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An exploration of the multiple motivations for spending less time at work

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An exploration of the multiple motivations for spending less time at work

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Abstract

This article makes a significant empirical contribution to our understanding of why people in the United Kingdom without childcare responsibilities actively reduce or limit the amount of time they spend in paid employment. We show how the negative aspects of employment (push factors) and the desire to spend time in more varied and enjoyable ways (pull factors) interact to produce decisions to enact working time reductions (WTRs). The push factors include excessive workloads and difficult or tedious tasks which can result in stress and

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mental exhaustion. For people working non-standard schedules, their lack of control over hours can make it difficult to enjoy the free time that is available. The pull factors we have identified include traumatic experiences such as illness or the early death of a loved one which can lead to an increased awareness of the salience of time. Also important was the desire to develop skills and subjectivities unrelated to work-time identities. An overarching theme in the interviews was the idea that full-time work leads to a loss of autonomy, and a reduction in hours is a route to greater freedom. These motivations are contrasted with understandings of WTRs present in the empirical and predominantly quantitative literature which highlight the structural constraints that often force women in particular into part-time work as a result of childcare responsibilities. An exploration of the motivations of short-hour workers is pertinent, given increasing concern that long hours of work exacerbate multiple social, economic and environmental problems. We suggest that a deeper understanding of why individuals want to work less could help facilitate 'priming' campaigns aimed at increasing demand for WTRs more generally.

Keywords

Time use, working time reductions, working time preferences, leisure, part-time, post-work

Introduction

From an early age, it is generally presented as both inevitable and morally dutiful to spend most of our lives working for pay. Education focuses on preparing us for the world of work, and for many in affluent societies, it becomes the crux of their identity (Frayne, 2015). However, not everyone accepts this situation unquestioningly. As part of a larger investigation into what the world might look like if we all spent drastically less time at work, we spoke to people who have intentionally reduced or limited working hours to understand the circumstances in which this decision had been taken. The percentage of people in the United Kingdom working part-time who said they did not want a full-time job has risen from 35% in 1992 to 57% in 2019, according to the Office of National Statistics. Furthermore, a recent report indicated that 40% of women and 77% of men working part-time in the public sector do so for reasons other than family or domestic commitments (Office of National Statistics, 2019; author's own calculations).

However, despite these figures, the desire for autonomy over hours and WTRs is still primarily understood in terms of the need to provide childcare (e.g. Beham et al., 2012; Chandola et al., 2019; Dick and Hyde, 2006; Ellingsæter and Jensen, 2019; Gash, 2008; Gerstel and Clawson, 2018; Walters, 2005). Whilst the need to

provide childcare remains the key driver of short-hour working, an excessive focus on families with children living at home obscures the experiences of people who reduce working hours for other reasons (including those who care for elderly relatives, although this is not an issue we explore here). Previous research on WTRs and working time preferences (WTPs) is predominantly quantitative and so does not provide a rich understanding of the lived experiences driving the decision to spend less time at work (e.g. [Anxo et al., 2013](#); [Campbell and Van Wanrooy, 2013](#); [Walsh, 1999](#); although [Horning et al., 1995](#) is a key early exception. Also, see [Frayne, 2015](#)). In contrast, this article takes a qualitative approach, attempting to understand not only the circumstances around which the decision for short-hour working was taken but also how WTRs might occur in the future, for instance via the introduction of 4-day weeks.

The structure of the article is as follows. We first present some of the extant literature on approaches to part-time/short-hour working. We highlight how, whilst insightful for understanding broad trends within the labour market, there is an overemphasis on family life as the overarching motivation for working less. We then discuss some of the more radical justifications for working less and the recent surge of interest in WTRs. After outlining our research design strategy, we present our results which show that negative experiences at work interact with positive experiences outside work to pull people away from full-time employment towards more varied and balanced lifestyles. Finally, we conclude by considering what our findings mean for policy and the future of work.

Previous approaches to short hours employment

Short-hour working (also known as part-time work)¹ has been a feature of industrialised labour markets since the 1960s ([Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998](#)). In the United Kingdom, this type of work is overwhelmingly carried out by women with current estimates suggesting that over 40% of women are in short-hour roles as opposed to just over 10% of men ([Spiegelaere and Piasna, 2017](#)). Short-hour work is concentrated at the bottom of the labour market and is often low paid and low skilled, with limited potential for promotion ([Nightingale, 2019](#)). The disproportionate number of women working in short hour roles has generated interest in why women are over-represented considering the low quality of many part-time jobs. Debates have revolved around the question of whether women prefer shorter hours or are forced into these roles due to the existing gender division of labour ([Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998](#); [Gash, 2008](#)) and were galvanised by controversial assertions by [Hakim \(2002\)](#) that women's over-representation in part-time jobs reflected a lack of commitment to full-time labour market participation. Hakim's work has been rightly criticised for its static and essentialised portrayal of women's orientations towards work ([Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998](#)) and ignorance of

the social contexts and structural constraints in which supposed preferences were formed (Dick and Hyde, 2006).

