Happiness Under Pressure: How Dual-Earner Parents Experience Time in Australia

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Abstract

Against a background of profound social, economic and organisational change in Australia, workers' ability to satisfactorily integrate paid work with personal life is essential for social and economic wellbeing. If working parents are as stressed as national time use surveys suggest, then how is time experienced by mothers and fathers who combine paid work with caring responsibilities? Which activities are associated with the highest levels of positive and negative affect? The empirical basis for examining these questions is provided through a review of selected data from the Work/Life Tensions project.

Using the Experience Sampling Method, we report on data gathered via personal data assistants (PDAs) from 173 working parents (6778 time use surveys) with a view to providing in-situ interpretive information on women's and men's activity patterns and their subjective experience of time over a 7-day period. Data from a screening survey completed by the same sample of working parents are also used to compare sample characteristics and levels of 'time crunch'. Despite high levels of time pressure the mood scores for parents suggest they are relatively positive about their time use patterns with the highest levels of positive affect being associated with socialising and recreation and leisure, and the highest levels of negative affect with child care and paid work activities.

By understanding better the experience and impacts of work-life tensions in time-crunched households, we aim to contribute to debates about the social and economic costs associated with time pressure and stress and their impact on individual and organisational wellbeing. Such an understanding is also crucial to understanding what makes us

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happy – and the need to build more positive experiences into our lives as a way of maximising our wellbeing.

Introduction

> Anxiety about having too much to do and guilt about not using time according to the nagging 'shoulds' of family responsibilities are standard fare. Our everyday routines are hurried, regimented, and largely beyond our control….Where once families were likely to spend the day living and working together at home, the daily routine is now more akin to a ritual of dispersion: babies to day-care, children to school, and most parents to a workplace away from home. At the end of the day, families re-converge on the household, only to face more responsibilities: meal preparation, homework, lessons, shopping and scheduling for the next day (Daly, K. (2000).

Kerry Daly's observations about family life in time-crunched households would strike a chord with many working parents where feelings of time pressure are exacerbated by tensions associated with perceived work and family roles. For many there is also a sense that the pace of life is accelerating, where there seems to be more and more things to do yet less time in which to do them (Gleick, 1999). Such private troubles are the source of a major public issue as evidenced by increasing levels of social commentary, policy debate, academic research and populist literature on the 'problem' of work/life balance and what to do about it (Bittman & Wajcman, 1999; Fiedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Gambles et al, 2006; Glezer & Wolcott, 2000; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, 2006; Hinz & Hinz, 2004; (Moen, 2003; Ody, 1999; Pocock, 2003; Shaw, 1995).

Concerns about the relationship between working life and private life focus inevitably on questions of time allocation. Much of the research in this area is premised on the assumption that an individual's ability to balance work and life will be associated with both work and non-work demands, the availability of time and other resources to manage such demands, and will vary across a range of socio-demographic characteristics including gender and age or life stage. Previous studies have also linked work/life

tensions with factors such as work overload (Bittman, 1999; Peters & Raaijmakers, 1998; Robinson, J Godbey, 1997; Schor, 1991) work-to-family interference (Coverman, 1989; Kay, 1996; Warner-Smith & Brown 2002) family-to-work interference (Neal, et al 1993) caregiver strain (Duxbury & Higgins, 2003) and lack of personal leisure time (Brown, e al, 2005; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; Kay, 1998). Duxbury and Higgins (2003) assert that an employee's ability to balance work and life demands is associated with a range of outcomes associated with work organisations, family units, individual wellbeing, and healthy communities. Theirs and others' research also suggests that work/life tensions may be moderated by factors associated with 'family-friendly' workplaces, as well as strategies used by individuals within households to juggle work and non-work demands (Blyton, et al, 2006; Bryson et al, 2007; Duxbury & Higgins, 2003). Despite such moderating forces, it has been reported in Australia (and other Western countries) that increasing numbers of people are experiencing time pressure and stress, and that time pressure is reported most by working couples with dependent children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 998).

