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Job Quality and the Perceived Work-Life Balance Fit between Work Hours and Personal Commitments: A Comparison of Parents and Older Workers in Europe

Colette Fagan and Pierre Walthery

Introduction

This chapter explores the influence of two important aspects of job quality – working time arrangements and job strain – on individuals' reports of the fit between their working hours and their family or other social commitments, which for brevity we term 'perceived work-life balance'. The volume, schedule and flexibility of working time are known to affect men and women's reports of their work-life balance (Crompton and Brockman, 2006; Fagan, 1996; Fagan and Burchell, 2002; Burchell et al., 2007; OECD, 2004; Presser, 2006); in this chapter we aim to advance the debate in two ways. First, we bring other aspects of job quality into the analysis by exploring whether job aspects traditionally related to psychological/mental well-being at work may have a spillover effect on workers' perceptions of their work-life balance, in other words, if stress and tensions experienced as a result of unfavourable working conditions disrupt work-life balance, for example by making it more difficult for employees to deal with their caring commitments. We focus particularly on job strain resulting from a combination of job demands, job control and social support, a model that has been widely used in occupational health research.

Second, we focus our analysis on a comparison of parents and older workers in employment in Europe (EU27 countries) to explore whether these life stages are associated with differences in their perceived

work-life balance. The tensions involved in co-ordinating employment with family and other responsibilities are known to be particularly acute when there are young children to care for, and it is also well-known that women take primary responsibility for managing this reconciliation in most households. Often this results in women working shorter hours in employment when raising young children, and in some countries this translates into a switch to part-time work. The tensions involved in co-ordinating employment with family life may reduce as children grow older (and for some parents, as their careers become more established) but other co-ordination tensions may emerge for older workers (both those with older children and those who are childless). At this later stage in life, elder care responsibilities and age-related health problems tend to increase and concerns with the transition to retirement may come to the fore in men and women's assessments of their current (and future) work-life balance (Loretto et al., 2005; Vickerstaff et al., 2008).

We use a European-wide representative survey of employees – the European Working Conditions Survey – to explore the perceived work-life balance fit between working hours and family or other commitments, comparing men and women at three key life stages: parents with young children, those with older dependent children, and older workers without dependent children. Finally, although not the main focus of this chapter, an overview of national differences in the impact of these factors on perceived work-life balance fit is also provided.

In the next section we review the results from previous research on the relationship between job quality and work-life balance. We then explain the data we are using (Section 3), present the results from descriptive and multivariate analysis (Sections 4 and 5) and finish with a discussion (Section 6).

Work-life balance satisfaction and job quality

Being able to balance work and family is increasingly regarded as a dimension of employment quality by the European Commission and other policy-making bodies (CEC, 2001, 2003; Leschke and Watt, 2008; European Commission, 2009c; Peña-Casas, 2009b). Satisfactory work-life balance is a common aspiration among the European workforce, even if it is ranked as a 'top priority' less often than 'job security' or 'interesting work'. Unfortunately many employees report that they experience problems reconciling the demands of employment with home and personal life (e.g., Crompton and Brockman, 2006; Burchell et al., 2007; Fagan et al., 2008; Hochschild, 2001; Pocock, 2003).