Whilst our research certainly confirms that preferences are fluid and socially constructed, an important aspect of Hakim's work is her reintroduction of the role of individual agency into debates around WTPs. International comparisons of the differing rates of short-hour employment across industrialised countries have illustrated how factors such as the availability of affordable childcare or employer flexibility schemes influence the number of women 'choosing' to work short hours at the national level (Anxo et al., 2013; Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998; Gash, 2008; Visser, 2002). Although these studies have been useful in highlighting interactions between households, employers and the state/social partners, this body of work has remained silent about how individual experiences influence WTPs. In particular, empirical research on men's and childless couple's attitudes to hours of work and time use more generally is limited (Gershuny, 2011; Hakim, 2002; Nightingale, 2019; Walters, 2005).

Beyond debates around women's WTPs, a much more radical body of work exists that critiques the centrality of paid work in post-industrial societies (Frayne, 2015; Gorz, 1999; Stronge and Harper, 2019; Weeks, 2011). Gorz (1999) championed what he called a 'multi-activity society' suggesting citizens should be engaged in a range of self-organised and voluntary social, cultural and ecological activities. These activities should not be subordinated to profitability and the needs of capital, and the centre of gravity in people's lives should shift, such that working time is no longer the dominant social time. More recently, Weeks (2011) has made a compelling argument for the value of 'time for what we will'. For her, the case for working fewer hours should be made in the name of autonomy and freedom rather than because it would allow us to spend more time with family which is the more common justification. Like Gorz, she highlights the potential for shorter hours to secure citizen's time and heightened politicisation. These critiques of work are useful as they open up more utopic horizons through which we can rethink and challenge conventional assumptions such as the centrality of the 35–40 h working week (see Kamerade et al., 2019).

WTRs may also be an important policy in the fight against climate change. Research has shown positive correlations between long working hours and environmental pressures when country level comparisons are made (e.g. Hayden and Shandra, 2009; Knight et al., 2013). These effects are primarily related to changes in the overall scale of the economy. Household level studies have shown similar trends but less pronounced effects. They suggest that longer working hours increase environmentally damaging consumption practices (Devetter and Rousseau, 2006; Nassen and Larsson, 2015). However in the Nassen and Larsson study the emissions reductions almost completely disappeared when they controlled for loss of income. Further research on this topic has shown that after 2010 although working hours declined in developed countries, carbon emissions per

capita remained stable (Shao and Rodriguez-Labajos, 2016). The extent to which WTRs are environmentally beneficial depends heavily on how the increase in leisure time is used (Druckman et al., 2012; Hanbury et al., 2019; Norgard, 2013).

In the United Kingdom, up until only few years ago, there was little interest in WTRs from unions or policy makers, with much collective organising that has taken place since the turn of the century focusing instead on issues of pay, pensions and precarity. In the mid-2000s a series of flexible working policies such as increased parental leave, flexitime, voluntary part time and compressed hours were introduced to improve workers' well-being (Perrons et al., 2005). However, despite being framed as pro-worker policies aimed at enhancing 'work-life balance' and equal opportunities, changes were largely driven by growth-related concerns such as raising employment rates and retaining skilled workers. Low uptake levels (particularly in the case of voluntary part time) mean that national average working hours were not significantly reduced (Fleetwood, 2007; Perrons et al., 2005).

Fears that artificial intelligence and automation could eliminate jobs in the future (e.g. Frey and Osborne, 2017) have been driving interest in WTRs as they are posited as a way to avoid the social harm of mass unemployment (Kamerade et al., 2019). In the United Kingdom, the low levels of productivity that have plagued the economy since the Great Recession are also a concern. From the 1960s onwards, productivity grew an annual average of two percent, but after 2009, this dropped to 0.7% a year (Stirling, 2019). Leisure time increases have stagnated and have decreased for those with the greatest socio-economic advantage (Gershuny, 2011; Stirling, 2019). As Weeks (2011) has noted, the 40-h week model emerged in a context when most households contained an unwaged female worker who cooked, cleaned and attended to all other socially reproductive labour allowing the waged workers to have fewer responsibilities when not at work than in dual earner households today. There is a generalised feeling that the social contract is broken with excessively long working hours now seriously impinging on people's life quality. As such, the 4-day week was included in the UK Green Party's manifesto in 2017 and in 2019 shadow chancellor John McDonnell took up the cause and announced that the UK Labour Party would attempt to reduce full-time hours to 32/week within the next decade without a loss of pay. The logic of this approach is that increasing labour costs may drive investments in automation which in the long run is likely to increase productivity, further fuelling the economic argument for WTRs (Skidelsky, 2019).

Research design

The data for this article are drawn from 40 interviews conducted with people in the United Kingdom and Ireland who had actively reduced or limited their time in

paid employment. We excluded people who had reduced their working hours primarily due to childcare responsibilities or ill health as well as underemployed people who were looking to increase their hours of work. Instead, we spoke with people who were relatively satisfied with their hours of work. However, as the discussion will illustrate, in many cases, structural factors such as poor working conditions or a history of mental health problems influenced individual's WTPs in a way that made the decision to reduce time at work not entirely unconstrained. Many of our interviewees had complex work biographies and had experimented with different work patterns and careers before reaching their current situation. We spoke to people who had worked a short-hour contract for most of their working lives as well as people who had taken a decision to do less paid work more recently.

