

Research trends

## Overview of Research on Work–Life Balance in Australia\*

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### I. Introduction

I was given an opportunity of a seven-month visiting fellowship at a new research centre, the Centre for Work and Life, University of South Australia, located in a suburb of Adelaide. With now only two months of the visit left, I review existing research on the interaction between work and family. The Australian Institute of Family Studies is best known for its research into the family and it has been influential through conducting large-scale national surveys and regularly publishing reports and a journal (*Family Matters*). Professor Barbara Pocock, the director of the Centre, has been working for a long time on labour studies through the perspectives of feminism and gender studies. When I first contacted her she was in the program of gender and labour studies at the School of Social Sciences of the University of Adelaide. As I wanted to do research on work and family with more focus on work issues, I emailed Professor Pocock, asking her to accept me as a research visitor, partly because in her influential book, *The Work/Life Collision*, she provides a picture of work–life issues in Australia that is also relevant to Japan. During our correspondence she moved to the newly established Centre for Work and Life as a director, which made it possible for me to be a visiting fellow at a centre most suitable to my research interest.

Owing partly to important role played by the director in policy discussions on work–life issues throughout the country, the Centre has been successful in raising funds from various sources, such as the Australian government and its research council, unions and collaborating with a company engaged in community development. The centre conducts a number of research projects at a time, such as the “work, home and community” study, which makes the workplace very stimulating, although the centre is not very large in size, having only four full-time researchers. In this article I review the current situation of work–life research in Australia, drawing mainly on journal articles and research reports, as well as on information obtained informally in conversations with members in the Centre.

### II. Gender, family and work in Australia

In contemporary Japan there has been growing concern about the work–life balance and re-organising ways of working, initially in connection with gender equality and more recently as a countermeasure to the declining fertility in our country. For most Japanese, Australia is associated with the image of a country of relaxed lifestyles and well-frequented holiday resorts. However, international comparisons with European countries and the USA rank Australia alongside the UK and the USA as a country where working hours are long. Many scholars alert us to the changes that took place after the 1980s. Thus, “post-1980 reform has emphasised a ‘US style’ approach to increasing living standards that depends on labour market flexibility to stimulate employment and economic growth”. Subsequently the working hours of full-time workers increased (Van Wanrooy and Wilson 2006: 354), a larger proportion of people are working at night or on the weekend, and

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earnings are widening together with inequality, along with the growth in service sector, white collar, part-time and casual work and jobs demanding long hours (Pocock 2006: 53–56). To close these gaps between images and the reality, in this section, I provide a few indicators that are important for describing work and life in Australia in comparison with those in Japan.

A gender perspective plays an important role in the discussion about work–life balance. We begin with comparing two gender equality measures that are used internationally: GDI (the gender-related development index) and the GEM (the gender empowerment measure). The GDI measures the gendered in/equalities in physical and cultural resources acquired by each individual, drawing on information about life expectancy, education and income, while the GEM measures gendered participation in political or economic decision-making, drawing on information about seats in parliament, the gendered share of the occupations of legislators, senior officials and managers, the gendered share of professional and technical occupations, and income. Australia is rated second (out of 140 counties and areas) in GDI and seventh (with only Nordic countries and Belgium ahead of it out of 80 countries) in GEM, while Japan ranks 14th and 43rd in these areas, respectively. Thus, the position of Australia in GEM deserves special attention.

Figure 1 shows age patterns of employment to population ratios in Australia and Japan. As in Japan, the Australia data display an M-shaped curve, showing lower participation rates among women in their 30s, although they are slightly higher than those in Japan. This similarity is notable, given the difference in GEM rank noted above.

[Figure 1 is about here]

However, when we compare the two countries with respect to the working hours of men at the age of 35 to 44,<sup>1</sup> when they are most likely to have small children (Figure 2), it is noteworthy that even in Australia more than 20% work 60 hours a week or more, but it is also noticeable that nearly 40% work less than 40 hours a week. Given these differences in working hours, what differences are there between these two countries in the time men spend in domestic work and childcare? The proportion of non-market activities to total work hours for Australian men is 38%, while that of Japanese men is 7%. The estimated hours a day spent on non-market activities by men in Australia are 2 hours and 39 minutes, but only 25 minutes in Japan (UNDP, 2005) .