If working parents are as stressed as national time use surveys suggest, then how is time experienced by mothers and fathers who combine paid work with caring responsibilities? What associations are there between time use, gender, life-course stage and mood state? Which activities are associated with the highest levels of positive and negative affect? The empirical basis for examining these questions will be provided through a review of selected data from the Work/Life Tensions project, a three-year study funded by the Australian Research Council. The following sections describe the research aims and methods used to gather data for the Work/Life Tensions project, and provide an overview of selected findings from the study.

The Work/Life Tensions Project

Study design

The main aim of the Work/Life Tensions project is to examine the hypothesis that wellbeing is positively related to reduced time pressure, more leisure and greater control over time schedules.

The study commenced in 2003 and the fieldwork was completed in 2006. Four methods of data collection were used in the study: focus groups; the Experience Sampling Method (ESM); structured interviews; and data linkage with the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health [ALSWH].[1] The initial sample for the ESM and interview phases of the study was to comprise 100 dual-earner couples who live with their children, with 50 couples to be randomly selected via the 'young' (aged 26-31) and 50 couples from the 'mid-aged' (aged 54-58) cohorts of the ALSWH study. Participants in the focus groups were recruited via a snowball technique in selected work organisations in Queensland and New South Wales.

Focus Groups: Ten focus groups were organised in urban and rural areas of NSW and Queensland in 2003 & 2004, involving 54

[1] The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health was established with the broad aim to examine factors influencing the health of women in Australia and their use of health services. The study commenced in 1996 with 3 cohorts of women of young (18-23), mid (45-50) and older (70-75) age – and involved around 40,000 Australians. The sample was randomly selected and is broadly representative of the national population in these same age groups. Data on the main study were planned every 3 years for 20 years – following the baseline survey that was undertaken in 1996. The main study has 5 key themes, including a thematic area focused on examining issues relating to time use and social roles [30]. Within this theme, the baseline and subsequent surveys have included questions about occupation, hours in paid and unpaid work, satisfaction with time spent in various activities (including leisure), the extent to which women feel time pressured or have time on their hands, as well as questions providing measures of physical and mental health. For example, ALSWH survey data of relevance to time use, time tensions and health have been explored in terms of paid work (Bryson et al, 1998), family care-giving (Lee, 2001), social roles Lee & Powers, 2002), and leisure (Brown Brown, 1999; Warner-Smith & Brown 2002) and paint a picture of young and mid-aged women who, as a result of their busy, crowded lives report high levels of time pressure and stress (Brown, et al, 2002). While the ALSWH data set provides a rich source of quantitative data on women's time use and wellbeing across the life-course, such data are limited in their capacity to examine how women and men experience time. These limitations were addressed in the Work/Life Tension study which seeks to achieve a broad but detailed perspective on women's and men's experience of work-life tension in dual-earner families.

working parents aged 26-55. The purpose of these focus groups was to gain a broad picture of women and men's experience of work-life tension and to identify specific strategies used to 'manage' work-life tension in dual-earner households (Brown, e al, 2005; Bryson et al, 2007).

Experience Sampling Method (ESM): The ESM was developed by Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970s to sample people's reactions to the use of their time as they are experiencing particular events, rather than through recall afterwards (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). It involves a signalling device which cues respondents to report and evaluate their activities (via a self-report questionnaire) at random intervals (usually 7-10 times a day), over about a week (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). Our survey was provided to participants via personal data assistants (PDAs) which were programmed to beep at random times ten times a day for seven days (Ironmonger et al, 2005). When prompted, the participants were asked to enter information about what they were doing at the time, where they were, who was with them at the time, and how they felt about what they were doing. The Experience Sampling Method has particular strength for exploring how individuals experience time in daily activities, thereby addressing a limitation of time diary research which measures amounts of time spent on different types of activity (Davies, 1994; (Morehead, 2001). The ESM and interview phases of the study were completed with the young couples in 2004 and the mid-aged couples in 2005 (Brown et al, forthcoming).

Telephone interviews: Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted within one month of participants returning their PDAs. The interview schedule was designed to allow us to explore in more depth the findings from the first two phases of the study related to commonalities and differences between men and women's subjective experience of time in both age cohorts, the contexts in which time is experienced, as well as the strategies used to 'manage' time among working parents.

