work-life balance policy supports.

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Work-life balance; childfree; gender; deservingness; priority; workplace arrangements

## Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB), referring broadly to the way in which individuals combine paid work and commitments outside of work, is a key policy priority in the European Union (European Commission, 2019). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, European efforts to promote more sustainable forms of work-life balance through improved policy support takes on even greater importance. The increase in working from home in many countries increases the risk that employees will experience greater difficulty in

**CONTACT** Silvia Filippi  [silvia.filippi.1@phd.unipd.it](mailto:silvia.filippi.1@phd.unipd.it)  Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization, Università degli Studi di Padova, Via Venezia 8, Padova (PD) 35131, Italy

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managing the boundaries between work and private life, leading to decreased feelings of work-life balance (Mellner et al., 2015), difficulties that have increased during COVID-19 (e.g. Hjalmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020). Individuals with higher levels of perceived WLB can experience multiple positive effects, including job and life satisfaction and increased productivity at work (e.g. Haar et al., 2014). In contrast, work-life imbalance can lead to role conflict and role stress when work-roles and life-roles are perceived to be incompatible (Jones & Burke, 2006). Poor work-life balance is also associated with negative work-related physical health outcomes, such as increased blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol levels and psychological problems, such as mood changes, anxiety, substance dependence, and substance abuse (Allen et al., 2000; Frone, 2000; Lunau et al., 2014).

Extant work-life balance research, while both broad and detailed in scope, primarily focuses on couples with children (Casper et al., 2007; Crompton & Lyolette, 2006; Wierda-Boer et al., 2009). Indeed, work-family scholars have called for greater attention to kin work (i.e. informal care; Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020) as well as for less traditional families and individuals, including working adults without children (Verniers, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2017). The fragmented attention for the work-life balance of individuals without children stems, in part, from a clash between the conceptualization of work-life balance and empirical studies on this topic. Conceptually, the term work-life balance includes all facets of work and private life; empirically the focus is on paid work in relation to household work, family, and care (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Aspects such as informal care, leisure or volunteer work receive significantly less attention (Eikhof, Warhurst, & Haunschild, 2007; Verbakel, 2018; Yerkes et al., 2018).

The limited attention for this topic is surprising given the rise in childlessness in all western countries (Eurostat, 2018; Frejka & Sobotka, 2008)<sup>1</sup> and the fact that work-life balance policies, for example in the form of flexible working, are desired by employees both with and without children (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). Yet 'research on work-life balance has focused almost exclusively on the work-family conflict among parents and failed to include workers without children' (Verniers, 2020, p. 107), contributing to a persistent focus on family and care issues in work-family research, with some exceptions (e.g. Verniers, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2017). The undertaking of research on WLB among individuals without children can help attenuate this bias by shifting focus from a narrow conceptualisation towards a broader focus that accounts for the difficulties all workers face in making time for responsibilities outside of work.

The current study aims to make an empirical and theoretical contribution by focusing on childfree employees and the perceived deservingness of these employees to make use of work-life balance arrangements within organizations. Empirically, we use experimental data collected in Italy and the Netherlands to investigate the extent to which the perceived deservingness of employees to use organizational work-life balance arrangements differs across parental status as well as gender. We investigate the extent to which employees with children are attributed priority in accessing work-life balance arrangements at the workplace compared to employees without children, and whether this differs when the employee being considered is male or female. This empirical contribution also provides a theoretical contribution, whereby we explore the possible extension of the perceptions of deservingness literature (e.g. Laenen & Roosma, 2022; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017) to the workplace. The Netherlands and Italy offer a salient

comparison for this topic given high rates of voluntary childlessness (Sobotka, 2017) in contrasting cultural and work-family contexts (Knijn & Saraceno, 2010; Leitner, 2003).

### **Work-life arrangements in the workplace in relation to deservingness and priority**

While employers increasingly offer work-life balance policies such as paid leave or the right to request flexible working (e.g. den Dulk et al., 2018), these are primarily designed to help parents (and in limited measure, caregivers) balance work and family requirements (Feeney & Stritch, 2019; Mitchell, 1997). These policies differ from work-life balance policies not explicitly related to care, which support the balance of paid work and private life more broadly (Casper et al., 2007). As a result, there is a discrepancy between the concept of work-life balance, the recognition of the need for work-life balance for all employees, and policy support for work-life balance in practice. This discrepancy is also evident in the uptake of work-life arrangements, with parents more likely than employees without children to make use of work-life benefits (Konrad & Yang, 2012; Young, 1999) even though employees with and without care responsibilities can benefit from such policies (Williams & Multhaup, 2018).