Table 1 shows background information of our interviewees including their current job title, age, work schedule and years in short-hour work. Because of the heterogeneity of our sample, it was difficult to classify individual's schedules consistently – that is some people were contracted a set number of hours, while others worked specific days of the week. Self-employed people arranged their work on a more ad hoc and variable basis. In the table, we indicate the total number of hours and where possible, the way that these hours are distributed across the day/week/year. Please note that due to some interviewee's tendency to shift between different roles, the number of years on a short-hour contract does not imply that their current schedule has existed for their entire period of short-hour working. Significantly, unlike most previous studies of WTPs, interviewees were not faced with a hypothetical question, the answer to which is necessarily influenced by the feasibility of any desired change (Campbell and Van Wanrooy, 2013). Instead, they were discussing a concrete and well thought out decision, given its potential to seriously impact their well-being, life satisfaction and financial security.

Locating people who were working short-hour schedules was difficult. We used heterogeneous purposive sampling to select our interviewees as we wanted a wide variety of experiences, professions and backgrounds to be represented. In practice, this meant initial recruiting took place via word of mouth as we asked our diverse social networks to recommend colleagues or acquaintances who had adopted a short-hour working schedule.² We also recruited via internet forums and mailing lists that we thought might be used by people who were attempting to work less. These included a forum for hill walkers and rock climbers, a Facebook page for allotment gardeners, the mailing list for people who were subscribed to a magazine called *The Idler* and an internet community of freelancers known as The Leapers. In addition, we used snowballing. We worked to actively diversify the sample, for example when we felt that people who were working in very obviously 'pro-social' roles were over-represented, we sought out people in professions like marketing and advertising to try and rebalance our sample

Table 1. Interviewee information (all names are pseudonyms).

| Name | Age | Occupation | Years in short-hour work | Current work schedule |
|-----------|-----|---|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Philippe | 27 | Acoustic engineer | 2 | 3 days a week |
| Audrey | 29 | Online language teacher | 2 | Approximately 25 h a week |
| Carly | 32 | Cancer nurse | 5 | 22.5 h a week |
| Kate | 33 | Support worker doing live in care | 7 | 2 weeks/1 month off (variable) |
| Micky | 33 | Climbing training tool manufacturer | 12 | 25–30 h a week (variable) |
| Seth | 33 | Self-employed gardener | 3 | 4 days a week (irregular schedule) |
| Lucky-Lou | 35 | Cycle instructor/garden supervisor | 6 | 30 h a week |
| Luke | 35 | Civil service data analyst | 1 | 4 days a week |
| Claire | 37 | Ex-care worker now barmaid | 6 | 17–20 h a week (2 shifts) |
| Ronan | 37 | R & D director | 5 | 25 h a week (5 × 5h) |
| Tom | 37 | Carpenter | 10 | Project work: time off = time at work |
| Tony | 39 | Self-employed disability needs assessor | 20 | 1–2 days a week (variable) |
| Hans | 42 | Self-employed web designer | 9 | 25–30 h a week |
| Anna | 42 | Freelance media strategist | 3 | 4 days a week |
| Flora | 43 | Science teacher | 4 | 4 days a week |
| Paula | 43 | Educational psychologist | 5 | 3–4 days a week |
| Sarah | 43 | Freelance digital marketer | 2 | 3 days a week |
| Josie | 45 | Rope access technician | 5 | 6 months on/6 months off |
| Rhys | 45 | Patenting lawyer | 6 | 3 days a week |
| Brian | 45 | English as additional language advisor | 5 | 3.5 days a week |
| Adam | 45 | High tech electronic consultant | 5 | Approximately 25 h a week |
| Cath | 50 | Care assistant | 11 | Approximately 25 h a week |
| Chris | 50 | Renewable energy consultant | 10 | 4 days a week |
| Mark | 51 | Physics teacher | 4 | 2.5 days a week |
| Sadie | 51 | Learning and development consultant | 12 | Approximately 25 h a week |
| Phil | 52 | Data analysis consultant | 2 | 5 weeks on/5 weeks off |
| Rich | 52 | Sound equipment rigger | 8 | 25 h a week (average across the year) |
| David | 52 | Science and music teacher at a social, emotional and behavioral difficulties school | 5 | 2.5 days a week |

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

| Name | Age | Occupation | Years in short-hour work | Current work schedule |
|----------|-----|--|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| John | 54 | Ex-IT manager now executive director | 12 | 1 day a month |
| Clara | 54 | Accounts support | 20 | 15 h a week (3 × 5 h) |
| Will | 54 | Self-employed drummer | 30 | 1 weekend a month (variable) |
| Darren | 54 | Social enterprise manager | 19 | 24 h a week |
| Jessica | 54 | National Health Service statistician | 12 | 4 days a week |
| Joe | 57 | Bike shop manager | 23 | 28 h a week (4 × 7 h) |
| Tom | 60 | Paramedic | 1 | 20 h a week |
| Edward | 60 | Design manager in water industry | 1 | 3 days a week |
| Maxwell | 62 | Ex-design engineer now conservation work | 7 | 1 day a week |
| Kathleen | 64 | Self-employed dressmaker | 13 | 15 h a week (irregular schedule) |
| Roberta | 66 | Psychologist | 26 | 2–3 days a month |
| Oliver | 69 | Photography and film lecturer | 40 | 2.5 days a week |

