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EMPLOYEE AVAILABILITY FOR WORK AND FAMILY: THREE SWEDISH CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper explores the concept of availability, both empirically and theoretically, in the context of three Swedish organisations, and identifies the structural influences on availability patterns for work and family.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on quantitative case studies using employer records and a questionnaire sent to all employees in three different organisations. Multivariate descriptive statistics and multivariate logistic regression are used to illustrate and analyse patterns of availability for work and family.

Findings – The descriptive data demonstrate the influence of the organisational context and type of production process, as well as gender, on availability patterns. Patterns of work availability appeared to differ across the organisations, to a greater extent than patterns of family availability, which were highly gendered. The logistic regression results indicated that: occupational level was a significant influence on both temporal and spatial availability patterns across the organisations; gender was the most significant influence on time spent on household work and part-time working for parents with young children; age of employees and age of employees' children were the most significant factors influencing the use of time off work for family.

Research limitations/implications – Case studies cannot answer the question what would happen in other cases, or in the labour market as a whole. More extensive quantitative research would be needed to make empirical generalisations possible. Qualitative research would be needed to establish whether and how employees are able to make use of different availability patterns to improve their work-life balance.

Originality – The concept of availability is a new way of trying to capture and analyse tensions in people's everyday lives as they try to manage multiple demands.

Key words: Availability, family, gender, occupation, working time, work-life balance.

Type of paper: Research paper

Introduction

This article draws on empirical findings from three case study organisations in Sweden to argue that the concept of availability, both temporal and spatial, can contribute to developing an analytical framework for comparative work-life balance research across different organisational and institutional settings. The article explores the different patterns of availability for work and family amongst employees in a mill, a bank and a college and identifies the influence of gender, occupation, parental responsibilities and organisational context on these patterns.

The first section introduces the concept of availability and suggests why this concept offers a potential analytical framework for exploring work-life balance issues from an employee perspective. The second section provides an overview of general patterns of availability for work and family in Sweden. The research methods are then presented. The data analysis is presented in five sub-sections. The first three of these sub-sections in turn present the findings from the three case study organisations. The fourth sub-section discusses the differences and similarities in the findings from the three organisations. The fifth sub-section summarises some multivariate logistic regression results, highlighting structural influences on availability patterns. The final section of the article provides a conclusion and suggestions for future directions for work-life balance research.

‘Availability’ and work-life balance

Work-life balance practices may be conceptualised as actions and structural arrangements that address the competing demands experienced by individuals arising from working life and life outside work. To be available is to be accessible in time and space and responsive to the needs and wants of others, for example one’s employer or family members. Availability is both a disposition and a capacity, emphasising both structural conditioning and action. It therefore has the advantage of connecting structure and agency without merging them together or giving priority to one over the other (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000). It is actors, not structures, that are available, but the interplay of material and normative structures condition the way actors’ availability is manifested. Availability is also a relational concept that highlights the distinction between being available to meet the needs of another/others and claiming another’s/others’ availability. Here we are not concerned with the motives and intentions related to different availability practices, such as working part-time or overtime hours, but rather with how different factors such as organisational context, occupation and gender influence the take-up of these practices, hence the main aim in this article is to identify the key structural influences which provide a context for individual action.

The concept of work-life balance is grounded in discourses of choice and flexibility (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Hogarth et al., 2000) that became predominant in Europe from the 1990s, replacing earlier political discourses of equal opportunities and family-friendly policies. The change within the political discourse reflects a more individualistic and gender neutral framework for analysis and policy in which structural inequalities and durable power relations are easily submerged, with the focus shifting instead to individual difficulties in reconciling work and family commitments. Both employment relations and gender relations tend to be hidden in the discourse on work-life balance. The focus is rather on seeking equilibrium between two apparently separate and equal entities: work and family or work and ‘life’, which can be combined harmoniously.

