MISALIGNMENT AND Misperception in Preferences to Utilize Family-Friendly Benefits: Implications for Benefit Utilization and Work–Family Conflict

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Despite their increasing popularity, family-friendly benefits are frequently underutilized. Drawing on literatures concerning social norms and pluralistic ignorance, this study examines the role of personal preference, group norm misalignment, and misperception of group norms on employees’ utilization of family-friendly benefits. In 2 samples (154 firefighters and 440 nurses) across 3 data collection periods, we found that when employees’ preferences for benefit utilization were misaligned with the perceived group norm, they adjusted their family-friendly benefit utilization in a manner congruent with the norm, even when that norm was misperceived. Further, we found that family-friendly benefit utilization was negatively associated with work–family conflict. Together, our findings suggest that misperceived social norms regarding family-friendly benefit utilization can lead to situations whereby employees do not utilize family-friendly benefits because they mistakenly perceive utilization is not socially accepted and, as a result, experience higher work–family conflict.

The literature on work and family has long emphasized the conflict between the two domains. Much of the research on work–family conflict (WFC) has examined its ill effects, linking it to increased employee stress, turnover intentions, absenteeism, burnout, and dissatisfaction with job, family, and life (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992). As such, organizations have responded by providing family-friendly benefits such as flexible work arrangements and on-site child care (Poelmans, Chinchilla, & Cardona, 2003). However, if employees do not utilize the benefits
offered by the organization, WFC can remain an issue (Allen, 2001; Swody & Powell, 2007; Thompson, Beauvis, & Lyness, 1999). In this paper, we extend the literature on family-friendly benefit utilization by exploring how employees’ alignment with and misperception of group norms can impact the likelihood to utilize family-friendly benefits and WFC.

Social contexts shape employees’ responses to organizational benefit offerings (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). The more employees perceive a supportive work-family culture in their organization, the more likely employees are to utilize these benefits (Allen, 2001; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Swody & Powell, 2007; Thompson et al., 1999). In conditions in which organizational norms are not clear, employees will instead look to others in their work group to determine group norms for utilization (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Employees are more likely to utilize family-friendly benefits if they observe support from supervisors and coworkers for family-friendly benefit utilization (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Breaugh & Frye, 2007; Lobel, 1999; Osterman, 1995). These findings are largely explained by social norms theory (Berkowitz, 2005), which suggests that people behave in ways that align themselves with perceived group norms.

These processes set up conditions in which employees make decisions about utilization of family-friendly benefits based on two factors: their personal preference to utilize the benefits and their perception of the preferences of their peers (perceived group norms). In many cases, those two factors will be aligned and the decision to utilize a family-friendly benefit is straightforward. However, two other important issues remain. First, the direction of misalignment between personal preferences and perceived group norms may have an impact. In other words, a personal preference to utilize benefits when there is a perceived preference not to use benefits should impact the actual utilization of benefits in a manner that is different from when one prefers not to utilize a benefit (perhaps because it is not relevant to one’s situation) but perceives that others prefer to utilize a benefit. Our paper clarifies the impact of this misalignment with the use of polynomial regression and response surface analysis.

Second, a variety of literature streams suggest that individuals are not necessarily accurate in their perceptions of their peers’ views and, as a result, may make a decision based on misperceived alignment (or misalignment) between their personal preferences and the preferences of others. For example, one could prefer to utilize family-friendly benefits, work among coworkers who actually agree with him or her, but misperceive that his or her coworkers do not support benefit utilization. Most of the family-friendly benefit research has assumed that employees’ perceptions of coworkers’ utilization of family-friendly benefits are accurate. However, when work group norms are not clear to employees, they are socially constructed by employees, often based on incomplete information
(Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Turner, 1982). In such cases, employees turn to deeply rooted cultural beliefs about work (Acker, 1990). The concept of flexibility stigma (Williams, 2000) describes the negative responses directed at employees who utilize benefits that help them attend to family needs (Williams, 2010; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Flexibility stigma is a pervasive perception in organizations (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014), to the point at which it could shape perceived group norms about the acceptability of family-friendly benefit utilization. Particularly if employees would prefer to utilize family-friendly benefits, such a situation could lead employees to make difficult decisions about whether to take advantage of benefits or not.

Research concerning pluralistic ignorance explains situations in which individuals misperceive the attitudes of other group members and, further, situations in which those misperceived attitudes are misaligned with their own preferences (Allport, 1924; Berkowitz, 2005; Prentice & Miller, 1993, 1996). This situation occurs due to a combination of social comparison errors (O’Gorman, 1980) and attribution biases (Zhu & Westphal, 2011). Individuals have a tendency to overattribute the extent to which a peer’s behavior is a reflection of his or her personal views while further believing that they are accurate perceivers of others’ views. In the family-friendly benefits context, this possibility seems especially likely. Because many family-friendly benefits are used only at specific times when they are relevant (e.g., maternity leave is used only at very specific points), it may appear at any given time that few people are utilizing the benefit. That, combined with the pervasive flexibility stigma, may lead employees to conclude a lack of support for utilizing such benefits even though their coworkers privately support benefit utilization. When we combine the effects of misalignment and misperception, this suggests a scenario in which employees would like to use a benefit but do not because they perceive a group norm that does not support utilization.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of employees’ misalignment with and misperception of group norms regarding preferences for family-friendly benefit utilization on actual utilization. In doing so, we make several contributions to the literatures on family-friendly benefit utilization and pluralistic ignorance. Though other researchers have explored predictors of work–family benefit utilization, they have often focused on rather broad predictors, such as organizational culture, which may be difficult to change. In line with calls in the literature (Veiga, Baldridge, & Eddleston, 2004), we focus on individual perceptions, or an individual’s sense of his/her environment (albeit, perceptions that likely are shaped by and further shape an organization’s culture). Further, we extend our understanding of how those perceived group norms impact behavior by differentiating between different forms of misalignment.
We also extend the literature by examining both misalignment and misperception of group norms to understand benefit utilization. In addition to adding further clarity to the family-friendly benefits utilization literature, this approach addresses a key issue in the pluralistic ignorance literature. Despite being defined in terms of both misalignment and misperception of group norms, the pluralistic ignorance literature has predominantly focused on the misalignment aspect of the construct. The vast majority of the pluralistic ignorance literature in organizations has emphasized how individual attitudes differ from that person’s perception of the group norm without necessarily accounting for the accuracy of the perceived group norm (Westphal & Bednar, 2005; Zhu & Westphal, 2011). This is often because discrete groups are not studied, and thus actual group norms may be difficult to determine. Though theory, such as social norm theory, suggests that actors are more impacted by perception than actual group norms, it is clear that the accuracy of the perception impacts the extent of alignment with group norms; individuals who are accurate in their perception of group norms have different levels of (mis)alignment than individuals with the same personal preference but who are less accurate in their perception of the norm.

