

The Big Squeeze: Domestic Dimensions of Excessive Work Time and Pressure

David Peetz, Andréa Fox, Keith Townsend and Cameron Allan
Griffith University

Modern working patterns are directly and adversely affecting family lives and personal relationships. Using survey data, we confirm qualitative evidence that long hours of work, weekend work, irregular starting times, high pressure and long hours cultures are contributing to deteriorating home relationships and leading to dissatisfaction amongst partners.

Introduction

A considerable amount of rhetoric from government and, to a lesser extent, unions, employer associations and some employers has been devoted to the promotion of policies to better balance work and family life. In the early 1990s a Work and Family Unit was established within the Commonwealth Department of Industrial Relations. Similar units were later established in some State departments. However, this rhetoric does not sit easily with evidence of increasing work intensity (Allan, 1997; Allan, O'Donnell & Peetz 1999; Morehead et al 1997; Reeder 1988; Wright & Lund 1998) and increasing working hours (Campbell 2002, Pocock 2003, Watson *et al.* 2003). Data from the mid 1990s suggested increasing dissatisfaction with the balance between work and family life (Morehead et al 1997:583; DIR 1995:227), with dissatisfaction higher amongst employees whose weekly hours had increased.

Much of the debate about working time reform has centred around the idea that new work arrangements have been necessary in order to overcome the rigidities of the past that made it difficult to balance work and family responsibilities. But how much is this new flexible world helping people balance their work and personal lives? What factors influence people's satisfaction with the balance in their work and personal lives? How are interpersonal relationships affected? How does work affect home life, in particular how does it affect partners?

There is already important, detailed qualitative evidence of the adverse impact of increasing working hours on personal lives, backed up by aggregated statistics (Pocock 2003). Our research provides more depth to the quantitative side of the story.

Data come from a survey undertaken in 2002 of employees from 15 organisations in Queensland. These organisations comprised the great majority of those that participated in a major qualitative and quantitative study of working time arrangements in Queensland, and included: two manufacturers, a mine, a construction company, a government department, a law enforcement agency, a public utility, a bank, a theme park, a retailer, a law firm, a large-vehicle repair company, a trade union, a hospital and an educational institution. This included a mixture of small, medium and large organizations (although there was a greater representation of larger sized firms), a balance of strongly-, weakly- and non-unionised workplaces and a blend of female-dominated, male-dominated and mixed gender workplaces. The surveys were undertaken in those parts of the organisations that were studied in the qualitative stages of the case studies. These usually corresponded to either a whole workplace or the entire organisation, but in some cases it concerned a division of the organisation that encompassed more than one workplace, or particular occupational groups. In organisations where our study site included less than 200 employees, all employees (excluding

senior management) were surveyed. In those with over 200 in the study site, a sample of 200 employees was randomly selected, using systematic random sampling, in all cases bar one from a payroll list. Response rates varied substantially between organizations: from 60 to 21 per cent. The median was 44 per cent and the total 42 per cent. In total, 963 usable questionnaires were returned. The data are unweighted.

We also administered a separate partners' questionnaire to canvas the effect of work-time changes upon family members. We obtained data from 489 partners. We matched those partners to their spouses in the employee survey. While the employees in the main survey who were "matched" to participants in the partners survey may have had slightly different characteristics to those who were not matched, generally speaking this had no significant impact on the results. The partners' survey was much shorter and contained questions that to varying degrees pursued selected concepts had been examined in the main employee survey.

High pressure at work and home

We start with an analysis of high work pressure. We used a six-item index ($\alpha = .73$) that measures the pressures that arise from high intensity of work. These items comprised responses (on a five point scale) to the statement: "If you take time off or get sick, your work just builds up while you're away"; "I have enough time to rest during meal breaks" (inverted); "There should be more employees here to do the work that we do"; "I leave on time most days" (inverted); "I often take work home"; and "I get told at home that I am working too much". We refer to this item as our index of *work pressure* and we split employees into three broadly similarly sized groups on the basis of this index. We divided the respondents into three similarly sized groups: our full-time sample had 32

per cent in the high-pressure category and 29 per cent categorised as relatively "low pressure".