Public concerns over the work–life balance in both Australia and Japan are partly derived from the decline in fertility in each country, although the total fertility rate in Australia was 1.81 in 2005, which is one of the highest in developed countries.

With this brief overview of work–life conditions, I review the research on the work–life balance in Australia in the following section.

[Figure 2 is about here]

### III. Overview of research on the work–life balance

#### Overview of work–life issues in Australia

Literature on work and family life in Australia appears in journals in various disciplines such as sociology, family studies, labour studies, policy studies and pedagogy, published in Australia, and in journals published in the USA and the UK, such as *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Gender & Society* and *Gender, Work & Organization*. Most of the literature refers to studies not only on Australia but on other countries, especially the USA and the UK.

[Figure 3 is about here]

The work–life balance, as a general issue, attracts scholars in various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, social work, policy studies or economics, and has been studied using different approaches. Figure 3 shows an overview of the collision between work and life in Australia, and therefore helps us map the variety of studies that are reviewed in this article. It shows the historical transition where actual behaviours that are changing collide with values and institutions that have failed to adapt to the change, resulting in the fallout shown at the bottom. Despite the increasing labour force participation of women, values and norms have failed to change to accommodate these behaviours, and thus:

these lagged values and norms create cultural resistance to living in new ways – including in this example within mothers themselves, their children, their partners, governments, workplaces, and in broader society. (Pocock 2003: 239)

Mothers feel the dissonance between traditional values and what they do as mothers and fathers also have trouble with the gap between their belief that fathers should be as heavily involved in the care of their children as mothers and their actual behaviours (Pocock 2003: 239–240).

Unchanging workplaces that still have at their centre the ideal of a worker who is care-less help to retain working conditions that do not consider the necessity of care, thus causing the collision (Pocock 2003: 1, 38). These collisions result in a declining quality of life, loss of community and pressure on those carers still at home and on grandparents. To address these issues, women try to shorten their working hours by choosing part-time work with poor job security and a lower rate of benefits relative to full-time work (Pocock, 2003: 4, 5).

This overall picture contains complicated interacting issues that can fit into the following categories:

- (1) difficulties in life, such as childcare
- (2) division of labour in housework and care
- (3) male work issues (long work hours and/or unsocial work hours) and female work issues (their rising labour force participation and the insecurity of part-time/casual work)
- (4) loss of community

These categories are related and mutually influential, but a single study such as a journal article usually focuses on one of them and refers others as a related factors. Furthermore, whereas Figure 3 depicts historical changes and continuity, the differences between individuals in contemporary society are also an important focus of research and most research, in fact, adopts this kind of cross-sectional approach.

The fourth category, which relates work–life issues to community issues, is very important, but there are few existing studies that focus on it. In the following section, I give a short review of existing

studies for each of the other three categories listed above. The first two categories focus on the family, and many articles that fall in these categories appear in *Family Matters* and the *Journal of Family Studies*. The former focuses on the stress and well-being of workers and/or their families, while the latter deals with power or role relationships such as the division of domestic labour and childcare in terms of workload and responsibility. As each topic has accumulated a rich body of research in Australia, as it has in Japan and other countries, I review each separately, paying special attention to the effect of (paid) work on these issues because it is the focus of the current article.

### Difficulties in life and the way of working

The topic of work–life balance is based on a concern about the negative impact, symbolised by long working hours, of the workload on life. However, examining whether longer working hours really result in worse effects on workers and their families remains a research question even in recent studies. Some quantitative studies assert that longer work hours cause greater stress (Alexander and Baxter 2005), while others conclude that they are not necessarily related to well-being (Gray et al., 2004). Most of these studies, partly because of limits of the data, focus only on the stress and well-being of workers themselves, paying little attention to family stress. On the other hand, there are studies like Pocock (2006) where the impact of parental work on children is examined through interviews with students at primary and high school.