towards jobs sometimes considered less socially valuable (e.g. Graeber, 2018). Recruiting working class people on lower wages was particularly difficult. Those who were recruited tended to hold more strongly anti-materialist viewpoints, as it was this value system which allowed them to prioritise free time and personal well-being over access to material possessions and financial security.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 1 h and 2 h 40 min, with an average length of 1 h 40. During the interviews, we covered biographical details, why and how a decision to reduce hours had been taken, interviewees' attitudes towards their job and orientations to work more generally. We discussed the practicalities of how the WTR had been achieved as well as how the increase in free time was being used. Information on why a reduction in working hours had been sought was often scattered throughout the interview. Whilst relatively straightforward motives were sometimes expressed when the question was initially posed, as the interview unfolded and interviewees reflected on their work, leisure activities and values, more complex motivations were revealed. Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

We intentionally explore WTRs from an individual perspective. As such, we leave the question of 'how' WTRs have been achieved in terms of the financial implications for the household aside. This is partly because the huge variation in life stage, local property prices, expectations of material affluence etc., makes drawing commonalities from the data almost meaningless. However, it is worth

noting that only 15% of interviewees had children living at home. In the rest of the sample, 40% were unlikely to ever have children, 25% had children who had left home and 20% had no children yet but may have children in the future.

Results: Push factors

Long hours, work intensity and job satisfaction

Interviews revealed that the negative aspects of work are an important driver of the desire to work less. This relates to different and sometimes overlapping characteristics of the current labour market and individuals' experiences or positions inside it. Often the desire to work less was framed around excessive work demands, such as long hours and sustained mental effort. Interviewees often found that they were overloaded with work leaving little time for anything else. Over time, they grew to resent this situation and eventually took action to reduce working time. For example Rhys commented:

It's quite a constant mental effort, it's not something you can sort of do, in a sort of freewheeling mode. You do need to concentrate, large chunks of the day. And to be honest I think I find that quite difficult at times so again, working part time has helped with that because I don't have this... you know, I spend less time doing it basically, less time with this kind of intense mental concentration which I personally found quite difficult when I was working full-time. (Rhys, patenting lawyer, 45).

Rhys's output was measured by the number of hours he 'charged out' which indicates how much money he made for the law firm. The targets he was expected to hit remained constant, but as certain clients received loyalty discounts effectively, a year-on-year productivity increase was expected. When the management of the law firm where he worked was taken over by people who were 'even more workaholic', he moved to a larger organisation and dropped his days to three a week. Initially, he noted that his productivity improved slightly due to better focus at work but that this increase was not maintained once he had adapted to the new working pattern. Pre-recession increases in productivity have been attributed to 'more work' for 'less pay' which in practice meant job cuts (i.e. understaffing) and faster work pace (Dromey, 2016; Findley and Thompson, 2017). Hunt and Katz (1998) argue that long working hours and the increasingly skill-intensive nature of many jobs means that people may now need more time to rest and recuperate.

Work intensity has been shown to have a positive relationship to emotional exhaustion as well as having a negative impact on quality of life (Boekhorst et al., 2017). Certainly, many of the people we spoke to viewed conventional full-time work as a direct threat to their physical and mental health. The decision to partially

withdraw labour power was frequently framed as a pre-emptive protective measure. Some people, such as Brian, had directly experienced work-related stress and had observed their damaging effects at close quarters:

My dad had a breakdown when I was 14–15 and that was work related and so while he was never [...] saying you shouldn't work full-time, I shouldn't work hard, there was always a kind of idea that work can be stressful. And while I've never had a breakdown or had any kind of mental illness due to work or anything else I mean I certainly can feel work related anxiety (Brian, English as additional language advisor, 45).

Brian felt that working three and half days a week was sufficient as this left him with enough energy to be actively involved in the care of his daughter (who lives with her mother) and to enjoy his time outside work. He regularly volunteered at a local bike shop and had started playing the piano since reducing his hours. Interviewees like Brian often compared their behaviour with that of their colleagues who they saw as pushing themselves dangerously close to the edge.

In addition to the intensification of work, excessive workloads were also a problem, particularly for those in the public sector. Paula described her work experiences and workload as follows:

I love the job, I think it is very intense and can be quite addictive. Maybe addictive is the wrong word, it's more like you can become very absorbed and preoccupied with the work and there's never enough hours in the day, you always wanna do more, you always wanna kind of be more, you always wanna push yourself. I think if you are doing a five day week, there is always a little additional work that's required so if you are doing a five day week it turns into a six day week, it turns into a six and a bit day week, and you know it never stays in the boundaries that you intend it to stay in. So my rationale was if I work a 3-day week, then I'm probably gonna end up doing a four-day week [laughs] Which is probably not the right way to think about it. (Paula, public sector educational psychologist, 43).

