

Non-standard work schedules and parents reconciliation of work and family life: the protective role of intrahousehold support opportunities

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Research objective: In this study we investigate whether parents who have non-standard work schedules (i.e. work outside the Monday to Friday, nine-to-five schedule) experience higher work-family and family-work conflict compared to parents with standard working arrangements. We contribute to the literature by 1) considering both single parents and dual-earner couples; 2) accounting for the work schedules of both partners in the case of dual-earner couples and 2) by investigating the moderating effect of intrahousehold support opportunities, based on the household structure.

Background:

Non-standard work schedules (NSWS), namely work outside the Monday to Friday, nine-to-five schedule, can potentially have negative consequences for workers and their families (Arlinghaus et al., 2019). By causing an interference of work time with the time traditionally considered as ‘family time’, NSWS can increase both the work-family and family-work conflict. For parents in dual-earner couples NSWS can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, NSWS might help to better reconcile work and childcare, by allowing parents to desynchronize their work schedules and thus ensure that childcare is constantly provided (Hattery, 2001). On the other hand, NSWS can result in a desynchronization between parents’ working schedules and schedules of childcare and after-school services, thus increasing the friction between work and childcare (Siippainen et al., 2023). For single parents, NSWS might be particularly detrimental, in the absence of a strong support network.

The potential effects of NSWS on the reconciliation between work and life will likely depend on the mix of the partners’ schedules and the opportunity of receiving support with childcare. First, the desynchronization with the schedules of formal childcare institutions might not affect dual-earner couples in which one of the partners has standard working hours, although it might affect couples in which both parents have NSWS. Second, the potential negative effects of NSWS can be mitigated by the presence of other household members who might provide support with childcare. Studies have extensively documented the importance of informal childcare in facilitating work force participation (Wheelock and Jones, 2002) or in reducing parenting stress (Craig and Churchill, 2018).

The empirical evidence is mixed, as studies found evidence that NSWS both enable (e.g. Lozano et al., 2016) and hamper (e.g. Tammelin et al., 2017; Laß and Wooden, 2021; Lott and Wöhrmann, 2022;) the reconciliation between work and childcare. However, few of these studies consider single parents. At the same time, studies that focused on dual-earner couples rarely consider the work schedules of both partners. Additionally, the literature is missing

studies which account for the help with childcare parents might receive from other household members.

Methodology:

This study makes use of waves two and five of the European Social Survey (ESS). These waves offer information on experiences of conflict between family and work responsibilities of the main respondent, while also including data on household composition and the employment of respondents and their partners. The data collection for the two waves was carried out in 2004/2005 and 2010/2011 and included 26 and 28 countries, respectively. As such, this dataset allows us to investigate variations both between countries and across time. Based on these datasets we select a sample of single working parents and a sample of dual-earner couples with children below the age of 14, with complete information on our variables of interest.

We investigate both experiences of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. To measure work-to-family conflict we make use of four questions: “How often do you find that your job prevents you from giving the time you want to your partner or family?” and “How often do you find that your partner or family gets fed up with the pressure of your job?”. The response categories for each item range from 1 (never) to 5 (always), based on which we compute a mean score. To measure family-to-work conflict we make use of the question: “How often do you find it difficult to concentrate on work because of your family responsibilities?”.

For single parents our main explanatory variable of interest is a dummy variable on their NSWS, while for dual-earner couples the main explanatory variable of interest is the couples’ mix of work schedules, which identifies three types of couples: a) both working standard schedules; b) one partner with NSWS and c) both partners with NSWS. In identifying NSWS of the respondents and their partners we focus on both work outside of Monday-Friday (“How often does your work involve working at weekends?”) and work outside of the nine-to-five schedule (“How often does your work involve working evenings or nights?”). To measure the moderating effect of help with childcare parents might receive from other household members, we generate multiple dummy variables that capture intrahousehold support opportunities (e.g. presence of grandparents; presence of teenage children).

Additionally, we control for multiple individual and household characteristics. At individual level we include multiple variables on job characteristics for both partners (e.g. weekly working hours; overtime work at short notice; occupation) and demographic characteristics (age, gender and education). At household level we control for union type (married vs. cohabiting), number of children and age of the youngest child.

Given the nature of our data, we employ ordinary least squares regressions to estimate the effect of NSWS on work-family and family-work conflict and the moderating role of intrahousehold support opportunities.

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