Linkage with ALSWA survey data: In the final phase of the project, individual data from the ESM and interview surveys involving women only are being linked to existing data from the ALSWA project, to explore associations between time use and a

range of life circumstances, health history, and indicators of physical and mental health and wellbeing.

For the purposes of this paper, we will report on ESM data gathered from the young and mid-aged cohorts with a view to providing in situ interpretive information on women's and men's activity patterns (what they do) and their subjective experience of time (experience of positive and negative affect) over a 7-day period. Prior to commencing the ESM phase of the study, each participant was asked to complete a self-complete questionnaire where socio-demographic information was collected alongside assessments of personal time pressure based on a ten-item 'time crunch index' used by Statistics Canada in their 1992 General Social Survey on Time Use. We report on key characteristics of the sample first.

Sample characteristics

The initial sample for the ESM and interview phases of the study was to comprise 100 dual-earner couples who live with their children, with 50 couples to be randomly selected via the 'young' and 50 couples from the 'mid' aged cohorts of the ALSWH study. The final sample included 95 working parents aged 25 to 30, and 87 working parents aged 52 to 57. Selected characteristics from the sample are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Work/life tensions project: Sample characteristics

Characteristics	Young cohort (aged 25-30)	Mid-aged cohort (aged 52-57)
Participants	95	87
Gender	Female 51; Male 44	Female 48; Male 39
Households	Couples: 40	Couples: 39
Children living at home	All households	56% of households
Occupation categories		
Managers/administrators; professionals; associate professionals	29.5% 16.9%	54% 17.3%
Tradespersons; advanced clerical & service workers	34.7%	16.1%
Intermediate clerical, sales & service workers; intermediate production & transport workers.	14.7%	6.9%
Elementary sales & service workers; labourers & related	4.2%	5.7%

workers Other		
Time pressure		
Severe (>7 items)	32.6%	12.6%
Moderate (4-6 items)	41.1%	43.7%
Minimal (<3 items)	26.3%	43.7%

The young cohort included 51 women and 44 men and the cohort sample included 40 couples. All of the parents had children living with them at home. In terms of occupational categories, 29.5% of the young cohort were in managerial, administrative or professional positions; 16.9% in trades, advanced clerical and service positions; 34.7% in intermediate clerical, sales & service worker or intermediate production & transport worker positions; 14.7% in elementary sales and service worker or labouring positions; and 4.2% in other positions. The mid-aged cohort included 48 women and 39 men and the sample included 39 couples. 56% of mid-aged parents had children still living with them at home, with others having varying degrees of contact with children who had left home. In terms of occupational categories, 54% of the young cohort were in managerial, administrative or professional positions; 17.3% in trades, advanced clerical and service positions; 16.1% in intermediate clerical, sales and service worker or intermediate production and transport worker positions; 6.9% in elementary sales and service worker or labouring positions; and 5.7% in other positions.

The table also includes data on perceived time pressure among the sample using the 10-item 'time crunch' index which was originally developed by John Robinson (University of Maryland) and then adapted for use by Statistics Canada in their 1992 General Social Survey on Time Use (Fredericks, 1995). As we have reported elsewhere (Brown et al, forthcoming), responses to the individual items in the 'time crunch' index pointed to similarities and some differences between women and men at different stages of life. However, the main use of the index is to categorise individuals according to levels of perceived stress. Adapting protocols used by Statistics Canada in the 1992 General Social Survey on Time Use, high levels of stress are defined as a positive response to 7 or more of the questions on time perception, moderate levels of stress are defined as a positive response to 4 to

6 items, and minimum levels of stress are defined as positive response to 3 or less statements in the time crunch index (see table 1). Using these measures, 32.6% of young parents would be classified as severely time pressured, and a further 41.1% moderately time pressured. While a greater proportion of women (37.3%) in the young cohort were severely time pressured when compared with 27.3% of men, the difference between gender categories is not significant statistically. When comparing data between age cohorts, female and male parents from the mid aged cohort are significantly less time crunched than parents from the young cohort (x^2 11.9, df 2, $P < .01$), although more than 56% could still be regarded as moderately to severely time pressured.

