

CHAPTER 3

Do Americans Feel Overworked?

Comparing Ideal and Actual Working Time

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The late 20th century has witnessed dramatic changes in the ways Americans organize their work and family lives. As men's earnings have stagnated and women have become increasingly committed to long-term, full-time employment, the breadwinner-homemaker household that predominated at mid-century has given way to a diverse range of work-family arrangements. Today, dual-earner and single-parent families outnumber so-called traditional households, leaving most workers striving to juggle the competing demands of work and family.

These far-reaching social changes have created new options and dilemmas for American workers. They have also posed new questions and spawned vig-

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orous debates about the current state and future prospects of work and family life in America. Amid the growing controversy, two debates stand out. The first, triggered by the publication of Juliet Schor's *The Overworked American*, centers on the question of whether or not contemporary Americans are overworked. Schor (1991) contends that an increase in working hours has produced an "unexpected decline of leisure" in American society, with American workers logging more time at the workplace than did their parents or grandparents. Although much evidence indicates that the average number of hours worked per week for the labor force as a whole has changed little in recent decades, there is no question that changes in family structure, and especially the rise of working mothers, have raised new questions about how Americans balance their ties to paid work and family work (Jacobs & Gerson, 1997).

Questions about the links between work and family point to a second emerging controversy, which has gained renewed attention with the publication of Arlie Hochschild's *The Time Bind*. Hochschild (1997) argues that a cultural and social transformation has produced a society in which "home has become work and work has become home" and in which workers have shifted their allegiance from the home to the workplace. Like Schor's analysis, Hochschild's study draws attention to the new dilemmas faced by workers trying to balance multiple and conflicting obligations. From the perspective of the American labor force as a whole, however, it raises more questions than it answers about the changing nature of the link between family and work. Do most workers actually prefer time spent at the workplace over time spent at home, or do they face new economic and social constraints? And, more generally, does the balance people strike between work, family, and leisure actually reflect their preferences, or does it emerge from the social, cultural, and economic options they face?

Given the fundamental restructuring of family life in America and the increasing social and political concern over the fate of our children, these questions are not merely academic. Their answers hold important implications not only for how we address policy issues regarding employment, child rearing, and the workplace, but also for how we approach issues of gender equity at work and in the home. Our analysis focuses on the questions of how contemporary workers feel about the time they spend at work and how they would prefer to allocate their work time with other life pursuits. Since the concept of overwork depends as much on perception as on actual working time, we examine the differences between workers' real and ideal working hours. In light of their working hours, do workers feel overworked, and, if

given more choice, what kind of balance would they prefer to strike between work, family, and leisure time?

We argue that the debate about whether or not Americans are overworked should focus not only on historical trends but also on what workers want. We draw on a data set collected in 1993 by the Families and Work Institute that solicits information regarding both workers' actual hours worked and information on their preferred allocation of work time. We conclude that, contrary to the argument that workers are using work to avoid family time, those who are putting in long hours at work would prefer a more private and family-centered balance in their lives. Only those working relatively short hours would actually prefer to work more.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of historical trends in working hours. We then turn to an examination of the factors that may be producing a mismatch between employers' demands and workers' preferences regarding working time. To understand this process, we investigate the economics of the work week as well as broad historical changes in the factors influencing workers' preferences. Next, we consider the issue of how much time Americans want to spend at work. We then develop a set of expectations regarding how desired working time should vary by education, age, gender, and marital status. After presenting our data, methods, and results, we discuss some theoretical and policy implications of these findings.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN WORKING HOURS

In *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor (1991) contends that Americans are working more in recent years than at any time since the Second World War. Much subsequent research has challenged the argument that there has been a general increase in working hours among employed Americans. However, a careful review reveals that Schor never actually claimed that the average *work week* had lengthened substantially since the 1970s. Indeed, her own figures make it clear that there has been little change for either employed men or women. Schor thus reports that the average number of hours worked for men declined slightly between 1969 and 1989 (42.8 to 42.3) while the average for women increased by less than 1 hour per week (35.2 to 36.1; Leete & Schor, 1994). Instead, Schor argues that the increase in time spent working stems from a change in *annual*, not weekly, hours worked. Many difficulties complicate a calculation of annual working hours, including the fact that the

Census and Current Population Survey data do not distinguish between work and paid vacations.¹ Thus, Schor's empirical claims center more on vacation deprivation than on the growth of the typical work week.

When we focus on weekly working hours, our analysis of the time-series evidence shows, as have many others, that the past 25 years have seen few changes in the average number of hours worked for the labor force as a whole. Contemporary men work about 42 hours on average per week, and contemporary women average about 36 hours.² Yet we also find that focusing on the average worker tells only one part of the story. When we examine variation around the average, we find evidence of an emerging bifurcation in working hours among workers: There has been an increase in the proportion of workers who work long hours (50 hours or more per week) as well as an increase in the proportion who work fewer than 40 hours a week. Moreover, the length of the work week is linked to education and occupational position. The longest working hours are more likely to occur at the high end of the labor market, in professional and managerial jobs requiring college degrees. Part-time work is concentrated in lower echelon positions, particularly in retail sales and personal service occupations (these and related findings are presented in more detail in Jacobs & Gerson, 1997).

A second important phenomenon has been the growth of women's labor force participation. Life in two-earner households with children at home has always felt rushed, and now there are many more such families. Less than 15% of American households now consist of a married couple with a male earner only. With the exception of retired people, the remaining households are divided among dual-earner couples, single (predominately female) parents, and self-supporting individuals (Gerson, 1993).