From a practical perspective, we add to the literature by providing additional insight into why seemingly helpful benefits may not be utilized. The literature concerning misperceived and misaligned group norms offers potential solutions to the problem through relatively straightforward interventions that have been widely applied (e.g., Balvig & Holmberg, 2011; Schroeder & Prentice, 1998). As a result, this research can make an important contribution both in understanding the social nature of family-friendly benefit utilization and in suggesting avenues for intervention that can improve family-friendly benefit utilization.

**Family-Friendly Benefit Utilization**

Organizations seeking to provide their employees with opportunities for work–family balance typically offer family-friendly benefits. These benefits may include policies (e.g., flexible work arrangements), services (e.g., resource referral programs), and/or benefits (e.g., child care subsidies; Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005). When employees are offered family-friendly benefits, they are more likely to perceive their organization as family friendly, which leads to improved positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, affective commitment, and intentions to remain with an organization (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013). Although offering the benefits is important, actual utilization of the benefits can decrease WFC (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). In light of the negative outcomes associated with WFC,
it is in employers’ interests to encourage employees to utilize the family-friendly benefits that are offered.

Unfortunately, managers find that the formal existence of a benefit does not guarantee its use (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Researchers have found that the probability of an employee using work–family benefits depends upon individual and social factors (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Veiga et al., 2004). Individual characteristics, like gender, number of children, and expectancies regarding usefulness of benefits can influence utilization (Butler, Gasser, & Smart, 2004; Hass & Hwang, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Recently, more attention has been given to how social contexts can influence benefit utilization (Secret, 2000). Social contexts in organizations include several factors, including organizational cultures and perceptions of others in the workplace. For example, if the organizational culture rewards time spent at work, employees may be reluctant to take time off to attend to family responsibilities (Secret, 2000; Thompson et al., 1999). Further, workplace relationships influence benefit utilization behavior. When supervisors publicly express negative attitudes toward family-friendly benefits employees typically respond with low utilization (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Veiga et al., 2004).

Social contexts can also shape behavior via social norms that are established at the group level. Individuals’ perceptions of social norms are formed through observing peer behavior within their group, through communication with others in their group (Kirby & Krone, 2002), or by inference (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Upon observation of behavior, employees deduce coworker attitudes toward family-friendly benefit utilization; social norms theory suggests that individuals will act in a manner consistent with their perception of the norm (Berkowitz, 2005).

When an employee’s preference for family-family friendly benefit utilization aligns with his or her perception of coworkers’ preferences for utilization, the employee’s decision to actually utilize the benefit should coincide with the direction of the preferences. In other words, if an employee wants to use a benefit and perceives that others do as well, he or she is more likely to utilize the benefit. Similarly, when an employee does not want to utilize a benefit and perceives others do not support benefit utilization, he or she is unlikely to utilize the benefit. The greatest impact on family-friendly benefit utilization (whether positive or negative) is expected in conditions in which employees’ personal preferences appear to be reinforced by their perception of the group norm.

Hypothesis 1a: Family-friendly benefit utilization will be highest when an employee’s preference to utilize benefits
aligns with the employee’s perception that group members also prefer to utilize benefits.

**Hypothesis 1b**: Family-friendly benefit utilization will be lowest when an employee’s preference not to utilize benefits aligns with the employee’s perception that group members also prefer not to utilize benefits.

**Misalignment With Perceived Group Norms of Family-Friendly Benefit Utilization**

Although important, the impact of alignment between individual preferences and group norms is perhaps less concerning than misalignment (Bezrukova, Thatcher, Jehn, & Spell, 2012; Lau & Murnighan, 1998), particularly when examining work–family issues (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). Largely driven by the intricacies of group identification, the processes underlying misalignment do not seem to work in quite the same way as in alignment contexts, which are largely linear. In circumstances in which the perceived social norm aligns with personal attitudes, there is a general sense of individual safety, as individuals know how to behave and feel comfortable doing so. In circumstances in which the social norm does not align with personal attitudes an employee must decide how to address the disconnect between him or herself and his or her group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). When an individual believes the majority of group members hold an opinion that differs from his or her personal opinion, that individual has the option of behaving in accordance with his or her own attitudes or that of the group (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Typically, in these situations, individuals will decide to behave in accordance with perceived group attitudes, as there is a strong desire to remain in the in-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). By expressing a minority opinion, individuals risk compromising their social status or being ostracized from the group (Asch, 1956; Feldman, 1984; Miller & Nelson, 2002; Parks, 2004; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

With regard to utilization of family-friendly benefits, an individual who becomes aware of a discrepancy between personal and perceived group preference for utilization has the option of behaving in accordance with personal or group attitudes (Munsch, Ridgeway & Williams, 2014). In this situation, individuals are likely to behave in accordance with perceived group norms with regard to preferences for family-friendly benefit utilization by reducing their utilization of such benefits (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Prentice & Miller, 1993). We acknowledge that this could work the other way. Though individuals may not individually prefer to utilize family-friendly benefits, they may perceive that others do support
their utilization. Social norms theory would suggest that they would be more likely to increase utilization to fit with the group norm.

**Hypothesis 2**: When personal preferences and perceived group norms are misaligned, employees will align their family-friendly benefit utilization with the perceived group norm for utilization preference (i.e., low utilization when the perceived group preference for utilization is low).

*Misperception of Group Norms*

In many groups, attitudes toward acceptable behavior can be inferred from the behavior of coworkers. If others do not utilize benefits, employees may infer that utilization of such benefits must not be socially accepted. Social norms are also evaluated through daily discourse and communication between coworkers (Kirby & Krone, 2002). If not directly observable, employees may perceive utilization as not accepted because daily interactions suggest the benefits are not utilized (Veiga et al., 2004).

When behavior or direct communication are vague or silent (intentionally withholding ideas, information, and opinions), observers typically experience greater ambiguity in attributing employee motive for behavior (Halbesleben, 2009a). That is, if employees within a work group are silent with regard to family-friendly benefit utilization, observers may infer that silence connotes lack of support for utilization (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Situations of this nature may lead to misperception of group preferences for family-friendly benefit utilization such that it seems as though others do not support utilization of benefits when, in fact, they do support their use. The utilization of family-friendly benefits may be particularly susceptible to such misperceptions because they vary in when they are most applicable and, thus, may not be utilized by a large number of employees at any given point (e.g., maternity leave) or may not be visible to coworkers (e.g., elder care benefits).

When we combine the potential for misperception of group norms of family-friendly benefit utilization with the above arguments regarding alignment and misalignment, the possibility exists that employees would adapt utilization of family-friendly benefits to meet a group norm that was inaccurately perceived (in effect, moving their behavior away from the actual group norms). As noted above, such a situation is referred to as pluralistic ignorance (Allport, 1924; Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Buckley, 2007).

