

Work-Life Balance in Australia?

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Abstract

This paper considers some conceptual issues around 'work-life' analysis (especially 'work/care regimes' and 'work/care chains' before reviewing some empirical outcomes of existing arrangements for Australian workers, along with their households. The paper explores factors that underpin work-life outcomes and, building on empirical findings, offers a model depicting some of the key contributors to work-life outcomes. I argue that an ethic of care needs to accompany Australia's well developed ethic of work, and that new arrangements are necessary to govern their simultaneous realisation in Australia if negative interaction between the spheres of work and the rest of life are to be minimised. The paper is in three parts: first a discussion of the conceptualisation of work and life issues; secondly the state of work and life in Australia; and thirdly some brief reflections on policy implications. The paper draws on the 2007 Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) (Pocock et al. 2007a). I acknowledge the contributions of my colleagues Dr Natalie Skinner and Dr Philippa Williams to the paper.

Introduction: 'Work/Care Regime's and 'Work/Care Chains'

Like most OECD countries, Australia is a place of change in relation to paid work, and households (Charlesworth et al. 2002; HREOC 2007; Pocock 2003). Our labour market is small by international comparison: there are just over 10 million workers in Australia, compared to over 66 million in Japan and 798 million in China.

Resource demands from China in particular, have led to very low rates of official unemployment (less than 5 percent). While underemployment affects many, official unemployment is very low on historical trends and by international comparison. The rate of participation in employment has been increasing steadily for the past 30 years, on the back of women's increased participation as men's has fallen. The current rate of women's employment participation (58.1 per cent) compares to 48.5 per cent in Japan. This rate is close to that of the US and higher than the OECD average. However, women's employment participation is often interrupted for extended periods after childbearing, and much of it is part-time – much more than in most OECD countries. In 2006 over 46 per cent of women were employed part-time (26 per cent in the OECD), a third of them for less than 16 hours a week. Most of these part-timers are employed casually rather than permanently.

Non-standard employment has grown significantly in Australia in the past 30 years, especially through 'casual' work: that is, work that lacks protection from unfair dismissal and is exempt from most rights and benefits attached to permanent work including paid sick and holiday leave (although some casual workers receive a loading to compensate for some of these losses). Casual work rose from around 13 per cent of the workforce in 1984 to 23.2 per cent in 2006 (Campbell 2007, p 20, figure 4).

Many Australians think very positively about their work: 60 per cent say they would go to work even if they did not need the money (HILDA 2001). This does not mean, however, that they like all aspects of their existing jobs.

For full-time workers, hours of work have increased on average over the past 30 years, and many find their jobs more intensive and demanding. Most of the hours of overtime worked by Australians are unpaid and many are involuntary. While there has been a great deal of change in patterns of paid work, there has been all too little change in patterns of unpaid work with the latest data showing that men have not increased their contribution to housework in the past decade, while women have actually decreased theirs marginally. These changes in patterns of work and care have led to a very lively public conversation about work and family issues in Australia over the past decade.

Modelling work and care regimes

Work and life outcomes in Australia are governed by a range of factors, which I argue can be understood as a type of 'work/care regime'. Work and care are combined within complex social, cultural and institutional situations, and these shape work-life outcomes and whether 'work-life balance' is possible, and for whom. These work/care regimes are located within specific national and historical gender orders (Connell 1987, p. 116). Several factors construct work and care regimes including: dominant values and norms (e.g. appropriate forms of care, the 'proper' role of mothers and fathers); work/care institutions (like labour regulation, childcare provisions, leave arrangements, working time and welfare systems) and the behaviours and preferences of individuals (Pocock 2005), as set out in Fig. 1.