Stereotypical ideas of employees without children help to maintain parent-focused work-life balance policies and practices. In many contexts, individuals without children are viewed as 'childless', suggesting an absence of something that is naturally expected, thereby going against gendered norms of womanhood (Verniers, 2020) and social norms of parenthood (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). The term childfree, which we use here, refers to women and men without children (biological or otherwise), while noting that the term can also mask potential variation within the category of childfree individuals (including involuntary vs. voluntary childfree and those who are temporarily childfree but may later become parents; Verniers, 2020). Experimental research shows that childfree people are perceived less favourably than parents and are seen to be psychologically unfulfilled for violating prescribed social roles (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). Moreover, work is often considered to be a central pillar of the identity of employees without children, due to the absence of a family or care responsibilities. This perception of work is often embedded in both society as a whole and in childfree individual's self-identity (Park, 2005), although the meaning ascribed to work can differ between women and men (Schmidt, 2016). Indeed, at the societal level, in comparison to mothers, women who choose to not have children are seen as less psychologically fulfilled, more materialistic and immature (Kemkes, 2008), emotionally unstable and selfish (Wood & Newton, 2006), and even unfeminine (Somers, 1993). Strong gender stereotypes are also evident in the workplace, which can extend to women and men's parental status. Men's performance at work is more often assessed based on competence, whereas women's performance at work is assessed based on warmth (Meeussen, Van Rossum, Van Laar, & Derks, 2022) as well as their morality and sociability (Prati et al., 2019). Moreover, mothers who work are viewed as less competent parents than mothers who are not in paid employment. This assumption of being a 'bad parent' only applies to mothers, not fathers (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). Women without children are also often negatively stereotyped in the workplace (Verniers, 2020). For women, having children is viewed as an integral part of their gender role; the stereotype linked to men is more connected

with career achievement rather than children (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). These workplace stereotypes are related to dominant gender stereotypes in society and individual beliefs about appropriate roles for men and women and decisions around childbearing (Coleman & Franiuk, 2011; Van Engen et al., 2012).

These stereotypes matter for perceptions of employees with and without childcare responsibilities. The continued emphasis on working parents in organizational practice and their greater utilization of work-life benefits has led to the so-called 'work-family backlash' (Young, 1999). This term reflects the push-back from childfree employees who feel they are penalized in the workplace for not having children, for example by having to work additional hours or cover for colleagues with childcare responsibilities if they need more time for care (Perrigino et al., 2018; Young, 1999). In this context, empirical insight into the perceived deservingness of employees without children to make use of organizational work-life arrangements is warranted as it can help raise awareness of the deservingness of both parents and workers without children to use work-life balance policies, such as flexible work policies (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). It can also draw attention to an understudied aspect of gender inequality in the workplace, namely the varying penalties women with and without children face (Verniers, 2020). Given the limited literature on work-life balance arrangements for employees without children, we draw on multiple related literatures to develop a useful theoretical framework, including deservingness heuristics developed in studies of the welfare state, and psychological and sociological literature on attitudes towards childless individuals.

### **Deservingness of work-life balance support**

The concept of deservingness has been widely applied in welfare state analyses to account for variations in who is perceived to be more or less deserving of policy support and why (e.g. Van Oorschot, 2002; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). The wealth of deservingness research shows we make important distinctions between those we consider to be more deserving of social policy support (e.g. the elderly, children, or sick and disabled people) and those we consider to be less deserving (e.g. the unemployed). Deservingness judgments are generally based on five criteria: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need (CARIN criteria; see also van Oorschot, 2000). Control (or lack of control) is one of the most important conditions for perceptions of deservingness. Individuals or groups perceived to be personally responsible for their situation (hence in control) are seen to be less deserving of policy support (van Oorschot, 2000). When individuals or groups are seen to be more (or less) likeable and grateful (attitude), people similarly perceive them to be more (or less) deserving of support (van Oorschot, 2000). Deservingness is further related to perceived reciprocity, that is, the extent to which people (are perceived to) do something in return for the support they receive (van Oorschot, 2000). For example, older workers are perceived to be more deserving than younger workers because they have contributed to the welfare state through years of employment, although expected contributions in the future can also be important for perceived reciprocity (van Oorschot, 2000). Identity also plays an important role in deservingness attributions. The more we identify with particular individuals or groups, the higher our willingness to support them (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; van Oorschot, 2000). Lastly, our perception of people's perceived need is an important driver of deservingness attributions;

the more help we think people need, the more likely we are to support them getting that help (van Oorschot, 2000).

We extend the idea of perceptions of deservingness to the workplace to investigate people's evaluation of the deservingness of childfree individuals to use work-life balance policies in the workplace. The extension of this idea is innovative and exploratory. The CARIN criteria were developed to study deservingness of welfare state policies, provided by the government. This concept has, to the best of our knowledge, not been applied to the workplace. Extending the concept of deservingness to work organizations rests on the assumption that workplace policies are similar to welfare state policies, although this assumption can be questioned. We return to this issue in the discussion.

