**Discussing working hours in contemporary societies: The Interplay between Work centrality, Time Preferences and Gender**

**Stream:** Working Time and Working Time Preferences (WTP) across the gender spectrum

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is broadly assumed in contemporary Western societies that individuals ought to commit a significant amount of time to their work. One key rationale behind this expectation lies in the necessity for a full-time job to meet, if not exceed, a minimum salary for a decent standard of living. This wage is not only essential for personal financial stability but also in contributing to the fiscal maintenance of the State. While assumptions related to FT work and long working hours have been critically examined (Dick, 2024), they are persistent in societies.

Beyond economic considerations, various factors such as beliefs, work ethics, and organizational assumptions reinforce this social expectation of dedicating extensive hours to work. In fact, it is expected that if work matters, individuals should dedicate a substantial number of hours to it. This is evident in research that shows that professionals and employees that work shorter hours face career difficulties and are often constructed as “not ambitious”, especially in the case of women (Benschop et al. 2013).

Scholars defined the relevance of work in people’s lives as work centrality. Work centrality is defined as “the beliefs that individuals have regarding the degree of importance that work plays in their lives” (Paullay et al., 1994). A definition that doesn’t include temporal references, nor indications regarding the amount of time one must work to demonstrate the importance of work in his/her life.

However, in everyday language, working hours and work centrality are often perceived as intertwined and gendered (see for instance the hashtag #lazygirljob# and Mogg, 2023). This relationship can complicate both public and academic discussions concerning the socially accepted duration of working hours, particularly in the context of a full-time job, and the very notion of what a full-time job should be in contemporary societies regardless of gender. Societies that, in different rhythms but everywhere around the world, are going or have gone through unprecedented changes in gender and family roles.

Following that, the purpose of this paper is: (1) analyse the evolution of how work centrality has been operationalized in research (2) analyse Work Centrality (WC) from the perspective of Working time preferences (WTP) (3) Consider the diversity of individuals, family structures and occupations in WTP and WC from a gender spectrum perspective.

In pursuing these goals, our aim is to foster organizational innovation on working time organization. This endeavour involves addressing additional legal, economic, and organizational challenges, although these aspects are not the primary focus of this paper. The paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature by synthesizing insights from both WC and WTP literature, thereby revisiting prevailing assumptions. As a result, we present a theoretical framework that combines WC and WTP along with delineating 6 archetypes of workers resulting from this model.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

First, we revise the literature on work centrality and discuss what work centrality, a concept coined in the 60s-80s, means. We pay attention to how “time” has been introduced into the definition or constructs.

Second, we revise research on WTP and related concepts, such as working time congruence, working time match and mismatch. WTP are often discussed in the context of different debates around working time organization: short working hours, long working hours and overtime, workweek compression and/ or reduction.

Third, we bring together these two concepts and define a theoretical framework that considers the hours an individual would like to work (WTP), the importance of work for the individual (WC) and the number of actual hours s/he works (AHW). From that, we draw a model that shows different combinations of WTP, WC and AHW. We then describe 6 archetypes of workers according to those different combinations. Finally, we conclude the short paper with a preliminary discussion and conclusions.

**Work centrality: time in the operationalization of the construct and gender differences**

The importance of work in people’s lives has been measured in organizational research using the concept of work centrality. The origins of the concept WC can be traced back to the work of Dubin (1956), Lodahl and Kejner (1965) and Kanungo (1982). (See Table 1)

Building on Dubin’s approach, Ruiz Quintanilla and Wilpert define WC as “the degree of importance that working has in the life of an individual” (1991:93). Three years later, Paullay Alliger & Stone-Romero (1994) echoing the work by Dubin, Lodahl and Kejner and Kanungo, operationalized the concept of WC distinguishing it from “Job involvement”. WC was defined as “the beliefs that individuals have regarding the degree of importance that work plays in their lives” (1994: 225). The authors added that “WC is seen as being shaped by the socialization of the individual” (1994:225), definition that to some extension, is similar to Kanungo’s definition of WC as he considers that it’s a normative belief that is historically caused.