By using the concept of availability, it is possible to highlight the asymmetry in the social relations of employment and the family. Employment can be conceived as the purchase of a certain share of workers' availability, which is then used in different ways and under different conditions. The concept here has parallels with the Marxist concept of labour power. Likewise in families there are more or less explicit demands and claims for availability in order that different tasks can be done and needs met. Within the family, one partner's availability may liberate the other partner from household and care work, thus increasing their availability for employment (Jonasdóttir, 1994). Whilst availability refers to human capacity and potential, work-life balance can be understood as a preferred outcome in which multiple demands from work, family and other spheres of life are met. Work-life balance is therefore a normative concept in comparison with the more analytical concept of availability.

Availability can also be distinguished from flexibility. Flexibility implies variability, with adaptation to changing circumstances, either internal or external to the organisation, and therefore change in some state or capacity (Jonsson 2006). Whereas, availability is not necessarily related to change and variation in time, it is rather a disposition, or a capacity among actors that can be continuous or take different manifest forms depending on the situation. Flexibility requires availability and is one way that availability can appear in certain structural contexts.

This article does however follow the typical focus of work-life balance research and policy by examining the inter-relationships between work and family (though we do recognise that there are other important work-life balance issues, for example those affecting older workers in transitions to retirement, see Gardiner et al., 2007). Policy-makers have tended to focus on flexibility in working time arrangements as the solution to work-life imbalance for families with young children (DTI, 2003), implicitly adopting a mutual gains philosophy (Tailby et al., 2005). However the tensions between business imperatives for temporal flexibility to meet service demands on the one hand and family-friendly flexibility on the other are well established in the research literature (Hyman et al., 2005). Tailby et al. (2005) have highlighted the co-existence of work-life balance policies and work intensification within the workplace. Flexibility is also a relational concept and Jonsson (2006) makes a distinction between 'being flexible' and 'having flexibility'. Employment relations are such that often it is the employer who has flexibility whilst the employee has to be flexible in relation to organisational needs, because of the asymmetrical power relation between the employer and the employee. Here Fleetwood's (2006) notions of employer-friendly and employee-friendly flexibility are relevant, with flexibility that can be positive or negative for each party. Flexible working practices may enable or limit work-life balance. The needs of the business, not the needs of the family, tend to be the determining factor. Therefore the demands emanating from employment tend to set the rules for what is possible or preferable in other spheres. In other words 'balance' tends to be about balancing practices within the private sphere in relation to work, rather than the reverse (Lewis and Lewis 1996). The demands emanating from the family are less visible. Coser (1974) suggested that the workplace and the family should both be seen as greedy institutions, each grasping for people's time, presence and commitment. Here the relationship between work and family is seen as a conflictual rather than a symmetrical, potentially harmonious relationship (Guest 2002).

Much of the research on work-life balance undertaken from an employment relations perspective has adopted case study methodology applied to a specific workplace. There have been relatively few comparative studies of different

organisations. One comparative study was conducted by Charles and James (2005) who carried out qualitative interview-based research in three workplaces in South Wales (manufacturing, retail and public sector organisations). Charles and James' research focused on employees' perceptions of gender roles, job insecurity and work-life balance. It explored the relationship between gender, perceptions of work-life balance and different working time arrangements and family-friendly policies in the three organisations. This article is also based on comparative research, though of three different organisations in a region of Sweden. However it takes a rather different approach by addressing the interplay between variations in availability patterns, gender, occupation and nature of work processes, and employing a quantitative research methodology.

Patterns of availability for work and family in Sweden

Equal opportunities policy in Sweden is directed towards women's and men's availability patterns for family and work. The measures adopted have encouraged women's availability for employment on the same conditions as men but have also attempted to increase men's availability for the family, mainly through increased paternal leave (Bekkengen 2002). The Swedish welfare state has been characterized as an *individual earner career model* requiring both women and men to provide financial support and care for children and the home (Esping-Andersen 1990). In practice, there are still gendered patterns, especially in relation to the family.