Full-time employees who scored high on our work pressure index were more likely to be dissatisfied with how hard they had to work than those with medium scores on the index (Table 1). They were less likely to be satisfied with how fairly they were treated at work and more likely to disagree that all employees are treated with fairness. They were more likely to say they were dissatisfied with their job, more likely to say that they got sick more often than a year ago and more likely to report that they felt like taking a day off more often. Adverse effects on personal productivity were also implied in the data.

What about life at home? We used an abridged version of this index (excluded the item "I get told at home that I am working too much" to avoid the possibility of reverse causality) to see how work pressure affects personal lives as told by employees. The effects were striking. While 20 per cent of those with medium scores on the work pressure index were dissatisfied with the balance between their work and family lives, dissatisfaction was 47 per cent (and satisfaction only 27 per cent) amongst those with high scores.

By comparison with those with medium scores, those with high scores were:

- much more likely to agree that "My work responsibilities interfere with my social life more than they should";
- twice as likely to agree that "I am often too tired to properly enjoy my time away from work";
- more dissatisfied with "how easy it is to take time off for other personal matters such as sporting events and school concerts, on work days";

Table 1 Work pressure and work-related correlates

	Relatively high pressure (%)	Medium pressure (%)	Relatively low pressure (%)
Dissatisfied with how hard you have to work	33	9	5
Dissatisfied with how fairly treated at work	24	11	5
Disagree that all groups of employees are treated with equal fairness	54	38	28
Dissatisfied with job	16	7	7
Get sick more often than a year ago	18	14	8
Feel like taking a day off more often than a year ago	57	44	34
Less able to perform well in job than a year ago	17	6	6

Source: Main employee survey

Population: all respondents

N = 726: 219 (col 1), 282 (col 2), 225 (col 3).

Numbers in cell indicate the proportions of respondents in the columns having the characteristics in the rows. For example, the top left hand cell indicates that 33 per cent of “high pressure” employees were dissatisfied with how hard they had to work.

- twice as likely to say that their satisfaction with their work and family balance had gone down in the past year;
- over three times as likely to say that their “ability to keep work and home life separate” had gone down;
- over twice as likely to say that their “opportunities to have a social life” had gone down;
- twice as likely to say that the “time spent with people at home” had gone down;
- three times as likely to say that “how well they got on with people at home” had gone down; and,
- more likely to say that their time spent on community activities, hobbies, gardening or sports and domestic activities had gone down (Table 2).

Work and personal lives and tensions

If high work pressure adversely relates to the work-life balance, what effects do working time arrangements and other aspects of work have on it? As shown in Table 3, increases over the past twelve months in reported job stress, how tired respondents felt at work and how long it took them to recover from work were also associated with greater dissatisfaction with

the work-life balance. We combined these first three items to create an index of “fatiguing” ($\alpha = .83$) which measured employees' pressure-related responses to increases in work duration and/or intensity. (Some 49 per cent of our full-time sample showed an increase in fatiguing, with 24 per cent showing what we called a “high increase”, indicated by a “gone up” response to all three items.)

Women were less dissatisfied than men but only amongst part-time employees – there were no gender differences in satisfaction amongst full-time employees. Satisfaction with the balance was significantly lower amongst “long hours employees” and amongst those who reported increased hours compared to twelve months ago.