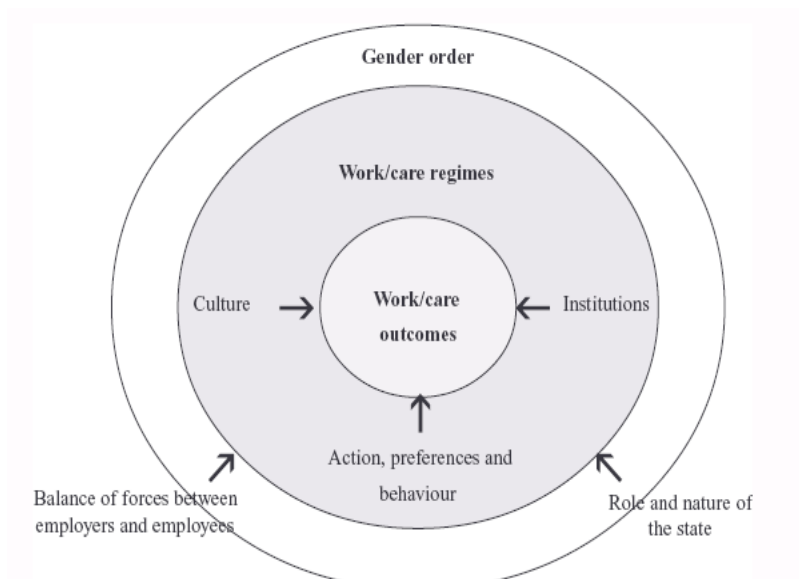


Figure 1: Gender orders and work/care regimes

Table 1 sets out a list of the components of work/care regimes, which differ widely from country to country.

Table 1: The components of work/care regime

Work/Care regimes	Manifestations
Work/Care culture <i>Dominant values and norms</i>	What we think (<i>Social norms</i>) for example, the archetypical 'proper mother', 'proper father' and 'proper worker'
Work/Care institutions <i>Specific institutions</i>	<i>How, where and when we do things:</i> industrial law labour market childcare institutions schools workplaces pre-schools leave arrangements work time welfare arrangements government payments family structures
Action, behaviour, preferences <i>What we do and want</i>	What we do. Behaviour and preferences at a point in time, for example, around participation in paid work, allocation of unpaid work, how we care for dependents

I have applied this framework in Australia arguing that at any point in time or place, work and care outcomes are the consequences of the gender order and its specific embodiment in a work/care regime (Pocock 2003). Recent analysis of Australian Social Survey Attitudes data against this model finds that traditional breadwinner households and 'new traditional' households (where women work part-time) are better accommodated in Australia's current work/care regime, than dual earner households and sole parent/earner households who seek less time at work, more time for leisure and feel the pressures of a time-squeeze (Western, Baxter and Chesters 2007).

Work/care chains

Work/care regimes shape the lived experience of workers and their dependents and they often embed 'work/care chains' which affect the work and care outcomes of care providers – whether nannies, childcare workers, or other service providers. In many cases, the standards of care for those who depend on care providers (like the children of immigrant nannies), deteriorates down a 'work/care' chain. In the absence of universal quality public care supports and decent wages for paid carers in some countries, increasing participation rates can result in growing inequality and deteriorating care chains. At the end of these chains are the cognitive, emotional and social deficits of children who the literature suggests may be damaged by their poor care (Norrie and Mustard Fraser 2002). In recent years, researchers have begun applying theories of global commodity chain (or 'value chain') analysis to the international care economy, paying attention to its intersection with immigration systems (Kurian 2004) and to its gendered character (Durano 2005). A 'care deficit' is emerging in many locations (Hochschild 2003) as female participation in paid work grows, especially where patterns of work are changing very rapidly as in China and India (Chowdhury, Carson, and Carson 2007, Hill 2007). This care deficit is

met in various ways: over-work by working women; decline in the quality of care; the employment of cheap carers who immigrate to cities from rural and regional locations or other countries, or a shift of care onto other family or community members. The latter mechanisms have been conceptualised as a 'work-care chain' (Salazar Parrenas 2001, Hochschild 2003, Pocock 2006). Williams (2008) has described these mechanisms – of meeting care through the immigration of low paid workers - as a 'profoundly asymmetrical' solution to the problem of work and care.

Existing literature suggests that a 'global care economy' exists, underpinning labour markets in every country. OECD countries are entering new international trades of care with poorer countries (Durano 2005). Rapid population growth in poorer countries accompanied by high levels of national poverty is accelerating immigration to countries facing a shortage of carers. This has important implications for global care and work flows, especially around the Pacific Rim. For example, 6.5 million Filipino immigrants now reside in over 130 countries. These international circuits of care are gendered and racialised (Salazar Parrenas 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). Rich white nations and individuals draw on mostly women of colour from Asia and Africa to do their care work, usually at very low pay. While such immigration creates many positive benefits, existing literature also points to an international distributional care injustice, as care is drawn 'upward' and away from the country (or region or household) of origin where a local care deficit is created (Hochschild 2003).