Studies show that attitudes towards childfree people change depending on whether having children is seen to be a voluntary or involuntary decision, an effect which is stronger for childfree women than for men (Doyle et al., 2013; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995). While involuntarily not having children is often legitimized, a person that voluntarily decides not to have children is still perceived more negatively (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995), particularly women who remain childfree as this goes against gender norms (Bays, 2018; Verniers, 2020). Given this negative evaluation attributed to voluntary childfree individuals, we focus on potential variation in the perceived deservingness of these individuals compared to parents. Indeed, we expect the perceived deservingness of WLB arrangements attributed to childfree individuals to be lower than that attributed to workers with children for two reasons. First, voluntarily childfree individuals are assumed to deviate from the social norm in two ways: by not having children, and by not *wanting* them (Veevers, 1980). Further, while childfree people may be equally in need of possibilities to balance work-life and thus need work-life balance support, their needs may not be perceived as equally important as those of parents (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). Given the absence of childcare obligations, the non-work time of childfree employees is presumed to be free time (Wilkinson et al., 2017). We expect childfree people to be perceived as less deserving to use work-life balance arrangements in the workplace (**H1a**). We expect this relationship to be stronger for childfree women than for childfree men (**H1b**).

## Priority in using work-life balance arrangements

The limited literature on attitudes towards childfree individuals suggests the need to distinguish between the perceived deservingness to use work-life arrangements and the priority attributed to different groups in using these arrangements. While these two aspects could be related, attributing priority is not necessarily a result of perceived deservingness. For example, while being childfree is increasingly socially acceptable, strong social norms around parenthood and being childfree remain (e.g. Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). In the organisational context, stereotypes of childfree employees related to their work-life balance could lead to lower attributions of priority because their work-life balance concerns may not be viewed as socially legitimate over the work-life balance concerns of colleagues with children (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). A qualitative study by Wilkinson et al. (2017) suggests that working single adults without children feel that only certain activities, such as those related to family and care responsibilities, are legitimate reasons to take time off from work. Self-oriented activities (relaxing, seeing friends,

exercising), are seen as less legitimate and not urgent reasons to take time off work or to refuse extra work (Wilkinson et al., 2017). As a result, they feel unable to ask for working time flexibility or to refuse employer requests to work more hours. These views could lead to childfree workers being attributed lower priority when accessing work-life balance arrangements in the workplace. Based on these findings, we expect that within the workplace, the work-life balance needs of parents will be prioritized over those of childfree employees (**H2a**). In line with the gendered nature of attitudes towards childfree individuals outlined above, we also expect this relationship to be stronger for childfree women than for childfree men (**H2b**).

### Cross-national differences in deservingness and priority

There is an absence of comparative research into the deservingness and prioritizing of childfree individuals to use work-life balance policy supports within the workplace. Drawing on extant literature on cross-national differences in work-family cultures, work-family policies, and welfare state deservingness, it is reasonable to expect cross-national differences in deservingness and priority at work. Countries differ significantly in their work-family cultures (i.e. the extent to which individuals are expected to prioritize work or family; see, for example, Ollier-Malaterre, 2018) and they differ in the extent to which national policies support the reconciliation of work and care (den Dulk & Peper, 2016). Studies further suggest an important relationship exists between work-family culture and the use of work-life balance arrangements in the workplace (e.g. Hobson, 2014). Similarly, national work-life policies have been found to be an important driver of the adoption of work-life balance policies at work (den Dulk et al., 2013). The link between this national context and perceptions of deservingness and priority in organizations and how these perceptions potentially differ across countries is less clear, however.

Welfare state research suggests that people evaluate individuals as being more or less deserving (deservingness perceptions), and how groups are evaluated can vary across country contexts (van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017; Laenen and Roosma, 2022). Moreover, the literature on attitudes towards childfree individuals (e.g. Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007) suggests key cross-national differences exist in individuals' acceptance of diverging family forms, like families without children. Northern and Western European societies (e.g. in the Netherlands) generally have more positive attitudes towards being childfree than Southern European countries (e.g. Italy) and Eastern European countries (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012). Indeed, Southern European societies tend to have stronger pronatalist attitudes, which encourage having children (Jones & Brayfield, 1997). Relatedly, Castles (2003) argues that cross-country variation in fertility rates across Northern and Southern Europe reflects national differences in cultural values, economic structures, and social policies. Combining these literatures, it is reasonable to expect cross-national differences in the attribution of deservingness and priority between Italy and the Netherlands. In line with this reasoning, investigating if the attribution of priority and deservingness related to work-life balance arrangements in pro-natalist countries (like Italy, Jones & Brayfield, 1997) differs from less pro-natalist countries (like the Netherlands, Jones & Brayfield, 1997) can provide useful insights into potential cross-national differences in perceptions of deservingness related to childbearing.