Paullay et al.’s conceptualization resulted from conceptual and operational distinctions they thought needed to be made between job involvement (to refer to the present job held by an individual) and involvement with work or paid employment in general, that they referred to, precisely, as “work centrality” (1994, p.224).

In the 2000’, authors such as Diefendorff et al. (2002) and Hirshfield and Field (2000) continued to rely on Paullay et al.’s and Kanungo’s definitions and their constructs but the latter introduced “time” in their understanding of work centrality.

The study of Hirshfield and Field (2000) sought to distinguish between existing measures of work centrality and work alienation. They used Paullay et al.'s 12-item measure of work centrality to explore the underlying dimensions of a general commitment to work. They found that work centrality is linked to the Protestant work ethic and leisure ethic as other authors have also pointed (Dick, 2024). This suggests that the concept of work centrality is fundamentally cognitive and normative, reflecting an individual's value system and self-identity that come from one unique familial and socialitzation history (Diefendorff et al., 2020).

Importantly, Hirshfield and Field (2000) included “time” as a component of work centrality, viewing it as a decision related to the allocation of time and effort across various life domains. They also introduced a dynamic view. Work centrality is assumed to be stable over a shorter period of time but may change over a longer period.

Twenge and Kasser (2013) introduced overtime in one of the items to measure work centrality in their study on the relationship between materialism and work centrality among young Americans. When materialistic values increased, work centrality declined, suggesting a growing discrepancy between the desire for material rewards and the willingness to do the work usually required to earn them.

More recently, Li, Jiang and Xu (2020) in their definition of work centrality, they add to the importance of work to one’s life, the inherent satisfaction and pleasure from it. And following Mannheim et al. (1997) and Hirshfield and Field (2000) consider that “people who value their work, invest more time and resources to their careers and the organization” (p. 252). Hao et al. (2022) also include time when they operationalize work centrality in their study on the relationship between employees' work centrality and their work recovery. Work centrality is measured in terms of allocating more time and energy to work.

In a nutshell, “time” was not part of initial operationalisations of WC, once this concept was distinguished from job involvement. It was later, around the decade of the 2000’ that time was included in this operationalization.

Table 1: Time in work centrality along different decades and authors

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Authors** | **Inclusion of time in the definition of Work centrality** | **Definition/approach to Work centrality** |
| Dubin (1956) | No | Central life interest |
| Kanungo (1982) | No | A normative belief about the value of work in one's life (p.342) |
| Ruiz Quintanilla and Wilpert (1991) | No | The degree of importance that working has in the life of an individual (p.93). |
| Paullay Alliger & Stone-Romero (1994) | No | Beliefs that individuals have regarding the degree of importance that work plays in their lives (p.225) |
| Hirshfield and Field (2000) | Yes | Relative allocation of time and perhaps effort among various life domains (p. 797)  People who value their work invest more time and resources to their careers and the organization. |
| Twenge and Kasser (2013) | Yes | A 5-item construct to measure work centrality, one of them on overtime: “ I want to do the best in my job even if this sometimes means working overtime” (p:888) |
| Li, Jiang and Xu (2020) | Yes | people who value their work invest more time and resources to their careers and the organization (p.252) |
| Hao et al. (2022) | Yes | work centrality as more time and energy (p.827) |

Some scholars investigated WC and gender and found that women’s work centrality is significantly lower than men’s (Sharabi and Harpaz, 2011), especially between men and women with children. (Snir, Harpaz, & Ben-Baruch, 2009). This situation is related to the different life events that men and women have and the gendered socialization processes, social expectations and beliefs. Moreover, in regions where female labour force participation rates are higher, work centrality among young women is also higher (Kittel el al 2019).

The evolution of gender socialization norms and societal expectations regarding women's participation and positioning within the labour force in recent decades has led to a gap’s reduction of work centrality between men and women (Sharabi and Harpaz, 2011). The trend towards decreased working hours and the emergence of leisure-oriented cultural practices have contributed as well to decrease the perceived centrality of work in men's lives.

Additionally, generational and occupational variation has been identified. It has been found that senior managers have higher work centrality than junior managers for both men and women (Sharabi, 2017) and that centrality can be high among women in blue-collar positions/occupations (Lamolla et al. 2021).