'Work/care' chains can be observed both within countries (as workers employ lower paid workers to make up the 'care gap' or leave their rural home to take up work in cities leaving the care of families to others) and between countries (as immigrant workers from poor countries increasingly step into the care gap). Kittay et al. argue for a global ethic of care to meet the problem of unfair care trades. Such an ethic creates obligations for

those who draw on the care of the poor immigrant and drain the quality of care in the country and family network of origin (2005, p 454).

I believe we need more research that brings together analysis of the nature and effects of work/care regimes as well as 'work/care chains' – and I have applied for funds to do this by comparing China, India and Australia².

Around the Pacific Rim, both labour flows, work patterns and care arrangements are evolving rapidly at a time when in many locations the welfare state is in retreat (or under-developed), the labour force is being feminised, and care deficits in developed countries are increasingly met or created by immigration.

Conceptualising work and life balance

Understandings about the interaction between work and life have become more sophisticated over the course of the past 20 years. Analysts increasingly apply a life-course approach and better data are being collected in a range of countries. However, the discussion is marked by some conceptual grey areas.

Firstly, it is helpful to define what we mean by 'work' and by 'life' and consider their relationship with work and family. I define work as paid work and life beyond work as the activities outside paid work including household activities and those activities with family, friends and community, including care activities and voluntary activity. I do not assume that 'work' is distinct from 'life': given the growing reach of work into the lives of Australians, this distinction would be absurd, but in order to better understand how work affects the rest of life, it is important to analytically distinguish the activities of paid work from the rest of life beyond the workplace. This definition subsumes 'family' activities within the definition of 'life' activities beyond work, so that in our definition work-life policy discussion subsumes the very

significant field of 'work and family' policy.

Secondly, how should we think about work-life interaction? Are they distinct spheres that can be held in balance? This is an important question. It lies at the heart of the common question: how can I get the balance right – as a mother, a worker, a manager? I believe that the concept of balance is not helpful given its implication that at the centre of such balance exists a clever or lucky individual who manages to keep things 'in balance'. This denies the complex range of actors and forces at work in constructing work-life outcomes. The metaphor of 'balance' over-states the place of the individual in the work-life picture. Instead, I believe we should be talking about the *interactive* nature of work and life and the porous boundaries between them.

Popular public discussion often implies that finding the 'balance' is a matter of canny self-organisation. This perspective denies the gendered, class and ethnic differences that shape work-life outcomes for individuals. Wealthy individuals can buy a wide range of helpful work-life resources that are not available to the poor. Professional workers often rely on low paid workers to undertake long commutes, daily juggles around multiple jobs and to live on their low pay to sustain the work-life 'balance' of professional and better paid workers. The latter often require a much more complex juggle by those they rely on than they undertake themselves, given their material differences in resources. Such gaps in 'work-life' circumstances raise issues about what Tronto (1993) and Williams (2001) have highlighted as an 'ethic of care' which is necessary to complement our over-developed 'work ethic'. This ethic of care has its international and racial dimensions as many social scientists have discussed (see Salazar Parrenas 2001). Clearly, the discussion around work-life outcomes is also highly gendered.

Work-life interaction in Australia

What is the state of work-life outcomes in Australia? We recently conducted a survey about work-life interaction in Australia. The AWALI 2007 sample is a national stratified random sample of 1435 Australian workers conducted through computer-assisted telephone interviews over two weekends in early 2007.³ The survey provides a good representation of the Australian labour force and the analysis is weighted by age, schooling, sex and geographic area to reflect population distributions. We consider four main findings which have significant policy implications in the Australian context: overall patterns of work-life interaction, outcomes in relation to hours, and hours preferences and the effect of poor quality jobs on work-life outcomes.

Spillover from work to life, and from life to work: work takes more than life

We asked people about the frequency with which work interferes with activities outside work, with time for family and friends, with community connections. We also asked respondents how frequently the reverse occurs: how often personal life interferes with work activities and restricts time spent at work. Confirming international findings, we find that work interferes with life much more than the other way around. For example, 70.0 per cent of both women and men felt that personal life never or rarely interferes with work activities, compared to the 45.1 per cent of men and 50.2 per cent of women who felt that work never or rarely interferes with activities outside work. It is interesting to note that workers often try to protect their workmates from the effects of stress on the home front: they talk of keeping it to themselves. However, they are not always so able to protect those with whom they live with from stress arising from work.