Pluralistic ignorance has been studied in a variety of contexts. For example, research concerning college student alcohol use has found that students commonly drink alcohol, despite maintaining attitudes against alcohol consumption (Prentice & Miller, 1993), largely because the
students misperceived that their peers had positive attitudes toward alcohol use. In work settings, pluralistic ignorance has been demonstrated in corporate board member responses to poor firm performance (Westphal & Bednar, 2005), the implementation of business ethics training (Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Buckley, 2005), and the adoption of stock repurchase plans by security analysts (Zhu & Westphal, 2011). More recently, researchers have found that pluralistic ignorance may lead to a stigma against workers who take advantage of flexible work in conditions in which employees believe utilization is not consistent with social norms (Munsch et al., 2014).

Previous empirical studies of pluralistic ignorance have operationalized the construct as a discrepancy between one’s personal support for a position and one’s perceived support of those in the reference group for that same position (e.g., Isenberg, 1980; Munsch et al., 2014; Sallot, Cameron, & Weaver Lariscy, 1998; Scholly, Katz, Gascoigne & Holck, 2005; Westphal & Bednar, 2005; Zhu & Westphal, 2011). However, when considering its behavioral effects, pluralistic ignorance extends beyond the basic misalignment of personal and perceived group attitudes discussed above. The essential component of misperception of the group norm is frequently left out of how it is operationalized, perhaps because it requires determination of the accurate group norm, which may be difficult to do in research settings (Halbesleben, 2009a).

Although we examine alignment with perceived group norms when testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, we conceptualize pluralistic ignorance as the misalignment between one’s individual preference to utilize a benefit and one’s misperception of others’ preference to utilize the same benefit. For pluralistic ignorance to occur, both misalignment and misperception must occur. Clearly, misperception and alignment can occur together. In instances in which an employee prefers to utilize family-friendly benefits and misperceives that coworkers prefer to utilize those benefits, the employee would be expected to engage in greater utilization of family-friendly benefits. Similarly, if an employee does not support the utilization of family-friendly benefits and misperceives that others do not support utilization, we would expect utilization to decrease. In other words, in instances in which there is agreement between individual preference and misperceived preference to utilize family-friendly benefits, utilization should coincide with the direction of the preference in a manner similar to that described in Hypothesis 1.

However, in instances of pluralistic ignorance, in which there is a discrepancy between one’s individual preference for utilization of family-friendly benefits and the misperceived preference of coworkers, we expect the effects of the discrepancy to be largely driven by the misperceptions of others within the group (Willer, Kuwabara, & Macy, 2009). Because
there tends to be a strong perceived bias against utilizing family-friendly benefits (e.g., Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Glass, 2004; Wharton, Chivers, & Blair-Loy, 2008), we expect this to work out such that employees prefer to utilize benefits but underestimates the support of others; that underestimation should lead to lower utilization by employees in order to fit with the misperceived norm. However, we acknowledge that this could work the other way. Though individuals may not individually prefer to utilize family-friendly benefits, they may perceive that others do support their utilization and subsequently increase utilization. As our arguments leading to Hypothesis 2 suggest (and consistent with the preponderance of literature on family-family benefit utilization), we suspect this is not a common scenario but recognize that it is a possible manifestation of pluralistic ignorance that should still lead to behaviors that are consistent with the perceived group norm.

**Hypothesis 3:** When personal preferences and perceived group norms are misaligned, and employees have misperceived the group norm, employees will align their family-friendly benefit utilization with the perceived group norm for utilization preference (i.e., low utilization when the perceived group preference for utilization is low).

**Utilization of Family-Friendly Benefits and WFC**

As noted, organizations typically offer family-friendly benefits so as to minimize the extent to which family concerns interfere with work (and vice versa). As a result, we extend this study by examining family-friendly benefit utilization on employees’ WFC. WFC is a form of interrole conflict in which the roles enacted in the work and family domains are incompatible to some extent (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Family-friendly benefits are offered by organizations to help enable employees to meet the demands in both work and family domains (Glass & Estes, 1997; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). Family-friendly benefits should ease the burden of balancing the two domains, leading to higher levels of job satisfaction and lower levels of work withdrawal (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Breaugh & Frye, 2008; Frye & Breauagh, 2004; Hammer et al., 2005; Lapiere & Allen, 2006; Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001; Shockley & Allen, 2007; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007), particularly when they are actually utilized by the employee (as opposed to simply offered; O’Driscoll, et al., 2003). In line with previous research, we expect a negative relationship between family-friendly benefit utilization and WFC such that those that decrease utilization will experience increased WFC and vice versa.
Hypothesis 4: Family-friendly benefit utilization is negatively associated with WFC, such that as utilization increases (decreases), WFC will decrease (increase).

It is worth noting the specific nature of the relationships we are expecting. In this instance, we are proposing an indirect effects model (Mathieu & Taylor, 2006). That is, we expect misalignment with group norms and misperception of those norms to be associated with subsequent family-friendly benefit utilization (after controlling for previous utilization). Further, we expect family-friendly benefit utilization to be associated with lower WFC. However, we are not necessarily predicting a direct relationship between misalignment with and misperception of norms and WFC. As we consider the definition (and our specific operationalization) of WFC, we do not have a specific reason to expect that preference to utilize benefits will lead to concerns such as work taking away time from family. Nor would we expect the perception of others’ preferences to directly impact WFC. In either case, we are not expecting that these would place additional work demands on employees that would interfere with family. These arguments suggest that testing an indirect effects model rather than a mediation model is appropriate.

Method

Participants and Procedures

We tested the hypotheses with two samples. We chose the two samples for several reasons. First, multiple samples allows for constructive replication (Lykken, 1968), providing stronger evidence to support the hypotheses and greater generalizability. Second, our samples come from different occupational groups with quite different gender make-up; one is male dominated and one is female dominated. This allowed for further generalizability of the findings and may be important given gender differences in predictors of family-friendly benefit utilization (Butler et al., 2004; Powell, 1997). The samples also offered slightly different bundles of family-friendly benefits. Although that makes direct comparisons a bit more difficult (though conversion to percentage utilization assists with that concern), it allows for further generalizability in the sense that organizations vary in their benefit offerings.

Sample 1. The participants in Sample 1 were 154 firefighters from a municipal fire department in the Southwest United States. They worked at eight different stations; the stations had an average size from 12 to 27 firefighters. Ninety-eight percent \( (n = 151) \) of the participants in Sample 1 were male; their average age was 39.06 \( (SD = 7.70) \). They
had worked for the organization for an average of 7.90 ($SD = 3.65$) years and worked an average of 38.62 hours per week ($SD = 5.88$). Sixty-four percent of the participants were married, and 54.54% had at least one child living at home.

The firefighters completed surveys three times, with one year separating each data collection. Although there was no explicit theory guiding our choice of a 1-year time lag, we believed that some time would be necessary to see changes in family-friendly benefit utilization. In other words, the likelihood that someone would change in their utilization of benefits over the course of weeks or even a few months seemed unlikely.

To complete the survey each time, paper surveys were distributed to all firefighters in the department. So that we could track the participants while maintaining their anonymity, we asked them to generate a code based on demographic information (e.g., first two letters of their mother’s first name, last two letters of their high school, etc.).

