Work-life balance – the sources of the contemporary problem and the probable outcomes

A review and interpretation of the evidence

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to consider why work-life balance has become a major issue, and the likely outcomes of the widespread dissatisfaction with current work schedules.

Design/methodology/approach – The article reviews international evidence on hours of work and time use, and the academic literature on employees' attitudes towards their hours of work, and perceptions and complaints about work-life imbalances.

Findings – Working time has not lengthened and complaints about time pressure are unrelated to hours actually worked. The sources of the widespread dissatisfaction with current work schedules will lie in a combination of other trends – increased labour market participation by women, work intensification, the spread of feelings of job insecurity, more work being done at odd hours, the spread of new information and communication technologies, free time increasing more slowly than spending power and aspirations, and relatively long hours becoming most common among employees (and the self-employed) in higher status jobs. An outcome is unlikely to be a general downward trend in hours worked on account of the substantial opportunity costs that would often be incurred by employees, and because some (mainly middle class) employees have access to a number of effective coping strategies.

Research limitations/implications – Nearly all the evidence considered (and available) is from Western countries.

Practical implications – Regulation of working time with the aim of delivering more acceptable work-life balances needs to deliver flexibility (at employees' discretion) rather than any standard solution.

Originality/value – The article offers a synthesis of evidence from sources that are rarely drawn together – mainly labour market research, and leisure studies.

Keywords Job satisfaction, Hours of work, Lifestyles

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

How and why have work-life balance and the encroachment of paid work into employees' own time become major public issues? This ongoing debate may not be entirely due to, but it has been substantially ignited and shaped by, the publication in 1991 of Juliet Schor's *The Overworked American.* This book became an academic best seller in the USA. It seemed to be telling Americans things that they like to hear – that they are working too long and too hard for their own good, and that they ought to ease up. Rather than actually easing up, it appears that Americans prefer to congratulate themselves on their selfless sacrifice. As Schor's thesis became known internationally, overwork was identified as a problem throughout the modern world (for example see Garhammer, 1998; Zuzanek *et al.*, 1998), and overwork has become established as the

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virtually uncontested source of work-life balance problems. The work-life balance terminology has been adopted only during the last 20 years, but the issue is much older. How married women workers balance their "two roles" has been an issue since their labour market participation began to rise following the Second World War. The problems of workers on shifts, or unsocial hours as these schedules came to be described, have been recognised and investigated since the 1950s. However, since the publication of Schor's book, work-life balance has been presented as a general problem affecting men as well as women, and irrespective of whether their normal hours of work are particularly unsocial.

Schor offered two principal explanations of why Americans were overworking. She was critical of how workers had become victims of a work-and-spend culture, but her main strictures were reserved for employers who were accused of abusing their labour market power to over-ride workers' interests. An implication of Schor's diagnosis is that workers need protection either through collective bargaining and agreements, or by law – statutory ceilings on working time, as in the EU's 48-hour directive. Regulation, it is claimed by some, is the route to an optimal work-life balance.

This approach seems plausible. It certainly seems to be the case that labour market regulation leads to aggregate reductions in paid working time. "Less work" has been a consistent trade union demand throughout the history of collective bargaining and in the enlarged (post-2004) EU mean reported hours of work are longest in those countries (the UK plus the new post-2004 member states) where labour market regulation is weakest (see Table I). However, is regulation really the key to achieving an optimal work-life balance? Or, contrary to the current conventional wisdom, are the least regulated economies and labour markets (as in the USA) producing the optimal outcomes? Certainly, the "knowledge" developed by economists about how market forces are the best mechanism for taking different interests into account and achieving optimal outcomes has tended to be disregarded. Another possibility, more consistent with the evidence and analysis that follow, is that presenting the options along a continuum from tight to zero regulation has become outdated, and that the issue today is not whether to regulate but exactly what the regulations should be.

This article proceeds by considering whether working time has lengthened and finds that there has been no such general trend in any country. It then considers whether complaints about time pressure are associated with especially long hours of work and finds that this is not the case. The following sections introduce alternative explanations for the spread of dissatisfaction with work schedules, then the coping strategies that are available to some sections of the workforce. Likely outcomes, and the kinds of regulation (if any) by trade unions and governments that would lead to more acceptable work-life balances are then discussed.

