The Spectre Of Overwork: An Analysis Of Trends Between 1974 And 1997 Using Australian Time-Use Diaries

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Abstract

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new politics of working time. Industrial relations specialists, welfare agencies and others have raised the idea that increasing levels of overwork and burgeoning levels of unemployment are two sides of the same coin. There have also been concerns that changes in working hours have constrained employees' ability to participate in family and community life. Three theoretical perspectives – economics, industrial relations and feminism – have developed a common interest in issues such as the maldistribution of work, the decline in leisure and the balance between working life and private life. This article uses four Australian time use surveys conducted in 1974, 1987, 1992, and 1997 to examine three dimensions of possible change in working hours: (1) the average length of the working day; (2) the distribution of working hours amongst persons; and (3) the amount of time spent at work during nonstandard hours. These time use surveys provide a unique window for looking into changes in working life in Australia over the last quarter of a century, a period of major upheaval in Australian society. Analysis of these surveys shows that the average number of hours that Australians supply to the labour market has not changed markedly between 1974 and 1997. However, there has been a significant redistribution of paid work from men to women, thus creating more dual-earner households. There has also been a substantial collapse in the dominance of standard working hours, while the amount of time workers spend at work during nonstandard hours appears to have increased.

The politics of working time would appear to have been the distinctive industrial issue of the 1990s and beyond. Changes to the organisation of working hours have been promoted as the solution to unemployment, towards reconciling career and private life, and to maintaining or enhancing the quality of life in general (Zuzanek and Veal, 1999). The politics of working time displaces the issue of occupational health and safety as a rallying focus in contemporary workplaces. Reflecting on the transformation of industrial relations

during the 1980s and 1990s, the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) asserts that the restructuring of hours of work is the 'major change which was underway' during that time (1999: 125). Somewhat more boldly, the German sociologist, Martin Garhammer, claims that the scarcity of free time has replaced hunger and the scarcity of food as 'a major social concern' in modern societies (1999: 327).

Like tributaries to river, a number of different theoretical sources have contributed to the stream of concern about working hours. For some decades now, there has been a recurrent anxiety that contemporary women have become overburdened. This has led many to ask whether promoting opportunities for the advancement of women has resulted, perversely, in a double burden, adding responsibility for providing income to women's as yet undiminished family responsibilities (Hochschild, 1989). Generally, this is the issue lying behind most of the discussion of the balance between *work and family*.

As well, levels of unemployment have remained stubbornly high in most industrialised countries, especially in Western Europe, while female employment has grown faster than male employment. At the same time, the fastest growing sector of the economy has been the service sector, retail trading hours have been extended (see Donaldson, 1996), and employment growth has been disproportionately concentrated in casual and part-time jobs (OECD, 1994). The labour movement worldwide has been coming to terms with the casualisation of the employed workforce and its implications for industrial bargaining and the regulation of working conditions, including working hours. At the core of the claim that the workforce has become more casualised is the idea that employment has become more insecure (Campbell, 1997; Standing, 1997). Growing insecurity of employment is also believed to lie behind the trend to very long hours of work ('overwork') among full-time employees (ACCIRT, 1999: 112). The phrase '*maldistribution of work*' is often used to capture this aspect of overwork.

The publication of Juliet Schor's *The Overworked American* in 1991 revived an interest in the link between economic progress and leisure time in advanced societies. Increasing prosperity should mean increasing freedom from drudgery. Explicitly or implicitly, this has been the view of thinkers at both extremes of the political spectrum, from Hayek to Marx. The fact that, on the contrary, 'economic progress' has resulted in reduced leisure has caused ripples of alarm. '*The decline of leisure*' is the expression most associated with this apparently perverse development.

The Decline In Leisure – All Work And No Play?

Perhaps the strongest indication that time pressure is increasing is given by the increasing proportion of the population reporting the feeling of being short of time. Starting in 1965, the U.S. time use researcher John P. Robinson and his collaborators have been asking respondents: 'Would you say you always feel rushed, even to do the things you have to do, only sometimes feel rushed, or almost never feel rushed?' The proportion of 18- to 64-year-olds who report always feeling rushed rises from 24 per cent in 1965 to 28 per cent in 1975 and 35 per cent in 1985, reaches its peak of 38 per cent in 1992, then declines slightly in 1995 (Robinson and Godbey, 1997: 231).

Unfortunately there has been no comparable sequence of measures in Australia. However, in 1974, as part of the Federal government's policy of decentralisation, the Cities Commission funded a survey designed to compare the quality of life in a new emerging regional centre to life in an established metropolis. As part of the investigation, respondents where asked to rate themselves on a scale of perceived time pressure. As well, in 1997 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released the first national data on how Australians felt about the amount of time available to them. The results of these two surveys of prime working-age (25-54 years) populations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Feelings Of Time Pressure Among Metropolitan Prime Working-Age Australians (25-54 years)*

1974	Melbourne	
	Men (N=211) %	Women (N=251) %
Always feel rushed	28.0	23.9
Only sometimes feel rushed	52.1	59.8
Almost never feel rushed	19.9	16.3

1997	Metropolitan Australia	
	Men (N=1099) %	Women (N=1268) %
Always feels rushed or pressed for time	13.3	17.5
Often feels rushed or pressed for time	31.7	36.1
Sometimes feels rushed or pressed for time	38.7	34.2
Rarely feels rushed or pressed for time	13.7	10.4
Never feels rushed or pressed for time	2.6	1.7

Sources: Cities Commission Time Use Survey, 1974; ABS Time Use Survey, 1997.

* Sample estimates, percentages calculated after omitting the small numbers of men and women who failed to respond.

