

Summary

Introduction

Balancing childcare responsibilities with the demands of paid employment is challenging for parents, especially mothers (Schober, 2013). The work-family conflict that ensues can negatively impact parents' satisfaction with life (Budig et al., 2016). Recognising these patterns, scholars and the British government have proposed the adoption of flexible working arrangements as one means to fulfil both work and non-work demands simultaneously and achieve work-life balance, which contributes to high life satisfaction levels (House of Commons, 2018). This article tests whether the adoption of flexible working arrangements benefits parents' life satisfaction levels. It focuses on flexitime and teleworking, two flexible arrangements that remain largely unexplored by prior research regarding the impact they produce on individuals' life trajectories. Moreover, this study further adds to the existing literature by testing for the first time whether the inflexible partners' life satisfaction is impacted by flexible partners' use of flexitime or teleworking in heterosexual families.

Existing literature does not establish whether adopting either flexitime or teleworking has a positive association with high life satisfaction levels among parents. On the one hand, the autonomy that workplace and work hour flexibility grant their users is linked with the ability to undertake time inflexible domestic tasks and low levels of commuting related stress, both of which may positively influence life satisfaction (Song & Gao, 2019). Contrastingly, users of flexibility are also likely to experience discriminatory attitudes from employers, manifested in lower career advancement opportunities and pay rises for the former (Chung, 2018). This pattern may produce deleterious consequences for flexible workers' wellbeing.

Some prior studies show that mothers are more likely to experience these consequences than fathers, given differences in the purpose behind men and women's uptake of flexible working arrangements (Lott and Chung, 2016). Women use flexitime and teleworking to engage with childcare, while men's use of these arrangements is typically associated with career advancement through working overtime (Chung & Horst, 2018). Thus, employers may view flexibly working women negatively while flexibly working men in a positive light when measuring work commitment. Nevertheless, an opposing perspective holds that their ability to conform to gender role expectations and finish domestic tasks whilst sustaining paid work made possible through flexible working increases mothers' life satisfaction. On the contrary, the work intensification that flexibly working fathers are likely to experience may increase their stress levels, decrease their leisure time, and reduce their satisfaction with life (Chandola et al., 2019). Overall, empirical findings of the gendered impact of flexitime and teleworking on parents' life satisfaction are mixed, creating the need for further exploration, which this paper aims to fulfil.

In terms of cross-partner effects, previous studies ranging from over two decades established that husbands' employment patterns can impact wives' life trajectories and vice versa (Killewald, 2013; Lundberg and Rose, 2000; Lyonette and Crompton, 2014; Killewald and Garcia-Mangano, 2016; Bredtmann et al., 2017). However, these studies have not explored how one partner's use of flexitime and teleworking can influence the other partner's life satisfaction levels. Acknowledging these mechanisms, my research intends to examine cross-partner effects of the use of flexitime and teleworking on levels of parental life satisfaction.

Moreover, previous quantitative research on the association between the use of flexitime and teleworking and life satisfaction has used cross-sectional approaches to analyses. Thus, they have allowed for selection biases and omitted variable biases to impact their findings. Within the broader field of flexible working research, to date, only one empirical study, using German data, has analysed the effects of individual and cross-partner use of flexible working arrangements on wages (Langner, 2017).

In this article, making mothers and fathers as my unit of analysis, I aim to address all the above mentioned empirical and methodological gaps in the literature surrounding the association between

flexitime and teleworking and life satisfaction. I will exploit UK household data from Understanding Society to answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the association between the use of flexitime and teleworking on the life satisfaction levels of mothers and fathers who use it?
- (2) What is the association between one partner's use of flexitime and teleworking and the other partner's life satisfaction levels? Does the nature of this association differ by gender?

Theoretical Background

Integral to explicating the association between the use of flexitime/teleworking and parents' life satisfaction is Karasek and Theorell's (1992) demand-control-support (DCS) model. The model implies that the autonomy over schedules and place of work, granted by flexitime and teleworking, can reduce parents' work-life conflict by enabling them to balance work and non-work demands (Laurijssen & Glorieux, 2013). The ability to amend their start and finish times or working a compressed week allows mothers to perform time-inflexible tasks while participating in the labour market. Similarly, working from home also gives mothers the ability to perform childcare responsibilities while simultaneously maintaining employment (Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). For fathers, both flexitime and teleworking foster participation within domestic labour, enabling them to balance work and home domains. Many scholars argue that work-life balance plays a crucial role in determining individuals' wellbeing, especially parents who experience a heavier burden of domestic responsibilities than non-parents (Hokke et al., 2020; Desrochers et al., 2012). Thus, balancing becomes crucial and acts as a critical component in determining parental life satisfaction levels. The flexibility enactment theory (Kossek et al., 2005) extends the implications of the DCS model to reassert that individuals' control over their temporal and physical boundaries between work and home domains allows them to achieve a work-life balance and experience high levels of life satisfaction (Lin et al. 2015). Thus parental life satisfaction is likely to be correlated with parents' use of flexitime and teleworking.