A total of 186 firefighters worked for the department at Time 1; 182 firefighters completed the first survey for an initial response rate of 98%. From Time 1 to Time 3, we were able to match completed surveys from 154 participants for a final response rate of 83% and a retention rate of 85%.

To rule out nonresponse bias and attrition effects, we compared the final study sample with the firefighter population of the organization (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). The study sample did not significantly differ from the employee population on any of the variables for which we were granted organizational data (gender, age, and station). Following Goodman and Blum (1996), we conducted a multiple logistic regression on the full Time 1 sample in which each of the key study variables (measured at Time 1) was entered as a predictor and whether the participant continued to Time 3 was the outcome variable; none of the variables were significantly associated with completing the study. Finally, we found that those in the final sample were not significantly different from the participants that responded only to the Time 1 survey when comparing the variables at Time 1.

**Sample 2.** The participants in Sample 2 were 440 registered nurses from a hospital in the Midwest United States. They worked in 46 different units; the units had an average size from 5 to 33 nurses. Eighty-nine percent ($n = 392$) of the nurses were female; their average age was 38.55 ($SD = 6.81$). They had worked for the organization for an average of 8.57 ($SD = 3.94$) years and worked an average of 37.3 hours per week ($SD = 5.82$). Seventy-four percent of the participants were married, and 62.3% had at least one child living at home.

As with Sample 1, the nurses completed surveys three times with one year separating each data collection. To complete the survey each time,
the hospital’s director of Nursing sent all registered nurses a brief email explaining the project and the hospital’s support of it along with a link to the survey. So that we could track the participants while maintaining their anonymity, we asked them to generate a code based on demographic information (e.g., first two letters of their mother’s first name, last two letters of their high school, etc.).

A total of 613 registered nurses worked for the hospital at Time 1; 551 nurses completed the first survey for an initial response rate of 90%. From Time 1 to Time 3, we were able to match completed surveys from 440 participants for a final response rate of 72% and a retention rate of 80%. As with Sample 1, we again compared the final study sample with the registered nurse population of the organization and found that the sample did not significantly differ from the employee population on any of the variables for which we were granted organizational data (gender, age, and department). The attrition analysis conducted in Study 1 was repeated with similar results. Overall, we concluded that nonresponse and attrition bias were unlikely to play a significant role in the interpretation of the results.

**Measures**

*Family-friendly benefit utilization.* We measured family-friendly benefit utilization by providing participants with a list of family-friendly benefits from Hammer et al. (2005). Hammer et al. had actually used 13 items; but three of the benefits were not provided by the fire department, and we did not ask about them at the request of the department. Because the hospital did not provide on-site child care, we excluded that item and had 12 family-friendly benefits in that sample. For each of the benefits, we asked the participants whether or not they used the benefit. Consistent with Hammer et al., those that indicated “yes” were coded with a 1; those that indicated “no” were coded with a 0. We then converted these scores to percentages to reflect the percentage of benefits utilized by the participant. This was done for both Time 1 and Time 2.

*Family-friendly benefit utilization preference.* At Time 1, we also asked each participant to respond to the following question for each of the family-friendly benefits: “For each of the following benefits, please indicate the extent to which you would prefer to use it compared to how much you currently use it.” We asked the same question about their perceptions of peer preference for each benefit as well. We used the coworkers in the same work group as the comparison group to address concerns about the unclear nature of the comparison group in pluralistic ignorance studies (Halbesleben et al., 2007).
Preference was measured on a scale from $1 = \text{much less}$ to $5 = \text{much more}$, with 3 indicating that they used it as much as they wanted to. To indicate overall preference for greater family-friendly benefit utilization, we calculated a mean of the responses to the family-friendly benefits. Cronbach’s alpha for the aggregate measure of individual preferences was .71 for Sample 1 and .75 for Sample 2. Cronbach’s alpha for the aggregate measure of perceived coworker preferences was .73 for Sample 1 and .74 for Sample 2. Though acceptable, the somewhat low alpha levels may be a reflection of the individualized nature of family-friendly benefit utilization (Saltzstein et al., 2001; Secret, 2000). In other words, preference to utilize one benefit may not necessarily be tied to preference to utilize another depending on the specific needs of the employee.

WFC. We measured WFC using the nine-item scale of Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams (2000). Items were measured on a five-point scale from $1 = \text{strongly disagree}$ to $5 = \text{strongly agree}$. A sample item was “My work keeps me from my family activities more than I would like.” Because family-friendly benefits are implemented with the goal of reducing the negative impact of work on family, we only used the work interference with family items. Cronbach’s alpha for the WFC scale was .84 for Sample 1 and .91 for Sample 2.

Control variables. In the analysis, we controlled for Time 1 family-friendly benefit utilization preference in order to better capture the change in behavior that results from attempts to address misalignment between individual preferences and perceived group norms; to a lesser extent, this also controls for the possibility of need for the benefit overriding preferences or group norm perceptions (though we acknowledge that need could have changed as well). For Sample 2, we also had data concerning work–family culture using the Thompson et al. (1999) measure (Cronbach’s alpha: .73). However, only Time 1 utilization was a significant predictor in the analyses. Following the recommendations of Becker (2005) and because we did not have those data for Sample 1, we dropped work–family culture from subsequent analyses. This was also consistent with our goal of examining more proximal predictors of family-friendly benefit utilization.

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables are displayed in Table 1. The descriptive statistics provide an interesting picture. First, in both samples, the perceived preference was lower than the participant’s reported preference to utilize benefits. Moreover, there were slight declines in the mean benefit use in both samples from Time 1 to Time 2. The correlations are largely what one would expect given the processes
TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample 1</th>
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<th>Sample 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. T1 utilization</td>
<td>23.99</td>
<td>12.33</td>
<td>38.87</td>
<td>24.88</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>.86**</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. T1 preference</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. T1 perceived preference</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.63**</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. T2 utilization</td>
<td>22.94</td>
<td>12.67</td>
<td>36.74</td>
<td>25.78</td>
<td>.89**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. T3 work–family conflict</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
<td>-.61**</td>
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Note. Sample 1: N = 154; Sample 2: N = 440. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2, T3 = Time 3. Correlations above the diagonal are for Sample 1; correlations below the diagonal are for Sample 2. T1 and T2 utilization are scored in percentage terms; the mean value represents the average percentage of the total number of family-friendly benefits individuals reported utilizing.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

we were examining. The nonsignificant correlations in Sample 1 between perceived preference and Time 2 utilization and in Sample 2 between reported preference and Time 2 utilization are interesting but may be the result of examining the zero-order relationship between these variables without accounting for the change from Time 1 (which we account for in our subsequent analysis).

Impact of Misalignment With Group Norms on Time 2 Benefit Utilization

To examine the impact of misalignment with perceived group norms on family-friendly benefit utilization, we utilized polynomial regression and response surface analysis to test our hypotheses (Edwards & Parry, 1993; Shanock, Baran, Gentry, Pattison, & Heggestad, 2010). To operationalize misalignment with group norms concerning preference to utilize family-friendly benefits, we examined participants’ self-reported individual preference to utilize benefits as a predictor, with the self-reported estimate of the group’s preference as a moderator (in the nomenclature of Shanock et al., self-reported preference was X and perceived preference was Y). Predictors were centered on the midpoint of their scale (3) prior to estimating each model (Edwards, 1994).

