When Life Changes: Actual and Preferred Working Hours around Family Transitions in the Netherlands

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Background and Research Question

Work hour mismatches, the discrepancies between the hours people actually work and those they would prefer to work, are both widespread and consequential. Studies across diverse national contexts consistently find that substantial proportions of workers experience such mismatches, though the prevalence varies considerably across countries and economic conditions (Drago et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2003; Steiber & Haas, 2018). These mismatches have important consequences for job satisfaction, work-family conflict and broader patterns of gender inequality (Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Reynolds & Aletraris, 2006; Wooden et al., 2009).

Despite their importance, the dynamics of hours mismatches across the life course remain poorly understood. While a substantial literature documents how family events affect *actual* working hours, less is known about how these transitions shape *preferred* hours and the emergence or resolution of mismatches between the two. The existing evidence offers mixed findings. Some studies, primarily from the United States, found weak or inconsistent relationships between parenthood and hours mismatches (Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds & Johnson, 2012). Longitudinal evidence for Australia found that work hour preferences shift predictably in response to life events: motherhood leads to significant reductions in women's preferred hours, while events like widowhood and involuntary job loss create mismatches when labor markets fail to accommodate changing preferences (Drago et al., 2009).

Family transitions can affect preferred working hours through multiple mechanisms. First, transitions may fundamentally change people's *wants* or *desires* regarding work by reshaping their identities and work commitment. Becoming a parent, particularly for the first time, may lead to identity shifts that lead people to reconsider how central paid employment should be in their lives. Second, transitions change economic needs. Union formation brings economies of scale that could theoretically reduce the necessity for paid work, while childbirth increases household expenses. Union dissolution reverses these economies of scale and typically creates acute economic pressure, especially for women (Mortelmans, 2020). Third, transitions alter time and energy constraints. This mechanism underlies role conflict theory, which

emphasize how family demands create time pressure that competes with employment commitments (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Childbirth dramatically increases time scarcity, while children starting school may alleviate some of this pressure. Union dissolution can intensify constraints for custodial parents while potentially reducing them for non-custodial parents. However, whether stated preferences already incorporate these needs and constraints, or whether they represent aspirations independent of practical considerations, remains unclear.

Crucially, actual working hours are not simply a function of preferences. Even when preferences shift in response to life events, the extent to which workers can realize these preferences depends heavily on employer demands, job characteristics, and institutional arrangements (Reynolds & Aletraris, 2006). Longitudinal evidence suggests that many mismatches are resolved not through changes in actual hours, but through workers adjusting their preferences downward or upward to match available opportunities (Reynolds & Aletraris, 2006). The question of whether family transitions create persistent mismatches or whether labor markets accommodate changing preferences thus remains empirically open. Furthermore, the relationship between family transitions and hours mismatches can be fundamentally moderated by gender and social class. For example, mothers are more likely than fathers to desire and to actually reduce hours after childbirth. Higher earners may have more financial freedom to desire fewer hours, while lower-income workers face greater economic needs to work long hours regardless of preferences.

In this paper, we investigate *how actual and preferred working hours change around major family transitions in the Netherlands, and how these changes relate to the emergence and resolution of hours mismatches*. We examine six key transitions spanning the family life course: union formation (cohabitation), first childbirth, higher-order childbirths, children starting primary education, children starting secondary school, and union dissolution. By comparing patterns across these transitions with fine-grained temporal resolution, we can adjudicate between competing theoretical mechanisms. For example, if role conflict theory is correct, transitions that increase parental demands should reduce preferred hours while those that decrease demands should increase preferred hours. By tracking both actual and preferred hours simultaneously, we can determine whether mismatches are resolved primarily through hours adjustments or preference adjustments. The Dutch context offers important advantages for studying these dynamics. Part-time work is highly prevalent and less stigmatized in the Netherlands than elsewhere, with strong protections against discrimination and greater acceptance of part-time arrangements even for men and highly educated workers. Moreover, Dutch working arrangements exhibit considerable granularity, rather than a stark part-time/full-time dichotomy. This

institutional context may facilitate the resolution of hours mismatches within existing employment relationships, contrasting with evidence from other countries where employer accommodation appears limited (Reynolds & Aletraris, 2006).

Data and Method

We combine data from the Dutch Labor Force Survey (Enquête Beroepsbevolking, EBB) with population registers covering the period 2006-2024. The EBB is a rotating panel survey in which respondents are interviewed up to five times over an 12-month period. In each interview wave, respondents report their actual working hours and answer two questions about preferred hours: (1) whether they would like to work more, fewer, or the same number of hours (assuming income changes accordingly), and (2) how many hours per week they would like to work in total. From these measures, we construct indicators of hours mismatches (the difference between preferred and actual hours) and their direction (wanting more versus fewer hours). We link EBB data to population registers that provide complete information on family transitions, including dates of union formation and dissolution, childbirth, and children's ages.

We focus on six key transitions: start of cohabitation, first childbirth, higher-order childbirths, youngest child starting primary education, youngest child starting secondary, and union dissolution. Our analytical strategy leverages the temporal structure of both the family transitions (observed in registers) and the work hours measures (observed in EBB interviews). Among participants of the EBB, we identify all respondents who were interviewed at least twice within a four-year window around a transition. This approach includes both respondents whose transitions occurred during their EBB panel participation — allowing for within-person before/after comparisons — and those whose transitions occurred outside the panel period but who were interviewed either before or after the event. The latter group, while not permitting within-person comparisons, still provides information about the typical situation at various time points relative to each transition.

We pool observations across individuals and conduct event-study analyses to trace the evolution of actual hours, preferred hours, and mismatches from two years before to two years after each transition. This approach estimates average trajectories while accounting for compositional changes and time trends. For respondents whose transitions occurred during EBB participation, we conduct additional within-person analyses using individual fixed effects, which control for all time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity

Data preparation is ongoing, thus we do not have preliminary results to share.

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