

# Past Patterns of Work Hours and Work-Family Spillover in Dual-Earner Couples

Joy E. Pixley  
University of California, Irvine

## Introduction

Work-family conflict is a serious issue; it has been linked to mental health disorders (Grzywacz and Bass 2003), physical health problems (Allen and Armstrong 2006), and lower satisfaction with work and with life overall (Kossek and Ozeki 1998). Research has shown a link between longer work hours and work-family conflict, and particularly with work-*to*-family conflict, in which work demands interfere with performing roles at home (Moen and Yu 2000; Winslow 2005). There is also some evidence that subjective factors, such as preferences and perceptions, mediate the relationship between work hours and work burnout (Barnett et al. 1999). The current study contributes to the literature on work hours and work-family conflict by using a life-course approach and couple-level data.

There is little theory and even less empirical work on how long-term patterns of work hours affect current work-family conflict. I posit that individuals evaluate their work demands and work-family fit in the context of their past working experiences. If so, increases or decreases in work hours over time may affect how stressful the current level of work hours is perceived to be. Long periods with the same high work hours may exacerbate work-family conflict; alternately, these workers may exhibit higher resistance to work hour-related stress due to selection effects.

In dual-earner couples, the partner's work hours should also be important. An important source of higher work-family conflict in recent decades is the increase in total hours worked by both partners in a household (Jacobs and Gerson 2001). A partner who works longer work hours not only has less time to contribute to joint tasks at home, but can also transmit his or her higher work-family stress to the other partner (Lavee and Ben-Ari 2007). There is evidence that parents with working partners experience more work-family conflict than those with non-working partners (Winslow 2005), but surprisingly little research has focused on the effects of partners' work hours on each other's work-family conflict (note its absence in Eby's (2005) very thorough review of the literature). In theory, changes in partner's work hours should have a similar, if smaller, effect on stress as changes in own work hours. Men may be especially vulnerable to changes in their female partners' work hours, as women typically do more household tasks. However, past changes in the partner's work hours are not addressed by most studies of work-family conflict. Furthermore, I can find no prior research on how work-family conflict may be affected by the pattern of partners' *relative* work hours (at the most basic level, whether their work hours are increasingly more similar, increasingly more disparate, or the same over time).

In short, despite the likelihood that past work history influences current work experiences, research on work-family conflict is almost exclusively focused on current conditions: no research has systematically examined how past patterns of work hours relate to current experiences of work-family conflict. In this paper, I test whether past patterns of work hours help to explain current work-family conflict, net of current characteristics. Along the way, I ask whether the same factors that help explain current work hours (e.g., gender, presence of young children) explain work hour patterns over time. I also look for effects of the male partner's work hour pattern on the female partner's work-family conflict, and vice versa. Finally, I test whether the pattern of difference in partners' work hours over time relates to current work-family conflict.

## Representing and studying work hour histories

I use an innovative life course method, the interpolated curve approach (ICA), which enables analyses of life course patterns not previously possible (Pixley 2008). ICA graphs each respondent's history as a series of job changes in continuous time ( $x$ -axis), with a changing level of work hours ( $y$ -axis). An advantage of ICA over similar approaches is the ability to represent complex, irregular patterns over any length of time, without sacrificing details such as exactly when work hours changed and by how much. Importantly, work hours can be represented as a continuous value, and not collapsed into categories such as part-time and full-time. Figure 1 illustrates a graph for one respondent's work hour history.

Each individual's work hour history graph is then systematically compared to every other graph in the dataset, using volumetric techniques that calculate the average distance between the two graphs' lines on the  $y$ -axis across the shared portion of the  $x$ -axis. These pair-wise differences can be examined directly: for example, I can determine what factors predict larger differences between partners' two work hour patterns in dual-earner couples. They can also be used to identify clusters of work hour patterns that are similar to each other, which constitute empirically-derived typologies.

## Data

For this paper, I use two related studies of dual-earner heterosexual couples conducted by the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute (Moen et al. 2001). The Cornell Couples and Careers Study (CCCS) includes 729 higher-status "dual-career" couples in Upstate New York; the Cornell Community Study (COMM) includes 379 more typical dual-earner couples selected from the CCCS respondents' neighborhoods. Both studies collected retrospective life histories from both partners, including job changes and work hours for each job. Although the first study is larger, the second study provides a useful replication opportunity, as its respondents are more representative of the broader population of dual-earner couples. Each study should capture workers at various points in their work hour histories, such as after a long period with the same work hours, having recently shifted to more or fewer hours, and having shifted work hours many years in the past. I use the interpolated curves approach to construct a work hour pattern for each individual, and then systematically compare those patterns across individuals and between partners within couples.

The eight-item measure of work-family spillover includes both positive and negative spillover, from work-to-family and from family-to-work. All tests are run with the full scale, and also separated by type of spillover. Work hour preferences are measured by a single item, asking what hours the respondent would ideally like to work.

## Results

Cluster analysis on the ICA distance matrix produces an eight-cluster solution for both samples. The distributions of work hour patterns within each cluster for one study (CCCS) are shown in Figure 2. Results noted here are similar for the COMM study. Some work hour patterns exhibit the "M" shape over the life course that is associated with women's reduced labor force participation during periods of heavy family demands. As expected, these clusters tend to contain more women than men. However, certain M-shaped patterns (such as cluster 5) contain as many men as women, and women are strongly represented in most of the stable work hour patterns as well. Not surprisingly, parental status helps explain work hour pattern clusters, and

this effect is somewhat stronger for women than for men. Further analyses will examine differences across patterns by occupational status and education.