After testing the polynomial regression model with each sample, we utilized response surface methodology (Edwards & Parry, 1993; Shanock et al., 2010) to examine the impact of agreement between preference for family-friendly benefit utilization (Hypothesis 1; slope $a_1$ in Shanock
et al. nomenclature) and the impact of level and direction of misalignment between individual preference and group preference for family-friendly benefit utilization (Hypothesis 2, slopes $a_3$ and $a_4$ in Shanock et al. nomenclature).

The polynomial regression results examining the impact of preference for family-friendly benefit utilization are depicted in Table 2. These findings are then graphed in Figures 1 and 2. With some exceptions, the findings are consistent across the two samples. In both samples, the beta for individual preference was negative, suggesting a pattern in which participants are less likely to utilize benefits at Time 2 despite preferring to use them more. On the other hand, the beta for perceived preference was positive, suggesting greater utilization when participants perceived that coworkers preferred greater utilization of family-friendly benefits. In Sample 1, $a_1$ was significant and positive, suggesting that as individual preference to utilize benefits increases along with perceived preference, Time 2 family-friendly benefit utilization is higher. In Sample 2, $a_1$ was positive but not significant; however $a_2$ was significant and negative. This suggests nonlinearity in the relationship between agreement in preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample 1</th>
<th>Sample 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.64*</td>
<td>6.87**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 utilization</td>
<td>.91**</td>
<td>.91**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ind. preference</td>
<td>-7.44**</td>
<td>-9.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of coworker preference</td>
<td>12.53**</td>
<td>10.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ind. preference $^2$</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ind. preference $\times$ Perception of coworker preference</td>
<td>-8.54**</td>
<td>-3.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of coworker preference $^2$</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.82**</td>
<td>.87**</td>
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<td>$a_1$</td>
<td>5.07**</td>
<td>.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>$a_2$</td>
<td>-3.30</td>
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<td>-20.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$a_4$</td>
<td>13.79**</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sample 1: $N = 154$; Sample 2: $N = 440$. Values are unstandardized betas. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. 

**TABLE 2**

Polynomial Regression Analysis of Discrepancy Between Preference for Family-Friendly Benefit Utilization and Perceived Coworker Preference as Predictors of Time 2 Benefit Utilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<tr>
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<td>-3.64**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>$R^2$</td>
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</tr>
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Note. Sample 1: $N = 154$; Sample 2: $N = 440$. Values are unstandardized betas. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. 

**TABLE 2**

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Response surface tests</td>
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Note. Sample 1: $N = 154$; Sample 2: $N = 440$. Values are unstandardized betas. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. 

et al. nomenclature) and the impact of level and direction of misalignment between individual preference and group preference for family-friendly benefit utilization (Hypothesis 2, slopes $a_3$ and $a_4$ in Shanock et al. nomenclature).
and Time 2 utilization. Specifically, the negative relationship suggests a concave curve (see Figure 2), meaning that, at some levels of agreement, utilization is high, but the impact of agreement may fade at very high levels of agreement.

It is interesting to note that, although not statistically significant, $a_2$ in Sample 1 was negative and only slightly lower than in Sample 2. This suggests that the pattern was similar between the two samples, but it is possible that the lower sample size in Sample 1 might be accounting for $a_2$ not reaching conventional levels of statistical significance. Overall, these findings provide some support for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that when
people prefer to use benefits more and believe others agree, they are more likely to utilize those benefits. However, the $a_2$ findings suggest that there may be limits to that relationship.

The $a_3$ findings were consistent across the samples and help to clarify the specific impact of misalignment. The significant, negative $a_3$ values suggest that perceived group norms regarding preference are more strongly driving Time 2 benefit utilization than is actual individual preference to utilize those benefits. This is most clear when examining the response surfaces in Figures 1 and 2 (note that because we controlled for Time 1 utilization, we included negative values along the $Y$-axis; those negative values represent reduced benefit utilization relative to Time 1). One can see that moving to the left along the line of discrepancy (the line running from the far left to the far right of the graph), utilization increases dramatically as perceived preference goes up, even in situations in which individual preference is low. On the other hand, as one moves to the right, utilization declines despite relatively high levels of individual preference to utilize the benefits. Interestingly, in Sample 1 there is a slightly upward tick in utilization when individual preference is high (see back right corner of the plane in Figure 1), suggesting that at some point, individual preference—perhaps driven more directly by need—outweighs the otherwise strong effects of perceived preference. It is likely that this pattern is what led to the significant $a_4$ in Sample 1 due to the nonlinear upward curve. Overall, these findings support Hypothesis 2 and suggest that misalignment with perceived group norms is associated with family-friendly benefit utilization, where perceived group preference to utilize benefits drives benefit utilization more than individual preference.

**Impact of Misalignment and Misperception on Time 2 Utilization**

As outlined in the introduction, although pluralistic ignorance has often been operationalized solely in terms of misalignment with group norms, it has been defined in terms of misalignment with a misperceived group norm. As a result, we tested the combined impact of misalignment and misperception on Time 2 utilization. We again utilized polynomial regression with response surface analysis. However, we created new predictor variables. To create the misalignment variable, we calculated the difference between each participant’s preference for family-friendly benefit utilization and his or her perception of the average coworker’s preference for utilization (echoing what is typically done in the literature). For misperception, we calculated the average preference for family-friendly benefit utilization within each department based on each respondent’s responses regarding their own preference for utilization. Then, we calculated the difference between each participant’s perception of the average coworker’s
### TABLE 3
Polynomial Regression Analysis Combining Misalignment With and Misperception of Group Norms as Predictors of Time 2 Benefit Utilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample 1</th>
<th>Sample 2</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1 Utilization</td>
<td>.93∗∗</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Misalignment</td>
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<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misperception</td>
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<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misalignment²</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misperception × Misperception</td>
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<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misperception²</td>
<td>−2.19</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.84∗∗</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Response surface tests

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<th></th>
<th>a₁</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>−5.66∗∗</td>
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<td>−2.72</td>
<td></td>
<td>−9.84∗∗</td>
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<td></td>
<td>−9.01∗∗</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Sample 1: N = 154; Sample 2: N = 440. Values are unstandardized betas. ∗p < .05. ∗∗p < .01.

Preference for utilization and the actual preference for utilization. Because there is a natural, interpretable midpoint (zero means alignment and accurate perception of the group norm), we did not center the predictor variables in the polynomial regression models to test Hypothesis 3.

In both samples, the perception of preference was significantly lower than the preference actually was (Sample 1, t = 6.07, p < .01; Sample 2, t = 8.90, p < .01). Moreover, the correlations between one’s perceived preference and the group’s actual preference was very low in Sample 1 (r = .01, ns) and significant but still rather modest in Sample 2 (r = .32, p < .01). Putting these findings into context, it suggests that perceived preferences are driving the results, yet they are only marginally related to the actual preference of the group.