Hence in Sweden both women and men have a strong connection to employment and the demands and rewards emanating from it. A high percentage of women were employed in 2005 (80%) compared with 86 per cent of men (SCB 2006). However a much higher percentage of women worked part-time (65%) compared to men (11%). Parents with children aged eight years or younger have a legal right to reduce their working hours by 25 per cent; though take-up is far more usual amongst women than men.

Women also do more unpaid household work than men in Sweden (SCB 2006). However women's unpaid work hours decreased between 1990 and 2005, while the time spent by men on unpaid work was stable. Hence the gender difference in time availability for family was reduced, not because men were spending more time on household work but because women were spending less time. During the same period, time spent on paid work decreased for men but was stable for women (SCB 2006). It seems that women's availability for the family decreased, whilst their availability for paid work was stable and that men experienced the opposite pattern.

It has been argued that the *male breadwinner* model is declining in favour of the *adult worker family* model of full-time paid work for both women and men, and equal participation in household tasks (Duncan et al., 2003). However, even in gender-egalitarian welfare regimes such as Sweden, women still have the main responsibility for family availability (Björnberg, 2002; Duncan et al., 2003; Gustafson 2006).

The Swedish labour market also has a high level of horizontal and vertical gender segregation. Women and men work in different sectors, occupations and hierarchical levels. Fifty-two per cent of women work in the public sector and 48 per cent in the private, while 81 per cent of the men work in the private sector and 19 per cent in the public sector (SCB 2006). Amongst the thirty largest occupations in Sweden, only five have a balanced proportion of women and men - defined as within a 60/40 percentage ratio. Regarding vertical segregation patterns, the managerial levels in the private sector are male-dominated (78% of these positions are held by

men and 22% by women). However in the public sector 56 per cent of managerial positions are held by women and only 44 per cent by men (SCB, 2006).

The case studies discussed in this article are within manufacturing (which is a male-dominated sector), finance (which has a balanced gender ratio), and education and research (which is female-dominated). The remainder of the article focuses on how patterns of availability manifest themselves among female and male employees at an organisational level. The next two sections describe the research design and present the findings.

Research methods

The data presented in this article originates from a quantitative study of three organisations in Värmland, a province in central Sweden, conducted in 1997 for another research project (Bergman, 2004). Whilst that research did not focus on work-life balance issues per se, some of the material is relevant to subsequent debates on work-life balance and, in particular, the relevance of the concept of availability. Further data analysis, using this concept, was then conducted giving rise to the research findings reported here.

The three organisations studied were a paper and pulp mill, a bank and a university college. The data-set came from two sources: employer records and a questionnaire sent to all employees (sample number = 2192), excluding hourly paid employees. Employer records were available for all employees. The questionnaire response rate was 72 per cent for the Mill, 84 per cent for the Bank and 78 per cent for the College. The employer records provided data for each employee on job, hierarchical position, age, gender, type of employment contract and working hours. The questionnaire provided other demographic data and responses to questions on temporal and spatial availability for work and family. Employer records and employee responses were matched and related to each other providing a combination of objective and subjective data.

The aim of this article is to explore the use of the concept of availability, both theoretically and empirically, in the context of the three case study organisations and not to generalise about availability patterns in the labour market. What patterns exist in other organisations, or in the Swedish labour market as a whole, is an empirical question that cannot be answered here. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the analytical reasoning and empirical findings will provide convincing evidence of the relevance and further potential use of the concept of availability.

Data analysis

The three case studies are presented, by descriptive cross-tabulations, in separate subsections below. This data is followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences in availability patterns across the case study organisations. The final subsection provides a multivariate regression analysis for selected availability variables.

In the tables presented below, availability is operationalised in three different ways. The first two relate to *temporal* and *spatial* availability for (paid) work and the third to availability for *family*. Temporal availability for work refers to availability in time, for example, whether respondents are working full-time or part-time, how their working hours are regulated, and patterns of overtime working. Spatial availability refers to the extent to which the employee is available outside the physical boundaries of the site of the organisation, for example whether respondents bring work home or go on business journeys. Availability for family is measured by responses to questions concerning how time off work is spent, whether the respondent or their partner does

the most unpaid household work, whether the respondent or their partner spends the most time working and whether the respondent works or has worked part-time during a child's early years.

