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## Introduction to the Special Issue "Parental work and family/child well-being"

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## Introduction to the special issue “Parental work and family/child well-being”

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### Abstract

The “new economy” is characterized by increasing levels of nonstandard employment. A significant proportion of employees work very long hours, work with high intensity, or have long commutes to work. Also, many workers struggle to secure adequate, stable employment or good quality jobs, work evening and night shifts, or work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. This special issue examines the consequences of the new economy for the well-being of families and children. The studies included in this special issue address the impact of parents’ nonstandard work schedules (shift work), long work hours, temporary employment, and long commutes to work on parental and child health and wellbeing, relationship satisfaction, work-family balance, and the division of labour.

**Key words:** shift work, working hours, commuting, parental well-being, child-wellbeing.

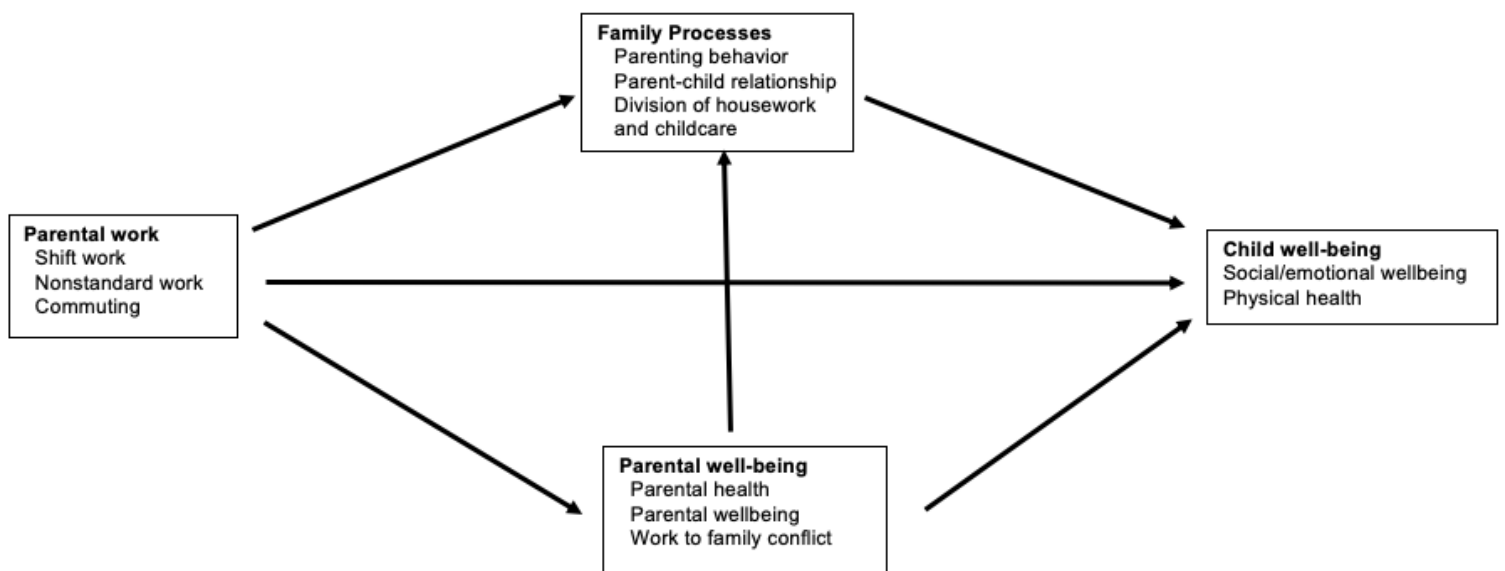


## 1. Introduction

Recent decades witnessed significant changes in when we work, with an increasing share of people working evenings, nights, and weekends (so called “shift work” or “nonstandard work schedules”). According to recent Labour Force Surveys, around 17% of Europeans work regular evenings, 6% work regular nights, and between 14% and 25% work regularly on Saturdays and/or Sundays (see, Taiji and Mills 2020). Moreover, non-standard employment – such as part-time work, temporary employment or contract work – has become widespread in recent decades. The percentage of employees who work involuntarily part-time and/or who hold temporary work contracts is particularly high in southern European countries such as Spain (24.8%) and Portugal (20.6%), and also in Poland (20.9%) (Green and Livanos 2017). Finally, more and more workers are commuting long distances to work. The average daily commuting time in Europe varies between 26 minutes in Portugal and 49 minutes in the UK (Gimenez-Nadal et al. 2020). These labour market trends have raised concerns about its impacts on workers and their families. However, research on the impact of nonstandard employment, non-standard work schedules, and commuting to work on family wellbeing and child development remains sparse and much of this work has been conducted in the US, with relatively little research in Europe and other world regions.