The polynomial regression results examining the impact of preference for family-friendly benefit utilization are depicted in Table 3. These findings demonstrated a clear pattern when graphed in Figures 3 and 4. The data are coded such that the zero points in the center of each axis represent alignment and accurate perception. In the case of alignment, moving toward the positive pole (up and to the right) represents instances in which a participant’s preference for utilization is higher than the perceived group norm for utilization; negative values represent cases in which a participant’s preference for utilization is lower than the perceived group norm for utilization. For misperception, a positive value (moving
to the left) represents instances in which a participant’s perception of the group norm overestimates the actual preference for utilization (he or she perceives more support than actually exists); a negative value indicates underestimation of support. Thus, the most interesting points on the figures are the far left and right corners. The far left corner represents cases in which individuals have relatively low preference for family-friendly benefit utilization and the actual group norm is relatively low preference, yet the individual perceives that the group norm is relatively high preference (negative misalignment and positive/overestimated misperception). This is a form of pluralistic ignorance, albeit one that would not be
expected to occur very often. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, those individuals are likely to increase their utilization at Time 2 after controlling for Time 1 utilization.

The classic case of pluralistic ignorance is represented in the far right corner. These are instances in which participants have high preferences for family-friendly benefit utilization and that preference is highly consistent with the actual group norm, but their perception is that the group norm is for relatively low preference for utilization. As indicated in Figures 3 and 4, and again consistent with Hypothesis 3, those individuals are likely to have lower utilization of family-friendly benefits at Time 2 after controlling for Time 1 utilization. These findings are supported by consistently significant, negative $a_3$ values across the samples and provide support for Hypothesis 3.

Although the emphasis of this analysis was on the poles, cases representative of pluralistic ignorance, it is worth noting other findings as well. In both samples, $a_1$ was significant and negative. In both samples, $a_2$ was negative; it was significant in Sample 2 and not in Sample 1, similar to the findings above and potentially explained by a smaller sample size in Sample 1. The significant negative $a_1$ values would suggest that, as the misalignment and misperception values move together toward the positive pole (the back corner), utilization decreases. However, in this particular application of response surface modeling, these values are slightly harder to interpret, because the traditional line of “agreement” represented by $a_1$ and $a_2$ does not actually represent agreement, per se, but rather instances in which both misalignment and misperception are in the same direction. As it turns out, such situations are unlikely due to the coding of the data. A positive misalignment/positive misperception case would mean that the individual preference is higher than the perceived group norm, which is also higher than the actual group norm (with a negative case being the opposite situation). Though certainly possible, mathematically, these values cannot be as high as situations in which misalignment and misperception move in opposite directions due to limits in the scaling.\(^1\) Thus, these initial findings support the predictions (e.g., Hypothesis 2) that when people’s personal preferences for family-friendly benefit utilization are higher than their perceptions of the group norm, they

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\(^1\)Consider the following situations (simplified by using whole numbers): In the first case, one’s personal preference is a 5, perception of the group norm is a 1, and the average preference in the group (the actual norm) is a 5. In that case, misalignment is 4 and misperception is $-4$. On the other hand, one could have a situation in which individual preference (5) is higher than the perceived group norm (3), which is also higher than the actual group norm (1). In that case, misalignment is 2 and misperception is 2; even in the most extreme case, it would only work out that misalignment is 3 and misperception is 1 (or vice versa).
utilize the benefits less. However, we draw those conclusions cautiously given the scaling considerations.

Impact of Benefit Utilization on WFC

In Hypothesis 4, we proposed that benefit utilization should reduce WFC as part of a broader indirect effects model. As the zero-order correlations suggest, there are significant negative correlations between Time 2 benefit utilization and WFC, suggesting support for Hypothesis 4. We also conducted regression analyses in which Time 3 WFC was predicted by Time 2 benefit utilization after controlling for Time 1 utilization. Those analyses indicated that, after controlling for Time 1 utilization, Time 2 utilization remained a significant predictor of Time 3 WFC (Sample 1: $\beta = -0.04, p < .001, R^2 = .45, p < .001$; Sample 2: $\beta = -0.01, p < .001, R^2 = .43, p < .001$). Overall, these findings support Hypothesis 4.

Post Hoc Analyses

To further clarify the results, we conducted several post hoc analyses. Although we had initially considered all of the family-friendly benefits as one “bundle” of benefits, it seems possible that the effects could be driven by perceptions related to one benefit or a small subset of benefits. As a result, we examined the data at the individual benefit level. At the individual benefit level, we did not find evidence of changes in utilization due to misalignment and misperception. This finding may be due to pluralistic ignorance affecting the utilization of some benefits but not others. It is worth noting that in our samples, utilization of any one benefit was generally fairly low; the mean level of utilization for all benefits was fairly low in both samples. These findings may also be explained by our one-year time lag. Although utilization of most benefits is unlikely to dramatically change from year-to-year, some benefits could change from one year to the next due solely to the opportunity to utilize the benefit (e.g., utilization of paid maternity leave). We considered several subsets of benefits as smaller bundles (e.g., removing maternity leave) but again did not find significant pluralistic ignorance effects. These findings may support our decision to examine overall utilization and control for Time 1 utilization, because the opportunity to utilize a benefit like maternity leave may shift from year to year, but for those that do utilize maternity leave, the opportunity to utilize other benefits increases. For example, we find participants that utilized paid maternity leave at Time 1 were unlikely to report using it again at Time 2; however, they were more likely to use several other benefits at Time 2 that are tied to having a child.
These findings support the idea that the need and utilization for any specific family-friendly benefit is largely individualized (Saltzstein et al., 2001; Secret, 2000) and that giving employees the option of several benefits allows them to customize their benefits in a way that suits their family. Ironically, it also may highlight how perceptions regarding family-friendly benefit preferences are formed and why they are generally lower than actual preference. If employees see relatively inconsistent utilization of benefits as employees customize their benefits options, it becomes harder to estimate how many people actually utilize the benefits.

Our model implies a mediated relationship between the preference variables and WFC (with Time 2 utilization as the mediator). As a result, we followed the procedures suggested by Edwards and Lambert (2007), extending polynomial regression to moderated mediation settings, and analyzed the impact of the indirect effect of individual preference to WFC at different levels of perceived preference. This offers support for our contention that this is an indirect effects model (Mathieu & Taylor, 2006) rather than a true mediation model. In other words, although preference to utilize benefits may be associated with WFC, it appears that the actual utilization of family-friendly benefits is what is truly driving WFC.

Finally, by controlling for Time 1 family-friendly benefit utilization, we reduced the amount of variability in Time 2 utilization that could be explained by the predictor variables (to put this into perspective, the $R^2$ values of the polynomial regression models drop by .70 if Time 1 utilization is not included in the models). However, although the variance accounted for in Time 2 utilization is much lower, the pattern of results does not meaningfully change if Time 1 utilization is not included as a control variable (results available from the authors). Nonetheless, we report the results with Time 1 utilization controlled for in order to address the issue of changing utilization in response to misalignment and misperception, and also to rule out the possibility that need for the benefits overrides any effects of group norm perceptions.