These considerations suggest that, while the general argument contained in the "overworked American" thesis is not sustained by the evidence, there are several kernels of truth to draw from it. First, there is an emerging group of Americans who work long hours, but they represent one segment of the labor force rather than American workers en masse. Second, the changing demographic makeup of the labor force, which now contains many dual-earning couples and single parents, has produced a growing sense of overwork even while average working hours have not substantially changed.

THE EMERGENCE OF LONG AND SHORT WORK WEEKS

Why has the work week expanded for one group of workers while shrinking for another? Hidden beneath the static average, we argue, are special forces at

work that encourage employers to offer *both* long and short work weeks. While some workers are facing pressures to put in longer hours at the workplace, others may find it harder to secure jobs that offer them as much work as they would like.

What factors are promoting long work weeks? First, employers have a stake in encouraging long work weeks from salaried employees. These workers do not receive extra wages for every extra hour worked, and from the employer's point of view, there is little or no marginal cost to persuading (and expecting) them to work extra hours (Landers, Rebitzer, & Taylor, 1996). The increasing cost of benefits provides a second reason that employers may push for longer work weeks. The costs of many of the most expensive fringe benefits, such as health care, are fixed for a full-time worker no matter how many hours he or she works. Consequently, the hourly cost of such benefits declines as the worker devotes more hours to the job. As the cost of benefits rises as a fraction of total compensation, employers may be inclined to seek longer hours from their employees. And, finally, the pressures of corporate downsizing may increase the incentive for employers to get more work per employee, increasing the hours and intensity of work. There is good reason to expect, therefore, that salaried employees such as managers and professional workers are likely to face increasing pressure to put in more than the once obligatory 40-hour work week.

For hourly employees and other workers who must be paid for each hour worked, however, the situation is likely to be quite different. When employees can expect a sharp increase in pay per hour (such as time-and-a-half payments) for working more than a 40-hour week, employers may be more restrained in their requests. Indeed, they may take active steps to limit the amount of work available and to convert full-time into part-time work. The rising costs of benefits contribute to this trend. Since employers need not and typically do not offer benefits to part-time workers, they can substantially reduce their compensation costs by encouraging part-time employment.

A set of economic and social factors is thus encouraging employers to offer or even demand both long *and* short work weeks. Moreover, these opportunities are not likely to be distributed equally across the labor force. While well-educated and highly trained employees who are paid on a salaried basis, such as managers and professionals, may face increased pressure to put in long hours at the office, those with less secure jobs, such as hourly workers, part-time employees, and contingent workers, may have a difficult time getting the work they need and desire. In this context, the supply of jobs available may not reflect or mesh well with workers' preferences. Rather, we are

likely to see a widening gap between those who would prefer to work less and those who wish to work more.

THE CLASH BETWEEN WORKER PREFERENCES AND EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS

While employers have good reasons to offer a supply of jobs with both long and short work weeks, workers face a different set of contingencies. Changes in family life over the past several decades, which have been nothing less than revolutionary, have altered Americans' perceptions of how much they would like to work as well as how they would like to schedule their working hours. As men have faced stagnant wages and women have become increasingly committed to work outside the home, the breadwinner-homemaker family that predominated in the 1950s has given way to a diverse range of family types. Among married couples, the dual-earner couple has replaced the male breadwinner model as the predominant arrangement. In 1970, in more than half (55.8%) of married couples only the husband worked, while husband and wife were both employed in less than one third of couples (31.2%). By 1990, this pattern had reversed, with working couples representing a new majority of couples (51.0%), and breadwinner husbands representing a minority (32.8%; Jacobs & Gerson, 1998). These changes are generating changes in worker preferences that may not fit with the supply of jobs.

Changes in family structure and the family economy have transformed worker needs and preferences in several ways. Most households now rely on women's earnings, and these economic responsibilities have fueled women's desire for secure, well-paying jobs. At the same time, members of dual-earner and single-parent households, who cannot count on an unpaid worker at home, face new needs for flexibility in their working hours and schedules. While women are especially likely to prefer good jobs with reasonable hours, fathers who share breadwinning with an employed wife also need flexible hours and some measure of control at work.

There is good reason to conclude that worker needs and preferences are increasingly at odds with employer expectations and demands. Just as the economic pressures facing employers are fueling longer work schedules for the best jobs and less security for jobs with shorter hours, working parents face new pressures to secure good jobs that also give them more time and flexibility to be with their families.

A DIVIDED LABOR FORCE

In light of this analysis, the debates about overwork and work-family conflict need to be reframed in several ways. First, rather than focusing on whether or not Americans are overworked, we need to assess the ways in which Americans increasingly face a divided labor market in which some experience overwork while others are not able to work as much as they would like. As Barry Bluestone and Stephen Rose (1997) point out, we need to "unravel the economic enigma" of both overwork and underemployment.³ Each of these situations is problematic, since overworked Americans must sacrifice family and leisure time, and underworked Americans experience economic hardship and thwarted opportunities. To generalize from only one of these situations is to ignore the experience of an important segment of the labor force and to misunderstand the dynamics of social change. (According to Robert Lerman, 1997, for example, the increase in earnings inequality results not from changes in the wage rate but rather from changes in the dispersion of hours worked.)

