

Working-time flexibility and fertility: Evidence for couples in Germany

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Abstract

The processes of globalisation and the changes occurring because of the rapid diffusion of new technologies are having a significant impact on the labour market. One of the important issues arising from these transformations is the flexibilization of working time, both on the side of the employee (the opportunity to obtain the start and end times one needs, compress or extend work hours and choose when to work) and the employer (worker's adjustment to the uncertain schedules and last-minute changes imposed by the employer). Previous studies suggest that working-time flexibility can either encourage or discourage couples from childbearing, depending on the type of flexibility, family and job context. With this study, we contribute to the literature by the comprehensive analysis of the link between childbearing and both employee- and employer-oriented flexibilities. We focus on couples and investigate both partners' working flexibilities in order to grasp potential interdependencies between fertility and partners' schedule synchronisation. With the use of the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data we perform an event history analysis of the risk of first and subsequent births. First results show that employer-oriented flexibility tends to be more prevalent in managerial positions and primarily among men, while employee-oriented flexibility is associated with higher occupational positions among both genders, with a particularly noteworthy impact on women in low occupational positions, ultimately resulting in varying birth outcomes for different couples.

Extended Abstract

The processes of globalisation and the changes occurring because of the rapid diffusion of new technologies are having a significant impact on the labour market (Stromquist, 2019). One of the important issues arising from these transformations is the flexibilization of working time that arises both on the side of the employee and the employer. Employee-driven flexibility, also referred to as schedule flexibility, is typically described as an opportunity to obtain the start and end times one needs, compress, or extend work hours and choose when to work and is often provided as a benefit to the most valued employees in high status occupations (Chung & van der Horst, 2018). Employer-driven flexibility, in turn, is a worker's adjustment to the uncertain schedules and last-minute changes imposed by the employer. It may occur both within groups of higher-educated workers (managerial positions) and low-skilled workers working on nonstandard contracts, e.g., on call (Korunka & Kubicek, 2017).

These two types of working-type flexibilities likely affect the work - family conflict and thereby might influence partners' fertility behaviours. On the one hand, employee-oriented flexibility minimises work-family conflict and promotes employees' capacity to fulfil family responsibilities (Chung & van der Horst, 2018). The literature shows that this kind of flexibility facilitates staying in employment after birth, especially among high-educated and those who worked in high-skilled occupations (Chung & van der Horst, 2018), which can influence the childbearing decisions among this group. On the other hand, this kind of flexibility may lower workers' work-life balance by blurring the boundaries between work and personal time and increasing work-to-family spillover (French et al., 2022; Lott, 2020a; Schieman & Glavin, 2008) and overtime among highly paid occupations (Lott & Chung,

2016). Employer-oriented flexibility, in turn, may lead to job pressure, stress and long working hours (Zerhouni, 2022). Certainly, it creates a difficult challenge for parents (and mothers in particular, as they are usually the main carer in the family) as it impedes providing parental childcare and using formal childcare (Haley & Miller, 2015). These challenges, however, may be easier to overcome by high-positied employees that can afford additional private childcare than by low-skilled workers with limited financial resources. Summing up, working-time flexibility can either encourage or discourage couples from childbearing, depending on the type of flexibility and job context.

Past research on working time flexibility and childbearing has been scarce and mainly concentrated on employee-oriented flexibility. In that regard, studies provided conflicting evidence. Sinyavskaya and Billingsley (2015) demonstrated that employee-oriented flexibility is positively related with first and second birth intentions in Russia. Positive relationship between schedule control and an intention to have a second child (but not the first) was also established by Begall and Mills (2011) on the pooled data for 23 countries. Osiewalska and Matysiak (forthcoming), in turn, demonstrated that schedule control is positively related to second birth risks but negatively to the first. The authors also highlighted the role of socio-economic status in moderating the relationship between employee-oriented flexibility and birth transitions. Namely they demonstrated that employee-oriented flexibility facilitates the transition to the second child only among highly educated women.

In this study we conduct a comprehensive analysis of the link between childbearing and working time flexibilities. The following research questions are addressed: (1) How employee-oriented and employer-oriented flexibility relates to first and second birth risks? and (2) How gender and socioeconomic status of partners moderate this relationship?. We focus on couples and investigate both partners' working flexibilities to grasp potential interdependencies between fertility and partners' schedule synchronisation. We make at least

three contributions to the literature. First, we add the employer-oriented flexibility into the discussion on working time flexibilities and childbearing. Employer-oriented flexibility is even more widespread than employee-oriented (Kalamucka et al, 2022) and may clearly affect work-family conflict, but has been largely overlooked in fertility research so far. It also often goes hand in hand with employee-oriented flexibility (e.g. in high status occupations), A failure to consider the necessity to adjust to last minute changes in the working time schedule imposed by the employer or clients may thus confound the relationship between employee-oriented flexibility and fertility. Second, we account for the job context, differentiating flexible working time from other work characteristics such as occupation, type of contract, or educational skills of the employee. This provides us with a broader perspective on potential influences, as under one type of flexibility, we can either find more family-friendly working conditions or those that contribute to work-family conflict (Lott, 2020b). Third, we account for the partner context, as most studies only consider individual perspectives (Chung & van der Horst, 2018). A couple-level perspective enriches our analysis because the decision-making process of couples regarding their employment types can be adjusted to their partner's situation, and the impact of one partner's working conditions on the family's quality of life can be moderated by the employment situation of the other partner.

Our study is based on German data. Germany serves as a prime example of a country where the traditional male-breadwinner model remains quite prominent (Miller, 2021). However, there has been a noticeable increase in the participation of mothers in the workforce, which has ignited couples' significant interest in family-friendly working conditions (Boll & Lagemann, 2019), including employee-oriented flexible working-time. Consequently, in 2019 around 40% of employees declared the ability to control, at least to some extent, their working schedules (Backhaus et al., 2020). On the other hand, the persistence of

employer-oriented flexibility based on German panel data reaches the level of around 20% (Lott & Chung, 2016).

With the use of German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data, we perform an event history analysis of the risk of first and subsequent births. Our response variable is the occurrence of a first or subsequent birth. The major explanatory variables are constructed based on the question about the type of working hours. Employee-driven flexibility we classify as „Self-determined working hours/ working time account” and employer-driven flexibility as „Changing working hours”. We control for partners' education, occupation, nationality, age as well as household income, cohabitation status, region, child parity, and age of 1st child (in models for subsequent births). All explanatory variables are lagged by two years compared to the response variable in order to capture the situation from before conception.

The first results show that employer-oriented flexibility is mostly seen among women at lower occupational positions and men holding managerial positions. Employee-oriented flexibility is explicitly related to high occupational positions among both women and men. Women holding low occupational positions are more likely to have a 1st or 2nd child when they benefit from employee-oriented flexibility. Employer-oriented flexibility, however, relates to decreased risk of 2nd birth among both women and men. Consequently, the lowest risk of subsequent birth is seen among couples in which both partners have employer-oriented flexibility or man has employer-oriented flexibility and woman does not have any. We will examine these relationships further to be able to present the complete set of findings at the conference.

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