Comparison of the two panels in Table 1 is difficult. There were only three alternatives in 1974 but five in 1997, and it is well known that respondents are reluctant to put themselves in the extreme categories (Miller, 1977). (This pattern holds true in the Table 1). In 1974 the majority of respondents chose the middle category ('only sometimes feel rushed'), avoiding the extreme categories on either side. In 1997 only a third of the respondents chose the middle category, while roughly one half selected the next-to-extreme categories

('often feels rushed or pressed for time' and 'rarely feels rushed or pressed for time'), with a heavy preponderance indicating 'often feels rushed or pressed for time'. Should these lower proportions of respondents placing themselves in the middle of a scale of perceived time pressure (and the high proportions indicating higher levels of time pressure) in the later survey be taken as evidence of an increased sense of time pressure or of the greater range of alternative categories to choose from?

Neither is the wording of the questions strictly comparable across the two surveys. For example, would those who placed themselves in the 'only sometimes feel rushed' category of the three-category scheme, place themselves in the 'sometimes feels rushed' or 'often feels rushed' (or perhaps even the 'rarely feels rushed') category of the five-category scheme?

Given these qualifications, perhaps the emphasis needs to shift from the growing proportions of metropolitan prime working-age Australians who feel more pressured to the dwindling proportions who feel relatively free of time pressure. Not only are the proportions in the extreme free-of-time-pressure categories much lower in 1997 (falling from roughly one in six to one in 30 for men, and to almost one in 60 for women), but the proportions in all categories below the mid-point are also lower in the most recent survey. This upside-down indicator of increased feelings of time pressure is especially clear among prime working-age women. In 1974, 17 per cent of women in this age category reported that they 'almost never feel rushed', whereas by 1997 the proportion who felt they had escaped time pressure, who 'rarely' or 'never' felt rushed, had fallen to 13 per cent.

Further information on the extent and significance of the experience of time pressure comes from the Women's Health Australia (WHA) project, which began in 1996. In the first wave of this large longitudinal study of women's health, approximately 60 per cent of young and mid-age respondents said they had experienced feeling pressured for time 'every day' or 'often' (more than once a week). Less than 20 per cent reported feeling relatively free from pressures of time (feeling pressured at infrequent intervals: 'monthly or never'). The survey showed an inverse relationship between feeling 'rushed, pressured, or too busy' and health assessment, so that the more 'rushed' an individual felt, the greater the likelihood that she would assess her health as poor. Among the mid-age cohort of Australian women, there was tendency for increasing reports of a feeling of 'constant tiredness' as hours of paid work increased.

A second wave of data was collected in 1998 for the mid-age cohort, and in the year 2000 for the younger age-cohort. To disentangle the effects of ageing from historical trends in the experience of time pressure, age was held constant and time pressure scores for the two periods were compared. Young-age women, whether or not they were employed (and net of the effects of ageing and presumably acquiring more adult responsibilities), rated themselves as facing very slightly less time pressure in 2000 compared to 1996. Among the mid-age women, however, perceived time pressure increased very slightly between 1996 and 1998, though less clearly among employed women.

Summarising the findings from these early waves of the WHA project, it is reasonable to conclude that time pressure is a widespread experience amongst Australian women, that it is associated with poorer health outcomes, and that it has not substantially diminished over the last few years.

Less Play? Trends In Leisure Time

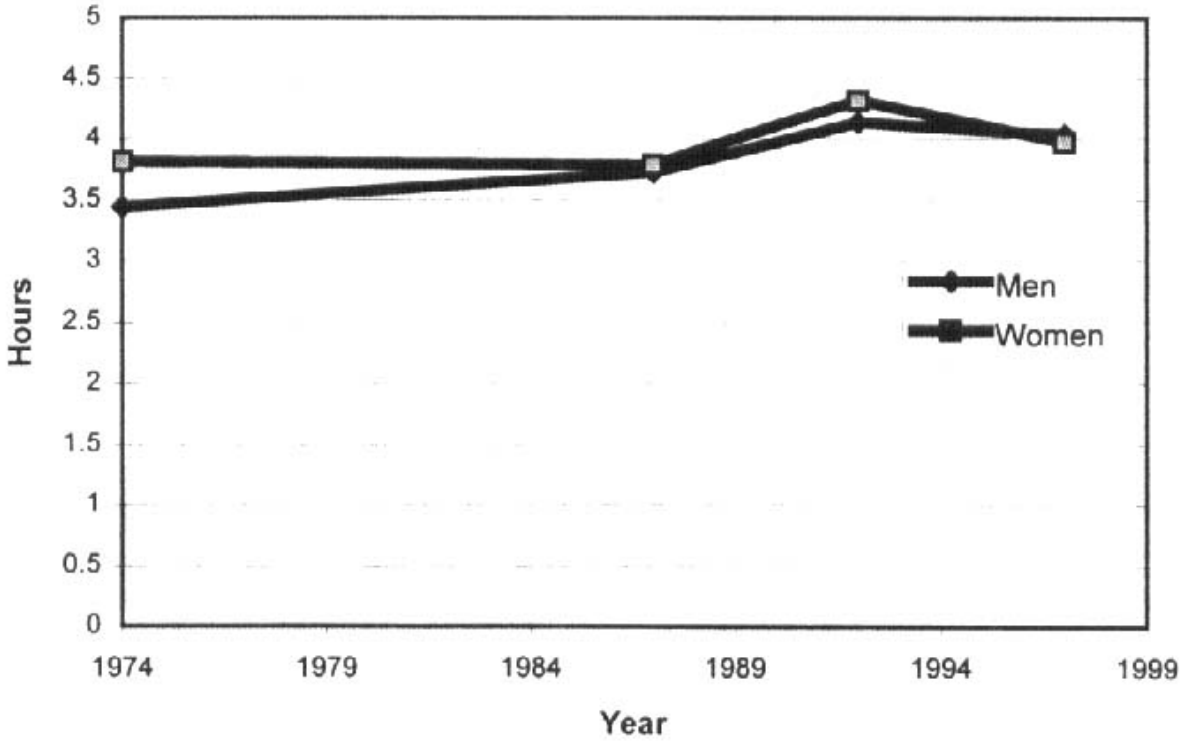
The rise in perceptions of time pressure goes some way towards explaining the enthusiastic reception given Juliet Schor's ideas. Self-rated time pressure is significantly associated with reduced hours of leisure. Data from time-diaries (the 1997 Time Use Survey) – the most direct and reliable method of measuring leisure time – reveal large differences in leisure according to level of time pressure. Metropolitan prime working-age Australians who reported that they 'never felt rushed or pressed for time' typically spent more than five hours a weekday in leisure pursuits, while those reporting 'always feels rushed or pressed for time' spent only three and a half hours in weekday leisure activities, about 40 per cent less than those reporting no perceived time pressure.