Working time

It is important to return to basics and ask why work-life balance has become a public issue. It cannot be a straightforward consequence of either Schor's book or the lengthening of hours of paid work because, except possibly in North America (see Schor, 1991; Zuzanek *et al.*, 1998; but see the powerful reservations of Robinson and Godbey, 1999), there is simply no evidence of a recent upward trend. There are many people in a number of countries claiming to be working longer than in the past (see for example Heisz and LaRochelle-Cote, 2003; Swan and Cooper, 2005). It is doubtless the

	Females	Males
Latvia	42.5	44.8
UK	40.6	44.9
Romania	41.4	42.1
Slovakia	41.4	42.1
Poland	39.9	43.1
Slovenia	41.0	42.0
Czech Republic	40.4	41.9
Bulgaria	40.8	41.4
Estonia	40.4	41.8
Greece	39.7	41.9
Hungary	40.3	41.5
Malta	38.7	41.1
Spain	39.5	41.0
Portugal	39.2	41.1
Austria	39.9	40.1
Cyprus	39.6	40.4
Germany	39.2	40.3
Sweden	39.6	40.1
Ireland	37.7	40.7
Lithuania	38.5	40.5
Luxembourg	37.9	40.3
Belgium	38.3	39.7
Finland	38.2	40.0
Denmark	37.7	40.1
Netherlands	38.1	39.1
Italy	36.4	39.8
Norway	37.6	39.0
France	36.9	38.2
EU 15	38.6	40.8
Acceding countries	40.2	42.4

Source: Eurostat (2002)

Table I.
Usual hours worked per week: full-time employees 2002

case in all countries that some individuals, and probably particular occupational groups, have lengthened their hours of work. However, there is no country, not even the USA, in which there is uncontested evidence of an overall lengthening of work schedules in the late-twentieth century.

There is often a difference between the hours that people claim to work and the hours that they actually work (as measured by time diaries). People tend to exaggerate their hours of work when asked to name their normal or average weekly hours; and the longer they really work, the more they tend to exaggerate. This discrepancy can be seen in Table II where the data are from the UK 2000 Time Use Survey (ONS, 2000a). Respondents who claimed to work up to 19 hours per week were in fact averaging 14.9; those who claimed to work 20-29 hours averaged 22.6; and those who claimed to work 30-39 hours averaged 33.1. Those who claimed to work longer were indeed working longer, but not to the extent that they claimed (and very likely believed). Those respondents who said that they worked 40-49 hours were averaging 37.7; those who claimed to work 50-59 hours averaged 41.7; and those who claimed to work in excess of

Main activity	0-19 hours	20-29 hours	30-39 hours	40-49 hours	50-59 hours	60 hours and more
Sleeping	516	501	502	496	481	478
Eating and drinking	81	77	75	74	75	74
Personal care	47	50	47	44	41	40
Employment	128	194	284	323	357	408
Study	40	12	4	5	3	2
Housework	191	200	143	115	111	97
Childcare (own household children)	30	39	19	15	17	15
Voluntary work and meetings	18	14	12	10	8	8
Social life and resting	78	78	69	65	60	58
Entertainment and culture	6	7	6	7	7	6
Sport and outdoor activities	14	10	12	15	12	12
Hobbies and games	21	15	19	17	17	17
Reading	20	22	18	19	20	15
TV and video	132	119	123	129	123	104
Radio and music	7	5	5	5	5	4
Travel	98	88	94	95	96	95
Other	12	10	7	7	7	5

Source: Eurostat (2002)

Table II.
Average minutes per day spent in different activities by number of hours (reported) usually worked per week, UK adults (respondents with jobs)

60 hours were really averaging just 47.6. This data, of course, assumes that time budget evidence is more trustworthy than individuals' own estimates.

In the UK reported hours worked have fluctuated trendlessly since the 1970s (see Labour Force Survey, various years). Previously, the long-term trend had been downwards. The absence of any clear recent trends over time in the evidence from reported (and probably exaggerated) hours of work is corroborated by data from time budgets. UK males of working age were spending far less time in paid work in 2001 than in 1961 (see Table III). Women of working age were spending on average an extra 20 minutes per day doing paid work in 2001 (which will have been due to their increased labour market participation) whereas men were spending 109 minutes less. When the analysis is confined to employed adults, and to working days only, the trends are still downwards except in the case of males with higher education whose mean paid work time increased by 12 minutes per workday between 1961 and 2001 (see Table IV).

