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Long working hours and working-time preferences: Between desirability and feasibility

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Abstract

Studies of workers engaged in patterns of long working hours increasingly draw on working-time preference data from large-scale surveys, in particular data on the 'match' or 'mismatch' of current working hours and preferred working hours. These data are useful, but they are weakened by the common instability of answers to simple working-time preference questions. This article reviews the existing discussion of the causes and implications of this instability. It takes advantage of a small programme of in-depth qualitative interviews in order to examine more closely expressions of working-time preferences among long hours workers. The interview results reveal widespread ambivalence, linked to the fact that employees hold multiple, often conflicting ideas, in particular around the feasibility of a reduction in their working hours. The results point to the need for a careful combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in the study of the causes of long working hours.

Keywords

ambivalence, employee attitudes, ideas at work, long working hours, mismatch, survey methodology, working-time preferences

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Studies of workers engaged in patterns of long working hours[1] increasingly draw on working-time preference data from large-scale surveys, in particular when seeking to analyse the causes of such long hours (e.g. Drago et al., 2009; van Echtelt et al., 2006, 2007). However, these data are weakened by several problems, and as a result the exact meaning and significance of stated preferences remain blurred. Working-time preferences can be seen as a black box that requires closer attention from researchers (Golden and Altman, 2008: 63).

This article aims to throw light into the black box of working-time preferences. It contributes to this purpose in two main ways. First, it clarifies the challenge that faces researchers in using working-time preference data for long hours workers. The article begins by drawing attention to the common instability of answers to simple working-time preference questions. It suggests that this instability is not the result of any technical failures in survey design, but is better viewed as a symptom of an underlying uncertainty in many workers' attitudes toward their working hours.

Second, the article offers pointers toward a fuller understanding of the working-time preferences of long hours workers. It uses a small programme of in-depth qualitative interviews, in which full-time employees engaged in patterns of long hours were asked in more detail about their working-time preferences. The sampling frame for the selection of interviewees was provided by a large-scale Australian panel survey, the *Australia at Work* survey. Qualitative interviews are commonly recommended as a way of enriching the discussion of the preferences of long hours workers (Fagan, 2001: 245; Fagan, 2004: 133; Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006: 635; van Wanrooy and Wilson, 2006: 365). However, as far as we are aware, our study represents the first time that the working-time preferences of long hours employees have been examined in this way. The interviews offer further evidence of the common instability of stated working-time preferences over time. However, their main contribution stems from evidence that – when given the opportunity to talk at greater length about working-time preferences – most full-time employees engaged in long working hours oscillated among different viewpoints and provided answers that were permeated with *ambivalence*, sometimes shallow but often deep-seated. We use the interview data to explore the roots of this ambivalence. The interviews indicate that ambivalence is linked to the fact that employees hold multiple, often conflicting ideas, in particular around the constraints that they face and the feasibility of a reduction in their working hours.

The first section of the article reviews the working-time preference questions found in large-scale surveys and discusses the problems of instability that affect the interpretation of the answers. The second section introduces our interview-based research project. The third section presents selected findings in relation to working-time preferences. The fourth section offers a conclusion, which underlines the issue of ambivalence and advocates a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in the study of the causes of long working hours.

Working-time preference data

Large-scale surveys of work and working conditions generally contain several questions on working-time, including current (usual or actual) weekly hours of paid work. In the

last 20 years, they have also begun to include closed-ended questions on *preferences* for working hours. A familiar sequence of questions begins by asking employees or employed persons their current hours and then asking in effect if they would prefer fewer weekly hours, more hours, or the same number of hours.

The results are sensitive to the format or framing of the questions (see below), but summarizing broadly, in the case of long hours workers, we can say that large-scale surveys reveal a significant proportion of long hours workers who state that they would prefer *fewer* hours; another significant proportion who state that they do *not* want to change their hours; and a small proportion of long hours workers who state that they want *more* hours (e.g. Wooden and Drago, 2009: 71). In many surveys, respondents are also asked to nominate the exact number of their preferred hours, thereby giving researchers a quantitative measure of the size of any discrepancy between current hours and preferred hours (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2007).

Working-time preference data are useful. They provide a window into subjective evaluations of working hours and thereby help to focus attention on what workers want. They provide information that could help predict quit behaviour (Böheim and Taylor, 2004). At the theoretical level, the fact that so many employees declare a preference for a change in working hours casts doubt on conventional labour supply theory in neoclassical economics, which assumes that the price mechanism serves to equilibrate labour markets and that workers are free to choose their hours at a given wage (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006). In the neoclassical approach, working-time preferences are seen as exogenous to labour market processes, innate to the individual, fixed and therefore stable – indeed, hardly worth enquiring about.[2]

The evidence of a significant disjunction between preferred and current hours pushes researchers to examine barriers to individual worker choice, thereby helping to stimulate discussion of policy initiatives to overcome these barriers (Lee and McCann, 2006). More specifically, evidence derived from preference data can contribute to policy initiatives by helping to identify and compare working-time 'gaps' (Lee, 2004; see Reynolds, 2004). Representative data on part-time workers who declare that they want more hours have been used for many years as the basis for measures of time-related underemployment, designed to supplement measures of unemployment and help generate a fuller picture of labour slack in an economy (ILO, 2009). It is possible to develop an analogous concept of 'overemployment' (Golden, 2006; Golden and Altman, 2008) constructed from data on long hours workers who state that they want to reduce their hours. Though overemployment does not have the same currency in labour market analysis as underemployment, its potential is widely recognized. Especially when joined with a volume measure, it can help to define the scope for policy intervention aimed at redistributing working hours (Bielenski et al., 2002).

However, working-time preference data are slippery, and they cannot be safely used for all purposes. Researchers commonly use responses to the preference questions in order to classify individuals into categories of either 'match', where the stated preference is for no change in current hours, or 'mismatch', where the stated preference does involve a change from current hours. In the case of employees engaged in long hours work, a familiar division is between employees who declare a match and most cases of mismatch, in which long hours employees state that they would prefer *fewer* hours.

This classification is reasonable, but it is important to avoid rushing toward rigid interpretations. One problem arises when researchers equate the division between 'match' and 'mismatch' with a straightforward divide between the contented and the discontented. But perhaps the major problem arises when researchers identify this as a divide between those who have freely chosen long hours (= 'match') and those who are constrained in their choices (= 'mismatch') (Bryan, 2007; Drago et al., 2009). According to one recent study, these can be labelled respectively as the 'volunteers' and the 'conscripts' in long hours work (Drago et al., 2009). The 'volunteers' are set aside, as posing few problems for research or policy, because they are seen as having freely chosen their working hours. Instead, research narrows in on the group of 'conscripts', searching for the characteristics that distinguish this group and analysing factors that might explain the mismatch. In this interpretation, discussion of match and mismatch leads into doubtful assumptions and arguments concerning the *causes* of long hours work – free choice in the case of the one group and one or another set of constraints, constructed out of standard survey variables such as occupation and union membership, in the case of the other group (Drago et al., 2009; see also Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006; van Echtelt et al., 2006, 2007).