Work-to-community interaction is widespread

Public policy and academic debate about the relationship between work and

life outside work tend to focus on the reconciliation of work and family. However, the impact of work on workers' capacity to develop and maintain connections in their community is generally overlooked. These effects include the impact of work on social networks and social cohesion. We asked respondents how often work interferes with their capacity to develop or maintain connections and friendships in their community as a broad indicator of the spillover of work onto the broader community fabric. Our findings on this issue indicate that work's interference with community connections is surprisingly widespread (see Table 2). Just under half the respondents (47.3 per cent) felt that work interferes with their capacity to build and maintain community connections and friendships to some extent.

Table 2: Work interferes with community connections by gender and work status, employees, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Never/ Rarely	Sometimes	Often/Almost always	Total
Men				
Full-time	47.3	30.0	22.7	100
Part-time	74.7	17.1*	8.2*	100
Total	51.2	28.1	20.7	100
Women				
Full-time	48.9	26.2	24.9	100
Part-time	61.5	30.9	7.5	100
Total	54.6	28.4	17.0	100
All				
Full-time	47.8	28.7	23.5	100
Part-time	65.2	27.0	7.7	100
Total	52.7	28.3	19.0	100

Note: Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. *Estimate not reliable. Hours usually worked per week used to categorise full-time (35 or more hours) and part-time (34 or less) work status. Table excludes self-employed persons.

Feeling rushed or pressed for time: women feel it most

Over half the respondents report frequently (often or almost always) feeling rushed or pressed for time (52.5 per cent, see Table 3). Women report more frequent feelings of time pressure (55.6 per cent) than men (49.9 per cent). Given that women are more likely to work part-time and that part-timers overall are less often rushed or pressed for time, this effect for women is pronounced. Working part-time offers men more relief from time pressure than it does women. Overall, women working full-time are most likely to experience high levels of time pressure in their daily lives.

Work-life satisfaction: most employees are satisfied with their overall work-life balance

Most respondents (75.4 per cent) are satisfied with their work-life balance. There are small statistically significant associations with gender and part-time/ full-time work status. Women (77.2 per cent) were more likely to report feeling satisfied than men (74 per cent) and part-time employees (84.6 per cent) more frequently report satisfaction than full-timers (71.8 per cent). Overall, women working part-time are most likely to be satisfied with their work-life balance.

Table 3 Rushed or pressed for time by gender and work status, employees, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Never/Rarely	Sometimes	Often/Almost always	Total
Men				
Full-time	17.0	29.8	53.2	100
Part-time	34.0	35.4	30.6	100
Total	19.4	30.6	49.9	100
Women				
Full-time	8.2	32.4	59.4	100
Part-time	15.8	33.1	51.0	100
Total	11.6	32.7	55.6	100
All				
Full-time	14.0	30.7	55.3	100
Part-time	21.0	33.8	45.3	100
Total	15.9	31.6	52.5	100

Note: Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Hours usually worked per week used to categorise full-time (35 or more hours) and part-time (34 or less) work status. Table excludes self-employed persons.

Work-life interaction and working hours

In the past 30 years the patterns of working hours in Australia have changed significantly, with growth in both part-time and extended full-time working hours. In our survey, 33.4 per cent worked more than 45 hours a week. Different working hours are associated with sizeable and significant differences in work-life outcomes.

The most striking finding is the consistent association for both women and men between long (45–59) hours and very long hours (60+) and poorer work-life outcomes.

Table 4 Satisfaction with work-life balance by gender and work status, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Not satisfied	Satisfied	Total
Men			
Full-time employees	27.4	72.6	100
Part-time employees	17.7*	82.3	100
Total	26.0	74.0	100
Women			
Full-time employees	29.7	70.3	100
Part-time employees	14.4	85.6	100
Total	22.8	77.2	100
All			
Full-time employees	28.2	71.8	100
Part-time employees	15.4	84.6	100
Total	24.6	75.4	100

Note: Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. *Estimate not reliable. Hours usually worked per week used to categorise full-time (35 or more hours) and part-time (34 or less) work status. Table excludes self-employed persons. Response range on satisfied with work-life balance: 1 'not at all satisfied' 2 'not very satisfied', 3 'somewhat satisfied', 4 'very satisfied'. Responses 1 and 2 categorised as 'not satisfied', responses 3 and 4 categorised as 'satisfied'.