Like other interviewees, Paula attributes the 'colonising power of work' (Frayne, 2015: 67–94) to her own personality and desire to perform to a high standard. This is consistent with research linking long working hours to the 'new lumpiness of work'. This suggests that long hours can be explained by the pressure on employees to '[be] professional in the eyes of their colleagues and clients' which manifests itself in the need to finish specific work tasks (lumps) under circumstances where failure to do so would inconvenience or let down other team members (Campbell and Van Wanrooy, 2013; Van Echtelt et al., 2006). Paula, like Rhys, was expected to meet targets in terms of work output, specifically in relation to the number of statutory assessments she was expected to

complete. Echtelt et al. write that ‘[i]n fact, for employees in these circumstances, it may be economically wiser not to reduce their official working hours because they know, or should know, that they will turn up to work the hours anyway’ (2006: 497). However, for our interviewees, although in many cases, overtime did continue once hours had been reduced, overtime work now took place during weekdays and newly arranged ‘free time’ rather than on weekends. The assumption that it is not worth reducing contracted hours because working overtime will continue misunderstands the benefits to reducing formally contracted hours. The important point is that despite the continued unfairness of the situation, a reduction in contracted hours meant an increase in free time overall.

For interviewees working in the public sector, increasing workloads seem to be related to austerity and the privatisation of public services. For example a care worker working in a local authority which has had 157 million pounds cut from its budget since 2010 (Soden, 2019) recounted how, as a cost saving measure, the official length of care calls was reduced leading to much unpaid overtime, reduced job satisfaction and stress. The increasingly poor working conditions led to staff shortages and the imposition of extremely long working hours. The experience of our interviewees is congruent with quantitative findings which show that ‘a preference for a reduction of working time is positively correlated with skill level and also to work intensity [...] [E]mployees with long working hour express a particularly strong preference for working shorter hours’ (Anxo et al., 2013: 22).

Non-standard working patterns and the experience of time

For interviewees working non-standard hours, the decision to reduce hours related to the way that time and free time in particular was experienced differently. For example Josie was required to work very long shifts away from home. Initially, these shifts took place on an oil rig; however, this working environment had parallels with being in prison as she explains below:

I was working on the oil rigs for about five years, I was doing a regular two [weeks] on, two [weeks] off for the last two years. And, phew I just got sick of it [...]. So, while I enjoyed the time off, I wanted to change the work schedule. [...] I found what was happening is I’d say something like, ‘oh you know that was like six months ago’. And realise that was a year ago but I actually disregard all the time I am at work I don’t consider that as part of my life [laughs]. I often wonder if people who go to prison do that. ‘Because you know if you spend a couple of years in prison, do you just kind of write that off because, and time was moving really fast [...]. I rather would have big chunks of time off (Josie, roped access technician, 45).

Now, instead of working on the oil rigs, Josie mends wind turbine blades. She works away from home from March until the clocks go back in October. For the

rest of the year, she lives in a small town in Ireland and occupies herself full time with leisure activities. She noted that ‘life would not be worth living’ if she had to work away from home all year round. Whilst she enjoys the work, she regularly works 12-h days in an unfamiliar environment. During this period, work occupies the entirety of her existence. As she is away from home, she is unable to maintain friendships, hobbies or family connections. During the 6 months that she is off work, she allows these other aspects of her life to flourish.

To a lesser extent, this type of experience was notable in other interviewees whose work required unsociable hours. Rich was involved in ‘the original “gig economy”, working on actual gigs’. The job involves hanging up sound equipment in large music venues when music groups and concerts are on tour:

Because [...] it tends to be early morning and late night it gets a bit Groundhog Day sometimes [...]. If I have got sort of gigs on more than two or three consecutive days then really, I’m working in the morning, coming home, having a bite to eat, getting my head down for a few hours of sleep working in the evening, getting a couple of hours sleep, working in the morning and just repeat. And that feels very pressured ‘cause when it’s like that, there isn’t time to do anything else really. (Rich, sound equipment rigger, 52).

The peculiarities of Rich’s schedule make doing the job on full-time hours quite difficult. Rich has developed his industry reputation sufficiently to allow him to work an average of 25 h a week, although the exact number fluctuates seasonally across the year. In both these examples, we can see that it is not the number of hours of work that is causing difficulties but the intrinsic features of the job. In the case of Josie, it is the requirement to work away from home, and for Rich, it is because he works a split shift and so must be on the job both early morning and late at night. A lack of consistent shift scheduling and short notice of shifts contributed to feelings of time scarcity for other interviewees. Research on alternate work schedules is inconclusive on how these types of arrangements affect the perceptions of time and leisure. Some research suggests that when workers have control of the scheduling of time off, what has been termed ‘work–life time imbalance’ is reduced, whereas involuntary scheduling increases feelings of time pressure (Tausig and Fenwick, 2001: 103). Other work suggests that having days off in the week, despite restricted schedule flexibility, facilitates time for friendship, although obviously these friendships are limited to others who are working non-standard hours or who are economically inactive (Pedersen and Lewis, 2012). Perceptions of time scarcity are also influenced by factors beyond work schedules including ‘time personality’ which is a measure of the way people think about and use time shortages. Kaufman-Scarborough and Lindquist’s (2003) work on this topic indicated that there is some limited evidence to suggest that those who are good at planning their time are less likely to

experience feelings of time scarcity. In the interview, Rich acknowledged that he ‘procrastinated horribly’ and regularly ‘waste[d] loads and loads of time not getting anything done’.