Regression analyses indicate that past work hour pattern does help predict current work-family spillover, at least for women. Work-hour cluster membership explains a small but significant proportion of variation in current work-family spillover after accounting for current characteristics, including work hours. These effects are much weaker for men than for women, and may disappear for men as the models are further refined. The effects are also much stronger for negative work-family spillover than for positive spillover, consistent with a focus on work-family conflict rather than other types of spillover.

Thus far, I have only compared work hour patterns using the full life history data. In additional analyses, I will limit the construction of patterns to the previous ten years, which I expect will have more proximate and thus stronger effects on current outcomes.

Also in subsequent analyses, I will compare partners' work hour histories within each couple. With this, I can test whether changes over time in how many more or fewer hours a woman works compared to her partner affects her experience of work-family spillover (or vice versa for men).

## References

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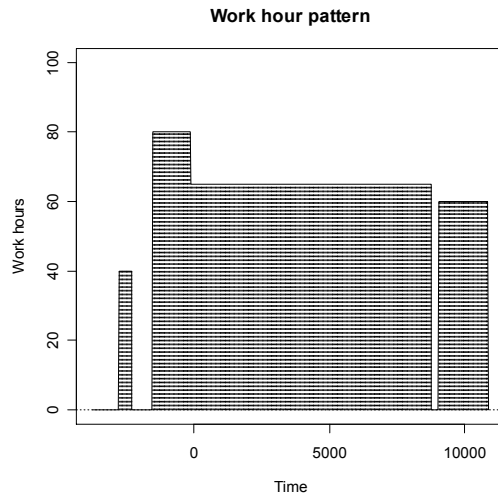


Figure 1. Example of a Work Hour History Representation Using the Interpolated Curves Approach.

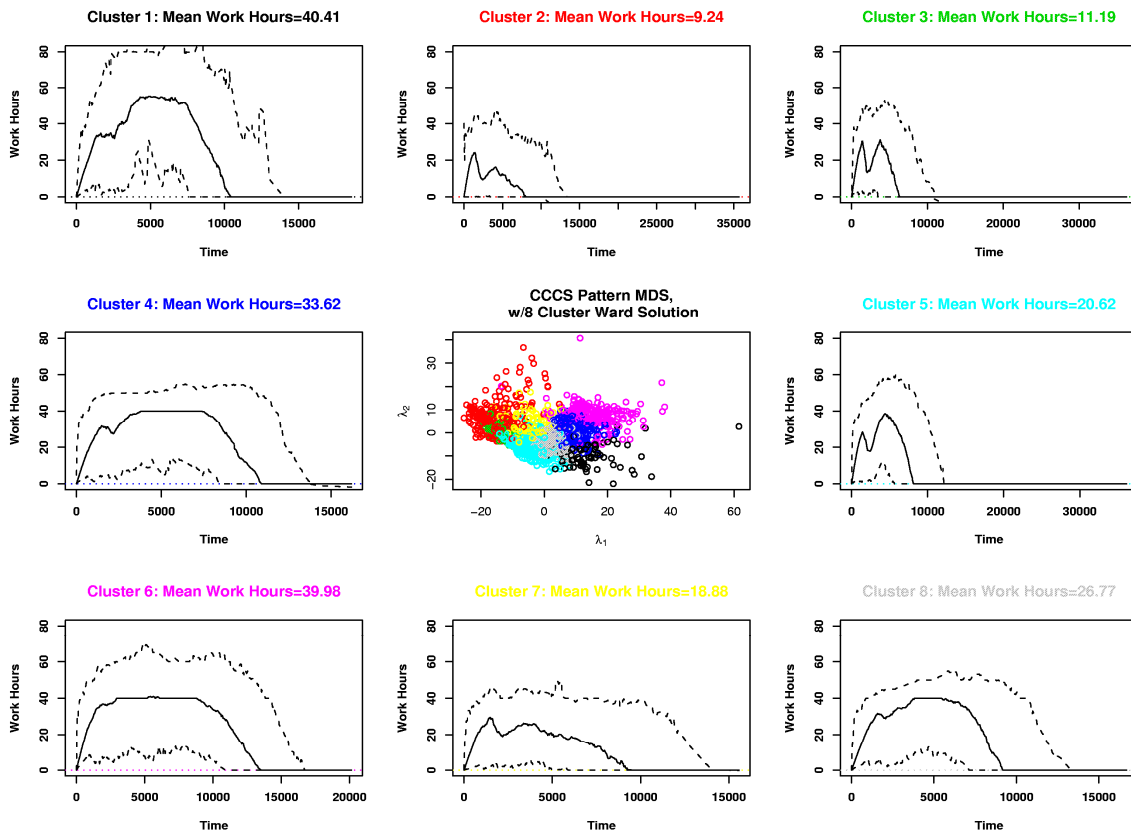


Figure 2. Distributions of Work Hour Patterns for Eight Clusters in the Couples and Careers Study.