This effect is most clearly seen in relation to an index of work-life interaction which we construct by averaging responses across five measures of work-life interaction: the frequency that work interferes with activities out-side work, with time for family and friends, with community connections; the frequency of feeling rushed or pressed for time and the overall work-life satisfaction.⁴ The average score is set at 100 with a standard deviation of 15 (very similar to the treatment of standard IQ scores). A score higher than 100 indicates a worse than average work-life outcome and a score lower than 100 indicates a better than average work-life outcome.

When we look at this index in relation to working hours there is a consistent statistically significant association between longer work hours and poorer work-life outcomes ($P < 0.001$) for both men and women (Figure 2.1).

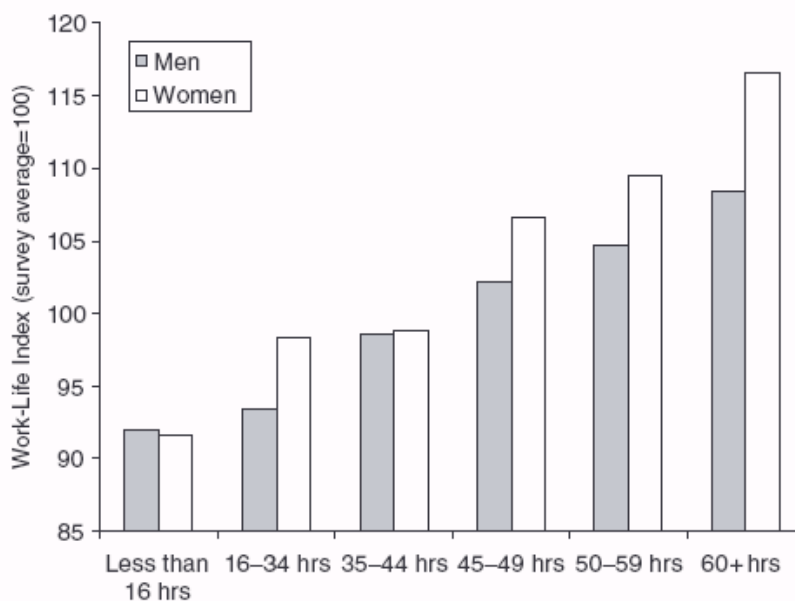


Figure 2.1 Work-life index by hours of work, AWALI 2007

Note: Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Estimate for women working 60 or more hours is not reliable. Figure excludes self-employed persons.

With the exception of employees working short part-time hours (< 16 hours) or standard full-time hours (35–44 hours), women consistently have significantly worse work-life outcomes than men as they work longer hours.

The picture is interesting when we turn to part-time work. Much more than in most OECD countries, many Australian women attempt to reconcile work and family through part-time work. Most of them work long part-time hours (two-thirds of all female part-timers in our sample). Overall, part-time hours (< 35 hours per week) are associated with better work-life outcomes. But part-time work hours have different effects for men and women ($P < 0.001$), suggesting that part-time work is not a very effective protector against negative work-life spillover for women. Long part-time hours are associated

with significantly worse work-life outcomes for women compared to short part-time hours. Further, there is no difference in work-life outcomes for women working long part-time or standard full-time (35–44) hours. In contrast, work-life outcomes for men do not differ between short and long part-time hours, and men working long part-time hours have better work-life outcomes than men working standard full-time hours (35–44 hours). This finding might be explained by a range of factors including the possibility that part-time jobs are low quality jobs (a relationship explored below) or that part-timers have less external support (from partners, the market or the extended family) than full-timers enjoy – which might in turn reflect their internalised belief that as part-timers they should *need* less support.

The fit between actual and preferred hours and work-life outcomes

Many Australian workers work more hours than they want to, while others work less. In our study, 40 per cent of those surveyed had a good fit between their actual and preferred hours, which we defined as one hour or less difference between their actual and preferred hours per week (changing this definition to two hours or less made little difference to our analysis). Most of those who did not have a good fit wanted to work less.