As already noted, there are variations in reported average weekly hours of work in different EU countries (see Table I). Time diary evidence confirms that such differences exist but simultaneously exposes difficulties in giving an unequivocal answer to

	Paid work 1961	Paid work 2001	Unpaid work 1961	Unpaid work 2001	Non-work 1961	Non-work 2001
Men	434	323	83	146	923	971
Women	183	203	303	277	954	959

Source: Gershuny (2005)

Table III.
Minutes per day, all UK adults aged 20-60

questions about which countries work longest. Among the seven countries in Table V (the participants in the European Time Use Survey), Sweden's 20-74 year olds were spending the most hours in paid employment on a typical day. This working pattern is not because a normal working week in Sweden is particularly long. In 2002 Swedish females in full-time jobs were reportedly working slightly longer than average across the pre-2004 EU15 while Swedish men in full-time jobs were working slightly shorter hours than the EU15 average (see Table I). The total adult population's paid workload in Sweden is relatively high on account of its relatively high rate of full-time female employment. There are some interesting contrasts in Table V. In Spain people work fewer hours than in Britain yet have less free time mainly because in Spain more time is spent sleeping and on personal care. So would the Spanish or the British feel the most pressed for time? The lightest paid workloads in Table V are in Germany and Belgium, but only Germany has more free time than the UK population because Belgians spend more time on domestic work and (as with the Spanish) also on personal care.

Whether full-time and part-time employees' hours of work are examined separately or aggregated makes a big difference to where countries appear to stand in average hours of work league tables. Bonney (2005) has disputed whether Britons really are working longer than most of their European counterparts (as suggested by the data in Table I). He points out that the UK is among the European countries with a high proportion of employees in part-time jobs, and that, when their working time is

Table IV.
Minutes per day, UK employed adults, 20-60, work days only

	Paid work 1961	Paid work 2001	Unpaid work 1961	Unpaid work 2001	Non-work 1961	Non-work 2001
Men						
Without higher education	556	519	47	93	837	828
With higher education	525	537	51	85	863	818
Women						
Without higher education	468	423	141	199	831	818
With higher education	467	463	126	167	848	810

Source: Gershuny (2005)

Table V.
Time use in Europe, selected countries, 2002 (men and women aged 20-74, minutes per average day)

	UK	Hungary	Germany	France	Sweden	Belgium	Spain[a]
Sleep	503	516	495	531	486	502	682[b]
Other personal	130	144	158	181	140	161	
Employment	196	186	155	181	212	154	159
Study	9	14	14	15	17	15	49
Domestic work	198	231	197	208	186	216	197
Free time	317	293	338	266	313	306	282
Travel	87	57	83	58	86	87	71

Notes: [a] Data from Spain is not strictly comparable as the definitions of some activities differ; [b] Includes "other personal"
Source: MacInnes (2006)

included, the UK's overall averages of hours worked per day and per week (32) decline substantially and cease to look exceptionally high.

Nothing above is disputing that complaints about time pressure (alternatively called "time squeeze" or "time crunch") are widespread and have become more common. In all modern societies for which evidence is available large sections of the population claim that their lives have speeded up, become more hurried and harried; and work is usually cited as the source of these developments and problems (see for example Duxbury and Higgins, 2003; Menzies, 2005). In Britain satisfaction with hours of work has declined sharply since the early-1990s (Taylor, 2002). These experiences are not disputed. Rather, the intention above has been simply to show that lengthened hours of work cannot be held responsible because there has been no such lengthening. As indicated, it is not straight-forward to determine which countries have the longest work schedules and where the people have the least free time, but no-one has shown that complaints about time pressure are cross-nationally associated with the relative "weights" of paid work in different countries. Perhaps most crucially, it is not the case that within countries the people who work longest are the most likely to complain about time pressure (see Schneider *et al.*, 2004; Zuzanek, 2004). This evidence is blithely ignored by most commentators.

Working time (whatever its length or scheduling) generates reported time pressure and stress when, and only when, it leads to social and emotional conflicts (Zuzanek and Mannell, 1998), and such conflicts are not associated with either particularly long or particularly short work schedules. Southerton and Tomlinson (2005) report that feeling "pressed for time" is related not to total time spent at work but to a wide variety of other predictors. These predictors include being self-employed or employed in a service job, being aged under 50, not working fixed hours, describing oneself as ambitious, having omnivorous leisure interests, going out regularly to meet other people and being female. It is difficult to identify a common denominator in this list but it is among these predictors that we need to search for clues as to why more people today report role overload and work-life balance problems. Further clues can be found in Southerton and Tomlinson's observation that reported time pressure can mean several different things: being short of time overall, having problems in co-ordinating with others, and experiencing "hotspots" when there is simply too much that needs to be done while otherwise those concerned have plenty of spare time.