**Working time preferences and gender**

Research on WTPs aims to determine whether people’s working hours coincide with the hours they would like to work. (Lamolla et al. 2021). When preferences coincide with hours actually worked there is working time congruence (Lee, Wang and Weststar, 2015). Otherwise, we talk about working hours mismatch (Angrave and Charlwood 2015; Böheim and Taylor 2004; Campbell and van Wanrooy 2013; Kalleberg 2008). Mismatch can be due to overemployment (working more of what one would like to) or underemployment (working less of what one would like to). Extensive data about these concepts can be found in the ILO (2022) report.

In a literature review driven by recent debates on working time reductions, Antal et al (2024, pp:1) concluded that research on Working Time Preferences “is highly fragmented across disciplines and journals”. This conclusion that is also found in Campbell and van Wanrooy´s (2013) study on Working Time Preferences in the context of long working hours. In their study they pointed to the ambivalence of answers when people are asked about their preferences, to the instability of these answers, as well to scepticism of interviewees regarding the feasibility of reduction in their working hours.

The inclination of women to opt for shorter work hours has primarily been linked to their household and caregiving responsibilities (Baxter and Evans, 2013). Some scholars have correlated these preferences with the centrality of career or work (Hakim, 1996 and 2003; Sweet et al., 2016). More career centric, more willingness to work more and more pronounced among highly educated and professional women (Gash, 2008; Holth, Bergman, and MacKenzie, 2017; Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 2003). Conversely, women in lower-quality positions have been associated with diminished career centrality (Sweet et al., 2016).

Antal and al (2024) review of research on WTP report previous scholars’ contributions concluding that gender plays an important role in shaping WTP. Summarizing their findings, women prefer and do work less hours, marriage has gender specific effects on WTP, although they report also contradictory findings. In all, they state the persistence of the male breadwinner model and certain ambiguity regarding working time mis-matches due to care responsibilities. They also report areas that require further research, such as how the amount of household work affects WTP and actually worked hours.

**Theoretical model**

Our model should help to clarify and understand the relationship between work centrality and working time preferences at an individual level. The model proposes combines Work Centrality and Working time preferences and considers the number of hours actually worked (HAW). We avoid to refer explicitly to Full time or Part time job and in this way, allow theoretical and practical discussion regardless of the institutional and social norms related to working hours which are specific to different countries and contexts.