Second, we need to clarify how this economic and social transformation has created a gap between employer demands and worker needs and preferences. Employers may benefit from dividing jobs into categories that distinguish strongly and weakly committed workers, but workers, including both employed women and men, increasingly need employment that offers a balance somewhere in the middle. They need jobs with long enough hours to support their families but short enough hours to meet their families' needs for time and attention.⁴

On the surface, the rise of long work hours for some and contingent, part-time jobs for others may appear to provide an innovative solution to the dilemmas faced by working parents and nontraditional families. However, in the context of rising economic insecurities, such workplace innovations are likely to intensify these dilemmas rather than resolve them. Neither families nor the economy are likely to fare well over the long run if workers are forced to choose between well-rewarded jobs with expanding opportunities and jobs that allow them to take their family commitments seriously. Moreover, the problem can only be exacerbated if this division of jobs serves further to divide men and women workers. Our analysis is thus guided by the conviction that American workers of both sexes need employment that offers both opportunity and family time. The social and economic fabric of American society can only benefit when working parents are able to balance paid employment and family life without endangering their economic security or long-term work prospects.

DO WORKERS FEEL OVERWORKED? RECONSIDERING WORKERS' COMMITMENTS TO FAMILY AND WORK

As families diversify and workers face new challenges in meeting their multiple commitments, there is a rising sense of being torn between public and private worlds. Whether individual workers are working more or less, new conflicts between work and family are creating pressures and dilemmas that most of them must address. Given the changes in American households, it is understandable that the notion of a "time bind" would capture the popular imagination in much the same way as the image of overworked Americans. Yet we need to know if this bind reflects new constraints on workers and a growing gap between what they prefer and what they feel they must do, or if, alternatively, this bind reflects a growing desire to spend more time at work at the expense of private pursuits. To answer this question, we turn to an examination of the link between workers' actual and ideal working hours.

Hochschild's (1997) study captures the emergence of "time binds" in illuminating detail. Yet her analysis of how and why workers cope with these binds is problematic in several ways. While a study based on one company at one point in time can provide some rich and suggestive ideas, when the company is clearly atypical, it cannot support broad conclusions about general cultural, structural, or individual change.⁵ To capture the complex links between workplace arrangements and the variety of strategies workers create to cope with their situations, we need to make comparisons among workers in a range of companies, with varied workplace structures and cultures.

Even more fundamentally, a focus on broad cultural and social change as the primary cause of workers' choices ignores the ways in which workers experience a conflict between what they prefer and what they feel compelled to do. Individual values, whatever their content, rarely provide a complete explanation of behavior because few have the opportunity to enact their fondest desires—especially at the workplace, where so much is influenced by organizational rules and those wielding power from above. Only by overlooking the real constraints that workers face can one argue that workers get just what they want.

Hochschild, for example, argues that economic forces are not at the root of decisions about working time because those with the highest levels of education and the highest wages are working as much as other employees. Yet affluent workers, no less than other workers, face economic and other workplace constraints.⁶ Indeed, we find that highly educated workers in the professional and managerial sectors of the labor force are the very workers

who face the greatest demands to put in long hours at work. Rather than insulating one from overwork, well-paid jobs that offer advancement may actually increase the pressures to work more as well as the penalties for working less.⁷

A focus, then, on a shift among workers in the relative valuing of work and home overlooks other possible explanations for the balance people strike between family and work, including social-structural, economic, and demographic forces.⁸ Without denying the importance of cultural influences outside the workplace, we argue that they are not the only or even the primary factors shaping workers' choices.⁹ To understand how workers balance their work and family commitments, we need to pay attention to such factors as the demands that jobs impose, the structure and culture of the workplace in which those jobs are embedded, and a range of demographic factors that influence where workers are placed in the economy, the labor market, and the family life course. For example, do those workers who put in very long hours at work do so because they prefer work over family or leisure? Or do their actions reflect perceived and real pressures and constraints? To answer these questions, we examine the link between actual working hours and the expressed ideals and preferences of workers. We are especially interested in ascertaining if those who work 50 or more hours per week prefer such a lifestyle or, alternatively, if they would prefer to have a different balance in their lives.

WORKER PREFERENCES, WORK-FAMILY CONFLICTS, AND IDEAL VERSUS ACTUAL WORKING HOURS

While average work hours have not increased substantially, there is still reason to believe that more workers are *feeling* overworked. Even though most families can no longer rely on the support of a woman at home, the structure of work has not changed sufficiently to accommodate the changes in workers' private lives. Working parents may thus feel squeezed in ways that are altogether new. Yet the debate has focused on historical trends in actual time spent at paid work rather than on whether workers feel overworked, squeezed, or overburdened. Since most national surveys do not include information on workers' desired work schedules, it has been difficult to address the subjective aspect of change.

In this vacuum, some have argued that since most workers are currently working a few minutes less than were their counterparts in 1950, they do not feel overworked (e.g., Kneisner, 1993). Such a conclusion not only ignores

the widespread and fundamental changes that have taken place in family structure over this period, but also overlooks the question of what kinds of work schedules contemporary workers desire. Regardless of the historical trajectory in working hours, we need to understand how Americans feel about their current work commitments in light of their commitments and responsibilities outside the workplace.

We argued above that changes in the demographic makeup of the labor force may be clashing with economic forces shaping the structure of jobs. As a result, we expect that a significant proportion of workers will experience a discrepancy between their actual and preferred, or ideal, working time. We expect that some individuals will report a preference for fewer hours than they are actually working, while others will indicate they wish to work longer hours. We also anticipate that the group desiring shorter hours will be the larger of the two because of the large number of working couples and working parents in the labor force.

In addition, we expect the relative size of the groups wishing to work more or fewer hours will vary with the number of hours worked. Specifically, among those working very long hours, a sizable proportion are likely to report a desire to work fewer hours. Conversely, among those working short work weeks, a sizable fraction are likely to report a preference for working longer hours. Since those working the longest hours are highly educated workers and workers employed in managerial, professional, and technical positions, the greatest gap between ideal and actual hours is likely to be found among the best educated members of the labor force as well as among professional and managerial workers.