While theoretical matter does not directly engage with the association between cross-partner use of flexible working and life satisfaction, it does underpin some key aspects in understanding the former. Mothers' use of flexitime and teleworking is believed to benefit fathers in several ways; firstly, mothers are then likely to take up more domestic responsibilities, allowing fathers to invest more time in the workplace and be rewarded by wage premiums, giving them greater bargaining power (Maume, 2015). Secondly, mothers' greater uptake of domestic tasks, which is believed to accompany flexible working, may also enable fathers to enjoy more leisure time (Killewald, 2013). Thirdly, an improved work-life balance which flexitime and teleworking are believed to cultivate, can positively impact mothers' outlook towards life, which may extend to their partners (Clark et al., 2019). All these benefits in their individual capacity or conflated are believed to be positively associated with fathers' life satisfaction.

In contrast, derivations from existing theoretical content indicate that fathers' use of flexitime and teleworking can negatively correlate with mothers' life satisfaction levels. It is noted that fathers' motive behind using flexible working arrangements is to increase their income by extending their work sphere. As a result, the burden of domestic responsibilities on mothers' shoulders amplifies (Pollmann-Schult, 2014), perpetuating stress and frustration (Schieman et al., 2018). Additionally, mothers may need to decrease their engagement with the labour market, which would produce disadvantageous outcomes for their income and careers (Cha, 2010). Subsequently, it is implied that in a household where fathers use flexitime and teleworking, mothers may experience low levels of life satisfaction (Platt & Polavieja, 2016).

Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned theoretical underpinnings, the four key hypotheses are:

- 1.) *H1: Mothers' use of flexitime and teleworking is positively associated with their life satisfaction levels*
- 2.) *H2: Fathers' use of flexitime and teleworking is negatively associated with their life satisfaction levels*

- 3.) *H3: Within a household, mothers' use of flexitime and teleworking is positively associated with fathers' life satisfaction.*
- 4.) *H4: Within a household, fathers' use of flexitime and teleworking is negatively associated with mothers' life satisfaction.*

Data

This article uses data from Understanding Society, an ongoing panel study, started in 2009, which interviews around 40,000 British households annually to explore economic and social changes in Britain at societal, household and individual levels. The study contains information on the employment patterns of individuals and married/cohabitating partners, which is necessary for my analysis. Data detailing the availability and use of flexibility by individuals is present in alternate waves (2, 4, 6, 8, 10) of Understanding Society. The longitudinal nature of the study allows researchers to explore within-individual changes over the life course and extract retrospective data about individuals' life patterns, both of which lie at the centre of my empirical framework.

The dependent variable in my analysis is life satisfaction level, which is measured by a five-category variable, ranging from 1 being "Very Dissatisfied" and 5 being "Very Satisfied". My two main independent variables are the use of flexitime and the use of teleworking, both of which are binary. Additionally, I also add some relevant control variables, which improves the robustness of my analysis.

Analytical Strategy

The empirical analysis comprises two main parts, cross-sectional analyses that use ordered logit regression models and longitudinal analyses that use fixed effects ordered logit models. My choice of models is driven by the ordinal structure of my dependent variable, life satisfaction.

1.) Cross-sectional Analysis

I carry out cross-sectional analyses on the pooled sample from waves 6, 8 and 10 from the Understanding Society dataset (2014-15 – 2018-19) using ordered logit regression (also known as cumulative probability models). The first model examines the overall and gender-specific association between the mothers' and fathers' use of flexitime and teleworking and their life satisfaction levels after holding other factors constant. The second model examines the association between spousal use of flexitime and teleworking and the life satisfaction level of inflexible mothers and fathers, controlling for both flexible and inflexible partners' characteristics. As this part is cross-sectional, I use survey weights to account for survey design, unequal probabilities of selection and missing responses. Clustered robust standard errors are used, which account for the clustering of units (Abadie et al., 2017).

2.) Longitudinal Analysis

For my third and fourth model, I employ fixed effect ordered logit analyses using data from waves 2 (2010/11) – 10 (2018/19) of the Understanding Society dataset. These models allow me to estimate the effect that their own or their spouse's/partner's transition from not using flexitime/teleworking to using flexitime/teleworking has on an individual's life satisfaction level (Berge and Houle, 2016). As in fixed-effects models, each individual serves as his or her own control, confounding effects arising from unobserved time-constant variables relating to both the independent and dependent variables, such as religiosity, lifestyle preferences and family values, are removed (Zhou and Kan, 2018). Thus, taking this analytical approach lowers the vulnerability of my models to omitted-variable bias and selection bias, creating great confidence in the robustness of conclusions (Zhou and Kan, 2018). Using fixed-effects ordered logit analyses, the third model in this article evaluates the odds of reporting higher life satisfaction levels following mothers' and fathers' transition from using flexitime or teleworking to using flexitime or teleworking. The fourth model analyses inflexible mothers' and fathers' life satisfaction following their spouse's/partner's uptake of flexitime or teleworking.

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