Why do people feel more time pressured?

So what is responsible for the spread of dissatisfaction with working time, and for time pressure and work-life balance becoming public issues? The most likely answer will lie in a combination of the following:

- *Higher rates of labour market participation by women.* Mothers with paid jobs and young dependent children, and care-givers more generally, are more likely than other employees to complain of time pressure (Cinnamon and Rich, 2002; Duxbury and Higgins, 2003; Elloy and Mackie, 2002; Garhammer, 1998; Zukewich, 2004: Zuzanek, 2004). Southerton and Tomlinson (2005) exceptionally found that although the women in their data set were more likely than men to complain of time pressure, having young dependent children increased complaints of time pressure among men but not among women. However, although their analysis is recent, the data set analysed by Southerton and

Tomlinson was assembled in the late-1980s when it was less common than it is today for mothers to return to paid work prior to their children reaching school age. All the relevant studies have found that the combination of paid work with the responsibilities of being a principal carer exacerbates reported time pressure, and it is women with young children who are the most likely section of the population to complain that they have simply "no time" for themselves (Daly, 1996; Menzies, 2005; Shaw *et al.*, 2003). It should be noted, however, that in the UK and The Netherlands, Cousins and Tang (2004) have found that men are more likely than women to complain about work-family conflict (which is different than, and not necessarily related to, time pressure).

- *Work intensification.* This intensification has affected employees at all levels. It has often accompanied the introduction of new (labour saving) technology and de-layering in the management grades (Noon and Blyton, 1998; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). It seems that almost everyone in the workforce has come under pressure to take on more tasks, more responsibilities and generally to do more. The lunch hour, and tea and coffee breaks, appear to be things of the past. Nowadays these occasions are often spent at the desk, catching-up on reading and paperwork (Reeves, 2002). This is one of the reasons why, even if they are not working longer, people are likely to feel that their work is making greater demands on them and having a greater impact (for good or ill) on their overall quality of life.
- *More widespread feelings of job insecurity.* Mean periods spent in jobs have not declined and the rate of involuntary terminations has not risen but employees today have greater fears about the prospect and likely consequences of job loss than was the case in the past (Doogan, 2001; Gallie *et al.*, 1994; Taylor, 2002). Moreover, increasing numbers of workers face regular staff appraisals, some in firms where company policy is to fire the weakest (Scullen *et al.*, 2005). "Jobs for life" have not become a thing of the past. They were very exceptional in the past and today there are still plenty of employees – in health services and education for example – who are able to enjoy life-long careers in their occupations. There was plenty of labour market mobility during the post-Second World War decades of full employment. Feelings of insecurity can make people reluctant to leave any job. It is also the case that (officially) voluntary terminations often occur in a context of anticipated redundancies and the offer of (apparently) generous severance packages. Workers who feel insecure are thereby likely to feel "under pressure" constantly or intermittently, and may well feel that their quality of life in and out of work is suffering.
- *Working at odd hours.* More paid work is being done at odd hours for a variety of reasons (Bosworth, 1994; Hewitt, 1993; Van den Broek *et al.*, 2002). Some reasons for extending hours of work into evenings, night times and weekends are long-standing. In some industries the technology requires production to be ongoing. Introducing shifts is a long-standing way of coping with upturns in demand and of gaining maximum returns from expensive capital equipment before it ceases to be state of the art. Other reasons are not entirely new but have become more common. Globalisation has led to more firms needing to be open whenever markets, customers or suppliers in London, Los Angeles or Tokyo, for example, are trading. Perhaps most important of all, many consumer services

have to be provided at the times of demand, that is, when customers have leisure time. The growth of leisure time and spending has lead to more workers being required to sacrifice their own leisure or at least displace it temporally. Some of the fastest growing types of employment in present-day Britain are in low (skill and pay) level consumer service occupations (Goos and Manning, 2003). Their greater prevalence does not appear to have alleviated any of the familiar problems (for employees) of working unsocial hours. These include synchronisation problems within households and conflicting demands on the same periods of time, and making it difficult for households to maintain routines, which is what most try to do (Breedveld, 1996a).