Self-reported data for current working hours can be associated with false overestimates (Robinson et al., 2011), but survey data on preferred hours are even more contestable. The interpretations outlined above appear to be based on an assumption that a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to a working-time preference question can be taken at face-value, as accurately reflecting an underlying 'true preference' held by the individual. We can hear here a distorted echo of the neoclassical view of working-time preferences as innate and fixed. In this view, stated preferences express firm, considered desires, which pre-exist in the minds of individuals and are then revealed through the response to closed-ended survey questions.

It is doubtful that working-time preference data are robust enough to sustain such interpretations. One symptom of their weakness is the fact that responses to simple working-time preference questions are often unstable. This is evident in at least two ways: i) instability according to the wording of the question; and ii) instability over time.

Instability of answers according to the wording of the question

Questions on working-time preferences in large-scale surveys often vary in structure and wording. In some surveys the relevant working-time preference questions are asked baldly, without prompts or conditions. But this bald format is open to several objections, which allude to possible confounding factors that can obscure the results. Some surveys respond to such objections by introducing conditions on the individual's consideration of his/her preference. The conditions generally make explicit a hypothesis of free choice and impose a trade-off of working hours and income. A soft version is found in the 1998 *Employment Options of the Future* survey: 'provided that you (and your partner) could make a free choice so far as working hours are concerned and taking into account the need to earn your living . . .' (Bielenski et al., 2002: 143). Similarly, the Australian panel survey, the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) Survey asks: 'if you could choose the number of hours you work each week, and taking into

account how that would affect your income? . . .' (Reynolds and Aletaris, 2006: 624−625; Wooden and Drago, 2009: 71). Tougher versions, which ask respondents to assume that their income will increase or decrease, sometimes in direct proportion to their hours, are found in other surveys (ABS, 2000). In some cases the components are separated into multiple questions (e.g. with an initial question on choice and then on the income condition), framed according to the method of payment (Feather and Shaw, 2000: 657).

Such differences in structure and wording have a substantial impact. Estimates of the macroeconomic overemployment rate in the USA range from as low as 6 percent to as high as 50 percent (Golden and Altman, 2008: 64), with much of that variation able to be traced back to differences in the structure and wording of the questions. In general, it is fair to say: the tighter the conditions in the question; the smaller the proportion of respondents who state a preference for change. This suggests that the same individuals would give different answers depending on the format of the question.

Instability of answers over time

Matches and mismatches change over time. This is understandable if there has been a shift in current hours; for example, when workers who express a preference for fewer hours are able to secure fewer hours. However, data from panel surveys suggest that changes in stated preferences are surprisingly frequent and that stated working-time preferences of individuals are liable to change, *even when their hours remain the same* (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006: 628−629; Reynolds and Aletraris, 2010: 493−496; see Drago et al., 2009: 580).

How do stated preferences change in the absence of a change in current hours? One explanation could be a change in background social and economic circumstances; for example, a family change such as children starting school, or an economic change such as a sudden loss of savings. But this does not exhaust all cases of a change in stated preferences (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006). In the case of the change from mismatch to match, some researchers offer a further explanation in terms of adaptive preferences (Golden, 2006, 2009; Golden and Altman, 2008) or 'settling' (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006: 620), whereby some workers alter their preferences by 'internalizing the external incentives in the labour market, workplace or culture' (Golden and Altman, 2008: 74). The notion of adaptation is important. It starts to allude to the plasticity of preferences. It points to the way in which stated preferences – and indeed attitudes and behaviour in general – may be shaped by forces such as norms and organizational cultures (Moen and Wethington, 1992; van Wanrooy, 2005). However, its use to explain the resolution of mismatches seems unduly narrow, amounting to just a slight tweak in the interpretation of stated working-time preferences. Used in this way, adaptation seems to invoke a two-stage theory of preference formation, in which preferences are indeed relatively firm and fixed at the start, but then bend under the pressure of mismatches.

A change in preference from match to mismatch, without any change in current hours, is the alternative puzzle for research. Again, this could arise out of a change in background circumstances. It is harder here to add on a notion of bending to the pressure of the match, though one possible cause cited in the literature is 'burnout' (Drago et al., 2009: 577).

Response instability: Causes and implications

The evidence cited above suggests that response instability in working-time preference data for long hours workers is common. Responses vary widely according to the format of the question, and responses for the same individuals over time can shift even in the absence of changes in current hours or changes in background circumstances. This does not mean that working-time preference data should be dismissed as devoid of meaning. The evidence is compatible with the idea of a core of individual workers, whose responses do not vary across different question formats and whose responses, in the absence of a change in current hours or a change in background circumstances, remain the same over time. For this core group, working-time preference data may still be difficult to interpret, but the data can be safely taken as the expression of an underlying view that is relatively firm. However, the evidence also indicates that outside the core stands a substantial group whose responses are not as stable. The precise size of this group is difficult to estimate, but it is large enough to constitute a challenge to researchers concerned to test causal theories by means of working-time preference data. For the latter group of workers, interpretation of working-time preference data is clearly problematic and demands care and close attention.

Response instability is a familiar problem, but surprisingly little effort has been devoted in the quantitative literature on long hours to considering its causes and its implications. Response instability could, of course, be due to imperfect questions – a technical problem, to be solved at some point by fine-tuning the questions and ironing out the instability. This proposition may appear plausible when faced with evidence of instability according to the wording of the question, though it has less purchase as a possible rejoinder to evidence of instability over time.

However, it is more probable that instability is due not to the inadequacy of the measure, but rather to the unstable nature of what is captured by the measure. In this latter view, response instability would be seen as anchored in the unstable and uncertain nature of the underlying attitudes held by many individual workers and expressed in their answers to working-time preference questions.

Support for the latter view can be found in methodological literature, initially in psychology and social psychology, but also stretching into other social science disciplines, which suggests that response instability is common in attitudinal surveys and that it often stems from *ambivalence*. Ambivalence has both an emotional and a cognitive component and can be usefully defined as ‘the presence of conflicting evaluations or beliefs held by a single individual about an attitude object’ (Craig et al., 2005: 6; see also Ashforth et al., 2010: 4). Emotional ambivalence is characterized by mixed feelings, but the balance between positive and negative feelings may vary, as can the intensity of the positive and negative feelings (Fong, 2006).