If working parents are as time-pressured as these data suggest, then it is important to understand the context for time use in terms of what people do and how they feel about it.

How do working parents spend their time?

Data from the ESM phase of the study provide a snapshot of the daily routines of respondents over 7 consecutive days where, on average, 34 time use reports were provided by each respondent over the course of the week. When cued, respondents opened up a survey form on a PDA which asked them to indicate how they were feeling when they were signalled, to indicate where they were and who they were with, as well as indicate what they were doing at the time. Respondents had the opportunity to list up to three activities that were being undertaken at the time of the signal. Activities were then coded manually by the research team using categories adopted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in National Time Use Surveys conducted in 1992 and 1997 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998).

Individual activities were allocated to one of nine activity categories and one of four activity types using the framework used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (see Table 2).

Table 2: Framework used to define categories of time use

Broad types of time use	Main activity categories
Necessary time Activities which are performed for personal survival (e.g. sleeping, eating and personal hygiene)	1. Personal care activities Sleeping, personal hygiene, health care, eating/drinking
Contracted time Activities such as paid work and regular education, where there are explicit contracts which control the periods of time in which activities are performed	2. Employment activities Main job, other jobs, unpaid work in family business or farm, work breaks 3. Education activities Attendance at educational courses, homework/study/research, breaks at place of education.
Committed time Activities to which a person has committed him/herself because of previous social or community interactions, such as setting up a household or performing voluntary work (E.g. housework, child care, shopping or provision of help to others).	4. Domestic activities Food & drink preparation and cleaning up, laundry and clothes care, other housework, grounds/animal care, home maintenance, household management. 5.Child care activities Care of children, playing/reading/talking with child, visiting child care establishment. 6. Purchasing activities Purchasing goods and services, window shopping. 7. Voluntary work & care activities Caring for adults, helping others/doing favors, unpaid voluntary work.
Free time The amount of time left when the previous three types of time have been taken out of a person's day.	8. Social & community interaction Visiting entertainment and cultural venues, attendance at sports events, religious activities and ceremonies, community participation. 9. Recreation and leisure Sport and outdoor activities, exercise, holiday travel & driving for pleasure, games/hobbies and arts/crafts, gambling, computer games, reading, AV media, attendance at recreational courses.

What do working parents do?

In the majority of cases (81%) respondents reported doing one main activity, with 16% of respondents reporting two activities and 3% of respondents reporting three activities when signalled. Table 3 summarises the proportion of respondents who reported their involvement in different types of activity by age cohort and gender by main activity only.

Table 3: Proportion of sample who undertook different types of activity (%) by age cohort and gender (main activity)

Activity type		YOUNG			MIDS	
	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
	N=1959	N=1135	N=3094	N=2005	N=1335	N=3340
No activity	2.2	2.7	2.4	0.1	0.1	0.1
Personal care	16.8	17.7	17.1	19.8	18.5	19.3
Employment	14.7	34.6	22	28.4	30	29.1
Education	1.4	0.3	1	1.1	1.1	1.1
Domestic	21.4	12.2	18.1	21.9	20.6	21.4
Childcare	20.2	7.4	15.5	1	1.3	1.1
Purchasing	3.9	2.5	3.4	2.5	2	2.3
Voluntary work/care	0.7	0.4	0.5	0.6	1	0.7
Socialising	5	3.2	4.3	5.6	2.7	4.4
Recreation & leisure	13.8	19	15.7	18.9	22.6	20.4

The data show variations in time use patterns between age cohorts and genders. For example, in addition to personal care (17.1%) the greatest proportions of time spent by young parents were on 'paid' (22%) and 'unpaid' work including domestic (18.1%) and childcare (15.5%) activities, as well as 20% of time in 'free' time activities including socialising, recreation and leisure. In contrast, mid-aged parents spent more of their time in paid work (29.1%) and 'free time' activities (24.8%) and less time in child care (1.1%). The difference here is largely due to 'mid-aged' women spending considerably less time on 'unpaid' work activities including domestic, childcare, purchasing and voluntary work (26% from 46.2%) and more time in paid employment (28.4% from 14.7%) when compared to their counterparts in the young cohort.