We compared the relative importance of long and increasing working hours with that of high pressure and “fatiguing” in explaining satisfaction with the work and family balance. We did this by predicting the last variable using ordinary least squares regression with these four variables as explanatory variables along with a number of other controls. (The control variables were: whether the respondent had another job; gender; how often start and finishing times were changed on short notice; starting work between 5pm and 4.59am; use of “flexi-

time”; travelling time to work; and having children. For the full equation adjusted $r^2=.30$.) We found that the predictive power of our two “work intensity” variables was much greater than the predictive power of the two “hours” variables. Removing the level and change variables on “hours” reduced the explained variance by six per cent, whereas removing the level and change variables on “work intensity” reduced the explained variance by 42 per cent. To look at it another way, the adverse impact that long hours has on the balance between work and personal lives is not just a result of the extra time that it takes employees away from the home environment – it is more importantly a consequence of the adverse impact that long and increasing hours have on the

work pressures that employees experience, and which they then bring home with them as baggage.

The times when people worked and the irregularity of their starting times were two other elements that mattered. Employees who worked on weekends and at night were less satisfied with the balance, underlining the continuing relevance of penalty rates as compensation for unsocial hours. Employees who started work at the same time each day were more satisfied than those who did not, with the greatest dissatisfaction felt by those who said that their starting or finishing times were often changed at short notice, making it difficult for them to arrange things in their personal lives.

Table 2 Work pressure and effects on family life: Employee perspectives

	Relatively high pressure (%)	Medium pressure (%)	Relatively low pressure (%)
Dissatisfied with balance between work and personal life	44	21	11
My work responsibilities interfere more with my social life than they should	60	25	13
I am often too tired to properly enjoy my time away from work	63	34	22
Dissatisfied with how easy it is to take time off for other personal matters (eg sporting events, school concerts) on work days	27	15	9
Dissatisfied with how easy it is to care for sick children or relatives on work days	22	14	9
Less satisfied with balance between work and personal life than a year ago	45	22	11
Less able to keep work and home life separate than a year ago	43	13	4
Fewer opportunities to have a social life than a year ago	43	20	12
Spend less time with people at home than a year ago	47	25	16
Get on less well with people at home than a year ago	20	6	4
Spend less time on community activities than a year ago	36	22	12
Less involvement in hobbies, gardening or sports than a year ago	48	27	17
Less involvement in domestic activities (eg. washing, grocery shopping, house cleaning) than a year ago	28	17	11

Source: Main employee survey

Population: all respondents

N = 726: 219 (col 1), 282 (col 2), 225 (col 3).

Note: the work pressure index used in this table excludes the variable "I get told at home that I am working too much".

Numbers in cell indicate the proportions of respondents in the columns having the characteristics in the rows. For example, the top left hand cell indicates that 47 per cent of “high pressure” employees were dissatisfied with the balance between their work and personal lives.

Table 3 Influences on dissatisfaction with work and family balance and deteriorating home relationships

	Proportion of employees dissatisfied with balance between work and personal lives (%)	Proportion of employees reporting deterioration in how well they get on with people at home (%)
Work pressure index		
- relatively high	44**	20**
- medium	21	6
- relatively low	11	4
Change in job stress over last 12 months		
- gone up	36**	16**
- same	16	6
- gone down	11	3
Change in how tired you feel at work over last 12 months		
- gone up	40*	18**
- same	13	6
- gone down	15	3
Change in how long you take to recover from work over last 12 months		
- gone up	45**	21**
- same	13	6
- gone down	19	3
Normal working hours		
- 45 or more per week	43**	17*
- under 45 per week	18	9
Gender and hours		
- male full-time	27	12
- female full-time	24	10
- male part-time	28	7
- female part-time	13	10
Change in weekly working hours (full-time employees)		
- gone up	40**	20**
- same	19	7
- gone down	22	8
Start work at same time each day (full-time employees)		
- yes	23*	14
- no	30	9
Starting or finishing times often changed on short notice, making it difficult to arrange things in personal life		
- yes	40**	18#
- no	22	10
Works on weekends (full-time employees)		
- yes	37**	16*
- no	22	9
Works at night (starts work between 5pm and 4.59am)		
- yes	38**	13
- no	22	10
Long hours are taken for granted in this organisation		
- agree	34**	15**
- disagree	13	6
Change in how much pressure from co-workers to work hard		
- gone up	40**	22**
- same	22	9
- gone down	20	5
Change in how closely watched by supervisor		
- gone up	38**	22**
- same	21	9
- gone down	22	7

Source: Main employee survey

Population: All respondents in partners survey (except rows 1 & 2: full-time and part-time employees in the partners survey respectively).