The Mill

The Mill was a traditional process industry producing paper and pulp. It was the largest of the three organisations (1277 employees) and male-dominated, both numerically (21% women and 79% men) and vertically, with men over-represented in the higher positions and women in the lower white-collar positions (see Table 1).

Table 1: Mill: Gender shares and concentration within occupations.

Occupational level	Male and female shares		Male and female concentration	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Managerial	98	2	11	1
Professional	84	16	5	4
Intermediate white-collar	58	42	3	8
Lower white-collar	28	72	2	28
Higher blue-collar	88	12	64	34
Lower blue-collar	70	30	15	25
Total %	79	21	100	100
No.	1015	262	1015	262

Notes

Shares refer to male and female employees within an occupational level as a percentage of all employees within the level.

Concentration refers to male (or female) employees within an occupational level as a percentage of all male (or all female) employees within the organisation.

Table 1 indicates the gender composition of occupations within different hierarchical levels, as defined by the Swedish Standard for Occupational Classification (SSYK), which ranks occupations in accordance with the qualifications required for the occupation. Employees in managerial occupations were almost exclusively male. Professional occupations, requiring engineering, economics or human resource management qualifications, were also male-dominated. Intermediate white-collar occupations within administration, sales and logistics were more gender-balanced. The female-dominated lower level white-collar jobs consisted of support staff including clerks, secretaries, receptionists and caretakers. Skilled blue-collar occupations, comprising production and maintenance workers, were male-dominated, as was the lower level blue-collar category that covered truck-drivers, packers and odd-job workers.

This organisation reflected a common pattern in male-dominated manufacturing industries, with a higher percentage of female than male employees in white-collar occupations (41% and 21% respectively). Nonetheless, a majority of the female employees were employed in blue-collar occupations.

Table 2: Work and family availability patterns in the three organisations (% by gender).

	Mill		Bank		College	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Full-time	98	63	100	59	85	66
Office hours	42	40	74	91	21	55
Shifts	57	48	-	-	-	-
Unregulated hours	1	12	26	9	79	45
Frequently works overtime*	14	14	58	48	68	43

Frequently takes work home due to workload*	5	3	34	6	75	46
Frequent business journeys**	6	3	29	3	36	22
Wants to reduce work hours	45	25	23	19	36	37
Time off mostly devoted to work	3	0	5	2	22	15
Time off devoted to both work and family	2	3	12	4	42	25
Time off devoted mostly to family	80	88	75	85	28	52
Time off mostly devoted to myself	15	9	8	9	8	8
Spends less time working than partner	12	35	7	30	6	35
Does more household work than partner	4	70	4	60	5	64
Works/worked part-time with young children	1	57	3	70	6	60

Note: *Twice a week or more. **Twice a month or more, for more than one day.

The work-related availability patterns in the Mill are indicated by the variables in Table 2. Men and women showed some differences and some similarities in temporal availability patterns. Men worked full-time to a higher extent than women and were more likely to work on a rotating shift system, providing 24 hour availability for the employer. For the employee, shift-work may be difficult to reconcile with family commitments but is at least predictable. The second most common pattern of working hours was traditional office hours, and this constant and predictable pattern was experienced by a similar proportion of women and men. Few employees, though more women than men, had unregulated working hours. A normal contractual week is 40 hours in Sweden. (If contracts are based on unregulated working hours, employees can decide how to allocate their working hours themselves over the week or month, with actual hours worked which are decided by the employee and not monitored by the employer.)

More male respondents (45%), than female respondents (25%), wanted to reduce their working hours. However actual overtime working showed no gender difference and a low overall frequency. Only 14 per cent of either gender frequently worked overtime hours. The demand for this type of availability from the employer was low at the time of the research.

