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# Too much or too little work? Couples' actual and preferred employment patterns and work hours mismatches in Europe

## Zu viele oder zu wenige Arbeitsstunden? Haushaltserwerbsmuster und Arbeitszeitpräferenzen von Paaren in Europa

### Abstract:

The most widely cited European data on work hours mismatches *at the couple level* date back to the 1990s. The general gist of analyses of these data was that 'overworked' dual-earner couples frequently preferred work hours reductions, especially those with childcare responsibilities. This study uses more recent data from the European Social Survey (2010-12) to update the available evidence on actual and preferred breadwinner models and on the occurrence and determinants of work hours mismatches among couples in Europe. The focus is on differences between demographic groups and countries in the degree to which cohabiting couples are either *underemployed* (working fewer hours than desired) or *overemployed* (working more hours than desired). Our analyses show that about one third of couples are underemployed, while only one in ten report being overemployed. We identify low education and the presence of children below school age as risk factors for *underemployment*, whereas highly educated women and fathers of teenagers tend to be *overemployed*. In a comparison of 16 European countries, we find couples in Greece, Ireland, Slovenia, and Spain to be most at risk of experiencing *underemployment* – in the countries that were most strongly affected by the recession. The effects of children on the experience of hours mismatches are found to vary across Europe – a particularly strong association of children below school age with parental *underemployment* is observed in Central and Eastern Europe, Finland,

### Zusammenfassung:

Die letzte große Erhebung und Analyse von Umfragedaten zu den Arbeitszeitpräferenzen von Paaren in Europa wurde in den 1990er Jahren durchgeführt. Der Tenor dieser Analysen war, dass sich die oft 'überarbeiteten' Zweiverdiener-Paare in vielen Fällen eine Reduktion ihrer Arbeitszeit wünschen, vor allem bei Vorliegen von Kinderbetreuungspflichten. Die vorliegende Studie nützt jüngere Daten aus dem European Social Survey (2010-12). Der Fokus der Analyse liegt auf Unterschieden zwischen demographischen Gruppen und Ländern im Ausmaß zu dem Paare mehr oder weniger Stunden erwerbstätig sind als dies ihren Präferenzen entspricht (*Über- bzw. Unterbeschäftigung*). Die Analysen zeigen, dass rund ein Drittel der Paare unterbeschäftigt ist (Präferenz für Arbeitszeitaufstockung), während nur rund eines von zehn Paaren angibt, überbeschäftigt zu sein (Präferenz für Arbeitszeitreduktion). Als Risikofaktoren für *Unterbeschäftigung* werden niedrige Bildung und Kinder im Vorschulalter sowie auf der Länderebene hohe Arbeitslosigkeit (Griechenland, Irland, Slowenien, Spanien) identifiziert. Höher gebildete Frauen bzw. Paare mit älteren Kindern sind dagegen mit einer höheren Wahrscheinlichkeit *überbeschäftigt*. Der Effekt von kleinen Kindern auf das Risiko von Unterbeschäftigung variiert ja nach Land. Stärkere Effekte werden in Zentral- und Osteuropa, Finnland und Deutschland beobachtet, vergleichsweise geringe oder keine Effekte in Großbritannien, Griechenland, Irland und Schweden.

and Germany and a particularly weak one in Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, and Sweden.

**Key words:** couples, labour supply, preferences, hours mismatch, European Social Survey

**Schlagwörter:** Paare, Beschäftigung, Arbeitszeitpräferenzen, Unterbeschäftigung, European Social Survey

## 1. Introduction

While some workers work part-time involuntarily, others are putting in more time at work than they would prefer. The occurrence of *work hours mismatches* of these two kinds – *underemployment* and *overemployment* – is a well-documented phenomenon that points to the fact that observable employment behaviours (such as actual hours of work) are the result of *constrained choices* (e.g., Altonji/Paxson 1988; Böheim/Taylor 2004; Otterbach 2010). Employers typically offer a very limited number of wage-hours combinations and therefore employees may not be able to work their preferred number of hours. Moreover, not all wage-hours combinations are compatible with breadwinning responsibilities on the one hand (i.e., need to earn a certain income) and time constraints, on the other hand. Constraints on working hours may derive from employers as well as from outside the workplace such as from care responsibilities.