**Discussion**

This study sought to examine the influence of misalignment with and misperception of group norms of support for family-friendly benefit utilization on employees’ utilization of family-friendly benefits in order to extend the line of research suggesting that employees do not utilize family-friendly benefits despite the advantages of utilizing such benefits (Allen, 2001; Munsch et al., 2014; Swody & Powell, 2007; Thompson, et al., 1999). We specifically sought to extend previous research concerning the impact of perceptions of others on benefit utilization (Blair-Loy
by investigating the potential that employee perceptions of their coworkers’ attitudes toward these benefits may be flawed. Our study, therefore, makes several unique contributions to the work-family literature concerning family-friendly benefits, as well as the literature concerning responses to group norms and pluralistic ignorance.

Our findings suggest that the relationship between employees’ actual preference to utilize family-friendly benefits and their perceptions of coworkers’ preferences play a role in their utilization of family-friendly benefits. When employees’ preferences for utilization were different from the perceived social norm, they generally aligned their behavior with the perceived norm, even if that norm was based on a misperception. That is, despite personally wanting to use family-friendly benefits, employees who perceive that others in their work group are not using, nor do not prefer to use such benefits, are less likely to utilize them. This creates a situation in which employees may wish to utilize family-friendly benefits but do not because they have a flawed perception that utilization is inconsistent with the social norm. Consistent with other studies that have found that simply offering benefits is not enough (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999), our study adds to our understanding of why employees may not take advantage of benefits that are offered, especially when they would prefer to utilize them. Moreover, our work contributes to the growing body of literature concerning more proximal predictors of family-friendly benefit utilization, suggesting that these types of perceptions may be even more important than more general notions of work–family culture in predicting utilization (e.g., Munsch et al., 2014). This was supported empirically in our finding that supportive work–family culture had little bearing on utilization. Finally, it is also consistent with the notion of pluralistic ignorance’s impact on behavior, in line with misperceived norms (Miller & McFarland, 1991; Willer et al., 2009).

We also found instances in which there was agreement between one’s preference and his or her perception of the preferences of coworkers. Generally, this led to utilization consistent with the agreed-upon preferences, although there was an interesting pattern whereby the impact of the agreement faded at high levels of agreement. That may have been a reflection of our controlling for Time 1 benefit utilization and reflects that increased changes in benefit utilization are less likely in cases in which agreement is very high because the status quo is an easier route to follow. It may also have been a function of our measurement of benefits in a binary way. In other words, it is quite possible that someone would have already been utilizing a benefit, actually want to utilize it even more and perceive a similar attitude by others, and the score at Time 2 was still reflective of
utilizing the benefit (in other words, there was no change despite very high preference).

Our findings were consistent with the literature in finding that utilization of family-friendly benefits decreases WFC (e.g., O’Driscoll et al., 2003). Though this was largely a replication of previous findings, the idea that it can be linked back, though perhaps not directly, to the relationship between misalignment and misperception of group norms in the utilization of family-friendly benefits is an important extension of the literature. In light of the many negative outcomes of WFC, attempts to work backward to reduce such conflicts can have a significant, broader impact on organizations.

Our study contributes to our understanding of the influence of perceptions of group norms in the workplace. Informal group norms that are generally held in the collective conscious are often implicit, making these norms difficult to detect, ever changing, and prone to inaccurate transmission (Parks, 2004). Pluralistic ignorance, when applied to implicit group norms, suggests that members may conform to norms that are predicated on inaccurate assumptions and/or transmissions (Prentice & Miller, 1993, 1996). Consequently, pluralistic ignorance may lead to ineffective normative behavior and faulty decision making (Halbesleben et al., 2005; Harvey, Novicevic, Buckley, & Halbesleben, 2004). Our study demonstrates that the effects of misperceived group norms may undermine organizations’ efforts to curb negative outcomes associated with WFC. Moreover, our study extends the pluralistic ignorance literature by testing the effects of misalignment and misperception rather than the common operationalization of only misalignment with group norms used in most studies of pluralistic ignorance (Halbesleben, 2009a).

In that regard, our findings reveal that group norms in the workplace may influence members’ lives outside of the workplace. To date, researchers have largely focused on examining the impact of explicit norms, behaviors, and relationships (e.g., supportive work–family culture, leader–member exchange, and coworker support) on WFC (Major, Fletcher, Davis, & Germano, 2008). The influence of implicit workplace norms on WFC, however, has received little attention. One exception examined the influence of the psychosocial work environment, or the norms that develop from formal and informal relationships and negotiations between organizational actors, on WFC (Hammer, Saksvik, Nytro, Torvatn, & Bayazit, 2004). Our study examines the influence of implicit group norms, including those that are inaccurately perceived, on one’s decision to utilize benefits offered by the organization that may decrease conflict between the work and family domain. That is, ineffective decision making resulting from one’s conformance to group norms (e.g., discrepancy
Finally, our study contributes to the literature on pluralistic ignorance by including the two important facets of pluralistic ignorance: misalignment and misperception. Perhaps due to the challenges associated with identifying discrete social groups and capturing actual group preferences (particularly in earlier pluralistic ignorance research, which emphasized broader social problems, Miller & McFarland, 1991), prior research has focused on operationalizing pluralistic ignorance as a misalignment between individual preference and perceived group preferences. Operationalizing pluralistic ignorance in this manner limits the extent to which researchers can separate the effects of pluralistic ignorance beyond the more general effects of perceived misalignment with a group norm (e.g., Asch, 1956). Moreover, it places emphasis solely on individual perceptions of a group rather than the more complex interplay between group and individual dynamics originally identified in the study of pluralistic ignorance (Allport, 1924). Moving forward, our findings highlight the importance of researchers considering mechanisms for capturing actual group norms in order to separate out the effects of misperception and misalignment. Within a workplace setting, this is somewhat easier to do, as work is often organized around specific units completing the work (e.g., work teams, departments, etc.). However, particularly given the increased role of boundary work in organizations (Barrett, Oborn, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2012; Kerr & Ulrich, 1995), researchers need to give careful consideration to the most appropriate social group from which to draw conclusions about social norms in order to capture both the misalignment and misperception components of pluralistic ignorance. 