Turning to spatial availability, very few of either gender frequently brought work home because of workload pressures, or went on business journeys. This pattern reflects the character of the production process. A majority of employees were involved in work that was tied to the plant and therefore could not be disconnected in time and space.

With respect to family availability, 79 per cent of male and 82 per cent of female respondents were living with partners, and these employees were asked about the time they and their partners spent on paid and household work. Seventy-four per cent of the males and 79 per cent of the females had children (24% of women and 38% of men having children aged eight years or younger), and these employees were asked whether they worked or had worked part-time when their children were young.

Table 2 shows that both men and women spent most of their time off work with their families. However, a much higher proportion of women (70%) than men (4%) spent more time doing household work than their partners. Women (57%) were also much more likely than men (1%) to work part-time when their children were young, in accordance with parental leave entitlements in Sweden. Nonetheless, whilst women were more available for family than their partners, 65 per cent of women worked as much, or more, than their partners.

The Bank

In the Bank the core business was the provision of financial services and there were 317 employees, engaged in managerial and white-collar occupations (see Table 3). The Bank was female dominated numerically (68% women and 32% men) but men were over-represented in managerial and professional positions that included legal and marketing occupations. The majority of women (92%) and men (65%) worked in intermediate and lower white-collar occupations. But men were most likely to be employed in intermediate positions, mostly financial advisers and estate administrators. Women were most likely to be employed in the lower white-collar occupations as clerks, cashiers and secretaries.

Table 3: Bank: Gender shares and concentration within occupations.

Occupational Level	Male and female shares		Male and female concentration	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Managerial	64	36	26	7
Professional	75	25	9	1
Intermediate white-collar	44	56	50	31
Lower white-collar	10	90	15	61
Total %	32	68	100	100
No.	102	215	102	215

See notes to Table 1

There was a gender difference in the work-related availability patterns in the Bank, as indicated by the variables in Table 2. All men at the Bank worked full-time, while 59 per cent of women did so. Whilst both women and men worked mainly office hours, men were more likely than women to work unregulated hours. On the other hand, frequent overtime working was almost as common among women (48%) as among men (58%). This pattern suggests that flexible and unpredictable temporal availability was demanded from employees, irrespective of gender. The proportion of women wanting to reduce their hours was almost as high as for men at about a fifth of the respondents. However, these statistics indicate that availability for work appeared to be compatible with the demands of availability for family for a majority of employees.

Turning to spatial availability, there were clear gender differences since significant proportions of men, but very few women, took work home or went on frequent business journeys. In the Bank women were available temporally, but not spatially.

Amongst the respondents, 88 per cent of women and 92 per cent of men were living with partners, whilst 84 per cent of women and 79 per cent of men had children (25% of the women and 38% of the men have children aged eight years or younger). Both men and women spent most of their time off with their families but men were more likely than women to spend time off on work as well as with their family. Most women spent more time doing household work than their partners and a high

proportion of women (70%), but very few men (3%) worked part-time when their children were young. Whilst women were more available than their partners for the family, 70 per cent of women worked as much, or more, than their partners.

The College

At the College the core activities were education and research. The organisation had 598 employees roughly equally split by gender (see Table 4). About a half (51%) of female employees were in the higher level managerial and professional occupations (mostly lecturers), reflecting the character of the core activities. However, there was vertical gender segregation with 84 per cent of male employees in these higher level positions. Both intermediate white-collar occupations (administration and computer/IT support) and lower white-collar occupations (secretaries, receptionists and clerks) were female-dominated.

Table 4: College: Gender shares and concentration within occupations.

Occupational Level	Male and female shares		Male and female concentration	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Managerial	72	28	16	6
Professional	60	40	68	45
Intermediate white-collar	32	68	6	14
Lower white-collar	20	78	10	35
Total %	50	50	100	100
No.	301	297	301	297

See notes to Table 1

On all measures of temporal availability, men at the College were more available for work than women, more likely to work full-time, unregulated hours and frequent overtime (see Table 2). Over a third of both women and men wanted to reduce their work hours. Whilst the gender difference in part-time working was not as great as in the other two organisations, with 15 per cent of men working part-time, compared to 34 per cent of women, this difference was mainly because these men had second jobs elsewhere, mostly at other colleges or universities.