The age patterns of preferred hours should reflect, to some extent, the demographic forces shaping workers' preferences. We thus expect that the greatest gap between actual and ideal hours for working women will occur when they have children at home. The gap between ideal and actual hours worked should grow as women reach their thirties and forties, the prime childbearing and -rearing years, and only wane as they grow older and their children leave the household. Because men do not contribute equally to domestic work, we expect this pattern will be less marked, if evident at all, for men.

Similarly, since family commitments increase the demands of domestic work as well as the expectations to spend time at home, marital status should also influence the gap between ideal and actual hours. We expect this gap to be larger among married couples than it is among singles. And, again, since wives continue to bear a greater share of the burden of domestic work, the gap should be more pronounced for wives than for husbands.

Like age and marital status, parental status should influence the perceived gap between ideal and actual working hours. Employed mothers with children under 6 should prefer to work less than those who have not borne children or whose children are older. Indeed, if they cannot realize this preference in their choice of jobs, then the gap between ideal and actual working hours is likely to be largest among this group. For men, however, the influence of parental status is likely to be quite different. Fathers may want to be with their families, but they also face an increased pressure to earn enough to support their families. These conflicting forces may dampen the influence of parental status for men, leaving the fathers of young children with preferences for working hours that are similar to other men.

DATA AND METHODS

To examine the contours and causes of workers' actual and ideal working time, we analyze information from the National Study of the Changing Workforce, a national probability sample of 3,381 employed men and women aged 18 through 64 based on hour-long telephone interviews. The response rate was 50.5%, and the data were weighted in order to reflect the characteristics of the U.S. labor force as estimated by the March 1992 Current Population Survey (Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1993). Conducted by the Families and Work Institute in 1993, this survey is distinctive in terms of the range of questions asked regarding workers' values and preferences and in its focus on the links, tensions, and conflicts between work and family. Since respondents were asked about their ideal as well as their actual working hours, we can examine whether the overall level of work activity reflects the desires of workers. We can also ascertain whether variation in preferences across groups of workers corresponds to variations in actual work levels.

The Changing Workforce survey collected a wide array of information about actual working time, ideal working hours, and how people would prefer to balance their commitments to work, family, and personal pursuits. Several questions regarding working time asked people how many hours per week they usually worked on their principal job and also on any additional jobs they held. Here we examine hours worked on all jobs together (we examine the issue of dual job holders elsewhere; see Jacobs & Gerson, 1997). In order to ascertain ideal work hours, respondents were also asked: "Ideally, how many hours, in total, would you like to work each week?" Using this information on total and ideal hours, we were able to construct a measure indicating

the difference between a person's usual hours worked on all jobs and his or her ideal hours.

RESULTS

In Table 3.1, which compares ideal hours to total hours worked for employed women and men, it becomes clear that most American workers experience a significant gap between how much they work and how much they would like to work. While one third of respondents reported that their actual and ideal hours corresponded precisely, nearly half indicated that their usual work week was longer than their ideal hours, and an additional one in six reported that they would prefer to work more than they currently do. (The unemployed should also be added to this group of "underworked" Americans, but the Changing Workforce survey includes information only on currently employed individuals.)

The vast majority of those who expressed a preference for shorter working hours indicated that they wished to work at least 5 hours less per week than they currently do. Nine in 20 of the total sample (90% of those wanting to work less) preferred to work at least 5 hours per week less. Nearly one third of the total sample (32% of both men and women) expressed the desire to work 10 hours less per week, and about one in seven of the total sample wanted to work at least 20 hours less per week.¹⁰

While women on average work about 6 fewer hours per week than men, the difference between the actual and ideal hours is quite similar for men and women. By approximately the same amount, both sexes indicated a desire to work less. Men reported a preference for working 5.51 fewer hours, compared to 5.14 fewer hours for women, a difference that is not statistically significant. If both groups were able to realize their preferences, the gender gap in hours worked (which is about 6 hours per week) would probably not change significantly.

These findings suggest that, whether or not they are actually working more than earlier generations, the majority of contemporary Americans feel overworked—at least compared to their ideals. Most workers do not appear to prefer long work hours over family and personal pursuits. Nevertheless, a notable group of workers would like to work more. As we shall see, however, these workers are not currently putting in long work weeks but rather are likely to wish to extend relatively short work hours.¹¹

In Table 3.2 we gain a clearer picture of how the gap between ideal and total working hours is linked to the number of hours a person works. The results

TABLE 3.1 Comparison of Total Hours Worked Per Week and Ideal Hours, by Sex

	Men (n = 1,300)	Women (n = 1,539)
Total Hours Usually Worked (all jobs)	45.77*	39.71
Ideal hours	40.26*	34.82
Difference (Ideal-Actual)	-5.51	-4.89
Percentage wanting to work less	50.06	45.58
Percentage ideal equals actual	33.78	37.61
Percentage wanting to work more	17.16	16.84
Percentage wanting to work at least 5 hours less	45.36	41.25
Percentage wanting to work at least 10 hours less	32.39	32.40
Percentage wanting to work at least 20 hours less	15.30	13.19

SOURCE: National Study of the Changing Workforce, 1992

NOTE: * The difference between men and women is statistically significant, $p < .01$. None of the other sex differences in Table 3.1 are statistically significant at the conventional $p < .05$ level.

indicate that those who work few hours prefer on average to work more, while those who work very long weeks prefer on average to work less. The great majority of both men and women who work more than 50 hours per week would prefer shorter schedules. Indeed, more than 80% of those who worked over 50 hours per week indicated a preference for fewer hours. The excess work was substantial: Those working between 50 and 60 hours per week preferred working 12 hours less, while those working more than 60 hours indicated a preference to work a full 20 hours less. While the preferences of individuals vary, we found that only 6.4% of women and 15.8% of men expressed a desire to work more than 50 hours per week. Yet roughly one in four men and 1 in 10 women actually put in that much time at work.