The topic of ambivalence has attracted attention from scholars in several disciplines. In sociology, ambivalence is seen as anchored in complex social relations marked by structural contradictions, and it is often taken to reflect ‘the contradiction and paradox that are characteristic of social experience’ (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 558; see Sjöberg, 2010; Smelser, 1998). It is particularly salient for the analysis of individual experiences within modern work organizations (Ashforth et al., 2010; Fong, 2006; Pratt, 2000), which are marked not only by complex social relations and conflicting expectations within the organization, but also by the chronic tension that divides paid work and the rest of life

– what is commonly called 'work-life balance' (Lewis et al., 2007). Working-time patterns, including long working hours, are an important site for tension around work-life balance (Lewis, 2003; Pocock, 2005).

One extended discussion of the methodological issue, with parallels to the case of working-time preferences, comes from political science. Zaller and Feldman's (1992) theory of the survey response takes its starting-point from the frequent instability of responses to attitudinal questions in political opinion surveys. They argue that instability reflects a fundamental ambivalence, uncertainty, vacillation, and even contradiction and conflict on the part of most respondents, which can be traced back to the fact that most individuals hold multiple, often conflicting ideas on important political issues.

At first glance, the topic of working-time preferences may appear to be distant from issues of public policy, which demand abstract political judgements. However, the gap is not as large as it may seem. Working-time preferences may appear to be simple statements of desire. In contrast to the view from neoclassical economics, however, they are unlikely to be fixed attributes of individuals; instead, they are more likely to be expressions of complex and contingent relations that extend well beyond desires to encompass individual decisions and patterns of social behaviour. This is consistent with what we know about preference formation in general, which is best conceptualized as an endogenous process that emerges from interactions between individuals and their environment (Druckman and Lupia, 2000; Philp et al., 2005). Thus, the examination of working-time preferences may start in the private realm of subjective feelings, but it also inevitably leads into practices and personal decisions. This includes practices in the past and present (choices in employment, choices in work and family life, the extent of control over working hours), and stated preferences may emerge in this context as rationalizations of prior choices. Most directly, however, preference questions refer to possible future practices. What individual workers think to do in the future will depend both on the practical options available to them and on their ability to identify these options. Indeed, one crucial precondition for expressing the desire for a change in hours is an ability to imagine such a change, including its conditions and consequences. Here, preference questions inevitably invoke not only feelings, but also complex ideas and judgements. In this perspective, stated preferences do not represent simple statements of innate desires; instead, they also tend to involve judgements of *feasibility* (Bielenski et al., 2002: 16; Fagan, 2001: 243−244; Golden, 2006: 214).

Closer to home, we can also refer to debates on part-time work and women's preferences and choices. One contributor explicitly warns that preference data:

> . . . are usually interpreted at face value and with little reflection on how these characteristics might be shaped by circumstances. For example, part-timers who say they do not want full-time work are interpreted as having voluntarily chosen this arrangement, from which it is often concluded that there is no need for policy intervention, with little concern to unravel the implications of how this decision is shaped by labour market experiences and constraints such as social norms or childcare costs. (Fagan, 2001: 242)

Fagan (2001: 243) appeals for a careful reading of preference data, and she goes on to sketch out a useful framework for interpreting working-time preferences, in which the individual's current circumstances and the societal working-time regime must be taken

into account. This framework includes several factors external to the individual, but it also incorporates a recognition of the importance of ideational factors, which shape individual's perceptions of external constraints. In this view, preferences are not only shaped and constrained by circumstances, but also by the way individuals respond to their circumstances, based on their values and social identity (see also Duncan, 2006; McRae, 2003).

Qualitative interviews have been widely used to enrich the discussion of preferences among part-time workers. These reveal themes such as 'trade-offs', whereby workers see themselves as in effect obliged to exchange good wages and working conditions for the part-time schedule. As a result, attitudes to the job, and indeed the hours, are often ambivalent, with part-time workers readily identifying aspects that are welcome, as well as other aspects that are less welcome (Walsh, 2007; Walters, 2005). These tensions come to the surface in subjective attitudes, but they are anchored in social structures such as conflicting norms and expectations of women's social role (Walters, 2005).

The literature on part-time work is highly relevant for research on workers engaged in long working hours (Lee and McCann, 2006: 74−78). It includes study of the situation of women who are classified as happy with their part-time hours (i.e. who have a 'match' between current hours and preferred hours), and it explicitly contests the assumption that these individuals can be seen as 'volunteers' who are pursuing a free choice of working-time patterns. Indeed, a voluminous literature explores the 'constrained choices' faced by such workers (e.g. Crompton and Harris, 1998; McRae, 2003; Walsh, 1999). More recently, the concept of capability (Sen, 1999) has stimulated a rich perspective that, instead of 'free choice' or even 'constrained choice', assesses workers' situations in terms of the range of options faced by individuals and the conversion factors that allow them to achieve specific outcomes. This is a conceptual framework that firmly grounds individual choice in a social context and draws attention to the importance of institutional conditions and social rights in expanding the working-time options for individuals to achieve working-time patterns that suit their interests and preferences (Fagan and Walthery, 2011; Hobson, 2011; Lee and McCann, 2006).

In spite of the clear relevance of such arguments, they enjoy only a faint echo in most quantitative studies of long hours work (Bielenski et al., 2002; Golden, 2006; van Wanrooy and Wilson, 2006). Some quantitative studies acknowledge 'preference endogeneity' (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2007: 293−294), but others persist in taking stated preferences at face value in the rush to deploy variables of 'match' and 'mismatch' in their analyses (Drago et al., 2009; Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006; van Echtelt et al., 2006, 2007). In particular, the suggestion in one recent study (Drago et al., 2009) that the group of long hours workers who declared a preference for *not* reducing their long hours are 'volunteers' repeats the error that much feminist literature on part-time work warns against; it treats what is likely to be the complex expression of constrained choices as if it were a simple free choice.

Supplementing quantitative data with qualitative interviews

The discussion in the preceding section points to several important questions concerning the working-time preferences of long hours workers:

- To what extent are stated preferences bound up with ambivalence?
- What generates ambivalence? What is the role of ideas and ideologies?
- How much significance should be given to stated preferences? For example, how well do stated preferences provide a marker of contentment/discontent? How well do they correspond to a voluntary/involuntary distinction?

To throw light on these questions, descriptive data from large-scale surveys need to be supplemented with a programme of in-depth interviews. Qualitative methods have been ably used in occupational case studies of long hours workers, both professionals (Donnelly, 2006; Perlow, 1998) and working-class employees (Lautsch and Scully, 2007), and they are usefully mixed with quantitative methods in a recent study of intensified work (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Similarly, they are used to explore the working-time preferences and work orientations of mothers who are employed full time (McDonald et al., 2006). This and similar work contains rich implications for interpretation of working-time preferences, successfully identifying the complex choices and trade-offs involved in working long hours, shaped by factors such as the desire for career progression or the trap of consumerism (Lewis 2003). However, these studies usually focus on work—life balance and have not yet been explicitly connected to the analysis of working-time preferences.