This difference is consistent with broader trends where working mothers tend to return to the labour market as children get older and become more independent. The pattern for fathers is less distinct, with mid-aged men spending more time in domestic work and 'free' time activities (increases of 8.4% and 3.1% respectively) and proportionally less time in paid employment (a decrease of 4.6%) when compared with males in the young cohort.

How do parents feel about time?

Having explored temporal contexts for time use activities, a section of the time survey form asked respondents to indicate how they were feeling when they were beeped. 15 affective states were listed on the survey form and respondents were asked to indicate how they were feeling in relation to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Six items related to positive affective states including feeling 'interested', 'in-control', 'enthusiastic', 'excited', 'happy' and 'calm'. Nine items related to negative affective states including feeling 'worried', 'sad', 'irritated', 'frustrated', 'bored', 'angry', 'guilty', 'stressed' and 'tired'.

Table 6 provides a summary of mean scores on positive and negative affect items, by age cohort and gender.

Table 6: Mean affective states during the study

ITEM	YOUNG	N=3267		MIDS	N=3507	
	Females	Males	All	Females	Males	All
Interested	2.94	2.86	2.88	3.47	3.25	3.38***
Worried	1.45	1.48	1.47	1.35	1.45	1.39
In control	3.66	3.63	3.62	3.78	3.92	3.84*
Enthusiastic	2.71	2.76	2.71	3.17	3.29	3.22***
Sad	1.14	1.31*	1.21	1.18	1.23	1.20
Irritated	1.50	1.73	1.60	1.24	1.46**	1.34***
Excited	2.05	2.25	2.14	2.29	2.41	2.34
Frustrated	1.60	1.71	1.65	1.37	1.60*	1.47*
Bored	1.30	1.56*	1.42	1.18	1.29	1.23**
Happy	3.45	3.36	3.41	3.46	3.52	3.49
Angry	1.22	1.31	1.26	1.12	1.20	1.16*
Guilty	1.26	1.25	1.26	1.19	1.18	1.19

Stressed	1.87	1.79	1.83	1.58	1.65	1.61*
Calm	3.11	3.31	3.20	3.26	3.36	3.31
Tired	3.08	2.74	2.92	2.09	2.11	2.10***

All responses on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)

*** P < .001; ** P < .01; * P < .05

Mean scores for all positive affect items were higher for mid-aged parents (irrespective of gender) and lower for all negative affect items compared with parents in the young cohort. The between-cohort differences in average ratings on the items 'interest', 'in control', 'enthusiastic', 'irritated', 'frustrated', 'bored', 'angry', 'stressed' and 'tired' were statistically significant. Items relating to degrees of 'happiness', 'control' and 'calmness' were relatively high for women and men in both age cohorts. Conversely mean scores for items relating to feelings of 'sadness', 'anger' and 'guilt' were relatively low for all respondents. While parents in both age cohorts may be time pressured, their mood scores suggest that they are relatively positive about their time use patterns, and this is particularly the case for mid-aged parents. As we have reported elsewhere, this association could be due, in part, to differences in the occupational profile of young and mid aged parents where a greater proportion of mid-aged parents (54%) work in managerial and professional positions compared to 29.5% of young parents, and the tendency for professionals to have more autonomy and control in their jobs as well as more disposable income than workers employed in other occupational categories [9]. Greater levels of control and income may also enable workers to better cope with time pressures (Brown, e al, 2005).

In terms of gender, although men scored higher on all positive affect items except one, these differences were not statistically significant. Surprisingly, mid-aged men also scored higher than mid-aged women on all negative affect items except the item relating to tiredness. However, only differences on the items 'irritated' and 'frustrated' were statistically significant. While men from the young cohort scored higher on five negative affect items ('worried', 'sad', 'irritated', 'bored' and 'angry') women scored

higher on the other four items. Differences in sadness and boredom were statistically significant.