A gendered pattern was also visible in spatial availability with men much more likely than women to take work home and also more likely to make frequent business journeys. However College women were much more likely to be available for work in these ways than women in the other two organisations.

Amongst the respondents at the College, 80 per cent of men and 81 per cent of women were living with partners, and 78 per cent of women and 70 per cent of men had children (32% of the women and 30% of the men had children aged eight years or younger). College employees, male and female, were much more likely to devote a large part of their 'time off' to work and less time to family than employees in the other organisations. Again there was a gender difference with 28 per cent of men and 52 percent of women devoting most of their time off to family.

Most women spent more time doing household work than their partners and a high proportion of women (60%), but few men (6%) worked part-time when they had young children. Whilst women were more available than their partners for the family, 65 per cent of women worked as much, or more, than their partners.

Differences and similarities between the three organisations

The descriptive data presented above demonstrate the influence of the organisational context and type of production process, as well as gender, on availability patterns. The

work was most easily disconnected from the workplace in the College and least easily disconnected in the Mill. The Bank was in an intermediate position, but closer to the College because it was a service provider. The different character of the tasks involved in production generated different conditions for employees to be available - temporally and spatially.

Availability patterns were also related to gender in the three organisations. In each case, men were more available than women for work, both temporally and spatially. Comparing the three organisations, the gender differences in availability were generally smallest in the Mill and most significant at the College. This finding is surprising given that the women at the College also demonstrated more temporal and spatial availability for work than women in the other organisations.

The Mill, numerically the most male-dominated of the three organisations, showed the most gender-neutral patterns in a number of respects. Women and men had similar availability patterns in the extent to which they worked overtime, brought work home, travelled on business journeys or devoted their time off to work. Working hours tended to be predictable, although longer than preferred for a significant proportion of employees, especially men. There was a clear separation of work and family time.

With respect to family availability, most employees at the Mill and the Bank devoted their time off to the family and the gender difference was small. There was a different pattern at the College, with more employees, both male and female, devoting time off to work instead of, or as well as, to family. However, the gender difference in how time off is spent was also greater at the College, with men much less likely than women to devote time off mostly to family.

In terms of the extent to which employees did household work and reduced their working hours because of young children, there was a clear gender pattern in all the organisations. Women did most of the household work in their family, and it is they who reduced their working hours when their children were young, not the men. Most male employees had a partner who devoted more of their time to household work than themselves.

It is however striking that about two thirds of the women in each organisation spent as much time or more working than their partner. This finding is consistent with aggregate data suggesting that the decline in the gender gap in working hours within the family has not been matched by an equalisation between partners of availability for household work (SCB, 2006). There is a dual demand of availability that rests more heavily on women than men. The College women appeared to experience the greatest pressure from these dual demands, as evidenced by a higher percentage wishing to reduce their working hours than women elsewhere. Thus the patterns of work availability differed across the organisations to a greater extent than the patterns of family availability. There was a general tendency for men to be disconnected from demands emanating from the family by women's family availability patterns (Jonasdóttir, 1994).

In the descriptive presentations above, patterns of availability appeared to be influenced by type of workplace and gender. However the presence of vertical segregation patterns in the three case study organisations raises the question of whether it was gender or hierarchical position that had the greatest influence on patterns of availability. In order to test more rigorously the impact of various influences on patterns of availability - such as gender, hierarchical level and organisation - the next section presents some regression analysis.

Multivariate analysis

This section explores some variables and their statistical associations with different types of availability, as shown in Table 5. The purpose of the logistic regression model is to show the probability that these types of availability will occur in relation to the independent variables listed in Table 5.