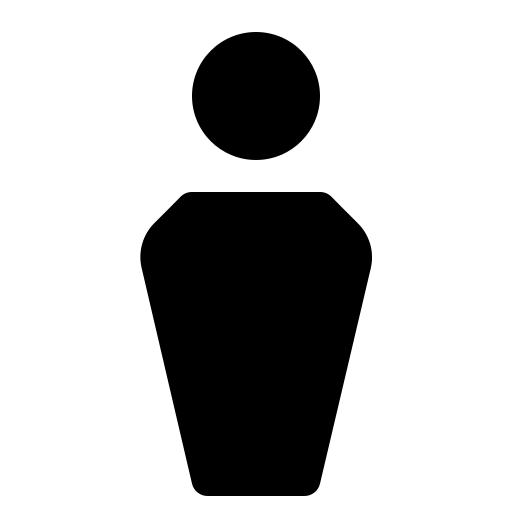
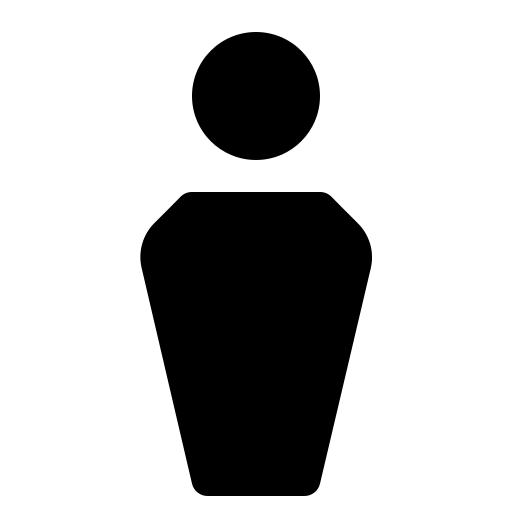
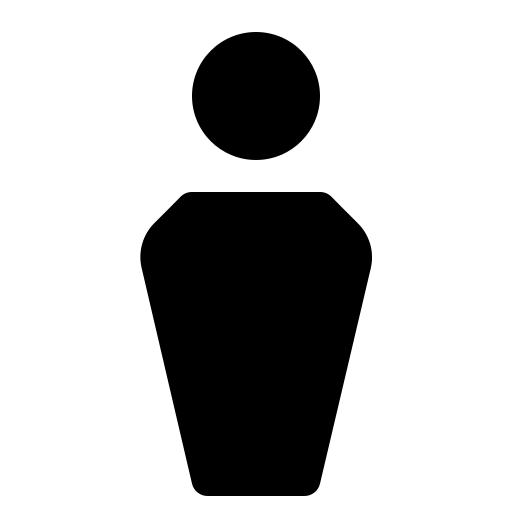
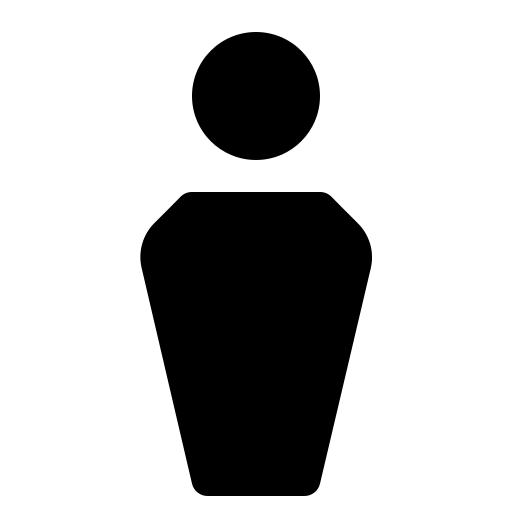
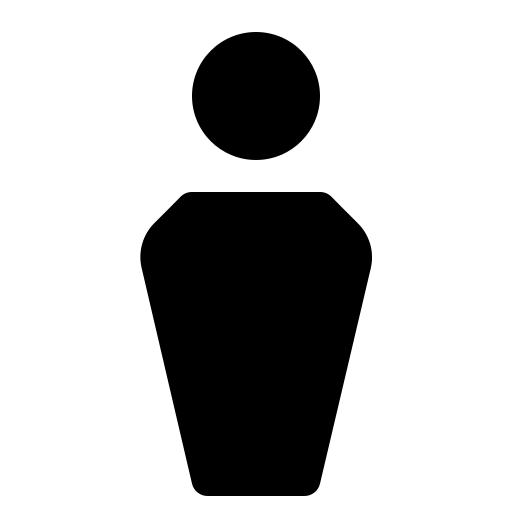
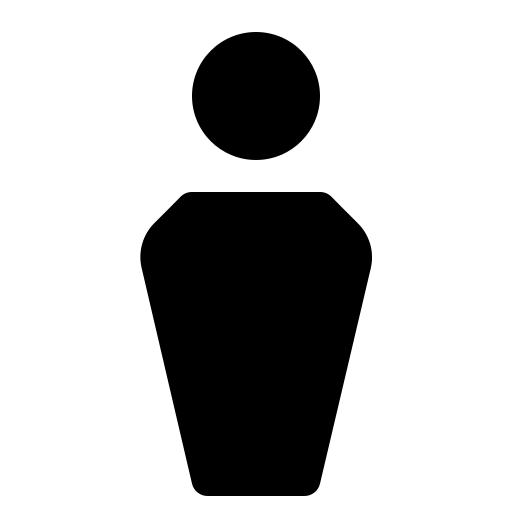
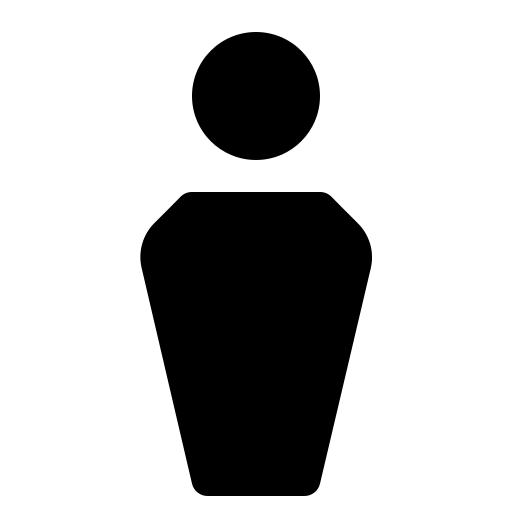
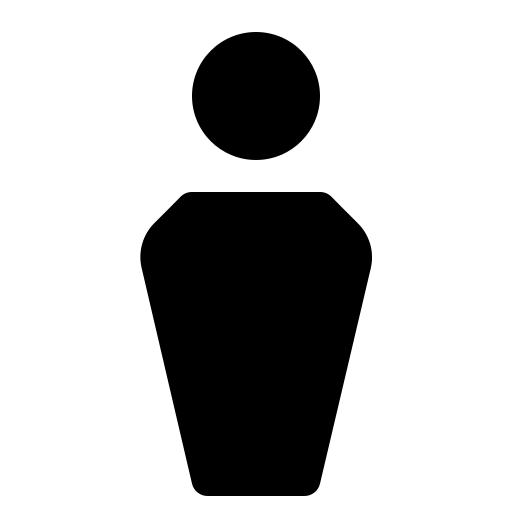
In this model, a person exhibiting high Work Centrality is subject to three distinct main scenarios regarding his /her WTP and the actual hours s/he work: (a) a preference for increased working hours (b) a desire for fewer working hours (working hours mismatch) or (c) alignment between their actual and preferred working hours. The three scenarios include working hours mismatch (a, b) and work hour congruence (c). Conversely, individuals with low Work Centrality may also experience the same scenarios as well.