- *New technology*. ICT, especially the mobile phone, the Blackberry, the internet and the laptop, lead to employees being able to work in any place and at any time. Hence railway carriages, car parks and airport lounges (among other places) have become workplaces for the public as well as staff (Felstead *et al.*, 2005). What is "possible" easily becomes what is "expected". Employees who are enabled to work at weekends may feel that doing so is necessary in order to demonstrate career commitment. Staff who are given mobile phones with which they are able to make contact with colleagues, bosses or subordinates at any time of their own choosing are also vulnerable to being contacted by any of these parties at times that are inconvenient for the recipient. Even though their hours spent actually working may not be exceptionally long, such staff may feel unable to "switch off" completely for long unbroken periods.
- *Free time increasing more slowly than people's incomes and spending aspirations* (as originally envisaged by Linder (1970)). Free time is increasing but very slowly in Britain; by just five minutes per day on average for 20-60 year old females, and by 48 minutes for men, between 1961 and 2001. Even for men, the pace of increase has amounted to little more than one extra minute of free time per year (see Table III). Free time has actually declined on workdays for employed adults (see Table IV). This decline has been due to increases in time spent doing unpaid work (mainly housework, child-care, shopping and other odd jobs) rather than the expansion of paid work time. Spending power has grown at a much steeper rate than the time available in which to spend the money – up by 140 percent in real terms for the average UK household between 1980 and 2003-2004 (ONS, 2002b). The steepest increase between these years (by a huge 283 per cent) was on spending on leisure services. People have been able to spend, and have been choosing to spend, much more on leisure rather than increasing their spending on other things. An indication of how this development has made life faster and more pressured, can be gleaned from time budget data (see Table VI), which shows that, especially on working days for full-time employees, people are now switching between activities more frequently than was the case in the past. This is one quantifiable indicator of life speeding up.
- *The long hours culture*. Nowadays the longest hours are worked by people in the professional and management occupations, the so-called chattering classes, who can be relied on to elevate their problems, or their heroic endeavours, into public issues (Hogarth *et al.*, 2001; Inkson and Coe, 1993; Inkson and Coe (1993); Oliver, 1998). Time budget data demonstrates the turnaround that has occurred in Britain

	Full-time employees 1961	Full-time employees 2001	Part-time employees 1961	Part-time employees 2001
Workdays				
Men without higher education	7.0	8.0	7.7	9.5
Women without higher education	8.3	9.3	12.5	11.7
Men with higher education	7.8	8.8	9.7	9.6
Women with higher education	8.7	9.9	10.9	12.1
Non-workdays				
Men without higher education	9.8	10.5	9.9	11.4
Women without higher education	11.2	11.3	12.0	12.4
Men with higher education	10.6	11.2	11.2	11.4
Women with higher education	11.5	11.9	13.7	12.4

Source: Gershuny (2005)

Table VI.
Number of activities per day (UK adults)

since the 1960s. In 1961 the best-educated men worked for fewer hours than less educated males; by 2001 the best-educated people were working the longest. Among women in 1961 there was little difference in hours worked by educational level; by 2001 the best-educated women were working on average for 40 minutes per day longer than other female employees (see Table IV). In 2001 managers and professional men and women were working 225 minutes per day on average (including non-working days), against 198 minutes in the intermediate occupations and 173 minutes among manual employees (see Table VII). Gershuny (2005) has argued that busyness (not leisure) has now become the "badge of honour", inspiring emulation in all occupational strata. This reason could be why so many higher-level employees are now claiming that they work longer than they actually do: over-work (the reality or just the appearance), not leisure, has probably become today's status symbol. Irrespective of whether busyness is emulated for status reasons, today's high status "hard working families" are not loathe to draw attention to their endeavours. Busyness as a "badge of honour" could be one of the underpinnings of the "long hours culture" that many professional and management staff experience (and complain about). They feel – rightly or wrongly but probably rightly in many cases – that it is necessary to arrive well before and leave work long after official start and end times (Swan and Cooper, 2005). Doing otherwise, they feel, will be interpreted by colleagues and bosses as betraying a lack of organisational and career commitment. Individuals can experience these pressures, and therefore feel under pressure, irrespective of the hours that they themselves actually work.

Despite these problems of higher level occupational groups, the next section argues that objectively measured work-life balance problems appear most serious, and least solvable, in working class households (Breedveld, 1996b; Warren, 2003).