Managerial Implications

Our findings suggest that an evaluation of employee preferences for utilization of family-friendly benefits may be misguided if analyzed by utilization rate alone. Low utilization at the aggregate level has implications for the organization trying to judge the value of offered benefits to their employees. If utilization is low, managers may determine their employees do not need or desire the family-friendly benefits offered by the organization. Further, employees not utilizing the benefits do not have the opportunity to leverage the positive effects of benefit utilization, such as lowered WFC. Our study suggests that these negative effects may be the result of misperceptions rather than reality. There is a need for organizations to carefully monitor the social norms that have been established to ensure employees understand the realities of what is truly
accepted by their organization, supervisor, and coworkers. It is important that managers understand that simply offering family-friendly benefits is not enough, particularly if employees perceive that others are not interested in utilizing the benefits. If managers want these benefits to be utilized, they need to create a work environment accepting of utilization behavior. To do so, they should monitor social norms with work groups and mitigate public disagreement when appropriate. Several studies in the pluralistic ignorance literature have found that publicly exposing others’ true attitudes reduces pluralistic ignorance and aligns behavior with their personal attitudes and more accurate group norms (e.g., Schroeder & Prentice, 1998). Applying this concept to the utilization dilemma, we suggest that if managers want to create a culture accepting of family-friendly benefit utilization, then they should be more outspoken regarding their support and others’ support and preferences.

This prescription aligns with recent literature on workplace interventions that are aimed at reducing employee WFC (Hammer, Kossek, Bodner, Anger, & Zimmerman, 2011; Kelly et al., 2014; Kelly, Moen, & Tranby, 2011). For example, Kelly et al. (2014) examined the effects of a workplace intervention program (named STAR) on employee’s schedule control, supervisor’s support for family and personal matters, and the work–family interface. The STAR intervention program included (a) supervisory training on strategies to demonstrate support for employees’ personal and family lives while also supporting employees’ job performance, and (b) participatory training sessions to identify new work practices and processes to increase employees’ control over work time and focus on work results. They found that the intervention program had positive effects on employee’s schedule control, supervisor’s support, and the work–family interface, which in turn reduced employee’s WFC. Regarding pluralistic ignorance of family-friendly benefits utilization, we prescribe a sort of intervention (managers publicly expressing others’ and their own preferences for family-friendly utilization). Although such an approach is in line with other research on pluralistic ignorance, future research is needed to empirically test the effects of such an intervention in this specific context.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Although our study advances the literature concerning misalignment and misperception of group norms by using polynomial regression and response surface modeling, our study is subject to some methodological limitations. Operationalizing benefits utilization as a yes/no response suggests benefits are utilized in the same way. We did not take into
consideration whether a benefit was utilized once or several times in this analysis (e.g., using elder care resources once or repeatedly). If 1 of the 12 benefits were heavily utilized but others were not, an employee’s utilization score would be classified as low and mask some variability in utilization. Although consistent with previous work using this measure (e.g., Hammer et al., 2005), future researchers should take this into consideration and account for frequency of benefit use, as it may impact work–family attitudes (cf. Kossek & Nichol, 1992). For purposes of this study, this concern is mitigated somewhat by controlling for Time 1 utilization so that the focus is less on level of utilization and more on change to align with a perceived group norm.

In addition, although the two-sample approach has advantages in terms of generalizability, the ability to generalize our findings may be limited by the use of two occupational groups working in two organizations with specific family-friendly benefits available to them. In both samples, the schedules are somewhat unique; both the nurses and firefighters in our sample typically worked only a few days a week with 12-hour shifts. This type of shift work, coupled with fairly segmented work and family boundaries due to the nature of their work (in both samples, it would be exceedingly difficult to take work home), might have unique implications for WFC (Halbesleben, 2009b) and utilization of benefits. Future work that explores contexts in which work is more flexible may help understand the boundary conditions of pluralistic ignorance in family-friendly benefit utilization. That said, research already suggests some impact of pluralistic ignorance in flexible work arrangements (Munsch et al., 2014), and it is quite possible that the flexibility might reduce exposure to work group information and actually increase pluralistic ignorance (Halbesleben, 2009a). Moreover, we acknowledge that our findings regarding work–family culture are limited by the fact that the data were collected in workplace settings that are somewhat unique. To the extent that there was little variability in perceptions of that culture, the ability of that variable to predict utilization might have been decreased. Studies utilizing samples from multiple organizations with more varied work–family cultures may help address this issue to provide stronger tests of distal versus proximal predictors of family-friendly benefit utilization.

We examined employee perceptions of a wide array of family-friendly benefits. Instead of taking a one-by-one approach to examine perceptions and utilization of benefits, we sought to capture a broader effect with the bundle approach (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). Examining the influence of a benefit bundle, or group of highly related and complementary human resource benefits (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000), is common among strategic human resource researchers (Ichniowski, Shaw, & Prennushi, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Marchington & Grugulis, 2000;
As our data suggest, taking this approach allowed us to examine benefits utilization while accounting for relatively low levels of utilization of individual benefits (and moreover, relatively small changes in utilization over time). However, this approach also raises some interesting issues with regard to resources and their impact on employees’ WFC. Several resource-based theories, most notably conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), suggest that resources may have individualized influence on employees (e.g., a benefit might help one employee but have little impact on another employee; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014). Further, conservation of resources theory suggests that resources may interact, such that the presence of unique combinations of resources can have a synergistic effect (often termed resource caravans; Hobfoll, 2011). Future research is needed to further explore the unique combinations of resources that might impact WFC and what individual factors help predict those latent combinations. This is important both from a practical perspective in offering the resources that are most effective but also due to the impact of misalignment and misperception. It is quite possible that, for some employees, misalignment and misperception in specific benefits will have no effect, or alternatively, misalignment and misperception in just one benefit may have just as big of an effect as misalignment and misperception in multiple benefits.

Finally, although we focused on the effects of misalignment and misperception on the utilization of family-friendly benefits, it is possible that misalignment and misperception may influence the utilization of other benefits, such as vacation days, with important implications for organizations. For example, the literature on vacation days and recovery has found that, during vacation, recovery from work demands occurs and individual resources are replenished, which in turn leads to improved individual well-being (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006). If misalignment and misperception are found to influence utilization of vacation days such that employees forego their time off, broader employee well-being may suffer as a result. For this reason, future research should study the impact of misalignment and misperception on the utilization of other types of organizational benefits.

**Conclusion**

Family-friendly benefits are becoming increasingly popular among organizations interested in combating the adverse consequences associated with WFC (Baughman, DiNardi, & Holtz-Eakin, 2003; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2001). In addition to decreasing WFC, utilizing family-friendly benefits has been linked to positive outcomes...
including greater organizational commitment and a lower intent to quit (Grover & Crooker, 1995; Thompson et al., 1999), less absenteeism (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999), and greater job satisfaction (Allen, 2001; Baltes et al., 1999). However, the present study suggests that perceptions regarding coworker support for such policies could play an important role in utilization, which could play a role in employee well-being. Most notably, if employees who personally want to use benefits perceive that others do not prefer to use them, and as a result do not utilize the benefits, the employee and the organization may not gain much value from offering the benefits. Although additional research is needed, our findings suggest that interventions to improve the understanding of social norms regarding preferences for family-friendly benefit utilization may help to address discrepancies between employees’ preferences and their perceptions of coworker preferences. Our findings similarly suggest that alignment of preferences and perceived preferences lead to utilization consistent with those shared preferences, making the value of family-friendly benefits far easier to assess for organizations.

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