Despite recent legislative changes, the work-family culture in Italy is characterized by its persistent gendered and familialistic nature, with little work-family support, and a strong emphasis on the family (Riva, 2016). A gendered work-family culture also exists in the Netherlands, but with slightly better work-family policy support (Yerkes & den Dulk, 2015) and a work-family culture that favours individualisation and freedom of choice (Knijn & Saraceno, 2010). As Italy is more strongly characterized by its emphasis on the family and a lower acceptance of being childfree than the Netherlands, we hypothesize that the gap between childfree employees and parents for both perceived deservingness (**H3a**) and prioritization (**H3b**) will be higher in Italy than in the Netherlands.

## Methods

Given the crucial context of workplace support for work-life balance (den Dulk et al., 2018), in the present study we aim to explore the attribution of deservingness of work-life balance arrangements for voluntarily childfree employees compared to employees with children.

## Recruitment and participants

Data for this exploratory study were collected between March and May of 2020, using convenience sampling (Etikan, 2016), meaning the data collected are non-random. Recruitment channels were the same across countries, with respondents widely recruited via social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and via e-mails to colleagues and research networks. These networks included the colleagues both nationally and internationally of authors 1 and 2. Despite similar recruitment channels, participants self-selecting into participation could have different individual characteristics, also given their varying positions in academia. The generalizability of the empirical results is therefore limited. Eligibility criteria for participating in the survey were age (i.e. respondents needed to be 18 years or older), and residency (i.e. in either Italy or the Netherlands). Respondents were recruited in their own language (Italian/Dutch). A total of 411 respondents participated in the survey (278 Italian/133 Dutch); 111 respondents did not complete the survey and could not be included because of missing data on key variables. Outliers were identified using Cook's distances (i.e. standardized Cook's values larger than 3), resulting in the exclusion of 12 respondents. The final analytic sample totalled 288 respondents (187 Italian and 101 Dutch respondents), of whom 80% identified as female and 20% identified as male. Descriptive information on the sample can be found in Table 1. We control for

**Table 1.** Descriptive sample statistics.

	Italian respondents ( <i>N</i> = 187)		Dutch respondents ( <i>N</i> = 101)	
	<i>N</i>	%/SD	<i>N</i>	%/SD
Sex (Female)	150	80.2%	81	80.2%
Age	35.1	13.5	35.1	13.2
Children	62	33.2%	42	41.6%
Educational level Low	77	41.2%	1	1.0%
Intermediate	95	50.8%	11	10.9%
High	15	8.0%	89	88.1%



differences across the samples in key socio-demographic characteristics (age, relationship status, urbanization of area of residence, employment status, and income), discussed below.

## Design and procedures

This study used a cross-sectional experimental design and was implemented through the online data collection platform Qualtrics. Participants could only begin the survey after reading a participant information sheet and providing informed consent. The informed consent form contained limited information on the purpose of the study to avoid biased responses. The survey began with a short text in which participants were introduced to a protagonist (i.e. a fictitious person within the workplace). In this introduction, the gender (male vs. female) and parental status (with children vs. childfree) of the protagonist were manipulated among the research participants. The manipulation makes the voluntary nature of not having children explicit by emphasizing the protagonist's choice to not have children: *'John/Mary has decided to not have children'*.

Subsequently, all participants answered questions pertaining to the protagonist's deservingness and priority for WLB arrangements. The survey ended with a few demographic questions. After finishing the survey, participants were thanked for their participation and were fully informed about the true aim of the study.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University.

## Materials

### *Experimental conditions*

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of the  $2 \times 2$  experimental design (protagonist gender (male/female)  $\times$  protagonist parental status (parent/no children)). The text provided to respondents differed across each condition. Each text contained a brief description of a hypothetical full-time working woman or man (*Mary vs. John*, names translated to Dutch and Italian), who had either two children or no children; the age of the protagonist was not specified. The description read as follows:

*John/Mary is a full-time worker in a well-known business company. John/Mary has decided to not have children/has two children. Recently, he/she decided he/she would like to have more free time for himself/herself to recover from work, relax, and spend time on his/her hobbies. At the same time, he/she does not want to give up his/her current job. He/she would like to make use of work-life arrangements available from his/her employer to find a better balance between work and his/her private life (e.g. flexible working time, more vacation, or sabbatical).*

### *Attention check*

After reading the text, respondents completed an attention check to assess if the information presented on the protagonist's gender, parental status and work status was understood correctly: *'Does John/Mary work part-time or full-time?'; 'How many children does John/Mary have?'*. If respondents answered incorrectly, they were reminded of the

gender-specific name (John or Mary), parental status, and/or full-time working hours of the protagonist in their experimental condition. They could then go on to complete the questionnaire.