Constraints, options and likely outcomes

Ever since W.I. Thomas (1927) coined the phrase, social scientists have recognised that "when people define situations as real they become real in their consequences". There

Main activity	Managerial and professional	Intermediate	Manual and routine	Long-term unemployed/ never worked
Sleeping	491	503	513	533
Eating and drinking	88	85	84	105
Personal care	45	47	47	52
Employment	225	198	173	8
Study	5	4	5	7
Housework	163	184	179	239
Childcare (own household children)	22	24	19	19
Voluntary work and meetings	17	17	15	24
Social life and resting	73	76	79	96
Entertainment and culture	7	6	5	5
Sport and outdoor activities	16	13	13	13
Hobbies and games	24	20	17	26
Reading	32	27	25	40
TV and video	122	137	168	187
Radio and music	6	7	8	11
Travel	95	83	79	64
Other	8	10	10	12

Source: Eurostat (2002)

Table VII. Average time (in minutes per day) spent in different main activities by socio-economic class (UK adults)

is impressive evidence that large sections of the labour forces in modern societies feel overworked. Dissatisfaction with working time is widespread, and likewise complaints of time pressure and dissatisfaction with existing work-life balances. Long hours may not be the basic cause of the complaints and problems but shorter hours could still ease the predicaments even if the prime sources were not eliminated. Is this a likely outcome of the current condition?

Much international attention has been paid to developments at Volkswagen in Germany and nationwide in France in the 1990s. In 1994 the working week at Volkswagen was reduced to 28.8 hours. France legislated a 35-hour maximum workweek in 1998. Both measures were controversial at the time and their impact remains in dispute because in each case the implementation was uneven (for example, some overtime was permitted in France, and some employees were already working no more than 35 hours), and in neither case did all other things remain equal. At Volkswagen employees lost their 13th month of pay – an annual bonus – and average take-home pay declined by 10.4 per cent. In France there were no outright pay cuts but several years of pay stagnation followed the implementation of the 35-hour law. In both France and at Volkswagen there were reports of work intensification – squeezing periods of non-work out of working time and raising production quotas. At Volkswagen and in France, employers gained opportunities to use labour more flexibly. There is evidence from both Volkswagen and France that workers who received it appreciated having more free time, but as explained above, other things did not remain equal. Perhaps the two most noteworthy features of these "experiments" are, first, that each was

introduced not primarily to achieve better work-life balances but to save or to create jobs. In 1994 Volkswagen had decided that 31,000 out of its 108,000 German workforce were surplus to requirements. In 1997-1998 in France unemployment stood at 12.5 per cent. Second, neither "experiment" endured. In 2006 at Volkswagen standard hours of work were raised to 33 for production and 34 for administrative staff with no corresponding increase in pay (see, on Volkswagen, Blyton and Trinczek, 1996; Dribbusch, 2006; Rosducher and Seifert, 1996). France's 35-hour law was not fully implemented until 2000-02 but by 2004 permitted overtime had been extended to a level that made the original reform meaningless (on France's 35-hour law, see Estevao and Sa, 2006; Fagnani and Letablier, 2004; Frost, 2005; Hayden, 2000). In each case the reversal was justified by an alleged need to boost competitiveness so as to avoid further lay-offs or to achieve a further expansion in employment (by 2001 unemployment in France had declined to 8.8 per cent). Contrary to what appeared possible in 1994-1998, Volkswagen and France have not led a Europe-wide downward lurch in hours of work.