This evidence provides further support that an increasingly bifurcated labor market is a major aspect of social change. It has implications not only for how much time workers spend at work but also for how workers feel about their work arrangements. Those at the top appear to feel overworked, while many of those in less attractive positions express a desire to work more. These data also raise questions about whether employers are heeding the needs and preferences of their employees when it comes to structuring employment options. A "taste" for "overwork" does not appear to explain why those putting in long work hours are doing so.

We now turn to education and occupational differences in working patterns (see Table 3.3). Since actual hours worked increase with educational

TABLE 3.2 Comparison of Total Hours Per Week Worked and Ideal Hours, by Hours Worked and Sex

A. Women	Number of Cases	Total Hours	Ideal Hours	Difference	Percentage Wanting to Work Less
Total	1,539	40.13	34.99	-5.14	45.58
Total Hours Usually Worked					
Less than 30	188	19.83	25.34	5.51	10.91
30-39	328	34.41	33.70	-0.72	27.73
40-49	742	41.38	35.91	-5.46	48.48
50-59	183	51.80	38.71	-13.09	86.24 ns
60+	98	66.52	43.75	-22.77	88.43
B. Men					
Total	1,300	45.77	40.26	-5.51	50.06
Total Hours Usually Worked					
Less than 30	59	20.45	29.67	9.21	8.77 ns
30-39	110	34.19	37.39	3.20	9.59
40-49	694	42.19	40.41	-1.78	38.40
50-59	257	51.91	39.65	-12.26	84.01 ns
60+	180	66.55	45.93	-20.62	84.98

SOURCE: National Study of the Changing Workforce.

NOTE: We conducted tests of statistical significance for every pair of adjacent groups, by sex. For example, women who worked less than 30 hours were compared to those working 30-39 hours. Women working 30-39 hours were compared again with those working 40-49 hours. All paired differences are statistically significant, $p < .05$, except the three entries marked "ns."

TABLE 3.3 Total Hours Per Week Worked and Ideal Hours, by Education, Occupation, and Sex

A. Women	Number of Cases	Total Hours	Ideal Hours	Difference	Percentage Wanting to Work Less
Education					
Less than high school	102	38.59 ns	39.57*	-0.98*	31.57*
High school graduate	457	38.56 ns	35.33*	-3.23 ns	35.62 ns
Some college	544	38.75 ns	33.75*	-5.00*	44.90*
College graduate	236	42.22 ns	33.62 ns	-8.60 ns	63.04 ns
Some graduate education+	200	43.14	35.30	-7.83	60.71
Managerial, professional, and technical occupations	671	42.12*	34.20 ns	-7.92*	58.28*
Other occupations	868	37.96	35.27	-2.70	36.39
B. Men					
Education					
Less than high school	130	44.11 ns	43.74*	-0.36*	32.11*
High school graduate	388	44.95 ns	40.87*	-4.08 ns	43.66 ns
Some college	379	44.24*	39.35 ns	-4.89 ns	49.09 ns
College graduate	226	48.37 ns	38.48 ns	-9.89 ns	64.61 ns
Some graduate education+	177	49.22	40.50	-8.72	63.00
Managerial, Professional, and technical occupations	562	48.59*	39.66 ns	-8.93*	66.80*
Other occupations	738	43.66	40.71	-2.95	37.50

SOURCE: National Study of the Changing Workforce.

NOTE: * $p < .05$. We conducted tests of statistical significance for every pair of adjacent groups, by sex. For example, women with less than high school education were compared to those with a high school degree. Women with a high school degree were compared again with those who had attended some college. Paired differences that are statistically significant, $p < .05$, are indicated with a star, and those that are not are marked "ns."

level while desired hours decline, the gap between ideal and actual hours is highest among the most educated workers of both sexes. Interestingly, desired hours are highest among male high school dropouts, who must work relatively long hours at low rates of pay to earn an adequate income. In contrast, actual hours worked are highest for college graduates and those with graduate training. The gap between actual and ideal hours is highest for these two groups. More than 60% of both men and women with at least a college education reported wanting to work fewer hours.

Occupational differences show a similar pattern. Professional, managerial, and technical workers are most likely to report feeling overworked. Women in these high-status positions would prefer to work 8 hours less than they do, while men in these professions indicate wanting to work just under 9 hours less. For workers in other occupational categories, the average respondent indicated wanting to work between 2 and 3 hours less. We find it especially interesting that, while professionals and managers work much longer hours than other workers, their *ideal* working hours do not differ from those of other workers. For both men and women, the differences in ideal working hours between professional and managerial versus other workers is not statistically significant. These differences thus appear to reflect the structure of work demands, driven by powerful economic forces, rather than the desires of workers.

These findings add support to our view that occupational position is critical in shaping the needs and desires of both men and women. Despite the persistent view that female professionals are less committed to work than their male counterparts, we find that workers of both sexes are looking for a reasonable balance between home and work. Those who put in long hours, regardless of gender, would like to cut back, while those who face shortened work weeks would like to work more. Ironically, it is the most highly educated and well-remunerated professional and managerial workers who, in the face of heightened pressure to work long hours, would prefer less time at the workplace.

Does age, and the related aspects of life stage, make a difference in shaping the gap between actual and ideal hours? If work-family conflict is the principal force driving the desire for fewer hours, then the biggest gap between actual and ideal hours should be concentrated among those in their late twenties, thirties, and early forties, the years during which workers are most likely to marry, become parents, and face the heavy demands of caring for young children.