N = 840 (column 1), 953 (column 2)

** = difference significant at 1 per cent level

* = difference significant at 5 per cent level

= difference weakly significant at 10 per cent level

Numbers in cell indicate the proportions of respondents in the rows having the characteristics in the columns. For example, the top left hand cell indicates that 50 per cent of partners whose own hours had increased reported an increase in the stress they feel at home compared to 12 months earlier.

We also collected perceptual data on how well people are getting on at home. The results, shown also in Table 3, broadly follow the pattern set by the data on satisfaction with the work-personal life balance. This is not surprising, as 27 per cent of employees who are dissatisfied with their work-personal life balance also report deterioration in how well they get on with people at home – compared to 4 per cent of those who are satisfied with their work-personal life balance.

Employees experiencing high pressure at work were three times as likely to report a deterioration in their relationships at home than were those under medium pressure, and five times as likely as those under relatively low pressure. Those reporting increases in stress, in how tired they felt, and in how long it took them to recover from work were around three times as likely to report deteriorating home relationships as were those who did not report increases in these indicators of fatiguing. “Long hours employees” were nearly twice as likely as other employees to report deteriorating relationships. Full-time employees who reported increased hours were nearly three times as likely as full-timers with no change in hours to report a deterioration in their home relationships. Weekend work for full-timers, and irregular starting times, also appeared to be linked to deteriorating home relationships.

This is not a case of reverse causality, that is employees voluntarily increasing their working hours because they are unhappy at home. If this were the case we would see no link between home relationships and workplace cultures. Yet long hours cultures clearly mattered. Deteriorating home relationships were more common amongst employees who reported that long hours were taken for granted, or who had trouble avoiding overtime or getting their workload reduced. Increased pressure from fellow employees and tighter

monitoring by supervisors were both associated with deteriorating relationships.

Similarly, if these patterns were due to reverse causality, then people with deteriorating home relationships would be less likely to say they were working more hours than they wanted. In fact, amongst those with deteriorating relationships, 57 per cent were working more hours than they wanted, compared to just 22 per cent of those with improving home relationships. While 36 per cent of those with deteriorating relationships said their current hours did not suit, this was the case for only 10 per cent of those with improving relationships.

The impact of work on employees' partners

In many respects, the data from the partners' survey tended to follow quite closely the data in the employee survey. For example, 25 per cent of employees in the employee survey agreed that “If it were possible I would like to get a job with another organisation”; 25 per cent of partners also agreed that “If it were possible, I would like my partner to get a job elsewhere”. Just as 22 per cent of respondents in the main employee survey reported a decline in their involvement in community activities over the previous year, so too 23 per cent of partners reported a decline in their own involvement in community activities. As we might expect, while 31 per cent of respondents in the main sample agreed that “My work responsibilities interfere with my social life more than they should”, a lesser (though still large) proportion of respondents in the partners' survey, 26 per cent, agreed that “My partner's work responsibilities effect my own social life more than they should”.

However, there were some differences. While 17 per cent of respondents in the employee survey were less satisfied than twelve months ago with their own working

hours, 26 per cent of respondents in the partners survey were less satisfied with the working hours of their spouses. While 30 per cent of respondents in the main employee survey said they were spending less time with people at home than twelve months ago, 41 per cent of respondents in the partners survey said that they were spending less time with their spouses than a year earlier. Partners, in fact, were also experiencing increasing hours: amongst respondents in the partners survey who were full-time employees, some 44 per cent reported an increase in hours (with 8 per cent reporting a decrease).