However, Schor's thesis that escalating hours of work cause a decline in leisure has provoked a spirited reaction among scholars of leisure. Paradoxically, given the increase in reported levels of time pressure since 1965, Robinson and Godbey have produced evidence contradicting any claim that the quantity of free time available to people in the United States has declined during this period (1997: 131-3). A similar finding has been replicated in 36 surveys across 19 separate countries, including Australia (Bittman, 1999; see also Gershuny, 2000 & 1992).

An analysis of 128,931 working-age people, drawn from the pooled Multinational Time Use database (and controlling for changes in employment status, age, marital status and children), shows that more free time became steadily available to both men and women from 1961 to 1983. It diminished in the 1980s, but then recovered to resume a historical pattern of increase. Across the 19 countries, the net increase in free time between the early 1960s and the early 1990s was more than seven hours per week for women and five and a half hours for men (Bittman, 1999: 372).

Among the metropolitan prime working-age male population in Australia between 1974 and 1997, as shown in Figure 1, the mean hours of weekday leisure increased by about half an hour per week. Among comparable females, the mean weekday leisure increased by about ten minutes. This trend towards increased leisure holds regardless of employment status. Employed women spent more time in leisure pursuits in 1997 than they did in 1974, even though the increase is smaller than in the case of non-employed women. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, in aggregate, the time available for leisure among the working-age population is indeed increasing, and hence that Schor's claim about the perverse effects of economic progress on time available for leisure receives no support from the best available evidence.

Figure 1: Mean Hours Of Weekday Leisure (metropolitan prime working-age Australians)



Source: Cities Commission Time Use Survey, 1975; ABS Time Use Survey, 1987, 1992, 1997.

More Work? Change In The Average Weekly Hours Of (Paid) Work

Nor is it clear, as Schor has also argued, that average working hours have increased in the last quarter of this century. Even those sympathetic to Schor's views have acknowledged this.

> [T]he average length of the work week does not appear to have changed appreciably in recent decades ... the American worker is putting in about the same amount of time on the job as did his or her counterpart thirty years ago. American men are working about 42 or 43 hours per week for pay, while American women are working about 36 or 37 hours per week on the job (Jacobs and Gerson, 1998: 443).

Similarly, Iain Campbell (2001) has noted that, at the most aggregated level, the average actual hours of all employed persons in Australia has remained stable at around 35 hours per week since 1982.

Here we investigate this issue using information from four separate time-use surveys, conducted in 1974, 1987, 1992 and 1997. Since respondents noted the particular activities they were doing at each time of day, the time-diary data show the length of the working day down to the nearest five minutes. Although each respondent keeps a diary only for one or two days, care is taken to cover all the days of the week by allocating the same number of diaries for each day. By assuming that the paid work-time respondents record in their diaries is representative of the time allocation behaviour of the whole population on that day, it is possible to estimate the average workweek accurately.

Results from time-diary measurement of working hours differ systematically from those gathered from labour force surveys. In the latter, the standard questions (termed 'stylised') ask respondents for estimates of weekly hours of employment. Typically respondents are asked: 'How many hours did you work last week?' or 'How many hours do you usually work in a week?' In comparison with these stylised estimates, working hours derived from time-diary records (including diaries kept for a whole week) are significantly lower. Those reporting long hours of work in their stylised estimates record considerably fewer hours in their diaries, a tendency that is particularly pronounced among the self-employed. Time-diaries also reveal a previously hidden proportion of people working a very small number of hours per week; hence the diaries of the nominally unemployed reveal significant hours of work (Robinson and Bostrom, 1994; Robinson and Gershuny, 1994; Niemi, 1993).

Our time-diary estimates for the four survey years are shown in Table 2 below. The weighted mean of around 27 hours a week looks unfamiliar because is a per capita average across all persons. It includes those respondents who did no paid work and those classified as 'not in the labour force' – categories of persons omitted from headline labour force survey results. As Jonathon Gershuny suggests, it represents one segment of 'society's great week', that proportion of the 168 hours of any week that is allocated to labour market activities (2000: 24). Significantly the mean length of the working week for persons has barely changed over the 23-year period covered by these surveys. The standard errors associated with the means each year show that no two means could be statistically judged to be significantly different from each other. The accumulated wisdom of 50 years of statistical theory leads us to conclude that the average workweek has remained stable for nearly a quarter of a century (as long as the sex of the workers is ignored).