These situations may seem difficult to exist in reality since, as mentioned above, work centrality has been associated with a desire to work more and low work centrality with a preference for working less. However, the reality is much more diverse and the model represents a continuum of combinations. Work centrality is not a dichotomous variable, nor are the actual hours of work or work preferences the same for everyone. For instance, for a person the preference for working less can be 2 hours less and for another can be 4. In this sense, workers are placed in 3 coordinates: Actual working hours (AWH), Preferred Working Hours (PWH) and Work Centrality (WC).

In order to make the model tangible, we have defined 6 archetypes (Jung, 2014) named from A to F, which respond to the 6 scenarios formerly mentioned. Archetypes shall contribute to understand different patterns of preferences regarding working hours and its centrality in individuals' lives by a typical or idealized representation of a worker with certain characteristics, traits, or roles associated with their occupation or profession.

**Figure 1: Model of WTP, WC and AWH**

Working Time Preferences



Less

More

Actual Working hours

-

+

D

E

C

**C**

**B**

**A**

F

F

Low

Work Centrality

High

Work Centrality

**Archetype A: Low WC and AWH<PWH**

This archetype is characterized by individuals with low Work Centrality who aspire to work more hours than they currently do (AWH < PWH). Work holds limited significance in their lives (low centrality), prompting a preference for increased working hours. This archetype often encompasses individuals seeking additional work hours for economic motives, such as the unemployed, those working part-time, or even full-time workers desiring higher income.

*John (35 years old) works in a supermarket 30 hours a week and although he finished compulsory school, he hasn’t further education. He earns the minimum salary. He is renting a flat of 50 m2 and have two children of 6 and 8. He would like to move to a bigger flat but with his current wage he can’t afford it.*

**Archetype B: Low WC and AWC >PWH**

Comprising two variations, this archetype includes individuals working overtime and desiring to eliminate it or working a standard number of hours but wishing for a reduction. In both instances, Work Centrality remains low, and are typically driven by economic considerations.

*Sarah (50) works in a restaurant of the Mediterranean coast. During summer, she has long working journeys as the kitchen is open from 12 to 12. They aren’t enough employees and the boss asks her to do overtime very frequently. She is often tired and would like to have more time to herself. She’s considering to look for another job but is not easy for her.*

*Anne (25) rose up in the same city where John works. She has a full-time job as a pharmacy assistant. She loves the sea and sailing. Last year she managed to buy a second-hand boat and would like to have more time to dedicate to her passion, sailing. She would like to ask to reduce her schedule, however, as she is a newly hired employee, she does not dare to do it.*

**Archetype C: Low WC and AWH = PWH**

This archetype includes workers that their work centrality are low but they work the amount of time that they prefer. This amount of time can be a lot or a little, depending of other personal needs and motivations. In the figure, we represent this archetype C in a continuum from preferences and actual hours that are few to a lot.