Table 3.4, which displays actual and ideal hours by age for men and women, largely confirms our expectations, although differences across age

TABLE 3.4 Age Profile of Total Hours Per Week Worked and Ideal Hours, by Sex

A. Women	Number of Cases	Total Hours	Ideal Hours	Difference	Percentage Wanting to Work Less
Age Group					
16-25	144	36.65*	36.32 ns	-0.33*	35.50*
26-35	505	39.56 ns	34.44 ns	-5.12 ns	47.19 ns
36-45	476	40.48 ns	34.34 ns	-6.14 ns	48.82 ns
46-55	265	41.21*	35.23 ns	-5.98*	49.68*
56-65	149	38.32	35.18	-3.14	33.33

B. Men	Number of Cases	Total Hours	Ideal Hours	Difference	Percentage Wanting to Work Less
Age Group					
16-25	126	38.64*	38.52*	-0.13*	26.69*
26-35	490	46.50 ns	41.50 ns	-5.00*	48.74*
36-45	353	47.24 ns	40.77 ns	-6.47 ns	54.85 ns
46-55	222	46.97*	38.89 ns	-8.08*	61.34*
56-65	109	44.02	38.68	-5.33	43.46

SOURCE: National Study of the Changing Workforce.

NOTE: * $p < .05$. We conducted tests of statistical significance for every pair of adjacent groups, by sex. As in previous Table 3.3, paired differences that are statistically significant, $p < .05$, are indicated with a star, and those that are not are marked "ns."

groups in ideal working hours are remarkably small and often statistically insignificant. We can see that for men, actual working hours increase until ages 46 through 55 and then begin to fall somewhat. Ideal hours increase slightly until age 35 and then remain roughly constant. Thus, the gap between actual and ideal hours grows for men until age 55. Among the 46 to 55 age group, the gap is 8 hours. More than three fifths of this group of men indicated a preference for shorter hours. Notably, it does not appear to be fathers of young children but rather men in their fifties (whose children are likely to be older) who are most likely to express a strong interest in working fewer hours.

For women, ideal hours are remarkably consistent across the age groups. None of the paired comparisons are statistically significant. The gap between ideal and actual work hours peaks at 6 hours among the 36- to 45-year-old age group. However, the gap remains virtually unchanged at 6 hours for women between the ages of 46 and 55, and it drops to 3 hours only for women over 55.

From age 26 through 55, between 45% and 50% of women expressed a preference for working fewer hours.

For both men and women, the desire to work fewer hours is not restricted to the years in which young children are living at home. Nor is there evidence of a clear generational shift: There is as much or more interest in working less among the middle-aged as there is among the youngest group of workers.¹² When gender differences emerge, it appears that men in their fifties may be seeking more leisure, while women in their thirties may be seeking more time for family responsibilities. However, gender differences in the effects of life stage are small, indicating a growing convergence between men and women in their strategies for building work careers over the life course.

The gap between ideal and actual working hours appears to be driven more by the shifting demands of work over the life course than it does by age gradations in workers' preferences. During the thirties and forties, both men and women are trying to build their careers, and their time in paid jobs increases. Their desire for increased working time does not show a corresponding increase, and consequently a gap between ideal and actual work time emerges.

Despite the similarities we have found among women and men, it is reasonable to expect that the unmet desire for fewer hours might be concentrated among those employed women who have small children. If so, then allowing everyone to work their ideal hours might result in women disproportionately taking advantage of shorter schedules, thus reinforcing the gender gap both in hours worked and earnings. We have seen, however, that the unmet demand for fewer hours is roughly equal for men and women. In Table 3.5 we examine the relationship among gender, family situation, and ideal working hours in more detail.

These results confirm a difference between married and single workers of both sexes. Married women work almost 1.5 hours less per week than women who are not currently married, but they would like to work 4.5 hours less. The gap between actual and ideal working time is thus 3 hours greater for married than for single women. In other words, married women would ideally prefer to work 6 hours less per week, while single women would prefer to work 3 hours less per week.

In contrast, married men work more than do single men, by about 5 hours per week. However, married and single men wish to work about the same amount of time. The difference between single and married men in terms of ideal working hours is not statistically significant. As a result, married men report a larger gap between actual and ideal hours (6.5 hours per week) than do single men (2.7 hours per week). Thus, for both men and women, married life is characterized by a significant time deficit. The reasons for this deficit,

TABLE 3.5 Comparison of Total Hours Per Week Worked and Ideal Hours, by Marital and Family Status, by Sex

	Number of Cases	Total Hours	Ideal Hours	Difference	Percentage Wanting to Work Less
A. Women					
1. Married (or living with partner)	872	39.14*	33.21*	-5.94*	48.29*
2. Not currently married	667	40.71	37.69	-3.03	40.78
3. Married, working spouse	703	38.97	32.79*	6.18	49.22
4. Married, non-working spouse	169	39.94	35.10	-4.83	43.98
5. With children under 6	283	37.48*	31.40*	-6.08	51.17
6. Without children under 6	1,256	40.18	35.54	-4.64	44.40
B. Men					
1. Married (or living with partner)	879	47.00*	40.53	-6.47*	52.93
2. Not currently married	421	42.18	39.48	-2.71	41.65
3. Married with working spouse	341	46.55	40.73	-5.81	52.31
4. Married, non-working spouse	538	47.28	40.40	-6.88	53.32
5. With children under 6	263	48.27*	41.71*	-6.56*	55.57
6. Without children under 6	1,037	45.15	39.90	-5.25	48.69

SOURCE: National Study of the Changing Workforce

NOTE: * $p < .05$. Tests of statistical significance are reported for paired comparisons within sex. Thus, married women are compared with not currently married women (row 1 vs. row 2). Similarly, tests compare rows 3 and 4, and rows 5 and 6, for women and men, respectively.

however, differ by gender. For men, it emerges from spending more time on the job; for women, it stems from a desire to cut back on working time.