Table 5: Working hours preferences and work–life outcomes, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Never/ rarely	Sometimes	Often/almost always	Total
Work interferes with activities outside work				
Actual and preferred hours match	55.7	31.5	12.8	100
Prefer more hours	54.5	30.0	15.5	100
Prefer fewer hours	36.9	35.7	27.5	100
All	47.3	33.1	19.6	100
Work interferes with enough time with family or friends				
Actual and preferred hours match	49.1	36.0	14.9	100
Prefer more hours	44.2	34.6	21.1	100
Prefer fewer hours	27.8	38.3	33.9	100
All	39.1	36.8	24.1	100
Work interferes with community connections				
Actual and preferred hours match	64.1	24.2	11.7	100
Prefer more hours	56.2	32.3	11.5	100
Prefer fewer hours	40.8	30.6	28.6	100
All	52.7	28.3	19.0	100
Feel rushed or pressed for time				
Actual and preferred hours match	20.8	33.9	45.4	100
Prefer more hours	17.6	38.4	43.9	100
Prefer fewer hours	10.9	26.4	62.8	100
All	16.0	31.3	52.7	100
Satisfaction with work–life balance				
		Not satisfied	Satisfied	
Actual and preferred hours match		15.1	84.9	100
Prefer more hours		25.1	74.9	100
Prefer fewer hours		33.1	66.9	100
All		24.5	75.5	100

Note . Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Hours match defined as 1 hour or less difference between actual and preferred hours per week. Table excludes self-employed persons.

International studies suggest that workers who have a good fit between their working time regime and their preferences are likely to have better work-life outcomes (Fagan and Burchell 2002; Messenger 2004). Our data provide good evidence in support of the proposition that a good fit between hours of work and preferences improves work-life outcomes, reinforcing studies in other countries. Significantly better work-life outcomes occur for those workers who can get a better fit between the hours they work and their preferences.

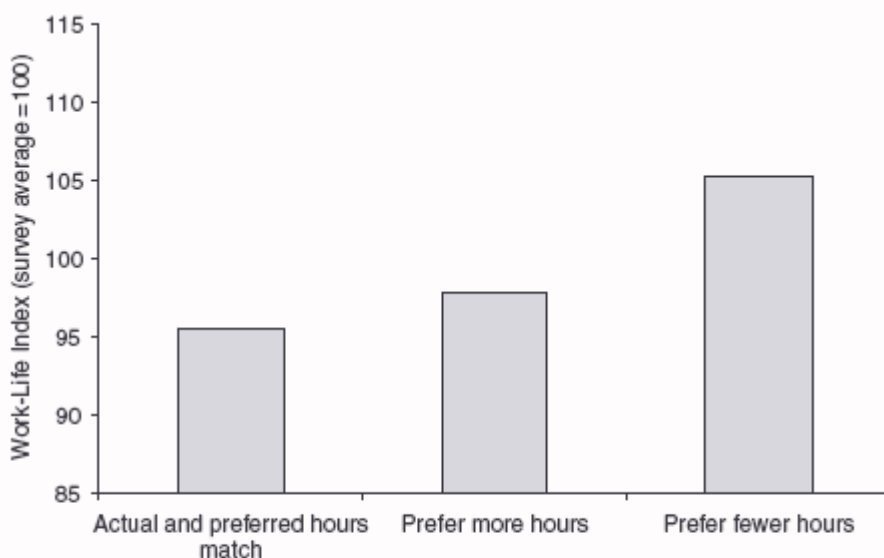


Figure 2.2 Work-life index by fit between actual and preferred hours, AWALI 2007

Note: Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Hours match defined as one hour or less difference between actual and preferred hours per week. Original data shown (not adjusted for work hours). Figure excludes self-employed persons.

In terms of the overall work-life index, there are significant differences between those respondents with a good fit and those who seek more or seek less hours ($P < 0.001$; see Figure 2.2). Those with a good match of actual and preferred hours have the best work-life outcomes. Those who are working less than they want also have better than average outcomes.