Results: Pull factors

Fragility of life and awakening to the finite nature of time

Many interviewees recounted how the desire to work less had emerged from a realisation that life was fragile and time was finite. Their decision to work less was often linked to a traumatic event which had reoriented their attitude to the meaning of life and the passage of time. This shift in perspective was sometimes precipitated by ill health. For example during a period of introspection following detached retinas and almost blindness, Tom felt that continually striving for more material possessions was not a fruitful means of achieving well-being. In the extract below, he describes his feelings following an eye operation:

I just felt a bit more distant from everyone around me. [...] I just couldn’t get into the work ethic of working 50 hours a week. You keep going around, what’s the point of this? [...] I had, in some people’s eyes, it was a four-bed detached house, [...] a brand new van [...] new this, new that. And you sit there and you just go, there’s just like an in-satisfaction inside of you. [...] It’s not how we’re designed to live. [...] You start actually trying look at who you are really. [...] And, so that unwinding is probably actually taking time to really, really look at who you are and really what do you want from your time. (Tom, carpenter, 38).

Once he had recovered, Tom never returned to full-time work; instead, for the last 10 years, every contract he completes is followed by a period of unpaid activities of equal length. Contracts last between 2 weeks and 9 months.

The unexpectedly early death of a family member also seemed to precipitate a reorientation of attitudes towards time. Carly recounted how both she and her sister had decided to work on a short-hour schedule early on in their careers following the death of their father:

We are both in the mind-set of like, life is short, you need to do what you want to do and make yourself happy and life is not all about nine to five working. So, yeah. I guess that comes from.. we lost our dad so maybe it’s like, you know, life is short so since then we’ve both been ‘do what you want.’ (Carly, cancer nurse, 34).

This realisation that time was more important than money was further accentuated for Carly through her work with young cancer patients. She noted how none of them wished that they had spent more time at work. Carly also linked her

decision to the pressures of shift work which she found was making her feel ill and exhausted. She initially dropped her hours to 30 a week on the suggestion of her manager. However, she enjoyed the free time she had gained so much that a year or so later she reduced her contracted hours again to 22.5 a week despite the financial implications of continuing to pay a mortgage on a relatively low wage. These shifting orientations to work suggest that the transition towards attaching a greater value to time is an iterative process whereby a reduction in hours can create space for reflexion and potentially greater self-awareness that can in turn push people further towards valuing life outside work. Previous research on people who reject full-time hours has suggested that ‘the availability of disposable time triggers a self-reflective process: [...] they now have time on their hands to reflect upon time. [...] The time pioneers are convinced that this will facilitate the realisation of their subjective aspirations in life’ (Hornig et al., 1995: 5). Frayne has discussed this as a ‘break point’ or ‘de-reification’ and notes that for his interviewees, the decision to work less came as a result of ‘having punctured through nurtured cultural beliefs’ often related to ‘a kind of personal crisis in which accustomed habits and beliefs are thrown into doubt’ (2015: 125). Narratives of awakening were common in many of our interviewees also. These findings confirm previous research which has shown that work orientations are not innate or fixed.

Pull towards other activities and freedom

Some interviewees had managed to reconfigure their priorities without major trauma being the trigger, and some had found it difficult to prioritise work over leisure activities throughout their lives. A frequently stated reason for working less was the straightforward desire to spend time doing other activities. In the extract below, we return to Paula who via ‘a middle-aged stock take’ concluded that an excessive amount of her energy was devoted to work:

[Y]ou get to a certain point in your life and [...] it was almost like I had a goal and that part of my life and I had achieved it and it was a bit like well what now? And I kind of looked back and thought, you know, I have done a lot of working and I know it sounds a bit morose but I thought to myself you know if I am told that I have got a year left to live then will I be happy with how I have spent my time, you know up to now? And I kinda thought to myself well, no I wanna have some quality time for me. (Paula, public sector educational psychologist, 43).

She went on to explain how a long-term passion for animal welfare had evolved into a hobby that was extremely meaningful for her. Work was no longer as fulfilling for her as it had been and so she now took pleasure in a wider variety

of experiences: helping rehome animals, developing her fluency in French and travelling.

Other people had recognised the importance of daily variety and personal interests much earlier, and this had shaped their labour market experience considerably:

I have got loads of other interests that I just want to explore. I just don't want to spend all the time working and ignoring all those. And I mean, in some ways, it stops you from working full-time, because you just, you have more interests, you know? If you didn't have the interests you could work full-time and it would not be a bother. But, you know, you want to do all sorts of other stuff'. (Joe, bike shop manager, 54).