However, this unchanging per capita average masks a dramatic redistribution of paid work between the sexes. The hours that prime-age women contribute to the labour market have significantly increased, while the contribution of prime-age men has significantly declined. Metropolitan prime working-age men's mean hours of paid work have fallen from more than 45 hours a week to less than 37 hours a week, a drop of 19 per cent. In contrast, metropolitan prime working-age women's mean hours of paid work have risen from a little over 12 hours per week to 19 hours per week, an increase of 55 per cent during the last quarter of the century. Australian society now relies more heavily on the labour market hours of women, and less on the contribution of men. It is as if much of the (paid) work has been transferred from men to women.

Table 2: Mean Length Of The Paid Workweek* Among Metropolitan Prime Working-Age Persons By Sex

	1974	1987	1992	1997
Men	45.20	37.28	36.24	36.49
	(1.62)†	(1.01)	(0.63)	(0.63)
Women	12.30	17.17	17.97	19.01
	(1.23)	(0.84)	(0.50)	(0.51)
Persons	27.29	27.25	27.07	27.62
	(1.25)	(0.70)	(0.42)	(0.42)

Source: Cities Commission Time Use Survey, 1975; ABS Time Use Survey, 1974, 1987, 1992, 1997.

* These estimates are based on a narrow definition of time spent in paid work, excluding breaks at work, and travel to and from work.

† Standard error of the mean

The Maldistribution Of Work – Insecurity And The Growth Of Overwork

Of course, as others have noted (ABS, 1999; ACIRRT, 1999; Campbell, 2001), the stability of average working time says nothing about the dispersion of working hours. In the absence of a trend toward longer average hours of work, debate has shifted to issues connected with the polarisation of working hours, that is, very long hours, or overwork, for some, and few or no hours for others.

While other commentators have concentrated on the distribution of 'stylised' weekly hours of (paid) work, this paper relies on the more precise time-diary evidence that looks at daily hours of work. This means that many of the ways of presenting the analysis may be unfamiliar, because they differ from conventional analyses of the workweek. For example, information about the hours a respondent spends in paid work on one particular day does not tell us what they do on any other day of the week. A part-time worker and a full-time worker might both work eight hours on one day, but the full-timer works another eight hours on the next day as well, while the part-timer does no work on that day. This information can be slightly unsettling because the conventional discourse about part-time work and full-time work is based on a weekly time-scale, with a 35-hour cut-off in Australia. It should be remembered, however, that working time can be measured by daily hours, weekly hours, annual hours, or even as total hours over the whole of a working life. Focus on weekly hours is merely an arbitrary convention adopted for convenience. Although we also have some data about respondents' workweeks, this paper presents the analysis in terms of daily hours of work and not weekly hours of work in order to exploit the advantages of time-diary data.

The Growth Of Zero Work Hours

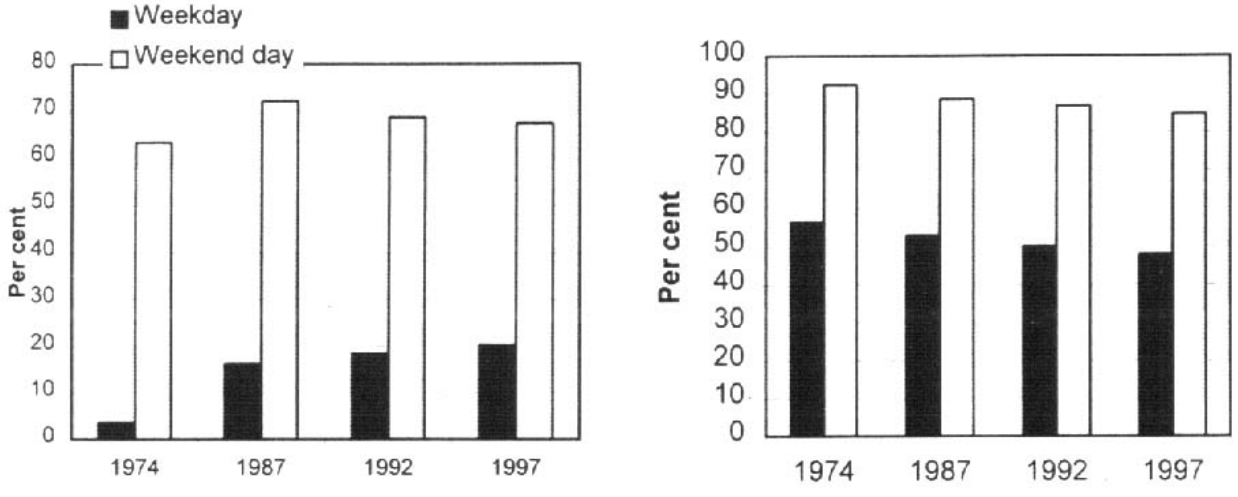
If there has been a trend towards the polarisation of working hours, there should be a growing proportion of people at each extreme – those working zero hours and those with very long hours of work. By examining the proportion of people recording that they did no work on a particular day, it is possible to get some indication of changes in the rate of employment associated with the polarisation (or maldistribution) of work. It should be noted that there are two classes of people with no record of paid work on the day they kept their diary – (1) workers who filled out their diary on one of their days off, and (2) those who are not in paid employment at all, that is, unemployed persons or persons who are not in the labour force. Moreover, by examining the proportion of people recording that they did no work on a weekday or on a weekend day, it is possible to get some indication of displacement towards weekend work that might be associated with the extended retail hours of the 7/24 society (Donaldson, 1996).

The proportion of the metropolitan prime working-age population who recorded zero time in paid work provides some support for the polarisation of work thesis. Figure 2 shows that the proportion of men who weren't engaged in any paid work on a weekday rose fivefold, from roughly 4 per cent in 1974 to 20 per cent in 1997. At the same time the proportion of men doing no (paid) work on a weekend day also rose slightly (from 63 per cent to 67 per cent) over the same period. The most plausible interpretation of this pattern is that there has been a substantial fall in the rate of employment of metropolitan prime working-age men over the last quarter of a century. This conclusion also receives direct support from the surveys. All four surveys included a questionnaire that asked respondents about their employment status. In the 1974 survey the proportion of metropolitan prime-age men who were in employment approached 100 per cent. By 1997 the proportion not employed had increased to more than 10 per cent.