Prevalent work hours mismatches are cause for concern and call for policy intervention, since it has been shown that the experience of such mismatches is associated with poor mental well-being (Wooden et al. 2009; De Moortel et al. 2017) and self-rated health (Bell et al. 2012). Negative associations with well-being outcomes have been found for both types of mismatch and there is evidence suggesting that underemployment may have a stronger negative effect on mental well-being (Wunder/Heineck 2013), whereas overemployment shows a stronger association with poor self-rated health (Bell et al. 2012). Underemployment, which may be conceptualised as an employment outcome that is halfway between adequate employment and unemployment (Dooley 2003) has furthermore been shown to be associated with a greater risk of financial hardship (Warren 2015). In summary, hours mismatches have negative implications for the well-being and economic welfare of individuals. In fact, hours mismatches have been shown to be as good a predictor of well-being outcomes as the number of hours worked (Wooden 2009; Bassanini/Caroli 2015). In addition to the negative implications of hours mismatches for the health and well-being of the workers concerned, such mismatches have undesirable societal consequences such as an inefficient allocation of labour (e.g., underutilisation in the case of underemployment, see Wilkins/Wooden 2001) and a bi-furcation of working time with an exhausted core workforce working longer hours than desired and an underemployed peripheral workforce (Jacobs/Green 1998). Negative ramifications of hours mismatches have also been found for the performance of organisations, with lower levels of organisational commitment among mismatched workers (overview in Reynolds/Aletraris 2006: 619).

Given the high degree of educational homogamy within couples (Blossfeld/Timm 2003; Schwartz/Mare 2005) and the associated working time polarisation between higher

educated dual-career couples and lower educated couples with two partners at risk of underemployment (Konietzka/Kreyenfeld 2010), it was argued that hours mismatches can be better understood at the couple level than the individual level (Clarkberg/Moen 2001). This conforms to the idea that the choice of working hours is often not an individual matter – working hours are negotiated not only with employers but also with partners (Reynolds 2014).

Given the evidence on negative individual, organizational, and societal consequences of hours mismatches, and since the last available evidence on work hours mismatches among couples in Europe dates back to the 1990s (see literature review, below), the aim of the present study is to provide new empirical evidence for the incidence and distribution of work hours mismatches among couples in Europe. A specific focus of the study is on the provision of rich descriptive information on cross-country differences in actual and preferred employment patterns at the couple level (breadwinner models) and the prevalence of work hours mismatches. Moreover, using regression analysis, we investigate the impact of education and the family life-cycle (defined by the presence and age of children) on a couple's risk of experiencing over- or underemployment in different European countries. We use data from the European Social Survey that was collected between 2010 and 2012, thus mapping a period when large parts of Europe were still suffering from recession and high unemployment.

## 2. Literature review

The early literature on work hours mismatches had a clear focus on the issue of *overemployment*. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a considerable body of research emerged, shifting the focus from individual workers to couples and families. This literature emphasised the issue of '*overworked families*' who would like to reduce their working hours in order to achieve a better work-family fit (Clarkberg/Moen 2001; Jacobs/Gerson 2001; Jacobs/Green 1998; Moen/Dempster-McClain 1987). It was argued that many couples work more hours than they would prefer and that such mismatches were in the main tied to the aim of combining paid work with childcare responsibilities (Merz 2002; Clarkberg/Moen 2001).

The most widely cited comparative European data on working time preferences at the couple level date back to the 1990s. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions in Europe carried out the 'Employment Options of the Future' (EOF) survey in the member states of the European Union in 1998 and Norway. Respondents were asked to state the hours that they would like to work themselves, and the hours that they would like their partner to work, if they had a free choice, but taking into account the need to earn a living. Calculations based on these micro-data have been widely published (Bielenski et al. 2002; Väisänen/Nätti 2002; Fagan/Warren 2001; OECD 2001: 136). The general gist of the analyses was that the preferences of couples were in many cases not in line with their behaviours and that dual-earner couples frequently preferred work hours reductions (Väisänen/Nätti 2002), especially in the presence of small children (OECD 2001: 136; see also Lewis et al. 2008: 30).