We examined more closely two indicators of the impact of working time changes on partners. The first was a proxy for the impact of an employee's working arrangements on their partner's time use: partner's responses to a statement indicating that their spouse's work responsibilities effect their own social life more than they should. As we shall see shortly, this is an important indicator of household stress. The second was a summary measure of dissatisfaction with an employee's work arrangements: partners' responses to the proposition that if it were possible, they would like their spouse to get a job elsewhere. As shown in table 4, respondents in the partners' survey had negative views of the jobs of their spouses in the main employee survey when those spouses:

- scored high on the work pressure index;
- scored highly on our previously mentioned "fatiguing" index;
- worked 45 hours or more per week;
- did not start work at the same time every day (especially if start or finish times were changed on short notice);
- worked on weekends;
- had little say over their workload or when they could take time off (though, consistent with earlier data, say over

start and finish times or number of working hours as such, did not influence partners' views);

- never received overtime or time off in lieu; or
- had children.

Partners were also asked a number of questions assessing change over the preceding twelve months. Where full-time respondents in our employee survey had indicated their working hours had gone up over the past year, 44 per cent of partners were less satisfied than previously with their spouses' working hours, and just 14 per cent were more satisfied. When employees working hours had decreased, only 20 per cent of partners were less satisfied with their spouses' hours, and 40 per cent were more satisfied.

Some 36 per cent of respondents to the partners' survey indicated that the stress they felt at home had gone up over the previous twelve months, with 13 per cent reporting a reduction in stress. Home-related stress as perceived by partners is influenced by many factors, only some of which are related to their own or their spouses' working arrangements. Nonetheless we examined factors identified in the partners' survey which were correlated with stress at home (Table 5). Highlighting the relevance of the "social life" indicator used in Table 4, we can see a very strong relationship between home stress and partners' opportunities to have a social life. Indeed, in a regression equation, the two most significant predictors of home stress amongst partners were changes in time spent with their spouse and changes in their opportunities for a social life. (Other variables included in the equation predicting home stress were changes in: weekly pay (at 10 per cent level of significance); time spent on community activities (at 5 per cent level) and involvement in domestic activities (at 10 per cent level).)

Table 4 Employee characteristics and relationship with partner dissatisfactions

Employee characteristics:	Proportion of partners agreeing that their spouse's work responsibilities affect their own social life more than they should (%)	Proportion of partners agreeing that if it were possible, they would like their spouse to get a job elsewhere (%)
Work pressure index - relatively high - medium - relatively low	49** 21 14	39* 25 17
Change in "fatiguing" index - high increase - other	43** 23	37* 23
Normal working hours - 45 or more per week - under 45 per week	45** 21	37# 22
Start work at same time each day - yes - no	23# 36	21** 36
Starting or finishing times often changed on short notice, making it difficult to arrange things in personal life - yes - no	64** 23	45** 24
Works on weekends - yes - no	42** 23	34* 24
Receipt of overtime or time off in lieu when working extra hours - never - other	39* 24	ns
How much say over when you take time off (for example, holidays, dentist appointments) - none or some - quite a lot or a great deal.	38* 21	ns
How much say over your workload - none or some - quite a lot or a great deal.	ns	29* 16
Has children - yes - no	32* 24	ns

Source: Matched partners survey and main employee survey

Population: Partners of matched full-time employees in the main employee survey

N = 470 (column 1), 467 (column 2)

** = difference significant at 1 per cent level

* = difference significant at 5 per cent level

= difference weakly significant at 10 per cent level

ns = difference not significant

Numbers in cell indicate the proportions of respondents in the rows having the characteristics in the columns. For example, the top left hand cell indicates that 49 per cent of partners of "high pressure" employees agreed that their partner's work affects their own social life more than it should.