### Division of labour at home

Men’s participation in housework and child rearing and its determinants has been an important theme in the sociology of family, even before the rising concern on work–life balance. Thus, a number of studies on this topic have already been conducted in Australia. Whilst many of these criticise persisting inequality, in which women take a larger proportion than men of workload, especially the responsibilities related to domestic work and childcare (Bittman, 1998; Craig, 2006a, 2006b; Dempsey, 2000a, 2000b; Pocock, 2003), some emphasise changes, showing examples of men who are involved in most of domestic labour and childcare (Grbich, 1995; Talbot, 2005). Overall, it seems to be agreed that men spend more time in domestic labour and childcare than before. However, women spend still more time than men in such work, as shown by indices measuring the distribution of childcare responsibilities when each partner each is in sole charge of the children. Thus, an uneven distribution of the workload at home in favour of men persists (Craig 2006b; Dempsey, 2000b). It is all the same noteworthy that a substantial number of men are stay-at-home dads or primary care-givers.

While most of these studies show that the employment conditions and working hours of women affect the extent of their partners’ involvement in childcare, they rarely show the effect of the working conditions of men themselves. Although one study shows that long working hours deprive children of time with their fathers and that full-time mothers whose partners work long hours feel lonely and “residualness” (Pocock, 2003: 141–144), I failed to find research analysing the relation between men’s work hours and their participation in childcare using a large national-level sample.

### Determinants of working conditions

Lastly, I summarise some important findings from the literature analysing the determinants of working hours, employment status and access to family-friendly provisions for women and men, either separately or comparatively.

Concerning the working conditions of mothers of young children, it is frequently asserted that their employment status is unequally insecure, compared to fathers or other employed women.

According to Baxter and Gray (2006), using a large panel survey data set, the longitudinal study of Australian children conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, overall, only 38 per cent of mothers with an infant (aged from three to 19 months) are in paid employment and a further 10 per cent are on maternity leave. Employment in part-time work is much more common for mothers of infants than it is for the broader population of employed women. Although somewhat longer part-time hours are more often associated with higher status, very short hours are often associated with lower status and casual work. Employed mothers of infants have a higher rate of self-employment than other employed women. Self-employed mothers are more likely to work non-standard hours than employees, and they are more likely to be in lower status occupations than those permanently employed, while they report a greater level of flexibility in their work hours.

Another example of research that focuses on working mothers includes a study that examines the gap between contracted and preferred work hours and its underlying factors (McDonald *et al.*, 2006). This shows that

nearly two-thirds of women working full time would prefer to work part time and the major reasons for not acting on their preferences is because of the nature of the job and the lack of career opportunities available for part-time employees. (p. 470)

To turn to men's work, Van Wanrooy and Wilson (2006), after tracking the historical change in the working time regime in Australia, analyse attitudes to working hours and their determinants. The average working hours of men who work full-time increased from 38.3 in 1978 to 46.8 hours in 2003. The authors attribute these results to Australia's working-time regime, where people believe that working hours are determined by individual commitment to work and its "liberal working-time regime" where people are less likely to support a strict limit on working hours.

In addition to studies on working hours are studies that examine accessibility to family-friendly practices at workplaces (Gray and Tudball, 2003). The distinguishing feature of the data of the Australian workplace industrial relations survey used in this article is that it is a large data set in which we can link information on employees and employers. Making the best use of this feature, they showed that there are larger differences within, rather than between, workplaces in access to family-friendly work practices, such as control over the start time and finish time and permanent part-time employment. These differences are based on levels of skill, employment statuses and the investment levels by firms. The implications of these results, according to the authors, are that employees who are most likely to be able to negotiate successfully with employers over work conditions are those with skills in short supply, and that policymakers need to focus on extending to all employees the availability of such practices.