The following sections provide an overview of the most important aspects in the associations between parental work and family and child well-being. Figure 1 illustrates the main pathways between parental work, family processes, parental well-being, and child well-being.

Figure 1: Pathways linking parental work to child and family well-being



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## 2. Impact of parental work on parent's well-being

The overall effects of nonstandard work schedules, nonstandard employment and long-distance commuting on employees' physical and mental well-being are well documented. Nonstandard work schedules are associated with chronic health conditions, sleep deprivation, and fatigue (for reviews, see Kecklund and Axelsson 2016; Moreno et al. 2019). Also, nonstandard employment (e.g., involuntary part-time work, temporary and contract work) has been linked to increased risk for mortality, coronary heart disease, occupational injuries, and poorer self-rated health (for a review, see Benach et al. 2014). A number of studies provide evidence of an association between nonstandard work schedules and poor mental health (for a review, see Zhao et al. 2019). Unpredictable work schedules are related with higher levels of anxiety, psychologic distress, and depression (e.g., Marchand et al. 2015; Niedhammer et al. 2015). Negative effects of adverse work conditions are particularly strong for parents who have to split their time between work and family duties. Not surprisingly, nonstandard work schedules as well as long commuting distances have been linked to higher levels of work family conflicts (Chung 2011; Davis et al. 2008; Taiji and Mills 2020).

A second strand of research has documented various beneficial aspects of nonstandard work schedules. In the Dutch context, Täht and Mills (2012) show that couples chose to work nonstandard schedules to avoid formal child care. By having one partner or both partners working nonstandard schedules at different times, couples are able to engage in "tag-team" parenting so that one parent is always present with their children. Nonstandard work schedules accompanied by flexibility and predictability can also enhance work-family balance (Fenwick and Tausig 2001; Lozano et al. 2016). Such findings highlight that family strategies play an important role in our understanding of whether and to what extent parental nonstandard work schedules impact family wellbeing either negatively or positively.

## 3. Impact of parental work on family processes

Nonstandard work schedules as well as long commutes to work can affect family processes in multiple ways. Both aspects of employment reduce the time available to one's family and cause physical and psychological stress. Nonstandard work schedules have been linked to adverse family outcomes, such as increased risk of marital dissolution and conflict (Kalil et al. 2010; Maume and Sebastian 2012). Parents working nonstandard schedules also spend less time with children (Connelly and Kimmel 2011), particularly in developmentally important activities such as helping with homework and attending parent-teacher meetings or school plays, than parents working standard hours (Li et al. 2014). Long commutes to work also diminish the time that is available for family life (Christian 2012), as commuting increases the total number of hours which parents spend away from the home. Parental time for children, however, is an important familial resource which enables parents to promote optimal child development through developing close parent-relationships, helping young children to form secure attachment and to develop cognitive skills and social and emotional competence (Huston and Bentley

2010; Neymotin 2014). Research has also shown that parents who work nonstandard schedules more often use insensitive and harsh parenting practices compared to parents who work standard schedules (Grzywacz et al. 2011). Previous research further shows that nonstandard work schedules are associated with reduced parent-child interaction and closeness (Han et al. 2010; Rosenbaum and Morett 2009) and a less supportive home environment (Han and Miller 2009; Han and Waldfogel 2007), especially in low-income families (Heymann and Earle 2001). Similar effects have been observed for parents who commute to work. For instance, long-time commuters experience higher risk of separation and lower levels of relationship quality than non-commuting employees (Kley and Feldhaus 2018).

#### **4. Impact of parental work on child well-being**

Parents' mental and physical health is an important resource for parents to promote healthy child development. Mental and physical distress associated with nonstandard work schedules and long commutes to work may lead to poor child outcomes by lowering the quality of parenting and parent-child relationships (for a review, see Li et al. 2014). When distressed, parents may be more likely to use either coercive or permissive parenting styles and such styles are associated with lower emotional and social wellbeing among school-aged children and adolescents (Heß and Pollmann-Schult in press; Strazdins et al. 2013; Van den Eynde et al. 2020).