For 20 years, Joe had been focused on bringing up his children rather than his short-hour job as a handyman in student flats. However, once his children were independent, he became more committed to his work repairing and building bikes for a local charity. This was initially a volunteer role that eventually evolved into a 28 h a week contract. He insisted that 28 h of work a week was sufficient, despite being paid a low hourly wage. Although he loved his job, he felt that more than 4 days would be too tiring or would not leave enough time to spend with his family. The tendency to value time can also be understood as a tendency to value other non-work activities. Joe also linked his limited labour market participation to the lack of good quality jobs in the north east of England. Many years ago, he had completed a higher national diploma in graphic design, but on discovering, there were few job opportunities in the area he had focused on family life and leisure activities instead.

Many interviewees were keen to draw attention to the importance of self-actualisation and the extent to which having dedicated time to activities outside work enriched their lives, provided them with challenges and allowed them to develop a sense of who they were outside their work identities. Seth was a self-employed gardener who generally only worked 4 days a week to have the time and flexibility to go out climbing and surfing when the conditions were good. Mastery, which is associated with 'feelings of competence and proficiency' and 'increased self-efficacy, self-esteem and positive affect' (Binnewies et al., 2010: 421) was an important aspect of what he valued in his leisure activities, as the quote below illustrates.

I feel like climbing is like you're like trying to get better at this thing and it's getting this thing that it's all about in a way [...] As in like the big buzz comes from like getting it, and it feels great. You know, I've worked really hard and that was really hard, and I've done it. [...] Whereas, I'd say with surfing, it's more like, related to like this, like buzz [...] of it happening. (Seth, self-employed gardener, 33).

This pull towards leisure activities has important implications for well-being, as participation in leisure activities is known to increase subjective well-being, and people often use leisure as a way of boosting their mood if they are feeling low (Brajša-Zganec et al., 2011; Taquet et al., 2016). The desire to use free time for creative activities and self-development was a common theme in the interviews. For example whilst Anna enjoyed her job and the challenges it afforded her, she was also keen to pursue what she called ‘passion projects’ which were unrelated to work:

Another motivation for going freelance is I write and I’ve been working on a novel for ages and I just found like every time I was getting some traction on it, something big would blow up at work, and you’d end up working late every day, and then most weekends. So I found that I was stalled. So I wanted to make the time, create time to write. Since then I have written two drafts [of the] novel so it has definitely step-changed the writing process (Anna, freelance media strategist, 42).

In many sectors of the labour market, reducing hours at work whilst retaining a regular job contract is impossible. As a result, a number of those in professional roles increased their sense of autonomy and reduced their hours at work by doing freelance. In the quote above, we can see a lack of control over the hours of work interacting with a desire to achieve creative goals outside work.

Not all interviewees had a goal-orientated approach to their increased free time. Instead, the desire for short-hour work was often expressed explicitly as a desire for more freedom. Many of the interviewees viewed full-time hours as an imposition that drastically reduced their autonomy, and they had shortened their hours to achieve a greater sense of control:

I don’t really want to do what someone else tells me to do all the time, I had rather just organise my own time so that’s why I would rather do agency work [...] like if I want to go and see someone for a couple of days or something I don’t wanna think, oh no I have got work! That sort of thing so I like having more freedom to like make up my own schedule of what I want to do. (Kate, support worker, 33).

I feel it’s much more balanced in terms of life not being too dominated by work really. And, it is more the feeling of freedom. (Rhys, patenting lawyer, 45).

The framing of the decision to reduce time at work in this way is reflective of how working time has been conceived in the literature which proposes a de-centring of work’s place in society. An increase in free time allowed interviewees to cultivate selves which were additional and incidental to the roles they performed at work. Few of the interviewees planned to use their time for overtly political or world changing activities as theorists Gorz and Weeks would have

perhaps hoped, although environmentally and socially beneficial activities were common, as well as solitary activities like walking, reading and running. Reduced time at work also seemed to enable greater possibilities for ‘a multitude of inter- and intragenerational relations of intimacy and sociality’ as people spent more time with friends and family (Weeks, 2011: 170). This is a previously demonstrated benefit to WTRs (Akerstedt et al., 2001).

Obviously, the reduction in working hours instigated by many of our interviewees has financial implications. The extent to which interviewees rejected the pleasures of consumerism varied greatly according to their expectations, social context and how much their disposable income was reduced by their decision to work short hours. However, most people had scaled back their spending to a certain amount at least:

A lot of my friends, the ones with the great jobs they’re spending all of their time working and then when they are not working they are buying the world’s most expensive fridge, or something else you can really do without. You don’t really need an 8-foot-high fridge, do you? And if it is a choice of between having a corporate job and a small fridge I am happy to have a smaller fridge. (Tim, ex-IT manager, 54).

Soper (2008) has written about the ‘intrinsic pleasures’ of consuming differently. Rather than framing a rejection of consumerism as a form of regression or asceticism, she sees it more as a sensual or hedonistic pleasure which allows people to recoup something of that which has been lost through an excessive commitment to amassing material possessions. This is reflected in the quotes and discussion above which show how rather than lament their loss of purchasing power, interviewees celebrated what their increase in free time allowed them to achieve. These comments hint at the potential environmental implications of widespread WTRs. However, in line with previous research (Gerold and Nocker, 2018), although environmental concern often acted as a backdrop, it was never mentioned as a key motivator for people interested in reducing their hours. For interviewees who were already committed to limiting their carbon footprint, a reduction in hours probably limited it further (mainly through loss of purchasing power), but for those who had little interest in environmental issues or who did not lack disposable income, an increase in carbon intensive activities (predominantly air travel) was often observable.