Table 5: The association between different availability variables and organisation, gender, age, children, and hierarchical level. Logistic regression and odds ratios.

	Work availability				Family availability	
	Temporal availability Unregulated hours	Often overtime	Spatial availability Often work at home	Often business journeys	Most household work	Time off with family
Organisation						
Mill	0.03***	0.60***	0.09**	0.36***	1.02**	2.50**
Bank	0.23***	1.69***	0.26**	0.48**	0.53	1.67
College (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Gender						
Man	2.32***	1.21*	2.74***	2.20***	0.03**	0.93
Woman (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Age						
- 35	0.43	0.57	1.07	1.96	1.56	1.44
36-45	0.80	0.93	1.03	1.99	1.86	3.66***
46-54	0.66	1.22	1.02	1.63	1.68	1.51
55 - (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)	1 (ref.)
Children						
8 yrs or less (ref)	1	1	1	1	1	1
9 yrs or more	1.32	0.72	1.20	0.92	1.12	0.20***
Level						
Managerial	2.17*	34.5***	86.24***	62.63***	1.03	0.95
Professional	2.76**	25.7***	110.6***	38.57***	1.23	0.95
White-collar	1.04***	9.60***	18.03***	16.83***	1.74	2.22
Blue-collar (ref.)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Count N	1 255	1 225	1 224	1 258	1 112	1 251
R² Nagelkerke	0.58	0.43	0.60	0.35	0.56	0.20

Note: ***< 0.01; **< 0.05; *< 0.10

The model measures each category of temporal, spatial and family availability by two dependent variables that are examples of the types of availability discussed above. Each dependent variable is dichotomous, for example *working unregulated hours/not working unregulated hours* or *often working overtime/not often working overtime*. The table shows the association between the three different types of availability – temporal, spatial and family – and the independent variables - organisation, gender, age, children, and occupation. The figures in the table are odds ratios that show to what extent the various categories of respondents are available in relation to the reference category, in other words the strength of the relation.

The following provides an example of how the regression results are used to compare the influence of specific variables on availability patterns, in this case the influence of gender on working unregulated hours. For the independent variable ‘gender’, the reference category ‘women’ has a value of 1. Table 5 indicates that men are more than twice (2.32) as likely to work unregulated hours as women, all other variables being equal. Thus, the regression analysis is a technique for controlling for the separate impact of each independent variable on the dependent variable. If the

independent variable, 'men' in this case, has an odds ratio that is higher than 1, the probability of working unregulated hours for 'men' is statistically higher than for the reference category 'women'. If the independent variable has a lower value than 1, the probability is lower than for the reference category. For example, the odds that men did most of the household work were considerably lower, at 0.03, than for women. Some significant patterns emerging from the regression results are highlighted below.

For the temporal availability variables, there were statistically significant associations with organisation, occupational level and gender but not age or having young children. These findings confirm that employees at the College were more likely to work unregulated hours than employees at the other two organisations. Employees in managerial and professional occupations were between two and three times more likely to work unregulated hours than white and blue-collar workers. Men, other things being equal, were over two times more likely to work unregulated hours than women. Working unregulated hours was strongly and equally connected to gender and hierarchical level.

Employees at the Bank were more likely to work overtime than employees at the College who, in turn, were more likely to work overtime than employees at the Mill. Men were slightly more likely to work overtime than women, as were full-time employees compared with part-time employees. Comparing hierarchical levels white-collar workers were more likely to work overtime than blue-collar workers but the odds that professionals and managers frequently worked overtime, in relation to blue-collar workers, were particularly strong. Overtime working is very strongly connected to hierarchical level, followed by organisation and then gender.