Qualitative data are valuable in that they allow for exploration into an undefined or relatively unknown area, providing either greater insight into 'top-line' quantitative data or new, richer data that cannot be obtained from closed survey questions. Qualitative data, however, have limitations. Biases in small samples can hamper generalization. In order to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of qualitative data, it is best if we can extract a probability sample of interviewees from a pre-existing large-scale survey. Drawing a sample in this way gives easier access to interviewees and offers a reassurance (and test) of the representativeness of the selected interviewees. An opportunity to link quantitative and qualitative data in this way for Australia was provided by the *Australia at Work* panel survey – a telephone survey on employment conditions and attitudes to work, funded through a grant from the Australian Research Council (ARC), along with Unions NSW, under the ARC's Linkage programme. The survey, which started in 2007 with 8341 respondents and finished with Wave 5 in 2011, was designed to be representative of the labour force in March 2006. Respondents were interviewed annually. The interview schedule concludes with a question that asks whether respondents would be willing to be contacted about a follow-up interview. In the second Wave of the study, the majority (75%) of respondents said 'yes' to this last question, thereby opening up a valuable opportunity to supplement the quantitative data with linked in-depth interviews on selected topics.[3]

The *Australia at Work* survey has a particular focus on working-time, and it contains two questions on working-time preferences. The basic question asks: 'Would you like to change the number of hours you currently work?'. The answers to this question are classified as: 'no, I am happy with my hours'; 'yes, I would like to work fewer hours'; and 'yes, I would like to work more hours'; with 'don't know' and 'refused' options also being available. If the respondent stated a preference to change their hours, they were then

asked to nominate how many hours they would prefer (van Wanrooy et al., 2007: 71). As can be seen, this represents an example of what we call a bald format, without prompts or conditions to accommodate income or other potential constraints.

In 2009, we took advantage of the opportunity to conduct linked in-depth interviews with a select group of respondents to the *Australia at Work* survey. The interviews formed part of a pilot project on full-time employees engaged in unpaid overtime. Long hours are common among full-time employees in Australia, and the majority of these workers state that they undertake their extra hours as 'unpaid' hours (Campbell, 2007: 46−51). Unpaid overtime is a puzzle for explanation, and the interviews aimed to enrich quantitative data by exploring the experiences of this group of workers, including their preferences, perceptions of choice and constraint, perceptions of control over working hours, the main reason for working extra unpaid hours, and assessments of external and internal pressures. Twenty interviewees were selected from a sampling frame of full-time employees who said they were working five or more extra unpaid hours per week and were willing to be contacted about a follow-up interview.[4] Respondent IDs were picked at random from the results of Wave 2, which was completed in 2008 and covered 7086 respondents (see van Wanrooy et al., 2008). The interviews were conducted during or just after the interviews for Wave 3 of the survey, most over the period from April to July, but the final three in December 2009. The selected employees were rung to request a telephone interview. In some cases, it proved difficult to arrange an interview, and the initial sample was topped up with other IDs picked at random. Interviews were conducted on the telephone, following a semi-structured interview schedule drawn up by both researchers. The interviews lasted on average 36 minutes, and interviewees were provided with a retail voucher to the value of $50 as a token of thanks.

Twenty complete interviews were recorded and the tapes transcribed and analysed. One interview was conducted in effect retrospectively, since the job that was the subject of the interview had just been quit in favour of a job with shorter hours. On closer inspection two interviews were set aside, because the jobs under scrutiny were not seen as meeting the criterion of five or more extra unpaid hours. The results in this article refer to 18 valid interviews. Interviewees have been assigned a pseudonym to protect privacy.

The main demographic and employment characteristics of the 18 interviewees are shown in Table 1. The interviewees are broadly representative of the group of full-time employees in Wave 2 of the *Australia at Work* survey who worked five or more unpaid hours per week.

The sample consists of full-time employees working five or more extra unpaid hours per week.[5] All qualified as long hours workers. A few were only at the lower end of long hours, working 40 to 45 hours per week, but most (13) were working *very* long hours of 50 or more. Most interviewees had been in the same job since the beginning of the survey. However, the car salesman (Pedro) and the executive chef (Costas) had freely changed jobs, with the car salesman subsequently moving out of that industry altogether. The liquor store manager (Tyson) had recently changed his workplace, but it was into a similar job within the same supermarket chain, and his working conditions were only slightly changed.

Table 1. Characteristics of 18 interviewees.

Sex		Age		Family type		Sector		Occupation	
Male	10	20–29	2	Partner with children <18	6	Private	14	Managers	4
Female	8	30–39	2	Partner	8	Public	2	Professionals	9
		40–49	9	Single	4	Not-For-Profit	2	Technicians and Trades Workers	2
		50+	5					Sales workers	3

In analysing these data, we start with the summary answers of the interviewees to the simple working-time preference questions in the survey and we compare these answers with the equivalent answers provided in the in-depth interviews. This serves two purposes. It serves to give a further perspective on the stability or instability of answers over time. In addition, it serves as a convenient device for structuring the discussion of worker attitudes. We might expect to find ambivalence and uncertainty most intensely in responses from individuals who have changed their answer over time. It is convenient therefore to examine these answers first before extending the analysis of ambivalence to all interviewees.

This is a qualitative study and the interview data have limitations. Though the sample has a degree of representativeness as a result of the method of selection, the number of interviews is small and sample bias is likely. Because it is based only on those who said 'yes' to the follow-up, there is a possibility of selection bias. Moreover, this is a distinctive group of long hours employees, comprising those whose long hours took the form of unpaid extra hours in their main job. This group forms the majority (60%) of all full-time employees working long hours (ABS, 2007), but in comparison to the overall group it is biased to professional and managerial occupations (Campbell, 2007: 46−47). In addition, of course, we are dealing with *expressions* of working-time preferences, albeit more extended expressions than found in large-scale surveys. Thus, we are wrestling with subjective understandings, which, as hinted above, are likely to be shaped by multiple pressures and coloured by diverse attitudes. To extract their meaning requires an effort of interpretation. Nevertheless, in spite of these caveats, it should be stressed that the small number of in-depth interviews are appropriate to our main purpose, which is exploratory and is oriented to throwing light on the working-time preferences of long hours workers.

Results of the qualitative interviews

By extracting our interviewees from a quantitative survey sample we can compare and contrast the answers given to brief, closed-ended questions in the survey with the more detailed answers in an in-depth interview. This enables us to burrow down to investigate

what lies behind simple 'yes'/'no' answers and thereby achieve a richer account of workers' attitudes and preferences.