### **Perception of deservingness and priority of WLB arrangements**

To measure perceptions of deservingness and priority of WLB arrangements, respondents subsequently answered six questions: ‘Responding on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. John/Mary has priority over other colleagues when /deserves to make use of: 1. Arranging his/her working time; 2. Requesting to work from home; 3. Taking leave from work (e.g. arranging holidays, or sabbatical)’. The mean scores for deservingness and priority were calculated based on scores of deservingness ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and priority ( $\alpha = .93$ ) for flexible working arrangements, working from home and leave arrangements.

### **Socio-demographic characteristics of participants**

We explored potential confounding socio-demographic characteristics, including age, relationship status (being in a relationship (i.e. married, legal partnership, cohabitating) versus not being in a relationship (i.e. being single, legally separated, divorced, widowed or other; reference category)); adapted from the European Social Survey (ESS)); urbanization of area of residence (urban area (i.e. large city or suburbs of a large city) versus non-urban area (i.e. small cities, country towns and the countryside; reference category)); adapted from ESS, 2016); employment status (currently employed (including sick leave or parental/maternity/paternity leave) versus currently not working (student, unemployed or other; reference category)); and income (measured on an ordinal scale from 1 to 10, using income categories specific to Italy and the Netherlands and adapted from the ESS, 2016).

## **Results**

### **Deservingness and priority to use WLB arrangements**

All data were analysed using SPSS version 26.0. Table 2 shows all descriptive statistics and ranges for the full sample per country. Respondents generally perceived employees presented in the various scenarios to be deserving of WLB arrangements and Italian respondents generally had higher scores of deservingness and priority than Dutch respondents ( $M = 7.33$ ,  $SD = 1.76$  (Italy);  $M = 6.37$ ,  $SD = 3.53$  (the Netherlands)) and were unlikely to attribute priority to use WLB arrangements ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 2.62$  (Italy);  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD =$

**Table 2.** Mean scores, standard deviations and ranges of deservingness and priority.

	Italian ( $N = 187$ )			Dutch ( $N = 101$ )		
	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD
Deservingness	0–10	7.33	1.76	0–10	6.37	3.53
Priority	0–9.67	4.10	2.62	0–9	3.13	2.45

2.45 (the Netherlands)). Finally, deservingness and priority for WLB arrangements are positively correlated ( $r = .17; p < .01$ ), indicating that when people attribute higher deservingness, they also tend to attribute higher priority.

### **Randomization checks**

We performed several generalized linear models (GLMs) and chi-square tests to check whether the randomization of our experimental conditions was successful. This check was done in relation to key socio-demographic variables of the respondents, including gender, educational level, political orientation, parental status and religion. We found no significant differences on these variables across the four conditions. We did, however, find significant differences between the Italian and Dutch samples: Dutch respondents were higher-educated ( $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 196,483, p = .000$ ), more often in a relationship ( $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 22,509, p = .000$ ), less religious ( $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 86,514, p = .000$ ) and generally had a higher income  $F(1, 141) = 24,353, p = .000$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .145$  than the Italian respondents.

### **Protagonist parental status and gender on perceived deservingness and priority of WLB**

A GLM with protagonist gender (male vs. female) and protagonist parental status (parent vs. childfree), controlling for participant parental status and participant gender was used to test perceived deservingness of WLB. Moreover, we tested the potential role of participants' country as a moderator. These scores showed no significant main effects of the protagonist's parental status,  $F(1, 278) = 1.252, p > .26$ , protagonist gender,  $F(1, 278) = 2.274, p > .13$ , or their interaction,  $F(1, 278) = 2.54, p > .05$ , on the extent to which respondents view the protagonist portrayed in the experimental condition to be deserving of work-life balance arrangements within the workplace. Moreover, while no effects were found for respondent's gender or parental status ( $ps > .10$ ), a significant country effect was found,  $F(1, 278) = 16.26, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . In Italy, in general, people found the protagonists described in the experimental condition to be more deserving of WLB arrangements ( $M = 7.35, SD = 1.77$ ) than in the Netherlands ( $M = 6.08, SD = 3.62$ ).

In a similar GLM for priority ratings, we also found no significant main effects of the protagonist parental status,  $F(1, 278) = 2.57, p > .10$ , or protagonist gender,  $F(1, 278) = 0.02, p > .89$ , on ratings of priority for work-life balance arrangements. Moreover, while no effects were found for respondent's gender or parental status ( $ps > .53$ ), a significant country effect was found,  $F(1, 278) = 14.81, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . In Italy, people rated priority for WLB arrangements to be higher overall ( $M = 4.13, SD = 2.64$ ) than in the Netherlands ( $M = 3.00, SD = 2.25$ ).