For the spatial availability variables, *frequently bringing work home* and *going on business journeys*, there were significant statistical associations with organisation, gender, and occupational level. Employees at the College were the most likely to bring work home and go on frequent business journeys, followed by employees at the Bank. Male employees were almost three times more likely to bring work home than female employees and twice as likely to go on business journeys. But again the different occupational levels showed the strongest connection to these two types of spatial availability. Professionals were the most likely to be spatially available, followed by managers and then white-collar workers. Previous research shows that business journeys are a predominantly male activity (Presser and Hermsen, 1996; Bergman, 2004, Gustafson 2006) and that, further, this type of spatial availability is related to masculinity (Leed, 1991; Wolff, 1993). These findings suggest that it is not only gender that matters, but also hierarchical position and type of work.

Rather different patterns emerge regarding family availability. In respect of who did *most household work*, what counted was gender, not work-related variables. However, in respect of who spent most *time off for family*, age of children, age of respondent and workplace counted more than gender or any other variables. Those employees with children aged eight years or less, aged 36-45 years and working at the Mill were the most likely to devote time off to family.

To summarise, occupation and hierarchical level had the greatest influence on work availability patterns, followed by gender and organisation. In terms of family availability patterns, gender had the greatest influence on time spent on household work. However, employees aged 36-45, those with young children and those employed at the Mill were the most likely to devote their time off to family.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of availability and argued that this concept offers a potential analytical framework for empirically exploring work-life balance issues from an employment relations perspective. Availability has been defined as accessibility in time and space and responsiveness to the needs and wants of others, including employers and family. Availability is both a disposition and a capacity and therefore shaped by both structural conditioning and action. It offers a useful framework for going beyond the subjective experience of work-life balance to map inter-relationships between work and family in different organisational contexts.

The descriptive data from the case study organisations demonstrated the influence of the organisational context and type of production process, as well as gender, on availability patterns. Patterns of work availability appeared to differ across the organisations, to a greater extent than patterns of family availability which were highly gendered. Further data analysis using logistic regression indicated that the occupation and hierarchical position of the employee were related to both temporal and spatial availability patterns across the organisations. Statistically significant associations were also found with gender for the temporal availability variables, and with organisation and gender for the spatial availability variables.

The research evidence reported here suggests that availability patterns are strongly influenced by position in the occupational structure. The higher the position, the greater the associated availability for work, irrespective of gender and organisation. The notion of a 'time famine' appears justified for professional and managerial workers (Bruegel and Gray, 2005) but cannot be generalised across all occupational groups.

In terms of family availability patterns, gender was the key factor influencing time spent on household work and part-time working for parents with young children. Age and age of children were the most significant factors influencing the use of time off for family. This study provides further evidence that even in gender-egalitarian welfare regimes such as Sweden, women still take the main responsibility for family availability (see also Björnberg, 2002; Duncan et al., 2003; Gustafson 2006). The balancing act between work and family is something that still rests more heavily on women than men, even when they are working as many hours as their partners.

The nature of production and associated opportunities for disconnecting work from the workplace in time and space varied between the organisations. This disconnection had consequences for the degree of permeability in the boundaries between work and family. Spatial availability for work is a form of flexible working that may mean reduced availability for family and intensification of work demands rather than an improvement in work-life balance. This potential outcome is illustrated by the flexible working patterns at the College for both women and men. These patterns, which reflect a disconnection of work from the workplace, might be interpreted as enhancing work-life balance, but they might also be interpreted as the intrusion of availability for work into family life. On the other hand, at the Mill, where there was much less scope for flexible working, the boundaries between work and family were more intact, enabling time off work to be more focused on family. This finding suggests the need for more empirical research on the implications of temporal and spatial disconnection of work from the workplace for the subjective experience of work-life balance.

Using the concept of availability, this article has attempted to reframe analysis of work-life balance. The main aim of the article has been to identify the key structural influences - such as occupation, gender and organisational production process - that provide a context for individual action, using quantitative research data

from three case study organisations. Further research is needed in order to establish whether and how employees are able to make use of different availability patterns to improve their work-life balance. This should include the use of combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore individual perceptions and experiences of different availability practices. Also studies of other organisational settings, and of the family dimension are necessary for analytical and empirical developments of the concept.

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