In response to the simple closed-ended question on working-time preferences in Wave 2 of the *Australia at Work* survey, 12 interviewees had said 'yes' they would like to work fewer hours and six had said 'no' they were happy with their hours. In terms of conventional terminology, this means that there were 12 with a 'mismatch' and six with a 'match' between their current hours and their stated preferences. We asked again in the in-depth interviews whether respondents would like to change the number of hours they currently work. The question was phrased exactly as in the survey: 'Would you like to change the number of hours you work?' and the answers were similarly framed as 'yes' or 'no'. Interviewees were not reminded of the answer they had given in Wave 2 of the survey. Those who responded positively were asked how many hours would they like to work and what would be needed for them to achieve their preferred hours. Wherever possible we probed about the content of the preference, and indeed most interviewees took the opportunity to expand on the meaning of their answers.

Table 2 provides a basic profile of the 18 interviewees, together with their responses to the basic working-time preference question, first in Wave 2 of the survey and then in the in-depth interviews.

Shift in preferences

As Table 2 indicates, the majority of interviewees (13) reproduced the 'yes' or 'no' answer that they had given in Wave 2 of the Australia at Work survey when the question was repeated some eight to 16 months later in the qualitative interview. In short, for most respondents the answers to the simple preference question were congruent across two different settings and stable over the (short) timespan between the two interviews.

The extent to which ambivalence underpinned the appearance of stability in these 13 cases is explored in a following sub-section. However, it is convenient to begin by focusing on the five who gave changed answers. These five comprised two (Tyson, Lilian) who changed their answer from 'yes' to 'no' and three (Derek, Jarrod, Abigail) who changed their answer from 'no' to 'yes'. Thus, two interviewees appeared to have resolved a mismatch and three appeared to have developed a mismatch.

A change in stated preference may simply reflect a change in actual hours in the interval between the survey and in-depth interview. This was true of Tyson, the liquor store manager, who appeared to have resolved an earlier mismatch by obtaining a transfer to a new job with fewer demands and fewer hours.

For the other four interviewees, however, the change in stated preference was not associated with any underlying change of job or change in actual hours. Three interviewees seemed to have *developed* a mismatch. Neither Derek nor Jarrod cited any change in background social and economic circumstances and certainly nothing that could be called 'burnout'. We can note that neither interviewee showed any awareness that they had altered their stated preference, and indeed the new preference did not seem intensely held. The naval officer (Derek) stressed in the interview that his job necessarily entailed long hours (around 70 per week), but he declared, almost as a throwaway line, that of course he would like to change his hours – he would prefer to be retired! The union

Table 2. Interviewees – basic profile and answers to preference questions.

Pseudonym	Sex, age	Family status*	Occupation	Preference for change	
				Wave 2 survey	In-depth interview
Costas	M, 49	Married with child/ren	Executive chef	No	No
Henry	M, 53	Married with child/ren	Financial investment adviser/manager	No	No
Yvonne	F, 42	Married	Engineering professional	No	No
Tyson	M, 44	Partner	Liquor department manager, supermarket	Yes	No
Lilian	F, 55	Married	Public servant	Yes	No
Derek	M, 53	Married	Naval officer	No	Yes
Jarrod	M, 27	Single	Union organizer	No	Yes
Abigail	F, 52	Married	Primary school principal	No	Yes
Will	M, 34	Married with child/ren	Plumber/project manager	Yes	Yes
Tony	M, 39	Married	HR manager	Yes	Yes
Dominic	M, 40	Separated (child/ren 1–2 nights per week)	Sales account manager	Yes	Yes
Pedro	M, 48	Married with child/ren	Car salesperson	Yes	Yes
Ethan	M, 43	Married	Engineer	Yes	Yes
Kim	F, 25	Single	Pharmaceutical sales rep.	Yes	Yes
Marcia	F, 45	Single	Engineer	Yes	Yes
Dimitra	F, 42	Married with child/ren	Manager	Yes	Yes
Bianca	F, 48	Partner	Social planner	Yes	Yes
Eva	F, 51	Married with child/ren	HR/Finance manager	Yes	Yes

* 'with child/ren' = with one or more children under 18 years.

organizer (Jarrod) similarly stressed the need for long hours in the job. He mentioned his devotion to the job and the importance of the service he provided, and he freely conceded that he had entered the job knowing that it would involve long hours. There seemed little overt uncertainty or conflict. In the interview he was able to identify an underlying dynamic of high workload and lack of staff, which pointed to a workplace context that at least in principle was capable of change. Partly as a result, he did express a clear, though still faint and rather wistful, preference for fewer weekly hours than the 70 to 80 that he was currently working:

> I wouldn't mind reducing it down to about the standard 40 a week. I don't know, it would be nice, and if it was paid, if budget would actually allow it to have some more staff on, yeah I'd certainly be grateful to reduce my hours. I know I'd still end up doing unpaid overtime but nowhere near the amount that I do now. (Jarrod)

The situation was more complicated for the 'Director of Campus' in a private primary school (Abigail). Abigail was working 50 to 60 hours per week. She seemed firmly attached to her job and her long hours. She declared fervently that 'it's such a wonderful workplace'. She spoke of her love of the job, the enjoyment of working with children and 'our dedicated teachers'. However, when asked whether she would like to change her hours, she responded with obvious ambivalence, signalled by opposing remarks and two-sided comments, and culminating in a heartfelt plea that seemed to hint at the heavy pressure of external expectations and a large amount of suppressed discontent. Particularly noticeable was the way her response jumped rapidly from idea to idea – from pleasure in the job, to the circumstances in which she agreed to take up the job, to an assessment of her stage in life, to a judgement on her past life, to a protest about workload, to a tentative, hesitant protest about employer expectations and the pressures placed on her in her quasi-management position:

> I would probably like to work say a four-day week or I would probably like to simply work. I enjoy what I do, I'm in what I do because I've been asked to be here, but I would have liked to have stepped back this year, the hours that I work. Because I'm getting too old . . . I would like to work my 38-hour week and be able to go home and just do the planning in the holidays like I used to do, and teach through the week like I used to do. I know you always have extra meetings, but . . . being at every meeting that needs to go on every night and every teacher thing that they present, being there as a delegate for the school . . . I didn't have to do that before, when I was a teacher! (Abigail)

The in-depth interview hinted at changes that may have sparked off Abigail's declaration of a preference for reduced hours. Apart from the reference to 'getting too old', she also explained that in the course of a recent workplace restructure she had taken up a slightly different set of tasks that she had hoped would be less arduous; but it had not panned out that way – there's 'less pressure but the time that I'm spending is the same'. It may be that her response to the direct question on preferences was coloured by her disappointment concerning the new position, but the most striking aspect of the interview was the volatility of her attitudes to her working hours, which were presented in starkly contrasting ways, both positively and negatively. The intensity of the swing from positive to negative and then back to positive was sharp, but it seemed to occur without much conscious awareness. A notion of 'burnout' might capture the negative part of this swing in attitudes, but it does not seem appropriate to the overall configuration of Abigail's response.

