

Country differences in the gendered effect of work-life balance on well-being: the role of legal and policy arrangements.

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Abstract

Increasing the number paid working hours, either by increasing labour market participation or by increasing the number of working time of part time workers, is a central policy issue in many European countries. A common view among policy makers is that working more hours is necessary to maintain living standards in the context of ageing societies (Collewet and De Koning, 2011). Whether working more hours influences individual's well-being, is hotly debated. The present paper focuses on the gendered relationship between work-life balance and individual well-being across Europe. Does paid work increase individual well-being? Are men happier working in full time jobs and women in part time jobs? Does this (gendered) relationship between paid work and well-being vary across European countries? If so, to what extent can this be explained by variations in national level legal arrangements and social policies? Taking a multi-level approach, we use data from the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS) and a unique set of national level legal and policy indicators from the MULTILINKS database (Dykstra, 2011) to examine whether individual and policy arrangements can explain the gendered relationship between work and well-being.

Extended abstract

Increasing the number paid working hours, either by increasing labour market participation or by increasing the number of working time of part time workers, is a central policy issue in many European countries. A common view among policy makers is that working more hours is necessary to maintain living standards in the context of ageing societies (Collewet and De Koning, 2011). Whether working more hours influences individual's well-being, is hotly debated.

While there is strong empirical evidence that unemployment reduces people's well-being (see Lucas et al. (2004) for an overview), the relationship between paid work and well-being is less straightforward (Dolan, Peasgood and White, 2008). There are two opposing views on the well-being implications of paid work. One argument is that paid work reduces well-being because it reduces the time available for leisure activities. Furthermore, the time spent on obligations, such as paid work, restricts the time that can be spent on other activities and reduces autonomy in time allocation decisions. It may therefore enhance experiences of having too little time to complete all necessary or desired tasks and increase time pressure and work-family conflict. These are, in turn, likely to reduce happiness (Pouwels, 2011). An alternative argument is that employment adds to income, and therefore increases well-being. Apart from the pecuniary gains of employment, the reasoning is that paid work can be rewarding *in itself* (see Jevons, 1871/1970, Lane (1992), Marshall (1890/1972), and Spencer (2004) for reflections on intrinsic rewards from paid work). People regard being employed as desirable. Employment brings social status and contacts, it enhances self esteem, and gives structure and life meaning to life. Paid work is also seen as a means to improve independence, not only financially but also in a psychological sense. However, diary studies on time use and well-being have shown that people rank work related activities among the least pleasant activities in life (Kahneman et al., 2004; Knabe, Rätzel, Schöb and Weimann, 2011).

The relationship between paid work and well-being is presumably different for women and men. As argued by Akerlof and Kranton (2000), society's prescriptions about appropriate modes of behaviour for women and men might result in women and men experiencing a loss of identity should they deviate from the standard. Following this, men are expected to be happier working in full time jobs and women working in part time jobs or not working for pay at all. Moreover, part time work may provide an opportunity for women to reconcile work and care, while maintaining social contacts, self esteem. This may increase well-being. An alternative view is that part time jobs are unsatisfying and reduce well-being because they often have lower prestige, offer fewer possibilities of promotion and often mean occupational downgrading.

So far, only a few studies have explicitly addressed how paid work hours influence individual well-being. Booth and Van Ours (2007, 2009, 2010), Boye (2011) and Collewet and De Koning (2011) are notable exceptions. These studies show that results differ strongly by country and gender. Booth and Van Ours show that for the UK that neither men's nor women's happiness is affected by their own hours of paid work (Booth and Van Ours, 2007). Happiness of Australian women, however, is reduced when they are working full-time or more than that, while happiness of Australian men increases if they work full-time or more hours (Booth and Van Ours, 2009). For Dutch women, paid work hours have no effect on their happiness. Dutch men, in contrast, are happiest if they have a large part-time or a full time job (Booth and Van Ours, 2010; Collewet and De Koning, 2011).

Boye (2011) investigates whether the associations between wellbeing and hours of paid work and housework differ between 18 European countries and focuses on the importance of the policy context in determining individual well-being. Results suggest that the associations between well-being and hours of paid work and housework do indeed vary by national family policy arrangements. Policy arrangements, such as policies that allocate reproduction work to the state or market, policies that support maternal employment (e.g. policies for job protection, child care, and parental leave), or taxation bonuses for dependent spouses, all affect the involvement of women in paid work, possibilities for the combination of work-care, and the amount of work-family conflict, and therefore affect individual well-being. In her study, Boye has concentrated on differences in welfare typologies to explain the relationship between paid work and well-being. While useful as an analytical tool, the use of welfare regimes or similar typologies overlooks the variation between countries in policies created to ease the work-care arrangements. It is necessary to address the specificities of social policy contexts, which have been shown to differ significantly in working time arrangements as well as in child care and leave arrangements.

In the present paper, we want to have a closer look at the influences of legal and policy arrangements in explaining the gendered relationship between paid work and well-being across Europe. Does paid work increase individual well-being? Are men really happier working in full time jobs and women in part time jobs? Does this gendered relationship between paid work and well-being vary across European countries? If so, to what extent can this be explained by variations in national level legal arrangements and social policies?

We address these questions by taking a multi-level approach to examine the effects of paid work on well-being in Europe. We use data of the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS3) in combination with a unique set of comparable legal and policy indicators of the MULTILINKS database,

developed in the context of the European 7th Framework Programme (Dykstra, 2011). The data of round 3 of the ESS contain a special model on well-being (Huppert et al., 2008), which includes information on overall life satisfaction and happiness, but also on satisfaction with work-life balance, and satisfaction with time spent at home and at work. The MULTILINKS database (Keck, Hessel, & Saraceno, 2009) has comparative indicators of legal and policy frameworks shaping financial and caring responsibilities in families for all EU 27 countries (plus Norway, Russia and Georgia). The indicators represent the allocation of responsibilities to the state or to families for (a) caring for children, (b) financially supporting children, (c) caring for frail older persons, and (d) financially supporting older persons. The patterns help to understand to what degree country-specific institutional frameworks support the desire to be responsible towards one's children and frail old parents and/or support individual autonomy, thereby lightening gendered dependencies.

Our paper makes a contribution to the literature by taking a multi level approach to examine the effects of work-life balance on well-being. It uses unique comparable indicators for legal and policy arrangement while at the same time, accounting for individual level explanations in the effects of paid work on well-being

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