Such a trend is an unlikely outcome from current complaints of overwork and work-life imbalance firstly because many of those concerned, and the allegedly overworked managers and professionals in particular, have other ways of coping and, second, because there are theoretical grounds for believing that the current packages of problems and benefits that workforces are experiencing are, as judged by their own actions, preferable to any alternative, realisable packages. Surveys repeatedly find that people who report that they work long hours (over 40 hours per week) say that they would like to work less (Fagan, 2002; Viasanen and Natti, 2002). In practice, as argued above, they probably actually work fewer hours than they report. British males' ideal work-week (according to their own stated preferences) would last just 37 hours, and women's would last 30 hours, shorter than for men but somewhat longer than women currently achieve on average (Fagan, 2002). Many workers say that they would be prepared to trade pay for shorter hours at work (Reeves, 2002). However, it should be noted, firstl, that how people answer always depends partly on the options offered. When offered the option, many people say that they would prefer flexible hours to shorter hours (Smith and Carroll, 2002). Second, there can be a difference between what people say and what they actually do, and words alone will not moderate market or employer pressures. Workers, like all actors all of the time, operate in constrained situations; the constraints arising from the behaviour of other actors who are also trying to realise their preferences. Gratton and Taylor (2004) suggest that the only options confronting some employees are long hours or no hours, but this is manifestly incorrect. There are far more employees currently working around 40 hours per week than working 50 hours and more. If they wished to do so, the long hours employees would not find it difficult to switch to shorter hours or otherwise less demanding jobs. In practice, this is rarely a reason given for job changing (Bonney, 2005). The German time pioneers, who are paraded as true "pioneers" by Horning *et al.* (1995), who had voluntarily chosen to downshift substantially and who had accepted commensurate drops in their earnings, remain very rare exceptions, and were regarded as peculiar by most of their German colleagues. The real constraint that confronts employees who work long hours is that they would be unable to downshift while retaining their current jobs, status, salaries and career prospects. In other words, their situation is not one of "no choice" but of preferring the balances of advantages and problems that accompany

their current hours to the packages that are available in shorter hours jobs. It should also be noted that not everyone objects to long and intrusive workloads. Some say that they enjoy their challenging work and choose to let their jobs dominate their lives (Lewis, 2003; Oliver, 1998). Employers who respected workers' real preferences would presumably be rewarded via the relative ease with which they were able to recruit and retain staff, not needing to pay an inconvenience premium, and avoiding unorganised resistance. Haworth and Veal (2004) have argued that, in the final analysis, in real life situations, profit maximisation is decisive but should this drive lead to long or otherwise injurious hours of work that override workers' real preferences? If the effects were sufficiently detested, there should be compensatory benefits (as described above) for employers who acceded to requests to downshift. The reality is workers' preferences and actual life situations are more complicated and their ways of dealing with their problems are more varied than most analyses of work-life balance issues suggest.

Instead of opposing and actively resisting, and thereby moderating employers' demands, workers (some more than others) who are working long hours or who, for whatever reasons, complain about time pressure can devise ways of coping. Employees whose workloads are longest and most arguably the most intrusive (as explained above, nowadays including many professionals and managers), have access to, and have been adopting or developing, a series of coping strategies:

- *Buying time* (by paying others to do tasks such as repair and clean homes and cars etc.). Households in the highest income decile spend over 20 times as much as the poorest decile on leisure goods and services such as sports, holidays, the cinema, the theatre and other forms of entertainment but they also spend over ten times as much on time-savers such as restaurant and cafe meals, telephone communication and motoring, and over six times as much on household and personal goods and services (Family Expenditure Survey, 2000). Working class households are far less likely to have the resources to cope in these and other ways that are described below. This reason could be why manual occupations work fewer hours on average, especially females in manual jobs who are just as exposed as their middle class counterparts to pressures from the "double burden", and manual employees are just as likely as managers and professionals to work at odd hours, and are also at least as vulnerable to work intensification and job insecurity.
- *Achieving and exercising time sovereignty* – being able to decide exactly when to work at odd hours. There is a profound class difference here. Managers and professional employees tend to work at home when they work outside their normal hours whereas when the manual grades work during the evenings and weekends this work usually requires their attendance at defined workplaces outside the home such as pizza restaurants or bars. The higher-level occupations have the greatest scope to decide exactly when they will work at odd hours (and sometimes during normal hours as well). They can make sure that their work does not prevent attendance at a key sports fixture or family celebration. Low-level employees are more likely to find that putting such private interests first invites dismissal (Van den Broek *et al.*, 2002). For manual occupations, labour flexibility usually means at the employers' discretion. Flexibility tends to have different meanings at different occupational levels. For low-level

employees, non-standard schedules are less likely to alleviate than to intensify conflicts between jobs and other demands on the employees' time (Presser, 2003; Scott-Dixon, 2003).