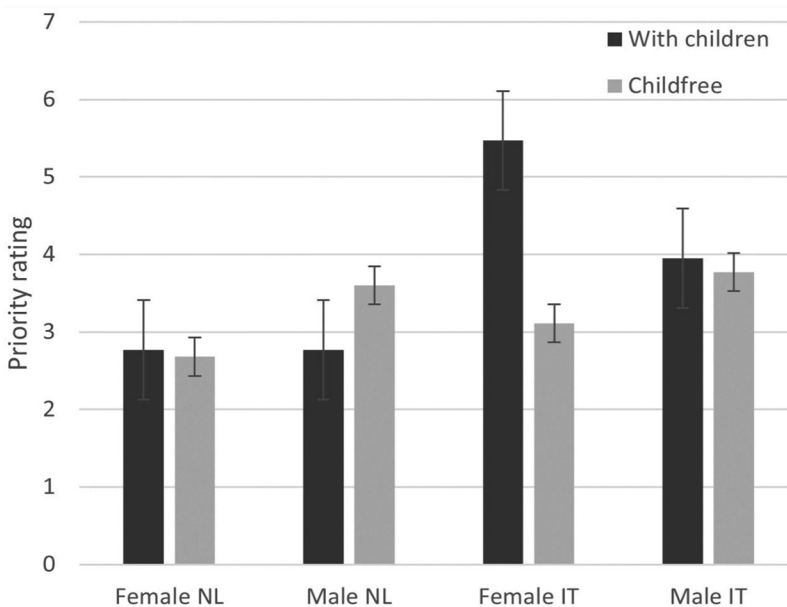
Despite the absence of main effects of protagonist gender and protagonist parental status, we did find a significant two-way interaction of protagonist parental status and protagonist gender on respondents' priority rating,  $F(1, 278) = 8.04, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Respondents rated the priority of the female protagonist higher when she had children ( $M = 4.24, SE = .33$ ) than when she did not have children ( $M = 2.92, SE = .31$ ),  $F(1, 278) = 9.66, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . This effect was not significant for the male protagonist ( $p > .37$ ). Furthermore, in the childfree experimental condition, respondents rated the priority of the

male protagonist ( $M = 3.81, SE = .31$ ) higher than that of the female protagonist,  $F(1, 278) = 4.80, p < .03, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . This effect was not significant for protagonists with children ( $p > .06$ ).

Interestingly, this two-way interaction was qualified by a three-way interaction of protagonist gender, protagonist parental status, and country,  $F(3, 278) = 4.60, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . To further interpret this interaction, we ran a GLM for the two countries separately, including all other variables. In the Netherlands, no significant two-way interaction of protagonist parental status and protagonist gender was found,  $F(1, 94) = 1.25, p > .26$ . In Italy, a significant two-way interaction was found,  $F(1, 182) = 11.48, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, respondents rated the priority of the female protagonist higher when she had children ( $M = 4.24, SE = .33$ ) than when she did not have children ( $M = 2.92, SE = .31$ ),  $F(1, 182) = 25.32, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .12$ . This effect was not significant for the male protagonist ( $p > .78$ ). Furthermore, when the protagonist had children, respondents rated the priority of the female protagonist to be higher than that of the male protagonist ( $M = 3.81, SE = .31$ ),  $F(1, 182) = 11.61, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . This effect was not significant for childfree protagonists ( $p > .17$ ). The two-way interaction of protagonist parental status and protagonist gender found in the general sample thus seems to be driven mainly by the responses of the Italian respondents.

## Discussion and conclusion

Despite extensive research on work-life balance, still relatively little is known about the work-life balance of individuals without children. Work-family research has only recently



**Figure 1.** The three-way interaction of protagonist gender, protagonist parental status, and country for respondents' priority ratings for WLB arrangements. Note: Sample means are presented in the bars and standard errors in the error bars.

started to move beyond the dichotomy of work and family responsibilities to look more broadly at work-life issues (Fisher, Bulger, & Smith, 2009), against a background of increasing family diversity and the rise in households without children (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). With this study, we attempted to further a broader understanding of work-life balance by investigating perceptions of deservingness of and priority for using WLB arrangements of childfree employees. We further studied whether the attribution of deservingness and priority differs based on gender.

Using an experimental design, we manipulated the gender (male vs. female) and parental status (parent vs. childfree) of one fictitious user of WLB arrangements in the workplace. The results revealed a significant gender difference in the rating of priority based on parental status. Respondents attributed greater priority to female employees with children than childfree women. We did not find a similar attribution of priority for male employees. These results are in line with previous findings that show women face significant gender stereotypes in the workplace, particularly in relation to childcare (O'Brien, Brandth, & Kvande, 2007). In line with our third hypothesis, this result differed across countries. The greater priority attributed to female employees with children over childfree women was limited to the Italian sample; Dutch respondents did not attribute higher priority for WLB arrangements based on the protagonist's gender or parental status. Greater public acceptance of voluntarily not having children in the Netherlands (Noordhuizen et al., 2010) could be a crucial factor in explaining these findings. In fact, in the last 30 years, the acceptance of voluntary childfree people has increased substantially in the Netherlands, rising from only 20 per cent in the 1960s up to 90 per cent in early 2000 (Noordhuizen et al., 2010). In contrast, while the acceptance of couples who remain childfree has also increased in Italy, an implicit stereotype remains that sees parenthood as some kind of moral obligation, especially for women (Pacilli et al., 2018).