The final example of a change of answer is provided by the senior public servant working 50 to 60 hours per week (Lilian), who appeared to have *resolved a mismatch* by changing her answer from 'yes, I would prefer fewer hours' in Wave 2 of the Survey to 'no' in the interview. One possibility here could be adaptive preferences, but the in-depth interview offered no evidence that an initial preference for shorter hours had been bent by the pressure of mismatch. Instead, the interview pointed strongly to an underlying

uncertainty and oscillation between contrasting viewpoints, which were likely to have been present for several years.

As in the case of Abigail, the interview revealed a strong ambivalence about long hours, though Lilian seemed more aware of the ambivalence. She openly admitted that she found difficulty answering the question about whether she wanted to change her hours, seeking in the course of the interview to develop and clarify her perspective. Lilian considered different time horizons for her answer, but she finally stated that she did *not* want to change her hours, at least not at the moment. She argued that in this current position, long hours were inescapable: 'the reality is for me at this sort of level you really can't do the job without doing the extra hours'. Nevertheless, this did not mean she was content with the hours. Though it would involve quitting the job, perhaps in the future she would change her hours:

> I would like to think that at some stage into the future when I'm seriously thinking about retiring or downsizing that I might move to doing four days a week or three and a half days a week or something like that. But not at this point in time. (Lilian)

These interviews suggest that ambivalence was associated with awareness of external social and economic circumstances, in particular ageing and the conditions for retirement. Yet, also of interest is the way in which ambivalence was linked to the tension between desirability and feasibility, that is the tension between aspirations and the structural possibilities for realizing these aspirations (Sjöberg 2010: 38). When asked about a preference for change, each of the interviewees circled around perceived external barriers to change. Especially when the implicit time horizon was short, interviewees could only see a formidable set of constraints, mainly located within the workplace, whether as a result of limited resources for new staff, employer expectations, or the nature of the job. Thus, each interviewee seemed to stumble over the difficulty of identifying realistic practical options, whether within the current employment relation or outside it, for realizing a hypothetical change toward reduced hours.

Widespread ambivalence

The shift in answers found in these five interviews could not, apart from the case of Tyson, be plausibly attributed to any fundamental change in current hours or background circumstances. Nor did it seem to be the result of any fundamental change in thinking, as in theses of adaptation or burnout. The most appropriate interpretation is that the shift did not signify much at all. The evidence of the in-depth interviews suggests that working-time preferences in these four cases were complex and deeply marked by ambivalence and internal conflict. The employees often had difficulty in giving a clear response, as they weighed up different considerations and reflected on differing viewpoints that could be applied to their long hours. As a result, it is not surprising that their answers to the question on working-time preferences were unstable and liable to shift, depending on which aspect of the contrasting attitudes they chose to emphasize. The change in answers from the survey to the in-depth interview is best seen as a rather fortuitous expression of this underlying ambivalence.

This is not to say that all four cases were exactly the same. However, the difference among them seems to have little to do with whether and when they answered 'yes' or 'no'. Instead, the difference is partly to do with the pressures they chose to cite in the course of explicating their preferences. It is also partly to do with the intensity and substance of the ambivalence that they expressed in the interview. In some cases (Derek, Jarrod) the ambivalence was muted and weak; in other cases (Abigail, Lilian) it was sharper. In some cases (Lilian) the employee was fully aware of an oscillation between differing viewpoints, while in other cases (Abigail) the oscillation seemed hidden from self-consciousness.

Ambivalence was not limited to the employees who showed a change in preference. Almost all 18 interviews showed evidence of ambivalence. Many started their response to the basic working-time preference question in the in-depth interview with a conditional ('I should work less hours, yes . . .', 'I would . . .', 'I suppose . . .') or with two-sided statements ('yes, but . . .', 'probably, but . . .' and 'no, but . . .') before going on to cite various considerations and contrasting viewpoints. Even among those who were most forceful in stating a preference, ambivalence readily emerged when speaking of cognate topics such as pressure on choice, control over hours, and what would be required for them to achieve a reduction in their hours. As in the four cases cited above, the pressures they listed often differed. Moreover, the ambivalence was sometimes muted and weak, but in other cases very sharp. Sometimes it was explicit, and in other cases more implicit.

The roots of ambivalence

The 18 interviews not only revealed widespread ambivalence but also, most important, pointed to the roots of this ambivalence. Several components can be distinguished. For example, one component is the understandable difficulty faced by interviewees in separating out the evaluation of long working hours from the broader evaluation of the job. As in the case of part-time jobs, a long hours job can be seen as a bundle of different aspects, in which the worker finds trade-offs. Long hours, even when seen as a negative, may be viewed as the cost paid by the worker for positive features, such as good wages, interesting job content, high chances of career advancement and extended control.

Even if it were possible to focus just on working hours, there is an additional difficulty in isolating the extra, objectionable component of working hours from the core component that is seen as unobjectionable and perhaps even welcome. Extra working hours may be seen by individual workers as a negative, but the core working hours may be viewed as a positive, not only because these hours ensure an income, but also because the work itself is interesting and stimulating. Thus, Costas, an executive chef in a large Sydney hotel, was insistent that he had fought hard to reduce his working hours from a potential 70 to 80 hours per week. Such long hours had proven in the past to be an unbearable imposition on his family life, but he declared himself comfortable with 60 hours:

> I think that I need to do those hours in order to get the job done to the satisfaction I want it, because I'm always achieving, trying to achieve new targets; personal targets, new things and just continuously growing. (Costas)

Finally, it is important to tease out the strong cognitive elements of ambivalence, linked to the jumble of ideas and ideologies and social identities that emerge in reflection on work and working time. Often the supply of ideas seemed over-abundant. Ideological judgements and stock phrases seemed to press forward at the start of the answers in the interview, but these judgements and stock phrases would then strike the speakers as hollow and imprecise, and, if given time, they would often push them aside in search of other perspectives.

The presence of cognitive ambivalence was most apparent in the interviews when discussing the prospects for change. As noted above, questions on working-time preferences can be seen as implicit questions about the *feasibility* of change. In confronting a question on working-time preferences, employees are faced with what is in effect a hypothetical question. They are required to imagine whether and how it might be possible to change their current working-time situation. This may be something that the workers have themselves already considered, either in depth, or at least in passing fancy, or it may be an issue that they are forced to tackle seriously for the first time in the survey or in-depth interview. In asking interviewees to assess what would be needed to effect change, we rendered this challenging issue of feasibility more explicit.

Ambivalence in the discussion of prospects for change seemed concentrated at three main sites. The interviewees found difficulty in analysing: i) the conditions for a reduction in hours; ii) the causes of long hours; and iii) personal responsibility or agency.