The trend for women over last quarter century, however, is one of increasing labour market participation. Over the period, the proportion of women with zero minutes of paid work in their diaries on either weekdays or weekends has declined. Compared to 1974, 9 per cent more metropolitan prime-age women in 1997 reported doing some work on a weekday. In a result that shows the demand for female workers in the 7/24 world of the new service economy, 8 per cent more women in 1997 than in 1974 also reported working on a weekend day. This is consistent with the survey data on women's employment status. The questionnaire data shows that employment over this period grew steadily, by about 20 per cent, among metropolitan prime working-age women, thus defying labour market cycles.

Traditionally the study of labour market behaviour has been the study of the behaviour of men. If one restricts oneself to these traditional concerns, one half of the maldistribution of (paid) work thesis – the growing proportions excluded from work – has been affirmed by this analysis of the time-diary data. The experience of Australian women, however, has been one of greater inclusion. They have experienced the opposite of a growing exclusion from the labour market.

Figure 2: Proportion of metropolitan prime working-age population with zero time in paid work by type of day - 1974-1997



Men

Women

Source: Cities Commission Time Use Survey, 1975; ABS Time Use Survey, 1987, 1992, 1997.

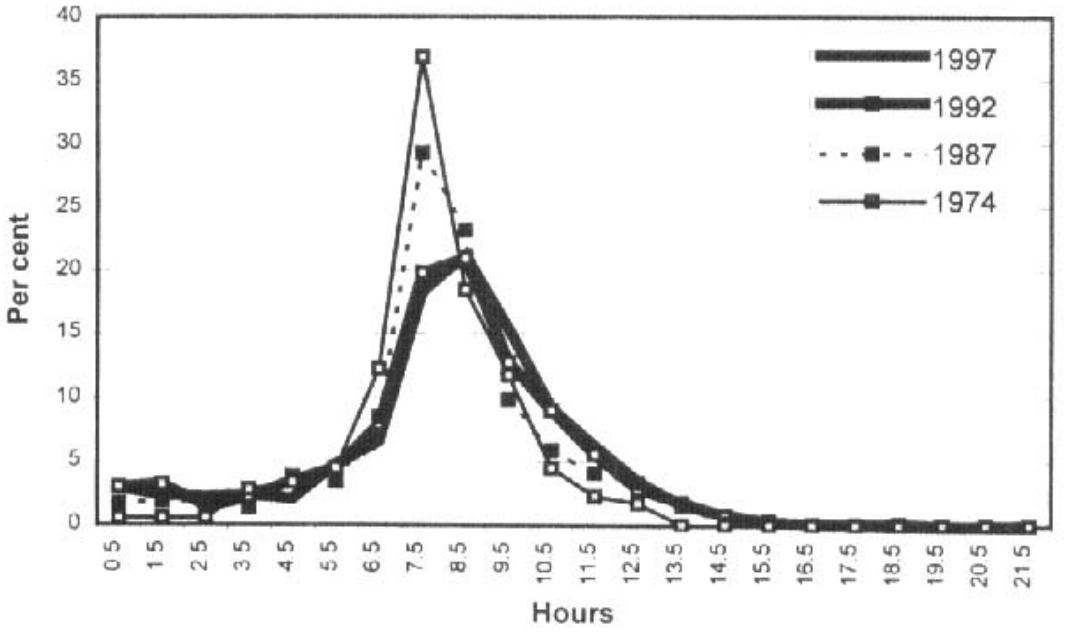
But what about the other half of the maldistribution of work thesis – the overly long hours (overwork) among those who have paid employment? For an answer to this question it necessary to examine the distribution of daily hours of work among those with positive (non-zero) hours of work in their time-diaries. It is to this form of analysis that we now turn.

Overwork, Trends In The Daily Rhythm Of Days Spent In Paid Employment

A study of those diaries of prime-age metropolitan men where some time in paid work was recorded does indeed show that their working days have become longer and less standard. Figure 3 shows the distribution of daily hours for each of the survey years. The increasing dispersion of working hours over this period is evident as a flattened peak and increased proportion in the tails of the distribution in the 1990s compared with earlier decades. There is also a discernible shift in each successive distribution towards the right hand side of the diagram, indicating a progressive tendency towards longer working days. In 1974, working hours were arranged relatively tightly around a peak in the range of seven to nine hours a day – more than 58 per cent of the observations fall within this narrow range, with a marked preponderance of working days of less than eight hours. In 1997, by contrast, fewer than 40 per cent of working days are between seven and nine hours in length, and there is a preponderance of working days of eight hours or more. In 1997 more than a third of the working days of this group lasted longer than nine hours, more than one in five male metropolitan prime-age workers (with non-zero hours of paid work) worked more than 10 hours a day, and one in eight worked longer than 11 hours a day. The proportions of workers with such long working days were markedly lower in 1974. In the case of 11-hour days, for example, fewer than one in 18 worked this long.

The distribution of daily hours of paid work among female metropolitan prime-age workers (with non-zero hours of paid work) has also undergone important changes over the last quarter of a century (see Figure 4). The pattern of change for women is one of progressive movement away from a short working day (significantly involving hours of work resembling the hours of the school day) towards more 'standard' daily hours. In 1974 more than half of these women workers worked less than six hours per day. By 1997 less than a third worked less than six hours a day, and more than half worked more than the seven hours of the supposedly typical working day (9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with one hour break for lunch). In the past, very long hours of daily work have been uncommon among women, but this situation is changing fairly rapidly. In the 1974 sample, for example, not one metropolitan prime-age woman (with non-zero hours of paid work) worked longer than nine hours a day, while in 1997 one-sixth of the women in this category had a working day of longer than nine hours. A striking finding is that the working days of women in this group who describe themselves as working part-time are also getting perceptibly longer.