These findings contribute to the work-family literature arguing for a broader view of work and valued activities outside of work (e.g. Hobson, 2014) and helps to raise awareness of the needs of diverse groups of workers, including those without children (Williams & Multhaup, 2018; Vernier, 2020). Such research is crucial as access to WLB arrangements is increasingly recognized as a right of all individuals, highlighted by passage of the 2019 European directive on WLB, for example (European Parliament, 2019). Yet WLB arrangements are unevenly implemented across workplaces (den Dulk et al., 2018). Taking time off from work or reconciling work with one's private life is often difficult in societies or organisations that reward workers who are able to devote more time and energy to work (Blair-Loy, 2003). These so-called ideal worker norms in most capitalist societies and economies create expectations of prioritizing work, an issue faced by all workers, not just parents (Williams & Multhaup, 2018). 'Today's ideal worker is someone who is available all of the time and anywhere – perpetually connected to the workplace' (Chung et al., 2022, 4). These ideal worker norms can make it difficult to prioritize care work or other priorities, such as self-care. By giving attention to an under-researched group of employees, our analysis contributes to a broader understanding of the difficulties all workers face in reconciling their work and private lives. It also provides an empirical base for academic and societal discussions around 'ideal' worker norms arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for a re-evaluation of conventional work arrangements and the centrality of work in workers' lives (Chung et al., 2022).

We note a number of limitations to our study. First, an issue of sampling bias arises as data were collected from a convenience sample (e.g. through social media) rather than a probability sample, therefore respondents are not randomly selected. This self-selection into participation means some groups may have been excluded (Etikan, 2016), such as lower-educated individuals in the Dutch sample. Comparatively, convenience sampling produced important differences between the Italian and Dutch samples in gender, age, and educational level. Both of these aspects of convenience sampling affect internal validity, i.e. the generalizability of our results. For example, the over-representation of women in our study could be partially responsible for the difference in attributed priority to the protagonist with children (e.g. in line with the literature on the motherhood guilt phenomenon, Aarntzen, van der Lippe, van Steenbergen, & Derks, 2021; Sullivan, 2014). Moreover, people with a higher level of schooling in the Dutch sample may have already been familiar with the research topic. Additionally, both external validity (i.e. generalizability) and internal validity (i.e. response bias) were potentially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as this could have limited respondents' willingness to take part in the survey, leading to the over-representation of those groups who chose to participate. To overcome these limitations, we controlled for socio-demographic characteristics and the results remained the same. We cannot exclude the possibility, however, that convenience sampling has led us to include outliers or other biases not controlled for (Etikan, 2016), also comparatively, therefore caution should be used when interpreting the findings. Despite the limitations highlighted, a convenience sample can be useful for gathering a variety of attitudes and opinions as well as identifying tentative hypotheses that can be examined more rigorously in future studies (Galloway, 2005). Another limitation relates to the age of the protagonist being implied rather than explicit in our experimental design. Future research could be more explicit about the age of the protagonist of the experimental manipulations. Future studies could also explicitly vary the age ranges in the manipulations to explore potential variation in the perceived deservingness or priority of workers to make use of WLB arrangements across multiple life course stages. Lastly, a further limitation of this study is its exploratory nature, extending the idea of welfare state deservingness to the workplace. In doing so, it implicitly treats employer provision of WLB policies as similar to the provision of welfare state policies. Yet employers in public, private, and non-profit sectors can have varying motives for offering WLB policies (den Dulk et al., 2018), and thus it may be difficult to transfer the idea of deservingness criteria to the workplace. We attempted to address this issue through consultation with deservingness scholars in developing the workplace deservingness items. Future research could control for variation in the availability of workplace WLB arrangements by including items on whether respondents are working in organizations that offer WLB policies.

Limitations aside, our study provides insights for future research into the work-life balance needs of employees without children. As rates of people without children increase in many countries, understanding differences in the perceived deservingness of employees without children to equally make use of organizational work-life balance arrangements as employees with children is important. Our study further suggests fruitful theoretical insights can be gained by extending the perceptions of deservingness literature from the welfare state to the workplace. From a policy and gender equality perspective, governments and organizations interested in promoting workers' well-being at work and at home can use the results of this study to evaluate the ways in which to address the

work-life balance needs of a diverse range of employees in differing family settings. In the context of changing work configurations within organisations as many employees return to the workplace and/or the use of hybrid work options in a post-pandemic world, such research could take on increased urgency.