Within marriage, differences are evident among women living in different family situations, but these differences are not as large as might be expected. Women with working husbands work about one hour per week less than those few whose husbands do not work, but this small difference is not statistically significant. Women in dual-earner marriages report wanting to work 33 hours per week instead of the 39 hours they report working, for a 6 hour per week gap. For those with husbands who are not employed, the gap is 5 hours (and the difference between the two is not statistically significant).

A similar pattern is evident for women with preschool children. These women work 37.5 hours per week on average, but would prefer to work 31.5 hours per week, for a gap of 6 hours per week. For women without children under 6, there is a 4.5 hour per week differential, which is statistically indistinguishable from the 6-hour gap for those with preschool children. Thus, for women, having preschool children and employed husbands affects both desired and actual working time, but does not create a dramatic change in the gap between actual and desired working time.

Marital and parental status also influence men's actual and ideal working time, but, as in the case of women, these effects are modest. Men in this sample with employed spouses do not differ from those with stay-at-home spouses on actual or ideal working time. Having preschool children in the household does increase the total hours worked per week for men, but it also increases desired working time. The fathers of young children are thus likely to perceive that their family's financial needs require them to put in more time at work. And since actual work time increases by more than does desired work time, a higher proportion of this group want to work less.

These results stem, in part, from the fact that women have already made strategic adjustments to avoid work-family conflict. After all, their average working hours are lower than men's at the outset. Nevertheless, the larger pattern suggests that family status is as important as gender and that both mothers and fathers with young children want more time away from work than do other groups. Marriage clearly provides an incentive that pulls both women and men toward personal commitments outside of work. Yet we find little support for the oft-stated argument that married women with young children are the primary group wishing to work less. Rather, about half of married men and women across a range of family situations express this desire.

We have examined how actual and ideal hours are shaped by a range of individual and social factors, including age, educational level, occupation, family situation, and gender. This analysis has found no trend suggesting, as

Hochschild does, that those putting in long hours at work are doing so out of a preference for long hours and a desire to avoid family commitments. To the contrary, we have consistently found that workers in high-demand jobs would prefer to work less. The wish for more work prevails at the opposite end of the occupational spectrum, where less-educated workers in less-prestigious jobs face underemployment and economic squeezes.

Our findings also suggest that the labor market is not producing employment options that reflect the preferences of workers. In the Changing Workforce survey, a majority of workers reported a preference for a different work schedule than they had. In particular, those working the longest were most likely to report a desire to work less. We thus conclude that the growth in long hours among some groups of workers is not being driven by a broad cultural shift in the commitment to work. Rather, it represents a change initiated by employers that employees are responding to and attempting to accommodate.

We have found that both women and men are facing this apparent bifurcation of work into overdemanding and underdemanding jobs. As women and men cope with converging situations, they are responding in similar ways. The problems caused by the changing nature of the labor force thus affect both sexes and cannot be solved by re-creating a distinct, separate, or unequal set of options for women and men. If "family-friendly" policies are designed to treat mothers (or women who may be "potential mothers") as a separate and problematic group, they risk not only re-creating gender inequality at work but also failing to address the needs of both female and male workers.

CONCLUSION: REORIENTING THE ANALYSIS OF WORK AND FAMILY

Much of the debate concerning work and family change in America remains shrouded in ideological controversy. Disagreement about whether such changes are beneficial or detrimental has often overshadowed careful analyses of the contours, causes, and consequences of change. We have addressed these controversies by offering a revised view of the nature of change and an alternate explanation for how these changes are being experienced by American workers. Our analysis also holds implications for the causes of the current difficulties and what kinds of social policies need to be crafted to address them. In this concluding section, we would like to consider the significance and policy implications of our analysis.

In considering the prospects for work and family life in America, it behooves us to keep in mind that most Americans share a common desire for

strong families and good jobs. In addition, with the exception of those "cultural conservatives" who believe that a return to the 1950s model of the breadwinner-homemaker family is both possible and desirable, most women and men agree that gender equity should be an important aspect of social efforts to forge a just and viable balance between family and work. We share these values and goals with other analysts, including Schor and Hochschild.

Indeed, Schor and Hochschild deserve much credit for focusing public attention on the issue of work-family conflict. Schor's research has helped undermine the ill-founded idea that American workers are not working as hard as their international peers in the global economy. It has also drawn attention to how changes in the family economy, which now typically depends on the earnings of women, have created a sense of overwork in many American households. Hochschild, too, has helped to deflate some distorted stereotypes. Her work rightly suggests that, whatever the economic incentives, American women are also working because they find personal gratification in public pursuits. Women have become strongly committed to work outside the home and cannot be expected to return to domesticity. Her descriptions of the links between family and work also help us move beyond idealized and misleading visions of family life as a haven from the problems of the marketplace.

Alongside these contributions, however, are some noteworthy analytic and political limitations. In Schor's case, the danger lies in overestimating the extent of the problem of overwork, while ignoring a growing segment of the labor force that faces underemployment and economic insecurity. In Hochschild's analysis, the danger lies in holding workers primarily responsible for their (and their children's) problems by ignoring the constraints at work and attributing workers' choices to their own preference for work over family time. While some workers may indeed prefer work over family life, such an outlook cannot explain the behavior or desires of the majority of workers.