While the analysis thus far has reported on mean affective states and their association with gender and life-course stage, to what extent is mood associated with different types of activity? The 6 items relating to positive affectivity were recoded to reflect a single score for positive affect (PA). The 9 items relating to negative affectivity were also recoded to reflect one score for negative affect (NA). Mean scores for PA and NA were then calculated for each of the nine types of activity and are shown in figures 1 and 2. The data indicate that the activities associated with the highest levels of positive affect were socialising and community interaction, voluntary work and care activities, education, and recreation and leisure. However, it should be noted that there was considerable variation in PA ratings for voluntary work and care activities and education as indicated by the confidence intervals (CI). This could be due to the different types of activity included in each activity category as well as the nature of demands within activity categories. For example, it is likely that a person who is doing voluntary work because they want to, will feel more positive about what they are doing than a person who feels compelled to help an elderly parent with dementia. It is also likely that a person who is under pressure to complete an assignment or to complete a training course because they feel they have to in order to progress in their career, may feel less positive than a person who is undertaking an educational programme for self development purposes and under no pressure. Such variations point to a potential limitation in time use research based on fixed categories of time use, and also highlights the complexities of mood states as being linked to motivation and perceived freedom of choice, among other things. That said, the high levels of PA (and relatively low levels of variation) associated with time spent in socialising and community interaction as well as recreation and leisure – sheds some light on the activities that are most closely linked to positive mood states.

Figure 1: Mean positive affect by type of activity

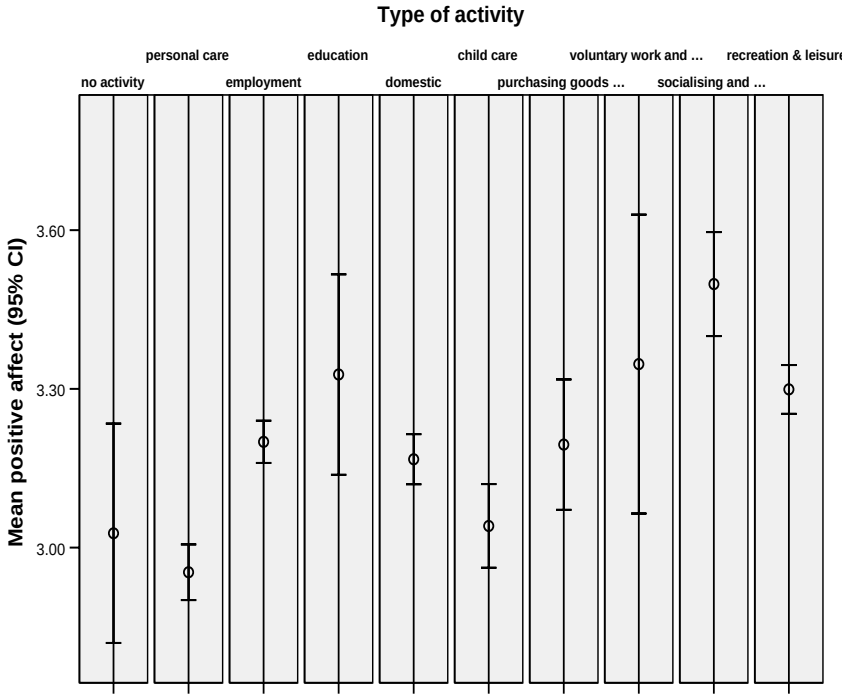
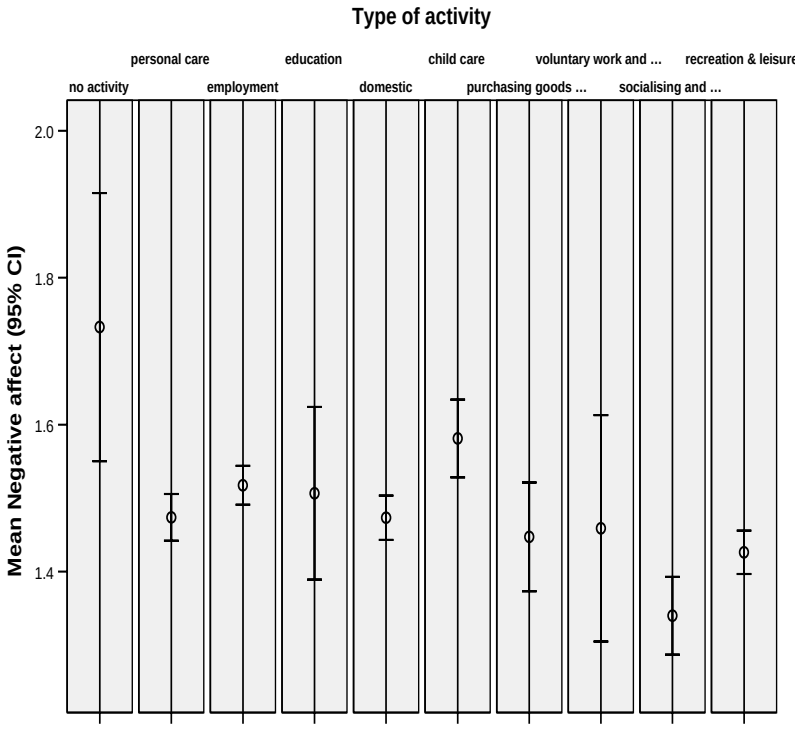