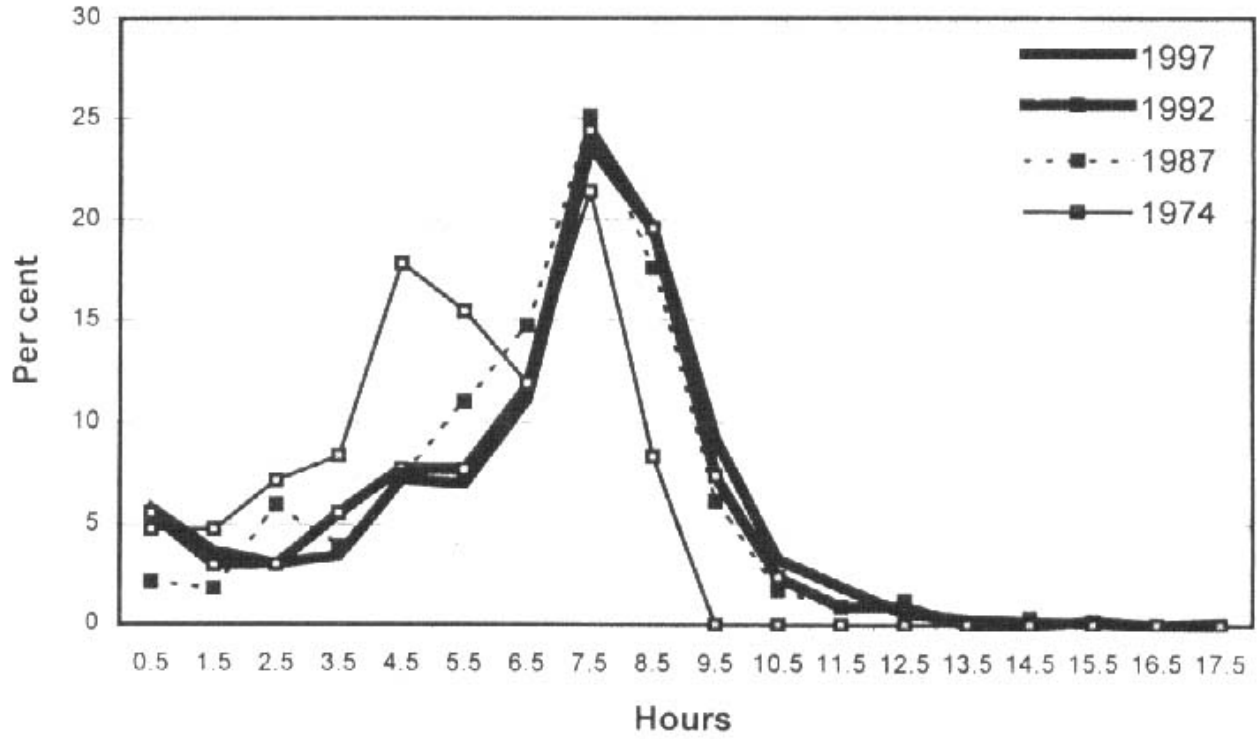
Figure 3: Length Of The Working Day (metropolitan male prime-age workers with non-zero hours of paid work)



Source: Cities Commission Time Use Survey, 1975; ABS Time Use Survey, 1987, 1992, 1997.

* Diaries with no record of paid work on the day the diary was collected are excluded from the diagrams.

Figure 4: Length Of The Working Day (metropolitan female prime-age workers with non-zero hours of paid work)



Source: Cities Commission Time Use Survey, 1975, ABS Time Use Survey, 1987, 1992, 1997
* Diaries with no record of paid work on the day the diary was collected are excluded from the diagrams.

The Balance Between Working Life And Private Life

A valuable feature of the diaries is the information they provide about what time of day an activity takes place. This allows us to analyse the prevalence of unsociable working hours, that is, the amount of work that takes place outside the hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. Since 1974, the average number of unsociable working hours worked by prime-age metropolitan workers has grown by a little over two hours per week for men and almost three hours per week for women. Our data indicate both that a higher proportion of people now work on Saturday or Sunday than was the case in 1974, and that this is especially true for women.

Many factors can influence the number of hours worked at unsociable times. One of these is occupation. If some occupations, such as managers or professionals, typically involve working at unusual hours, then a progressive increase in these occupations

would cause the average amount of unsociable hours worked to grow over time. Other factors are sex, age, marital status, number and age of children, household type, educational attainment, migration status, geographical location and day of the week.

An Ordinary Least Squares regression equation was used to test whether there was any change in the quantity of unsociable work hours independent of the change in the factors mentioned above. (The results are shown in Appendix 1). The procedure confirmed that education, occupation, being young, being a mature worker, being a lone adult (or in a share household), country of birth, and age and numbers of children all have significant effects on the amount of work undertaken at sociable hours. However, when these factors were held constant, a significant increase in the time worked during unsociable hours (two and a half hours per week for men and one hour for women) was still evident in the period leading up to 1997.