#### IV. Research, policy and society: can trends be reversed?

If we look at the findings reviewed in the previous section in terms of historical changes, we may ask how the finding that men are getting more and more involved in domestic labour and childcare can be reconciled with the increasing workload for male workers. Could it be possible for men to participate in domestic labour and childcare, even when their working time increases? Increasing working hours to too high a certain level might hinder an increase in men's involvement in the home. Given that fact that changes in working conditions have begun to have the negative effects on families that some studies are warning, we cannot be optimistic.

Many studies that focus on working conditions refer to the validity of particular policies. In Australia, where the two major political parties, the Liberal Party and the Australian Labor Party compete with each other for federal as well as state government, studies that examine the effect of policies are likely to have an impact on real politics. Currently these political parties are in a

delicate balance: in all state governments at the time of writing, Labor has power, while the Liberals, in coalition with the National Party, rule the federal government. Work–life balance policies seem to be one of the biggest issues for both of these parties, and a report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on House and Human Services called *Balancing Work and Family* (House of Representatives 2006) reflects the controversial character of this issue. Although this is a well-organised research report with a broad survey of the literature and public opinion, we can see in it conflicts between the parties. A dissention from the recommendations written under the supervision of Liberal committee chairman was submitted by Labor committee members and included in the report.

The official recommendations of the whole report emphasise that individual workers are free to negotiate working conditions to ease their work–life balance, but they do not have the right to demand legislation for such matters as extended parental leave and returning to work part time. While the report shows the effect of the legislation on this matter in the UK (House of Representatives, 2006: 176–179), and many studies discuss the problem of relying on free negotiation between individual workers and firms (Gray and Tudball, 2003; Lee and Strachan, 1999; Pocock, 2006; Van Wanrooy and Wilson 2006), “the committee has not recommended any additional regulations” (House of Representatives, 2006: xiii) and lists as recommendation 9 that

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations monitor rates of flexible working and caring in Australia and countries with “right to request” legislation, such as the United Kingdom, and publicly report the results (House of Representatives, 2006: 179).

However, the dissenting report states, “The labor members of the committee urge the Australian Government to take immediate steps to introduce ‘right to request’ legislation” (House of Representatives, 2006: 299).

While the proportion of male workers who work less than 40 hours and the level of fathers’ participation in domestic work and childcare is higher in Australia than in Japan, policies to balance work and life seem to be more progressive in Japan, in that there is legislation to compensate for loss of income during parental leave. Notwithstanding these differences, we can see many commonalities in main public concerns and research topics. The direction of change, such as the introduction of a market mechanism into all spheres in society is also common to both countries. What sorts of policies are effective in current trends where the pursuit of economic growth causes difficulties in families’ lives? There is a federal election coming up in Australia in the latter half of 2007. We should watch how this society changes.