Figure 2, depicts mean scores for negative affect by type of activity. Consistent with figure 1, socialising and community interaction and recreation and leisure are associated with the lowest mean scores for negative affect when compared with other activity categories. In contrast, child care and employment are associated with the highest mean scores for negative affect although the average scores here are relatively low.

Figure 2: Mean negative affect by type of activity



On balance then it would appear that activities associated with socialising and recreation and leisure are linked to higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect when compared to other types of time use. These findings support research conducted in the UK which links leisure activities with life satisfaction and argues for government intervention to boost life satisfaction by encouraging a more leisured work/life balance [16]. The data also support the need for policy interventions that seek to regulate hours and enhance conditions of work as well as promote access to affordable and quality childcare arrangements. Such assistance might help to reduce work/family tensions that are evident in how working parents feel about paid and family 'work'.

Work/life balance – Quo vadis?

In summary, while the average amount of free time may have increased in Australia, life for many Australians is characterised by high levels of time pressure and stress. This is particularly the case for young working couples with dependent children, where the bulk of time is either spent in 'contracted' activities (e.g. paid work) or in 'committed' activities such as childminding and domestic work. These pressures seem to recede for mid-aged parents who have fewer children to care for and increased amounts of leisure time at their disposal. It is also likely that older parents are employed in positions where they have more autonomy and control in their jobs, as well as higher levels of disposable income to better 'manage' different domains of life. The struggle for work/life balance can be conceptualised as the desire to balance work, family and leisure in ways that provide reasonable opportunities for individuals to participate in each of these life domains. In turn, wellbeing is increasingly conceptualised in terms of the satisfactory integration of work and family life (Lewis & Purcell, 2006).

A key issue of the new millennium is how to give individuals greater control of their time. This issue poses challenges to households, workplaces, and government, and is important given the reported associations between balanced lifestyles, leisure and wellbeing. Work/life balance is also important to unions and employers in terms of outcomes associated with employee welfare, job satisfaction and increased productivity. If a goal of public policy is to improve quality of life in Australia, then research is needed to understand variations in time use across different life domains, and how the time use mix changes over the life-course. Such research is necessary as a basis for determining what policy responses are needed to allow individuals greater freedom of choice in how time is used across different life domains, while at the same time ensuring that arrangements are in place to support particular lifestyle choices at different stages of family formation. By understanding better the experience and impacts of work-life tensions in time-crunched households, we aim to contribute to national and international debates about the social and economic costs associated with time pressure and stress and their impact on individual and organisational wellbeing, as well as help

formulate personal and public responses to social change. Such an understanding is also crucial to understanding what makes us happy – and the need to build more positive experiences into our lives as a way of maximising our wellbeing.

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