Household Work-Family Pressures

As Jacobs and Gerson (1998; 2001) have pointed out, what happens to individuals' average hours of work, especially those of employed individuals, is not the same as what happens to households. For example, more women entering the labour force as part-time workers can actually lower employed women's average weekly hours of work, if we follow the conventional methods of calculating these things. But because women's involvement in paid work means the formation of many more dual-earner households, it extends the scope of time pressure in two distinct ways. First, it means that households are supplying more working hours to the labour market than ever before, even though the employed woman's hours might have decreased. Second, as feminists have been pointing out for decades (Oakley, 1974), when the responsibility for earning is added to continuing responsibilities for the unpaid work of 'homemaking' and child-rearing, it can place unprecedented pressure upon women, especially in dual-career households.

A great advantage of the time-use surveys conducted by the ABS is that they collect diaries from every adult in the household. By combining the information contained in the diaries of adult household members, it is possible to analyse the total amount of labour households allocate to both market and (unpaid) non-market work. Table 3 shows that the average hours supplied to the labour market has indeed increased substantially for couple households where the reference person is younger than 55 years of age. The average time allocated to market work by the prime-age couples has risen from close to 50 hours per week to nearer to 60 hours per week, increasing by up to 15 per cent. However, among older couples it actually declined.

Table 4 shows that households utilising a traditional division of labour are no longer the predominant form of couple household. They have been displaced by dual-career families, with both husband and wife in full-time work. The proportion of households where the husband works full-time and the wife part-time has increased modestly, but not as much as those households where the husband is not in full-time paid employment.

Table 3: Mean Combined Weekly Hours Of Paid Work Among Metropolitan Married Or De Facto Couples (with and without children)

Age group*	1987	1992	1997
25 to 39 years	50.50	56.72	56.37
40 to 54 years	56.08	54.87	58.03
55 to 64 years	36.45	32.43	30.48
65 years or more	7.35	5.58	2.95

Sources: ABS Time Use Surveys, 1987, 1992, 1997.

* Based on the age of the reference person.

Table 4: Employment Status Amongst Prime-Age*, Metropolitan Married Or De Facto Couples (%)

	1987	1992	1997
Husband full-time, wife full-time	25.5	29.8	32.5
Husband full-time, wife part-time	27.4	30.6	29.9
Husband full-time, wife not employed	37.6	25.2	23.4
Husband not full-time	9.5	14.4	14.2
All couples	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS time Use Surveys 1987, 1992, 1997

* Based on the age of the reference person.

Has there been a trend over time towards reducing the burdens faced by dual-career households? Analysis of the time-diary data shows that little has changed over the last quarter century. The differences between household types have remained remarkably constant over the years. Between 1974 and 1997, dual-career couples spent around 137 hours per week in paid work and unpaid work. This was over 10 hours a week more than traditional couples, but only five hours a week more than couples where the husband worked full-time and the wife part-time. Dual-career households allocated more than 90 hours per week to market work and only around half this amount to unpaid work. In traditional families the emphasis was reversed, with about 50 hours per week being allocated to market work and 70 hours to unpaid work. Households where the husband is in full-time work and his partner does part-time market work come closest to an equal balance between paid and unpaid work, devoting a little under 70 hours to market work and around 60 hours to unpaid work (Bittman, 2001).

It is not that the pressures from either market or non-market work have been increasing over the years for dual-career families; it is simply that there are more dual-career families. It is not surprising that people living alone feel less time pressure than men or women with

partners, and that men and women with a pre-school age child report the highest levels of perceived time pressure (Bittman, 2001).

Twenty-Three Years Of Change To Australians' 'Great Day'

The typical time allocation of the dual-career household, with its drastically foreshortened average non-market time, does provide an important clue towards solving the mystery of how the (paid) working day could be getting longer, while at the same time there is a historical trend towards increasing leisure. Labour economists have tended to view the individual as choosing between (paid) working time and leisure. From the perspective of traditional labour economics, it follows that leisure time must necessarily diminish if (paid) working time increases. However, even labour economists have been forced to recognise that perhaps there is a triple choice between market work, non-market work and leisure. The tradition of time-use study assumes that time can be allocated between even more types of activities and that 'leisure' needs to be more precisely defined by distinguishing it from other activities, such as those associated with 'personal care' (sleeping, washing, dressing, grooming, eating and medical self-care). It is this more narrowly defined form of leisure, based in the time-use tradition, which has either been increasing or has remained undiminished for both men and women.

Australian women have been allocating more time to paid work without diminishing leisure time. This has been achieved by reducing the time devoted to domestic tasks (but not to the care of children) and, to a lesser degree, the time devoted to self-care. A major mechanism for this has been the outsourcing of domestic tasks. By substituting market-produced alternatives to home-produced meals, such as restaurant meals, take-away food, and almost-ready-to-eat goods from the supermarket, women have simultaneously reduced meal preparation time and shifted time spent eating across the boundary between self-care and leisure.

Over the twenty-three year period men have apparently broadly followed the standard trade-off between time spent in paid work and time spent in leisure pursuits (narrowly defined). This trade-off has often taken the form of involuntary allocation of extra time to leisure because no paid work has been available. It should be noted that more of men's 'great day' has also been devoted to domestic work, especially to more interaction with their children.

Conclusion

Having investigated the evidence accumulated by time-diary research since 1974, can we say that anxiety about the spectre of overwork and perceptions of ever increasing time pressure are justified? Is the work-family balance now more difficult to attain? Is the problem the maldistribution (polarisation) of working hours? Has economic progress produced a perverse result? On the basis of the evidence present here, I think we can answer 'yes' to all these questions, as long as we note that the story is different for women and for men. It is also important to note that the story for women has received less attention.

In the case of women, the anxiety over increasing time pressures is realistic because their increasing commitment to independent careers has increased their overall (paid and unpaid) working hours over the last quarter of a century. The increase in their paid working hours has been relatively evenly divided between employment in standard working hours and employment at unsociable hours. That they have managed to retain the same steady rate of time for leisure is attributable to their ability to reduce the time they have allocated to cooking and laundry and to squeeze the time devoted to sleeping, grooming and other self-care activities.