*Mark (20) is a college student who works as a safeguard in a swimming pool on Saturdays (8 hours a week). The job allows him to have pocket money while he studies law. On Sundays he spends the time studying and hanging out with his friends.*

*Jenny (30) works as a receptionist in a hotel Monday to Friday (8 hours a day). Her job allows her to pay for her studies of law, that she does in the evenings.*

**Archetype D: High WC and AWH < PWH**

This archetype encompasses individuals with high Work Centrality whose actual working hours fall short of their desired or preferred hours. Often observed among unemployed individuals, part-time workers, or even full-time employees seeking increased hours to align with their strong identification with work.

*Josep (22) wanted to be a teacher since he was a child. He got his first job very recently in an elementary school as a substitute teacher and has a part time job. As he has plenty of time in the afternoon he has thought to open an afterschool program for students who need extra help.*

**Archetype E: High WC and AWH > PWH**

Representing individuals with high Work Centrality, this archetype features actual working hours exceeding their preferred hours. Typically, these individuals find meaning in their work but do not necessarily seek to express it through extended working hours. Economic constraints may pose challenges to achieve their desired reduction in working hours, despite a strong inclination towards it.

*Emma (30) works as a doctor at a health centre. Despite having to cope with limited resources, she navigates through tightly packed schedules, frequently extending her working hours to accommodate patients beyond their allocated time slots. Driven by her commitment to her profession, Emma tries to fulfil the duties she holds as a doctor.*

**Archetype F: High WC and AWH = PWH**

Finally the 6th archetype include two types of workers related to the amount of hours they work. The first one, responds to the ideal worker (Acker,1992) , a person-male- that for him the work is important and works in a full time basis and matching the actual hours worked and the preferred hours. The second one, include people that for them work is important because is a source of self-realisation and socialisation (Lamolla et al., 2021) but they work less than full time. Although work is important, their personal time too. This personal time can be dedicated to family, but not necessarily.

*Julia (25) finished last year an MBA in a well-known business school and nows he works in a consulting firm as associate. She works long hours but she enjoys the job and accepts the organizational culture of work in this sector. She expects to promote soon to a senior position in this company or perhaps in the future launch her own consulting company.*

*John (30) works part time as a clerk. He enjoys working as he likes the job and his colleagues. He does not want to work more hours as he enjoys very much his free time and the salary is enough for his needs according to the cost of living where he lives, and the community services he has access to.*

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The diversity situations regarding preferences in working hours, work centrality and actual worked hours reflected in the model above help to understand contemporary work dynamics and reflect different needs and personal circumstances that are far from being homogeneous.

It is a paradox that, while there are different needs, the current system is highly standardized. For some individuals, working fewer hours poses a problem due to financial constraints. Others would prefer shorter hours for socializing or because they enjoy their work, but not if that requires working long hours. The model above allows to capture all these circumstances regardless of gender, occupational and professional diversity.

Moreover, preferences and centrality may change throughout people's lives as Campbell & Van Wanroy (2013) and Hirschfeld & Feild, (2000) have observed. Working hour frameworks should acknowledge this, and regulations should not penalize for different choices and avoid contributing to ageist and gendered perceptions and reinforcement of the “ideal working life balancer” model (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

Individual reasons for working more or less should shouldn’t be taken into account when debating what should be the frame of reference for working hours as this can inadvertently perpetuate gendered expectations. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the significant role of gender in shaping work preferences and not ignore power dynamics and gender inequalities in the workplace (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

The model creates a framework to bring together the different working situations and enables public and organizational debates around how working time should be organized: debates on working time reduction, long working hours, part time arrangements, short working hours regulation and protection and other. We argue that all these situations, that are often separately regulated and researched, could be addressed with a common framework such as the one provided here.

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