Previous studies show that children with at least one parent who worked NS schedules had more emotional and behavioural problems than those whose parents worked standard schedules (Dockery et al. 2016; Kaiser et al. 2019). Evening or night shifts had the strongest and most consistent associations with child behavioural problems (Dunifon et al. 2013). Children whose parents work nonstandard schedules also exhibit higher risks of depression and risk-taking behaviours (e.g., smoking, drinking, drug use, delinquency) (Han and Miller 2009; Han et al. 2010). These negative associations are partly mediated through family resources, such as parental mental health (Daniel et al. 2009; Strazdins et al. 2006), family processes such as low-quality parenting (Kaiser et al. 2019; Strazdins et al. 2006), reduced child-parent interaction and closeness, and a less supportive home environment (Han and Miller 2009). Fewer studies have addressed the negative effects of parents' commuting. The limited existing studies suggest that long commutes are associated with more peer relationship problems, more emotional symptoms, and greater hyperactivity in children (Dunifon et al. 2005; Li and Pollmann-Schult 2016).

There is growing evidence that parents' nonstandard work schedules have negative impacts on other domains of child development, including cognitive development, academic achievement, and physical health. Mothers' nonstandard work schedules are associated with lower cognitive and language development in children (Han 2018; Han 2005) and delayed neurodevelopmental-milestone achievement in the gross-motor, fine-motor and social domains in infants (Wei et al. 2019). When parents work nonstandard rather than day shifts, children have lower achievement in reading comprehension and

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mathematics (Han and Fox 2011) and attend fewer extracurricular activities (Han 2006). Nonstandard work schedules are linked to increased risk for child overweight and obesity (Champion et al. 2012; Miller and Chang 2015; Zilanawala et al. 2017) as well as sleep deficiency (Kalil et al. 2014; Radošević-Vidacek and Košec 2004).

## 5. Limitations of previous research

Previous research on the impact of nonstandard work schedules, nonstandard employment and commuting on family wellbeing and child development has various limitations. Since the critical review by Li et al. (2014) increasingly more studies on parental work schedules and family and child wellbeing have been conducted in other countries than the US, including Australia, China, Finland, Germany, South Korea, Taiwan, and the UK. However, the US studies remain predominant in this literature. We need more non-US studies to help us better understand national variations in the impact of nonstandard and atypical employment on family and child well-being and the role of social policy in mitigating or augmenting the impact of parental work on child well-being (Rönkä et al. 2017). In addition, despite some of the recent studies are longitudinal in nature (Dockery et al. 2016; Miller and Chang 2015; Miller and Chang 2015; Zilanawala et al. 2017; Wei et al. 2019), much of this research field is handicapped by cross-sectional design, thus raising a concern about unobserved heterogeneity and selection bias, as Cho and Coulton (2016) have shown. Furthermore, few studies in this field have incorporated children's own perspective on their wellbeing. Sole reliance on parent reports of children's social and emotional wellbeing can lead to biased findings especially when parents working nonstandard schedules suffer from mental health issues (Li et al. 2014; Sawyer et al. 1998). Finally, there is paucity of studies that use a mixed methods design. This is a significant gap as pathways linking parents' employment to family and child wellbeing is highly complex. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches may enable researchers to elucidate this complexity (Li et al. 2014) by shedding light on the varied everyday experiences of today's families and children in the globalized 24/7 economy.

## 6. Contributions in this special issue

The first study in this Special Issue, written by *Kaisa Malinen, Anna Rönkä and Eija Sevón*, examines the association between work schedules and relationship satisfaction among Finnish, Dutch and British parents. In particular, this study investigates whether parents who work evenings, nights or weekends experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction than those who work a regular day-time schedule, and whether this effect differs amongst the Finnish, Dutch and British parents. The data come from a research project investigating nonstandard work schedules from the perspectives of parents, children, and childcare providers in Finland, the Netherlands and the UK. The findings show rather weak associations between parents' work schedules and their relationship satisfaction in these three European countries. Moreover, the results show no between-

country differences in the association. A qualitative content analysis conducted by the authors reveal that for some parents, nonstandard work schedules also had a positive effect on their spousal relationship, and that many parents found effective solutions and coping strategies to counter the negative effects of nonstandard work schedules. However, parents working at night are less satisfied with their relationship than other parents. Malinen, Rönkä and Sevón conclude that in the examined countries, nonstandard work schedules do not strongly diminish parents' satisfaction with their relationship. This finding is in stark contrast to results from the U.S. that show strong associations between nonstandard work schedules among parents and their relationship satisfaction.