## Note

1. The increase in the number of individuals without children is generally ascribed to two social processes: an increase in the number of voluntary childfree individuals and declining fertility rates, which are a reflection of a growth in involuntary and voluntary childfree individuals. Explanations for these developments relate to both individual characteristics (e.g. difficulties in having children, postponing childbearing, absence of a stable partnership [Graham et al., 2013; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008]) and structural conditions (e.g. women's increased participation in education, the increase in women's employment, and higher autonomy career aspirations [Duncan & Phillips, 2008; Akmam, 2002; Keizer et al., 2008]). For detailed information on variation in fertility rate decline, see OECD, 2021.

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## Notes on contributors

**Silvia Filippi** is a PhD candidate in Psychological Sciences (since 1 October 2020) at the University of Padua, Italy. One of her key study areas is the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and people's well-being. Specifically, she focuses on how people's well-being is influenced by social and organizational environments, with a special focus on how these contexts affect people's ability to balance work and private life. She is also interested in topics related to economic inequality and wealth redistribution. Within this field, she studies how economic disparity shapes people's preferences for redistribution and how communication strategies can increase people's tax compliance and their support for progressive taxation.

**Mara A. Yerkes** is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science at the Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her research centres on the two broad themes of comparative social policy and social inequalities. Yerkes is the principal investigator of the ERC project CAPABLE, a comparative study on gender inequalities in work-life balance in eight European countries, and of COVID19 Gender (In)equality Survey Netherlands (CoGIS), a longitudinal research project involving researchers from Utrecht University and Radboud University Nijmegen. Yerkes is the author of three books, including *Transforming the Dutch Welfare State: Social Risks and Corporatist Reform* (2011; Policy Press), co-editor of *The Transformation of Solidarity. Changing Risks and the Future of the Welfare State* (2011; Amsterdam University Press), and co-editor of the book *Social Policy and the Capability Approach* (2019; Policy Press). She has published a wide range of book chapters and articles, in journals such as *Community, Work and Family*; *European Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Gender, Work and Organization*; *Journal of Comparative Welfare Studies*; *Journal of European Social Policy*; *Journal of Social Policy*; *Journal of Sociology*; *PlosOne*; *Policy and Politics*; *Social Policy and Administration*, and is the author of the *Social Policy* entry for Oxford University Press's *Online Bibliographies in Sociology*.



**Michèle Bal** As of February 2016 Michèle is working as an Assistant Professor in ISS – Public Health at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on perceptions of justice and injustice. She addresses questions, such as: What do people consider just and why? And how do people deal with a confrontation with injustice? She is currently working on three broad topics, all focusing on perceptions of (in)justice. First, she studies how perceptions of justice and injustice play a role in sustainable behavioral decisions. Second, she investigates how (in)justice perceptions influence processes of radicalization and polarization. Third, she examines to what extent feelings of relative deprivation can help explain inequities in health and well-being. As an Assistant Professor, she is also involved in different courses on the philosophy of (social) science and social justice and she supervises BA and MA students in their thesis research. Before working at Utrecht University, Michèle obtained a PhD at the Utrecht University with a project on the psychological processes that play a role in victim-blaming and victim support after which she worked for several years as an Assistant Professor in Criminology at Leiden University.

**Bryn Hummel** is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam University Medical Centre (since June 1st, 2021). Her PhD concerns sex- and gender differences in the care for people with suspected cardiovascular disease, focusing on the diagnostic process within the primary care setting. More specifically, Bryn aims to gain insights on how sex, gender-related characteristics, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and mental health may affect the care people receive when they suffer from symptoms suggestive of cardiovascular disease. Besides her PhD project, Bryn has an interest in a wide range of social issues, from socioeconomic inequalities and social policy to social determinants of health, focusing mostly on these issues from a gender perspective. Bryn has previously worked on the COGIS-NL research, which studies gender inequality as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**John de Wit (MSc, PhD)**, is professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science: Public Health (since 1 May 2016), and chair of the Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science (since 1 September 2018), at Utrecht University (<https://www.uu.nl/staff/jdewit/Profile>). John is a social psychologist by training who has worked across social psychology, health psychology, public health and health promotion for over 30 years. John's interdisciplinary research is concerned with the interplay of individual, social and structural factors in health-related behaviors, outcomes and inequalities. John research is mostly concerned with health and sexuality, with a particular interest in gender and diversity issues, including into the experience of stigma in relation to sexual health and sexuality, as well as differences in wellbeing by gender and sexuality. John also studies other important health and social issues, including health inequalities and sustainability transitions. John has an international track record and is an elected fellow of the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP). He has extensive governance experience, served on numerous committees and boards, and is an experienced educator, teaching courses in undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degree programs, and contributing to learning programs for professionals. He also has much experience in supervising PhD students on a range of topics.

## ORCID

Silvia Filippi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5890-7460>

Mara Yerkes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5480-4878>

Michèle Bal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2524-2191>

Bryn Hummel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9839-4655>

John de Wit  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5895-7935>

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