Table 6: Job quality outcomes by gender, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Strongly or somewhat disagree	Strongly or somewhat agree
Men		
Work load (often seem to have too much work to do)	43.9	56.1
Job security (worry about the future of the job)	65.9	34.1
Flexible working time (working times can be flexible to meet own needs)	34.6	65.4
Freedom when to do work (a lot of freedom to decide when to do work)	48.8	51.2
Freedom how to do work (a lot of freedom to decide how to do work)	27.0	73.0
Job satisfaction (satisfied with present job)	15.7	84.3
Women		
Work load (often seem to have too much work to do)	47.6	52.4
Job security (worry about the future of the job)	72.4	27.6
Flexible working time (working times can be flexible to meet own needs)	27.7	72.3
Freedom when to do work (a lot of freedom to decide when to do work)	50.8	49.2
Freedom how to do work (a lot of freedom to decide how to do work)	28.0	72.0
Job satisfaction (satisfied with present job)	11.9	88.1
All		
Work load (often seem to have too much work to do)	45.5	54.5
Job security (worry about the future of the job)	68.8	31.2
Flexible working time (working times can be flexible to meet own needs)	31.6	68.4
Freedom when to do work (a lot of freedom to decide when to do work)	49.7	50.3
Freedom how to do work (a lot of freedom to decide how to do work)	27.5	72.5
Job satisfaction (satisfied with present job)	14.0	86.0

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Table excludes self-employed persons.

Those who are working more than they want, however, have the worst outcomes. This effect is partly explained by the fact that many who want to work less are working long hours. However, when we control for differences in hours this pattern, while moderated, is sustained. Controlling for hours, the adjusted work-life index scores are 95.9 for those with a good fit, 100.8 for those who would prefer to work more hours and 103.6 for those who would like to work less. This pattern is observed for men and women. Figure 2.2 shows the original (unadjusted for hours) index scores.

Job quality and work-life outcomes

What difference does the quality of the job make to work-life spillover? Our index assesses six job characteristics: work overload, job insecurity, time and task autonomy, work schedule flexibility and overall job satisfaction. Our findings confirm what a large body of literature has already established: job security, load and employee control affect work-life outcomes and the general well-being of workers. On each of the job quality measures, substantial proportions of employees report low quality working conditions and experiences. Spillover from work into activities outside work is greater for those in poorer quality jobs, and this finding holds consistently for all six job quality measures and across the five work-life measures. This effect is particularly strong for work overload, which accounted for 16 per cent of the variation in work-life outcomes. These effects are consistent for men and women.

These findings have implications for the conceptualisation of work-life issues and the ways in which they are researched. While we have investigated only some factors that might be expected to shape work-life outcomes (leaving aside other likely contenders, for example, personal care responsibilities and the overall state of the labour market), we have found

that gender, issues around job quality, hours and the fit between actual and preferred hours are important in constructing work-life outcomes for individuals. We contend that our conceptualisation of the factors affecting work-life outcomes should recognise these factors and their possible moderators. We set these out in Figure 2.3, giving some prominence to job characteristics, alongside other likely causal factors.