The second contribution by *Inga Laß* and *Marc Wooden* examines the association between temporary forms of employment and work-life balance in Australia, using longitudinal data from the "Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia" survey. The authors highlight that temporary employment can have both positive and negative effects on work-family balance. On the one hand, certain characteristics of temporary work, such as high job insecurity, negatively affect workers' balance between the demands of the work sphere and other areas of life. On the other hand, temporary work can provide workers with more schedule flexibility, thus enable them to balance work with personal and family-related commitments. Laß and Wooden document that the results are sensitive to the analytical methods used. Whereas cross-sectional methods, which were employed in most previous research, produce mostly negative associations between nonstandard employment and work-life balance, findings from panel regression models are less conclusive. When accounting for unobserved heterogeneity, various types of nonstandard work schedules are no longer negatively, but become positively associated with work-family balance. However, the positive effects of temporary employment on work-life balance are limited, and often result from the reduced working hours attached to such jobs. Lass and Wooden also identify significant gender differences. Positive effects of temporary work were only found for women, whereas the findings for men show negative effects. The authors attribute these gender differences to the dominant gender regime in Australia, which assigns men the role as primary breadwinners and women the roles as primary carers and secondary earners. The job insecurity connected to temporary employment thus appears to threaten men's breadwinning capacity, whereas the flexibility provided by casual work seems to help women combine paid work with housework and care.

The third contribution by *Daniele Florean* and *Henriette Engelhardt* examines the association between couples' labour supply and their subjective well-being. The authors examine whether men's and women's life satisfaction is affected by their own working hours and the working hours of their partner. Their hybrid panel regression analysis of data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) shows that men's working hours positively affect their life satisfaction, irrespective of the presence of children in the household. The results for women indicate that increases in work hours are only associated with higher life satisfaction among childless women, but not among mothers. Surprisingly, women's life satisfaction is also enhanced by their partner's work hours. Men's life satisfaction, in contrast, does not substantially change when their partners increase their working hours. Additional analyses suggest that these effects are only weakly mediated by income and time scarcity for marital and family relations. The authors

conclude that both men and women are more satisfied when their labour supply corresponds to the male breadwinner model. The author speculate that this finding is driven by traditional attitudes towards gender roles and women's labour force participation in Germany.

The next contribution by *Anna Stenpaß* and *Stefanie Kley* shift the focus to commuting and examines how long-distance commuting affects couples' division of domestic labour. Guided by established theories of the division of household labour, the authors expect that men and women who commute to work perform less housework and childcare than their non-commuting counterparts. Using longitudinal data from the German Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam), the authors find that both male and female long-distance commuters (who commute 45 minutes or more one-way to work) do less homework and childcare than employed workers who do not commute. As a consequence, couples where only the woman commutes daily to work share housework and childcare equally. Couples where only the man commutes to work, however, often engage in a traditional division of housework, where most of the housework is done by the women. The findings show that long-distance commuting to work plays a crucial role in couples' division of household labour and should receive greater attention in future studies on the division of housework and childcare in couples.

The study by *Michael Kühhirt* is the first of three contributions in this Special Issue that focusses on child well-being. Kühhirt investigates whether mothers' employment pattern during children's first 5 years of life affect children's risk of overweight around age 6. The analysis is based on the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). The study is motivated by rising labor market participation among mothers and also the increasing prevalence of child overweight and obesity in recent decades. It is conceivable that maternal employment affects child overweight because mothers have less time to prepare fresh meals, to supervise children's eating habits, and to encourage children to participate in physical activity. Using sequence analysis, Kühhirt identified six typical patterns of early maternal employment and examined whether, and to what extent, these patterns are associated with child overweight at age 6. The results show only weak effects of maternal employment on child overweight. Overall, neither maternal part-time nor full-time employment during children' early years had a significant effect on the risk of becoming overweight at age 6. Only children whose mothers were non-employed after childbirth and later took up a part-time employment experienced increased risks of becoming overweight, compared to mothers who were continuously non-employed during children's first 5 years of life. Overall, the findings suggest that of maternal employment does not have a uniform impact on child overweight: rather the effect is contingent on mothers' employment trajectories.