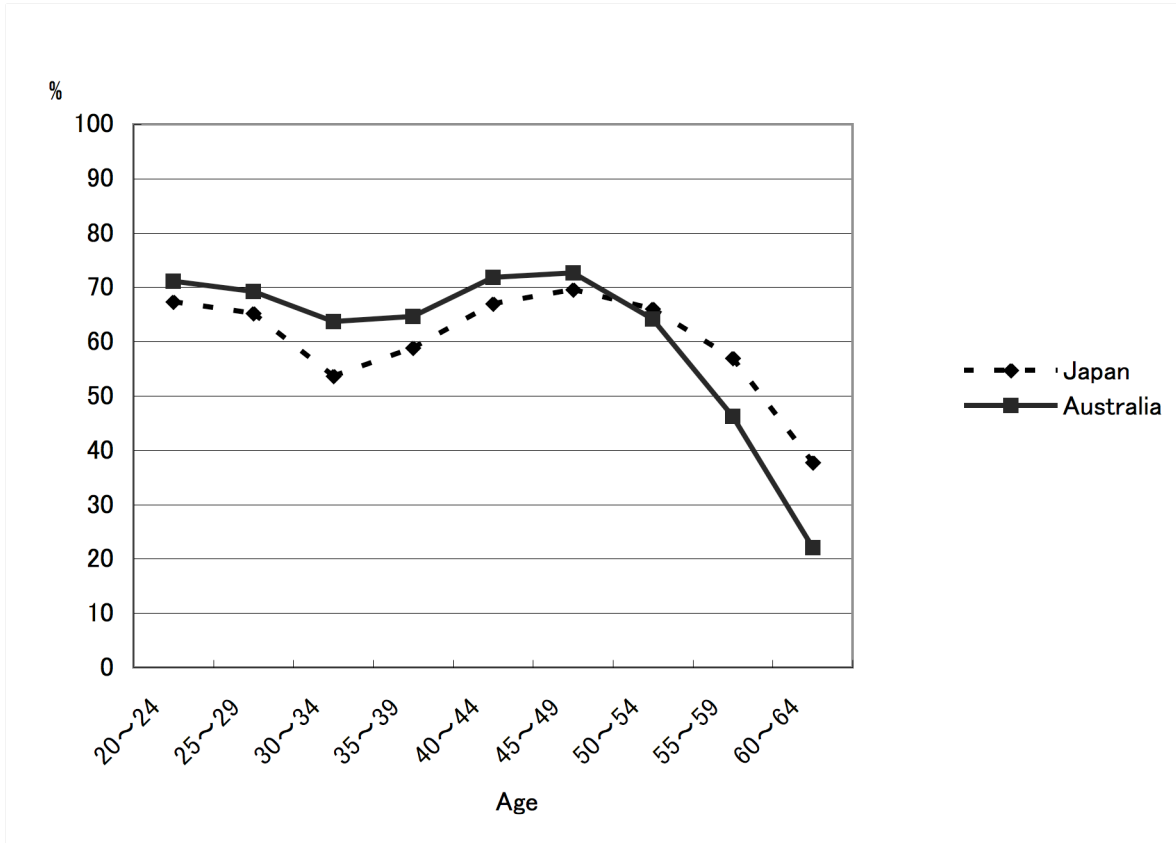
## Note

<sup>1</sup> Although the 30–39 age group would be more likely to include people with young children, I have combined the two age groups in Japan for comparability, because the information necessary to decompose the 35–44 age group into five-year age groups in Australia does not exist.