Conclusion

We have outlined the heterogeneous and multifaceted motives for reducing time at work uncovered during research. The increasing proportion of the population who describe themselves as voluntarily engaged in part-time/short-hour work in a context where nearly one in five women will not have children indicates that the

time is ripe for a more in-depth exploration of the biographical experiences which are driving the desire to work less. We have intentionally used quotes from the same interviewees in both sections of the discussion to illustrate the complexity of decision-making around short-hour working. Our results illustrate how negative experiences in the labour market play an important role in stimulating desires for alternative working patterns. This occurs through work intensification, unpaid overtime, lack of control and the experiences of time associated with working non-standard schedules. What links these accounts is the feeling that the pressures of work are preventing people from enjoying the ‘slivers’ of free time that are left over when other responsibilities have been fulfilled. Against this backdrop, those in a position to do so are pushing back against the ‘colonising power of work’ and are framing what they gain as a result of an increase in free time in hedonistic terms that emphasise their new found freedom (Frayne, 2015; Soper, 2008). Our interviews revealed that our relationship with work is fluid and that there is regularly an interactive effect between negative experiences at work and the desire to seek enhanced forms of meaning making elsewhere.

Frayne’s excellent study of society’s troubled relationship with work indicates that people can be drawn away from work by ‘rubbish jobs’, ‘mini utopias’ and ‘broken bodies’ and notes that his respondents rejected the idea that there could be ‘one overriding cause’ (2015: 119–154). Our research found both points of contact and divergence with the work carried out by Frayne. His discussion of ‘rubbish jobs’ did not quite ring true as the majority of interviewees enjoyed their jobs, what they resented was the imposition of long hours and an insufficiency of time to properly recuperate and develop subjectivities unconnected to the world of work. Secondly, rather than finding that people’s inspiration to work less came from utopic moments they had experienced prior to partial withdrawal from the labour market, our research suggests that these mini utopias can be created, once hours have been reduced and people are able to enjoy the hedonic pleasures of a slower lifestyle. Thirdly, whilst we excluded those who were unable to work full-time hours for ill-health reasons, the distinction between health and illness was not so clear-cut. Like Frayne, we found some of our interviewees had shortened their hours as a pre-emptive step to maintain good physical and mental health.

Although exchanging time at work for more enjoyable activities was an important aspect of what our interviewees gained by working short hours, paradoxically workers regularly flagged up the significant non-pecuniary benefits their time in work provided. There is no space to explore the issue in detail here, but our interviewees regularly indicated that leisure was not as fulfilling for them as their time in paid employment (although low-quality employment was under-represented in our sample). This is corroborated by research which suggests that paid work is one of the least pleasurable but most meaningful activities (Bryson and MacKerron, 2015; Kahneman et al., 2004; Wolf et al., 2019). It also underlines the importance of fighting to make good quality jobs accessible to all. As such, potential WTR policies

need to keep in sight Sayer's observation that 'what we do in life has at least as much, if not more influence on who we become, as does what we get' (2009: 1).

Understanding the motivations of those engaging in short-hour working is important, given the possibility for a shorter working week to help address numerous social and environmental crises (Stronge and Harper, 2019). Current thinking on the transition to shorter hours of work suggests that we need a multi-pronged approach which includes state initiatives, collective bargaining, company level action and voluntary action with the aim of 'nudging' existing institutions towards implementing a shorter working week (Skidelsky, 2019). However, despite its rising prevalence, the absolute number of employees willing to exchange time for money remains relatively low. A better understanding of what motivates people to reduce working hours will allow policy interventions that aim to stimulate the demand for short-hour working to be more effectively targeted. Previous research has shown that people can be 'primed' to value time more than money (Mogilner, 2010). In this vein, our research suggests that public engagement campaigns that emphasise the finite nature of time and the possibility of exchanging the negative experiences of employment with more activities that promote feelings of self-development and/or have a hedonistic element may see some measure of success. Recent research has revealed that people who value time over money are generally happier, and the greater the value they placed on time, the happier they were (Hershfield et al., 2016; Whillians et al., 2016). Equally the tendency of interviewees to engage in leisure activities which improve their well-being may in turn improve productivity, given the recent research which suggests that happier workers are more productive (Bellet et al., 2019).

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Notes

1. In this article, we use the term ‘short-hour work’ rather than ‘reduced-hour working’ or ‘part time’. We feel that both the initial terms set up a value laden dichotomy in which people working shorter hours are viewed as deviations from the norm of full-time hours. Given that standard hours of work are entirely socially constructed, we feel that these previous conceptualisations are unhelpful in the struggle to normalise and justify the value of ‘time for what you will’ (Weeks, 2011).
2. The personal connection to even these interviewees was often quite remote, for example house sitter (recruited via an internet forum) of a relative’s neighbour, the colleagues of friends, etc.

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