In the case of men, it is the polarisation of working time which provides a realistic basis for the anxiety about time pressure in the story about what happened and is continuing to happen to the once dominant figure of the working man. The maldistribution of (paid) working-hours theme is background music for the narrative of the changes in men's working life. Although the growth of unemployment and hidden unemployment among prime working-age men is real, so are the longer hours of those who are employed – hours that are, on average, greater than in earlier decades. Large proportions of employees are working very long days, and there has been a measurable increase in unsociable hours worked. At the same time, higher levels of unemployment have often taken the form of involuntary allocation of extra time to leisure because no paid work has been available. These findings are consistent with the idea that the maldistribution of work hours creates an insecurity that fuels overwork

The study of time-diaries provides support for those who argue that changes in working time are affecting the time available for other activities. Since the 1970s, working times have become more dispersed, with fewer days of work and higher rates of unemployment, but longer working days for those still in paid employment. Standard working hours are now less typical for both men and women workers, and work at unsociable times of the day has increased over the course of this period. The increasing sense of being under continual time pressure comes from the rate of formation of dual-career households and, therefore, from problems of balancing work and family responsibilities. The perception that life has become more rushed and that Australians of working-age are more pressed for time has an objective basis in the real increases in combined paid and unpaid workloads facing the typical household since this transition to a new family form over the last few decades.

Endnotes

1. The span of working life in Australia has become shorter. Compared with 30 years ago Australians are, on average, entering the workforce at a later age and many more are now retiring earlier. To avoid confounding trends facing the working-age population with changes in the span of working life and thereby to ensure more meaningful comparisons, the age-range of the population analysed in this paper is restricted to 25-54 years.
2. The WHA study began with a total of over 40,000 women in 1996. More detail about this survey is available at http://u2.newcastle.edu.au/wha/.

3. A score of 1 indicated the most extreme perceived time pressure, and a score of 5 indicated the perceived time pressure in the lowest possible category.
4. A consequence of the multi-cohort design is that only some ages were present in both waves. Among the young-age women it is only possible to compare women who were 22 or 23 years old in each wave, and among the mid-age women the only age at which comparisons could be made were in the range 47-50 years.
5. Given the large sample size, the differences in scores between the waves, regardless of the magnitude of the change, are statistically significant (Chi Square, P<.005).
6. In the 1997 *Time Use Survey*, the Australian Bureau of Statistics groups activities into ten major categories. For the purposes of this paper leisure is defined as the activities grouped under the categories of Social and Community Interaction, and Recreation and Leisure. These categories take in socialising, visiting entertainment and cultural venues, attendance at sporting events, religious celebrations, participation in community events, participating in sports and outdoor recreation, hobbies, games, crafts, reading, media consumption, hobby education, just relaxing, and the communication and travel associated with these activities (ABS, 1998). Traditionally, 'free time', by contrast, includes in addition to the major groups mentioned above educational activities and voluntary work (Robinson and Godbey, 1997: 12)
7. The Cities Commission conducted the 1974 survey, and unit record data is available through the Social Science Data Archive at the Australian National University. Information for 1987, 1992 and 1997 is derived from ABS confidential unit record files. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of the ABS.
8. Unpaid work includes indoor housework (cooking, cleaning and laundry), outdoor housework (house repairs and lawn and pool maintenance, as well as car care and maintenance), household management (bills, transport), child care and shopping.
9. Persons over 15 years of age.
10. We ignore the unpaid work that accompanies another activity which the respondent characterises as their main activity. Time spent in these secondary unpaid work activities is often very substantial and is unevenly distributed by sex (see Bittman and Wajcman, 2000).

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Appendix 1
Ordinary least squares regressions of hours per week spend in paid work at unsociable hours (outside 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday) by Australian workers

		Men		Women	
		B	Sig	B	Sig
Age					
	20-24 years	-1.16	ns	1.09	ns
	40-54 years	-1.17	*	-0.19	ns
	55-59 years	-2.40	**	-1.10	ns
	60-69 years	-3.00	**	-3.17	**
Residential region					
	Minor urban	1.98	**	0.76	ns
	Rural	2.70	**	0.15	ns
Place of birth					
	Europe	0.57	ns	-0.06	ns
	Neither Australia nor Europe	2.77	**	2.53	**
Education					
	Has a degree	-3.83	**	-2.45	**
Occupation					
	Property owner, manager, or professional	0.32	ns	3.09	**
Marital Status					
	Separated, divorced, or widowed	-1.26	ns	1.04	ns
	Never married	-1.76	**	1.01	ns
No of adults					
	1 adult	2.36	**	0.47	ns
	3 adults	1.49	**	-0.32	ns
	4 adults	2.58	**	0.44	ns
	5 adults	0.66	ns	-0.23	ns
	6+ adults	1.96	ns	1.31	ns
No of children					
	1 child	0.94	ns	-1.70	**
	2 children	2.54	**	-2.24	**
	3+ children	2.01	**	-1.56	*

		Men		Women	
		B	Sig	B	Sig
Preschool child					
	Present	-1.90	**	-0.28	ns
Survey month					
	January-March	0.41	ns	1.11	*
	August	-2.02	ns	5.09	*
	September-December	0.97	*	0.65	ns
Survey year					
	1974	-2.43	**	-1.38	ns
	1987	-1.00	ns	-0.46	ns
	1992	-0.14	ns	-0.98	**
Constant		14.25	**	7.32	**
Adjusted R-squared		0.018		0.020	

Ns= not significant.
*= significant at the 0.05 level.
**= significant at the 0.01 level.