Respondents in the partners survey also reported increases in stress when they were full-time employees themselves working longer hours. They were more likely to report increased stress when:

- they had children aged five to twelve;
- their satisfaction with their own hours had gone down;
- their satisfaction with their partners' hours had gone down; and

- their time spent on community activities or hobbies, gardening or sports had gone down.

In cross-tabulations changes in involvement in domestic activities had ambiguous effects: increases in stress were reported both when such involvement had increased and had decreased. Like time spent on community activities or hobbies, time spent on domestic activities by partners fell when their own working hours

Table 5 Home stress: Partner perspectives

Respondent characteristics:	Proportion of partner respondents reporting an increase in stress they feel at home over previous 12 months (%)
Hours worked by respondent (full-time employees)	
- gone up	50**
- same	25
- gone down	20
Any children §	
- age 5-12	47*
- age under 5	39
- no children	29*
Your opportunities to have a social life	
- gone up	11**
- same	30
- gone down	59
How much time you spend with your partner	
- gone up	22**
- same	24
- gone down	57
Satisfaction with own hours	
- gone up	26**
- same	27
- gone down	55
Satisfaction with partner's hours	
- gone up	28**
- same	31
- gone down	54
Time spent on community activities	
- gone up	26**
- same	32
- gone down	59
Involvement in hobbies, gardening or sports	
- gone up	31**
- same	30
- gone down	51
Own involvement in domestic activities (eg washing, cooking)	
- gone up	50**
- same	26
- gone down	57

Source: Partners survey

Population: All respondents in partners survey (except row 1 which is full-time employees in the partners survey).

N = 264 (row 1), 489 (rows 2 onwards)

ns not significant

§ The first two categories in this row overlap. The significance tests reported relate to the first and third categories versus their respective counterfactuals (ie having versus not having 5-12 year old children; having versus not having any children).

Numbers in cell indicate the proportions of respondents in the rows having the characteristics in the columns. For example, the top left hand cell indicates that 50 per cent of partners whose own hours had increased reported an increase in the stress they feel at home compared to 12 months earlier.

increased. However, domestic activities do not regenerate the soul in the same way as these other activities.

Conclusions

The long hours culture of work is destroying personal lives. This may seem a bold statement, but our data, when read in conjunction with Pocock's authoritative study *The Work-Life Collision*, make it difficult to draw a contrary conclusion.

Our data show that many aspects of modern working patterns are directly and adversely affecting family lives and personal relationships. How this compares with working patterns in decades past is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, it is clear that high pressure at work, the increased stress and tiredness at work, and the increased time it takes to recover from work, all contributed to a worsening of workers' relationships at

home. Deteriorating relationships were linked to long hours of work, weekend work for full-timers, irregular starting times and to indicators of long hours cultures including long hours being taken for granted, inability to decline to work overtime without it causing problems, inability to get a heavy workload easily reduced by talking to a supervisor, increased peer pressure and tighter monitoring by supervisors. Similarly, when employees worked long hours, under high work pressure, without access to overtime pay or “time off in lieu”, on weekends, or with changing starting times (especially where it occurred on short notice), their partners were more likely to see their social lives as inappropriately limited by their spouse's work responsibilities and more likely to wish their spouse had another job. Reduced opportunities for a social life or to spend time on community activities, reduced time spent with their spouse, and increased spousal working hours were all associated

with increased home stress experienced by partners.

Dissatisfaction with the balance between work and personal lives is not just an abstract concept about how employees feel. It is closely related to how families and household members interact, and how well they get on. If the tensions arising from working time restructuring are translated into increased difficulties in interpersonal relationships at home, and possibly increased divorce and violence, then part of the costs of workplace reform are being transferred to the domestic sector and possibly the public sector. We do not have data on divorce and violence, but the data we have on the reported impact of change on how well people are getting on at home are disturbing. In the end, policy makers will need to decide to what extent they wish to see the benefits of economic and industrial reform privatised while the costs are socialised and felt by the workers upon whose productivity the economy depends.

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