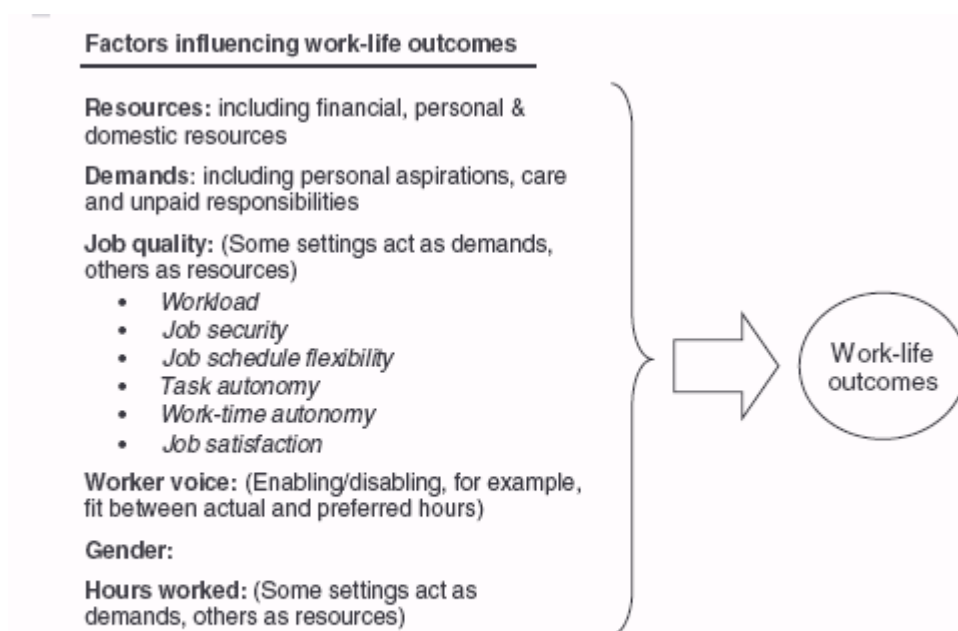


Figure 2.3 A conceptual map of some significant influences on work-life outcomes

In this figure we suggest that personal resources and aspirations are relevant to work-life outcomes, but that many other factors well beyond the control of the individual are also influential, including various dimensions of job quality and especially workers’ capacity to exercise voice to affect their jobs and their hours. Some of these factors are not independent of each other. For example, job security shapes worker voice: workers without secure employment hesitate to ask for changes in working time. In another example, long working long hours are often associated with dimensions of job quality like work overload. We also suggest in this model that the resources and demands that individuals deploy or face (whether financial,

personal or domestic) shape work-life outcomes, as does gender. A well paid, male worker on a permanent contract and with a high level of domestic support, minimal care responsibilities, a good boss who responds to worker requests, exercising control over working time, task and hours will have much better work-life outcomes than a casually employed, low paid mother with a boss who does not listen – especially if she unwillingly works overtime. This model suggests that greater attention should be paid to aspects of job quality, working hours and worker voice in researching work-life issues.

Public policy options in Australia

What do our empirical findings mean for policy in Australia centred on the reconciliation of work and activities outside it? Work and family issues have been particular sites of lively political debate in recent elections. However, while the 2001 and 2004 Australian federal elections involved considerable public debate about busy households and stresses on working mothers, very little changed in their aftermath beyond some increases in financial benefits for families and a financial bonus for those families having babies. While these changes are not insignificant, they were offset by labour law changes that made it more difficult for many workers to reconcile work and family, and resulting in a deterioration in the quality of jobs especially among the low paid (Elton et al. 2007; Elton and Pocock 2007; Peetz and Preston 2007; Pocock 2006).

As the data that we have presented show, issues of control over working time, influence over working life and job quality have very important effects on the nature and dimensions of work-life interaction. Changes in unfair dismissal regulation in particular cast a long shadow over security and voice at work (Elton and Pocock 2007; Elton et al. 2007). With the election of a new Labor Government in November 2007, the prospects for more worker influence have improved. The new Government is restoring unfair dismissal

rights, strengthening the right of workers to request flexibility at work (although it is unclear how well these will be enforced), and improving collective bargaining rights and arrangements.

Australia's working carers deserve concerted action from all levels of government if they are to work and care under arrangements that recognise and better reward their dual contributions. An economy that openly relies on greater contributions out of households to labour supply must provide decent minimum labour standards and supports. Without them, women and children in particular are the unsung shock absorbers of the current economic boom. Labour and social policy has to be better framed for social justice objectives including a better social settlement for children, low income earners and women. These new policies require new framings, better research and more use of the virtuous circle of good research: piloting, review, full implementation and further rounds of new research.

Notes

- 1 This paper draws in part on a forthcoming publication: B Pocock, N Skinner and P Williams (2008) 'Work-Life Outcomes in Australia: Concepts, Outcomes and Policy' in *Work Less, Live More, Critical Analysis of the Work-Life Boundary*, edited by Chris Warhurst, Doris Ruth Eikhof and Axel Haunschild, Palgrave, London, chapter 2.
- 2 My colleague Dr Elizabeth Hill is a collaborator on our application to the Australian Research Council to undertake this work in 2009-2011.
- 3 The AWALI 2007 survey was conducted by a professional polling company and will be repeated annually. Respondents were selected by means of a stratified random sample process. The concepts, methods, literature, measures and pre-tests underpinning AWALI are outlined in Pocock et al. (2007b).
- 4 The scale has a satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81).

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