## References

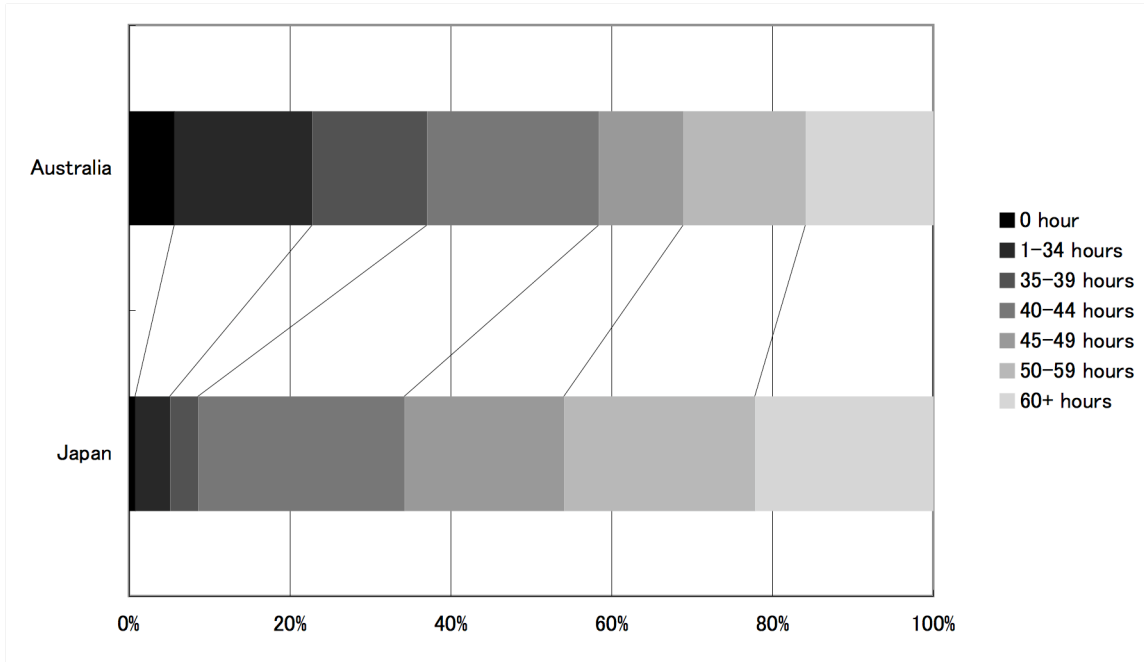
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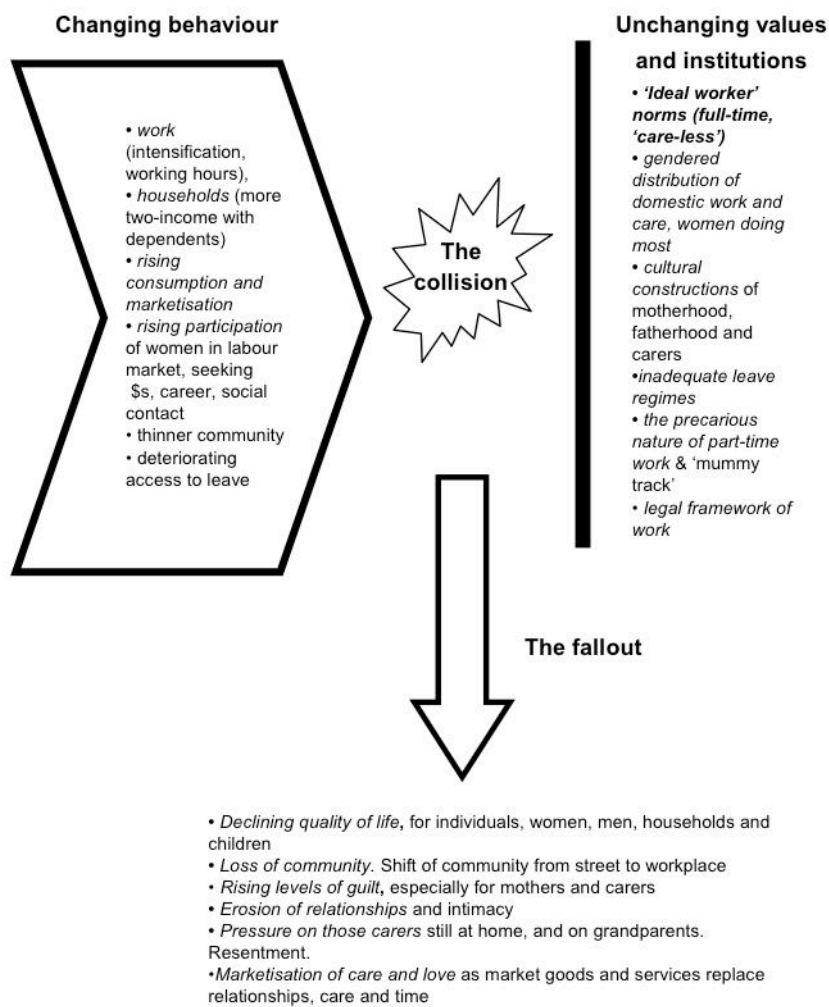
Source: OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics  
 LFS by sex and age – indicators Vol 2006 release 01

Figure 1. Age patterns of female employment-to-population ratios in Australia and Japan 2000



Source: Japan -- Population Census 2000, Results of Second Basic Complete Tabulation, Table 8  
 Australia -- ABS No. 6291.0.55.001 Datacube, Supertable, Table 1

Figure 2. Actual Work hours per week of Employed Men age 34-44 in Australia and Japan 2000



Source: Pocock 2003: 3

Figure 3: A model for the collision between work and life