We argue that it is essential to recognize the wide variation in circumstances faced by American workers. Both family situations and workplace arrangements are now remarkably diverse. It is distorting to characterize trends in the economy as simply a general increase in the prevalence of the overworked American or to attribute the changes that have occurred to a broad-based decline in the value of family life and a corresponding rise in the value of work. Rather, a range of diverse trends and causes is pulling workers in different directions at once. Given the diversity of American workers and their families, it is essential to examine the variation in working experiences across a variety of employment settings and family situations.

We share the values and goals of those who stress the problems of overwork and time binds, but our analysis suggests a different approach to diagnosing the shape and causes of workers' dilemmas as well as different social strategies for resolving them. We argue that in order to resolve the work-family dilemmas that American workers increasingly face, we must pay attention not only to the economic constraints and family pressures on workers, but also to the social, cultural, and structural conditions of their jobs. Some workers, especially among the well-educated in the professional and managerial sectors, are facing enormous pressures to work more than they or their families would wish. They face severe constraints on working less and real penalties if they choose to do so. Other workers, and especially those with little education and limited white-collar skills, face the opposite problem—how to find enough work with sufficient pay to support their families and build a sense of security at home.

Although the problems workers face take different forms, most seem to desire the same outcome. Thus, when we look at what workers want, we find a notable convergence. Most workers desire gratifying workplace experiences, but they also value their families and their personal time. Put simply, in addition to job security and opportunity, they want balance between family and work and some measure of flexibility in how they choose to integrate the many obligations they shoulder. In a world where both mothers and fathers must work, they do not want to have to sacrifice job opportunities in order to make time for their families. In terms of their feelings about their current jobs and their desires for changes, women hold these goals and outlooks as strongly as men.

In the abstract, these goals seem simple and straightforward. Unfortunately, social-structural trends appear to be moving in a direction that makes them difficult to achieve. As employers encourage extremely long hours from some and part-time work from others, owners' incentives collide with the new realities of working mothers and fathers. If we are to craft a resolution to this predicament, we must first recognize the social-structural causes of change. Otherwise, we are left holding ordinary women and men responsible for conditions they did not create rather than offering them genuine opportunities to be both committed workers and involved parents.

NOTES

1. Rather than indicating a loss in vacation time, the trends detected by Schor's analysis are more likely due to changing patterns of labor force attachment, especially

among women. Most workers who report less than a full-year work schedule do so because they joined or left the labor force at some point during the year. A decline in the frequency of these entries and exits probably accounts for the bulk of Schor's increase in annual working hours.

2. These results differ slightly depending on whether the question pertains to hours worked last week or hours typically worked last year.

3. While Bluestone and Rose are on the right track in exploring the increasingly polarized labor force, their analysis of working hours focuses on the mean, the average worker. We take the need to explore polarization a step farther by using statistics more appropriate for a polarized labor force, namely measures of dispersion in hours worked.

4. Even Schor notes that an increasing number of workers would like to work more than they actually do. But, rather than incorporate this fact into an analysis of an increasingly bifurcated labor market, she stresses the general increase in working hours for the labor market as a whole.

5. For example, as reported by Hochschild, the average working hours at Amerco, the fictionally named research site, are longer than average working hours for the American labor force as a whole.

6. Indeed, the case histories presented in *The Time Bind* demonstrate that long hours were required at Amerco for those who were serious about career advancement.

7. The analysis in *The Time Bind* also downplays the role of workplace culture in shaping and constraining individual decisions. According to Hochschild, a lack of demand on the part of workers, and not constraints imposed by supervisors and the culture of the workplace, led to the underutilization of flexible work arrangements. The focus on one company only, however, makes it impossible to examine whether companies with a more deeply rooted family-friendly orientation, in which informal penalties are not attached to formally available policies, encourages and allows greater use of flexible scheduling options by employees. To that end, we examined the influence of supervisor and workplace support on the use of flexible schedules by employees. Our analysis (Jacobs & Gerson, 1997) shows that those workers who enjoy flexible scheduling options do, in fact, take advantage of these options at notably high rates.

8. For example, Hochschild concludes that the arrival of children increases the number of hours that both mothers and fathers spend at the workplace, even though much evidence suggests that women with small children reduce the time they spend at paid work, albeit to a smaller extent than in previous generations.

9. We need to specify and define what "culture" means in the context of growing work-family conflicts. Not only do cultural values in the wider society vary and conflict, but the workplace also has a "culture" that influences the options and decisions of workers. Moreover, the culture of the workplace is likely to be shaped and constrained by those at the top, leaving workers at the middle and lower rungs of the organizational hierarchy coping to adjust as best they can.

10. Note that in Table 3.1, all percentages are of total male and female samples, respectively. Thus, 50.06% of men reported wanting to work less; 45.36% wanted to

work at least 5 hours less. This is not 45.36% of those who wanted to work less, but rather is 45.36% of the total. In other words, the great majority (45.36 over 50.06) of those men who reported wanting to work less reported at least a 5-hour gap between their actual and ideal working hours.

11. In a longer report, we examined the experience of dual job holders and compared them to the majority of workers who hold only one job. Dual job holders are indeed more likely to indicate a preference for fewer hours. Yet only 8% of the sample reported holding more than one job, and thus most of the sense of being overworked cannot be attributed to the experiences of people who work at two jobs. In other words, the total sample of workers feels only a bit more overworked than do single job holders.

12. Both age and cohort position undoubtedly influence these results. Younger workers in the current period may favor a more balanced work schedule than did previous generations at the same point in their life course, but we cannot establish this conclusion from this cross-sectional survey.

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Editors

WORK & FAMILY

Research Informing Policy



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