- *Modifying social networks into consistency with the demands of long hours or otherwise demanding jobs* (Gatenby, 2004; Jackson, 2004; Jenkins and Osberg, 2003). Long hours (and variable, unsocial hours in particular) make it difficult for large (and to a lesser extent smaller) groups of people with common interests to meet together regularly, at the same times, week-in and week-out. So team sports tend to be replaced by individual exercise. People who are able to do so pay for membership at private gyms where they can attend as and when they choose. Club sports operate with pools of players who play as and when they are able, but not in every fixture. Friendships, even marriages, operate without the same frequency and regularity of shared activities that are possible when people work shorter and more regular hours. Married couples in present-day Britain spend just two-and-a-half hours on a typical workday, and three-and-a-half hours on a typical weekend day, doing shared activities, and these activities tend to be eating, housework and watching television (Gatenby, 2004). Real couples do the same things at the same times hardly more frequently than pseudo-couples (males and females paired at random) (see Sullivan, 1996). However, it should be borne in mind that long, variable, and unsocial hours of work need not sentence people to solitary, home-based leisure. They can remain gregarious and enjoy high levels of participation in out-of-home recreation but not at exactly the same times or among exactly the same groups of friends week-in and week-out. Social networks become singularised and loose for individuals. Members of the same families, neighbourhoods and workplaces cease to be drawn together as frequently, and therefore become less solidly bound together than in the past. As is so often the case, there are marked social class differences in people's ability to develop social networks that are consistent with working long hours or at odd hours. Such differences are due to their differential access to financial and relevant social capital. High-level long hours employees tend to explain why they accept these schedules in terms of job satisfaction; low-level employees tend to say that they need the money (Taylor, 2002). Middle class couples, who overall have the longer joint hours of paid work, manage to spend more time together than working class couples who work fewer hours overall but are more likely to work at (different) odd hours (Warren, 2003).

These are some of the reasons why employers have not been pressured into alleviating time pressures on their employees, and why very long reported hours of work (over 60 per week) do not depress rates of participation in leisure activities except time spent watching television (see Table II). Employees who work relatively long hours are not really sacrificing leisure activities. Rather, it appears, they are making it possible to partake in their preferred forms of leisure (which often involve substantial cash outlays).

Conclusions

One conclusion to be drawn is that while complaints about work-life balance may be common in all occupations, these occupations do not face exactly the same problems

and have unequal access to coping strategies. Like much else, the character of the problems and the availability of coping strategies are class-related. Such differences need to be recognised in any search for solutions.

It should be recognised that an all-round reduction in hours of work is unlikely to be a satisfactory solution to any occupation's problems if only because current work-life balance problems have not been created by increases in working time (there has been no general increase) and complaints about time pressure are not objectively related to the number of hours that people actually work. Shorter work schedules are undoubtedly welcomed by some employees and make it easier for many to achieve more enjoyable or less irksome work-life balances but there is unlikely to be any "one size fits all" solution awaiting discovery then application. Recognising this reality is not necessarily to advocate wholesale deregulation of labour markets – abdication by trade unions and governments – but there are multiple indications that since the 1970s there have been changes and therefore that the aims of regulation may need to be rethought.

- During the long decline in working time from the nineteenth century to the 1970s, most gains in free time were achieved during economic upturns, when organised labour had muscle (Bienefeld, 1972). Since the 1970s negotiated or government enforced collective downshifts have occurred in the shadow of unemployment, or threatened or actual redundancies.
- Up until the 1970s each collective downward step in working time was consolidated. Since then, as at Volkswagen post-1994 and in France post-1998, there have been retreats.
- As mean earnings rise, the costs of reducing working time increase, and as Schor (1991) recognised, these penalties will be amplified in consumer cultures where there are constant and myriad invitations to consume.
- As educational careers lengthen (and therefore the costs increase), whoever pays (increasingly the "consumers") needs to recover the costs of the "investments in human capital" (the costs of education and training).
- It is not obvious that the productivity per hour gains that were once available when shortening the work schedules of manual occupations are available when dealing with present-day managers and professional staff. These workers are likely to become more effective the more time they spend reading or networking, depending on the particular occupation. It is perhaps noteworthy that Europe's politicians are among the occupations that are exempted from the EU's 48 hour ceiling on working time.

This article has indicated how work-life balance debates are mis-conceived. As a consequence, subsequent policy prescriptions too need to be re-considered. Maybe in the twenty-first century the aim of regulation in hours of work should not be everyone working less or reducing the current wide inequalities in working time. An alternative aim would be flexibility for employees as well as or instead of employers, and in all occupations, not just those of the middle classes. Finally, there should be acknowledgement that for some employees the problems of coping with the status quo may well be a more attractive package than any of the realisable alternatives.

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