The next contribution, written by *Jianghong Li*, *Heike Ohlbrecht*, *Matthias Pollmann-Schult* and *Filip Elias Habib*, uses a mixed-method design to examine whether nonstandard work schedules are linked to lower social and emotional well-being in children. The quantitative analysis based on the German Family Panel Study (pairfam) shows that children whose parents work rotating shifts and other types of nonstandard schedules experience elevated levels of emotional and social problems. However, children do not report more emotional and social problems when their parents work fixed shift schedules. Overall, mothers' work schedule arrangements have stronger effects on child



well-being than those of fathers. The qualitative interviews suggest that nonstandard work schedules made everyday life unsettling and family environment chaotic because it was difficult to plan. However, families used different strategies to deal with stress; contingent on what resources available to them, some families managed well, while others did not cope so well in protecting children from the adverse effects of nonstandard work schedules. This is one of the first studies in the research field of parental work and child wellbeing that uses a mixed-method design. It sheds light on how families cope with the stress associated working under the 24/7 economy. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative arms of the study are largely consistent and have implications for future research in the field in terms of theory and empirical analysis.

The last contribution in this Special Issue, written by *Christine Borowsky, Sonja Drobnič* and *Michael Feldhaus* examines the relationship between emotional and social problems in children and parents' commuting to work. This study also draws on the German Family Panel (pairfam) and performs longitudinal analysis. The study design includes two innovative aspects. First, the study tests whether the association between parental commuting to work and child well-being is mediated by the quality of the parent-child relationship. A second novel feature of this study is that child well-being is assessed by the parents as well as by the children. Borowsky, Drobnič and Feldhaus find that parental commuting to work is accompanied by a poorer parent-child relationship quality and more emotional and behavioural problems in children. However, although the quality of the parent-child relationships has strong effects on child well-being, the parent-child relationship quality is only slightly influenced by parental commuting to work. As a consequence, the indirect pathway from parental commuting to child well-being through the quality of the parent-child relationship is rather weak. The authors conclude that parental commuting to work is only a marginal risk factor for reduced child well-being, and that child well-being is driven more strongly by other work-related aspects.

All these studies address many of the limitations mentioned above. The study by Malinen et al. is one of very few studies that investigate the association between nonstandard work schedules and couples' relationship satisfaction from a cross-country perspective. Many studies published in this Special Issue (Laß and Wooden, Stenpaß and Kley, Kühhirt, Li et al., Borowsky et al.) use longitudinal data. Furthermore, Kühhirt and Borowsky et al. shed light on the underlying mechanisms by investigating whether the effect of commuting on child obesity and emotional and social problems is mediated by the quality of the parent-child relationship. Finally, Li et al. and Borowski et al. use information on child well-being reported by the children themselves, and not by the parents.

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Einführung in das Sonderheft „Elterliche Arbeit und Familien-/Kinderwohlbefinden“

### Zusammenfassung

Die “New Economy” zeichnet sich durch einen Anstieg an atypischer Beschäftigung aus. Ein hoher Anteil der Erwerbstätigen verzeichnet lange Arbeitszeiten, eine hohe Arbeitsintensität oder eine lange Pendeldauer. Ein beträchtlicher Anteil der Erwerbstätigkeit leistet Schicht- bzw. Wochenendarbeit oder geht mehreren Beschäftigungen nach. Dieses Sonderheft betrachtet die Konsequenzen solcher Arbeits- und Beschäftigungsverhältnisse für das Wohlergehen von Familien und Kindern. Die in diesem Sonderheft veröffentlichten Beiträge untersuchen den Einfluss von atypischen Arbeitszeiten (Schichtarbeit), langen Arbeitszeiten, befristeter Beschäftigung sowie langen Pendeldauern auf die Gesundheit und das Wohlergehen von Kindern und Eltern, die Partnerschaftszufriedenheit, Vereinbarkeitsprobleme und die Aufteilung der Hausarbeit.

**Schlagwörter:** Schichtarbeit, Arbeitszeit, Pendeln, kindliches Wohlbefinden, elterliches Wohlbefinden.

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