Conditions for a reduction in hours. Questions about alternatives are difficult to answer. Apart from anything else, they demand an ability to identify a mechanism for change. In the past, reduction of hours has occurred through collective endeavour linked to the struggle of the labour movement (Bosch and Lehndorff, 2001), but it is also possible to reduce hours through individualized means; for example, through individual negotiation with a supervisor or perhaps through moving to a different job.

When asked what would be needed to effect a reduction in hours, none of the interviewees mentioned collective endeavour. Some referred to individual negotiation, but most struggled to make sense of even the basic presumption of change within their current jobs. Some interviewees, like Jarrod (see above), identified more staff and more resources as a condition for achieving shorter hours, but most interviewees accepted without question the parameters of their current schedules. Many could see an alternative only in terms of changing jobs or perhaps retiring. Dominic, an account manager in sales, working 50 hours per week, felt that he could only reduce his hours if he could 'work faster' and 'be more efficient': 'I'm not saying that I'm inefficient, but I'd have to do better. I'd have to be better at what I'm doing to actually work less.' Dimitra, the manager of a lobbying and consultancy firm, who was working 50 to 55 weekly hours, tried to imagine someone putting in a request for shorter hours. She suggested: 'It would be stunning . . .' She shifted readily to the role of the manager hearing the request: 'It would be like saying . . . well . . . "actually that's the job; if you don't like it, do a different job".'

Causes of long hours. As these responses indicate, the difficulty of discussing alternatives is linked with the fact that many interviewees regarded the long hours in their job as

highly resistant to change, indeed as more-or-less unavoidable. Several interviewees referred to long hours as a norm of the job or occupation. This was true for Lilian (see above) and also for Dimitra ('it's the nature of the job'), while others said: 'it comes with the job' (Jarrod), 'it's just part of your job' (Abigail). As a norm, it tended to be unquestioned.

Some interviewees linked long hours to expectations for the occupation as a whole. Dimitra, referred initially to the specific demands of her own job, with abundant work outside of normal hours, either as part of lobbying activities or as the side-effect of adapting to the hours of headquarters in London. However, she quickly extended the discussion to professional work in general: 'there is . . . an expected kind of culture in professional things, where you're expected to work really from 8.30 to 6.00 most days – it's kind of like the unwritten rule of life'.

The argument that long hours were unavoidable took two, somewhat contrasting, forms. On the one hand, as described above, was an assertion that long hours are an inextricable part of a job or occupation. On the other hand, it is also possible to detect in the transcripts the strong tug of an ideology of personal responsibility. Thus, many workers voiced the argument that long hours were not mandatory as such, but rather were obligatory *if a worker wanted to do a good job*. The issue here was 'pride in the job', as Tyson announced, and it was generally identified with personal responsibility and character (though some workers also linked it to professionalism and their occupational identities). The two forms are similar in that they both involve an assertion of the unavoidability of long hours, but they differ in their interpretation of the source of long hours: external pressure on the one hand or personal ethic and personal choice on the other. The second form is of course somewhat paradoxical, in that the individuals were treating their personal ethic almost as an external constraint – as something like an involuntary compulsion.

Interviewees often oscillated between the two interpretations, stressing external pressure in some passages and then 'pride in the job' in other passages. We refer above to Lilian, the high-level public servant, and her conscious ambivalence over the appropriate categorization of her working-time preference. She displayed a similar ambivalence in considering the causes of her long hours. She began by referring to her own personal choices:

> When it comes down to it, it's your own standards and your own expectations of yourself . . . I am of that generation and I am of the personality type that likes to do the best job they can. (Lilian)

Nevertheless, she went on to mention the fact that her children were now older and did not require as much care, thereby providing her with the 'flexibility' to work longer. Most important, she spoke of intensified external pressures at work, including the increased demands placed on senior public servants by colleagues and supervisors. The talk of expectations, however, led back to ideas of professionalism, both her own and that of her colleagues: 'it's more about self-regard and wanting to be seen to be doing a good job . . . the more important thing is to be well-regarded and considered to be a competent and good operator'. Ultimately, she seemed to suggest that she really had little choice over her hours – she was in a 'take it or leave it' situation.

Personal responsibility or agency. Many workers highlighted personal choices and personal ethics, but they often found difficulty in determining both the extent of their choices and the point at which the choices took effect. The issue was explored directly in the interviews through questions about external pressures and constraints on choices. These questions sparked the strongest expressions of ambivalence and oscillation.

Many interviewees seemed to assume that constraint could only take the form of someone telling them what to do; if command and control was absent, then they concluded that the situation must be the result of free choice. In short, they found difficulty in identifying *indirect* pressures. The pharmaceutical sales worker (Kim) provided a stark example of uncertainty and confusion, claiming on the one hand that her long hours (approximately 50 per week) were mainly voluntary, but on the other hand that she had no real choice:

> I don't think I've got pressure to work . . . but at the same time if I don't do it, I wouldn't complete the responsibilities that I'm required to do . . . My manager doesn't say, 'now you have to work after hours'. But then again, the job requires you to work after hours, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to complete my role. I would say it's probably more voluntary, but I wouldn't want to work after hours, but I don't have a choice. (Kim)

The interview evidence: Conclusions

The in-depth interviews summarized above offer for the first time an exploration of the meaning and significance of working-time preferences among a group of long hours employees. Our discussion focuses on the widespread ambivalence felt by long hours workers when they discuss their working-time preferences. Political scientists suggest that underlying the instability of survey responses on public policy issues is a fundamental ambivalence in which respondents draw on a set of multiple, often conflicting ideas (Zaller and Feldman, 1992). We argue that underneath the answers to working-time preference questions is a similar pool of ambivalence or uncertainty, in which multiple, often conflicting ideas are at play.

These should not be thought of as ideas in the sense of carefully thought-out judgements that smoothly mediate between interests and rational action. Nor does it seem adequate to bundle them up as macro-level discourses on long hours (Kuhn, 2006). It is necessary to start with a messier notion of ideas, more appropriate to blurred interests and diverse forms of heteronomous action in the workplace. We can learn from studies of part-time workers, though attitudes of long hours workers are likely to differ in crucial respects. We suggest that most of our interviewees saw their long hours as in effect unavoidable. They stumbled in particular over the issue of the feasibility of change, which was in turn bound up with their understanding of the causes of long hours and of their own personal agency.

Our interviewees come from a distinct group of long hours employees, which is biased to professional and managerial occupations. It may be that the remaining, smaller group of long hours employees, whose extra hours were paid rather than unpaid, would present a different response in in-depth interviews. However, we would not expect major differences. Survey data on the main reason that full-time employees in Australia work

extra hours reveal a surprising degree of similarity between those whose extra hours were paid and those whose extra hours were unpaid (Campbell, 2007: 58–59). Overtime, when desired by employers, can be described as more-or less mandatory for employees in Australia (Campbell, 2007: 53), and as a result extra hours, whether paid or unpaid, are likely to be accompanied by similar judgements of unavoidability and similar sentiments of ambivalence.

This interview evidence challenges certain assumptions in the current quantitative literature on long hours and working-time preferences. As noted above, 'yes' and 'no' answers to simple working-time preference questions are often classified in terms of 'match' and 'mismatch', and this division is in turn sometimes equated with an underlying divide between the contented and the discontented or, more controversially, between 'volunteers' and 'conscripts' (Drago et al., 2009). These alleged divides find little support in our interview evidence. Differentiation according to the degree of contentment is plausible, but it is hard to find any neat boundary between the contented and the discontented. The interviews did throw up examples of relative contentment (Tyson, Costas) and explicit discontent (Pedro, Bianca), which corresponded to categories of match and mismatch. The other interviewees, however, resisted such classification. A muted undercurrent of dissatisfaction with working hours, regardless of stated preferences, could be detected, but the dominant sentiment is best described in terms of resignation, in which interviewees seemed to tolerate their long hours in a spirit of passivity or fatalism.

Most important, though many interviewees in our study stressed the significance of personal responsibility and choice, it is impossible to find any who would fit a strict notion of 'volunteers' for long hours. Constraint is not confined to those who declare a mismatch. It is noteworthy that even those who were most insistent on personal choice readily acknowledged the role of external constraints, such as heavy workloads and high employer expectations, in shaping their practice. Though interviewees often found it hard to accurately identify the social processes involved, all – both those who declared that they were happy with their long hours and those who declared that they wanted fewer hours – seemed to recognize that their participation in long hours work was a mix of both constraint and choice.

In sum, our interviews suggest that the familiar division between match and mismatch, as it is derived from answers to simple working-time preference questions in large-scale surveys, does not succeed in capturing dimensions of discontent and choice. As such, the significance of this division for research is more limited than generally claimed.

Conclusion

This article identifies a fundamental challenge to researchers hoping to use working-time preference data among long hours workers as a centrepiece in quantitative analyses. More positively, it offers a few ideas on where to go in order to meet the challenge. In this way it succeeds in prising open the lid and throwing some light inside the black box of working-time preferences.

Our critical argument focuses on the interpretation of stated preferences. We argue that it is important to avoid rigid interpretations that misunderstand their meaning and exaggerate their significance. We assemble evidence, starting with response instability, to support our argument that stated preferences, as they appear in the responses to closed-ended questions in large-scale surveys, cannot be taken as an expression of fixed and pre-formed 'true preferences' held by individual workers. Instead, they are better seen as the provisional expression of attitudes and ideas that are complex, fluid, and permeated by ambivalence and conflict. In our discussion of the in-depth interviews we pursue this alternative interpretation, seeking both to document the widespread ambivalence in the expressions of working-time preferences among long hours employees and to explore its roots.

Our qualitative study found a minority whose answers to a standard working-time preference question had shifted without any apparent rationale in the (short) interval between the survey and the in-depth interview. However, this is not the main evidence for the plasticity of preferences. We found that the majority of interviewees, extending to the majority of those whose answers remained the same, conveyed uncertainty and ambivalence when giving their answers. Only a small minority could be said to have had firm views on their working-time preferences. In short, our study suggests that most stated working-time preferences show a degree of softness and malleability that renders them unsuited to rigid interpretations.

We concentrate in this article on a critical argument, but the analysis points tentatively forward. What can we conclude about true preferences? We pick up on the important suggestion that working-time preferences are usually 'compromises between what is desirable and what is feasible' (Bielenski et al., 2002: 16). This suggests that preferences, in line with the capability approach, are best seen in a broad way in terms of the specific set of options available to the individual.

Our approach in this article is partly inspired by the spirit of cognitive testing, which seeks to test and revise survey questions by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews. In order to achieve a better assessment of working-time preferences, it could be useful to multiply the preference questions according to the time horizon of the hypothetical change. It may be possible to supplement standard questions with ancillary, follow-up questions that help in disentangling the influence of social and economic conditions. It may be useful to ask directly whether the individual perceives their working-time preference to be feasible and then explore the factors or constraints that underlie that view. In general, we could experiment with suggestions from survey design in other disciplines concerning how to examine topics that involve attitudinal ambivalence; for example, through the use of multiple questions and rating scales (Craig et al., 2005: 6−8). Alternatively, we could seek to identify the presence of ambivalence and then gauge its direction and intensity (Fong, 2006: 1021).

There is a strong case for more detailed examination of working-time preferences, using some of the new approaches sketched out above and linking up with the emerging theory on ambivalence in work organizations (Ashforth et al., 2010). These new approaches would help to capture some of the contingency and uncertainty that necessarily inhere to phenomena such as working-time preferences. It is true that it would be at the expense of the usefulness of the construct for many purposes of quantitative analysis.

This should not, however, be taken as a counsel of pessimism. Working-time preference data, even in the simple form derived from closed-ended questions in large-scale surveys, continue to be useful and appropriate for certain purposes; for example, in opening up an investigation of worker attitudes or in providing a measure and profile of overemployment. Our argument suggests that working-time preference data in this bare form are not at all suited to more ambitious aims such as analysing the causes of long working hours.

There is no room in this article to detail the possible paths forward in order to achieve the latter aim. We can note, however, that our argument, which draws attention to the influence of constraints on workers' choices, especially at the workplace, does imply a need to move beyond questions addressed to individual workers, whether in large-scale surveys or in more in-depth qualitative interviews. The best approach for a causal analysis of long hours work would seem to be one that combined quantitative analysis of large-scale data sets with in-depth interviews and theoretically-driven case studies in specific occupations and industries.

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Notes

1 Long hours are conventionally defined as weekly working hours that are above the standard or normal weekly hours. In Australia the standard is 38 hours per week, and long hours can be identified with weekly hours above 40. What can be called very long or 'excessive' hours are weekly hours that are above 50 (Campbell, 2007).

2 In neoclassical theory, it was argued for many years that an individual's actual working time could be safely taken as the appropriate measure of his/her preferences – it represented what could be called a 'revealed preference' (Golden and Altman, 2008: 62−63; Green, 2006: 10−11).

3 Overall attrition for the sample from Wave 1 was 15%. Thus, as a percentage of the original sample (8341 persons), the 5329 respondents who agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview in Wave 2 represented 64%. The follow-up question states: 'Q: . . . the researchers are wishing to explore the working lives of the people in the study further. Would you be willing to be contacted by the researchers for some further face-to-face interviews at a much later date? A: "yes, you can contact me" . . . "no, please don't contact me" . . .'.

4 The survey in Wave 2 contained 1228 full-time employees who were working five or more unpaid hours. Almost 80% (n = 979) of these stated that they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

5 Pseudonyms were used for the names of interviewees.

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