A matter of time: young professionals' experiences of long work hours

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Abstract

This article examines young construction industry professionals' experiences of working long hours from the perspective of the meanings that they ascribe to work time and how these influence the hours that they work. It considers how such notions of 'qualitative' time spent on work may shape attitudes and behaviour relating to 'quantitative' work hours. The findings show that, for the interviewees, work time has meanings chiefly associated with enjoyment, being professional and being part of a work family. The article contributes to the long work hours literature by broadening our understanding of how young professionals experience long work hours, why they may not always view them negatively and how the meanings that they attach to them can lead to particular patterns of work hours. It also highlights gender differences in this regard.

Introduction

The issue of long work hours has attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers as the number of hours that employees in developed countries work is increasing (Ng and Feldman, 2008; Trades Union Congress [TUC], 2008). In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, over 3.6 million people regularly work more than 48 hours a week (TUC, 2008). The situation is worst for those in managerial and professional jobs; almost 90 per cent of them exceed their contracted hours, working on average 1.3 hours beyond contract a day (Worrall and Cooper, 2007). There are signs that the recent economic crisis has led people to put even more hours into work (TUC, 2010).

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Despite this interest in the long work hours phenomenon, our understanding of individuals' attitudes to and experience of it remains somewhat limited. One reason for this may be that most research investigations of long work hours treat work time as an objective, quantifiable and homogeneous phenomenon (e.g. Brett and Stroh, 2003). However, sociological literature suggests that work time also has a qualitative, subjective dimension, with members of different organizational groups experiencing and giving meaning to time spent on work in different ways (Hassard, 1996). By exploring the meanings that young professionals in the construction industry attach to work time, this article contributes to the long work hours literature in three ways: first, it adds to our knowledge about how people feel about working long hours; second, it helps elucidate the patterns of long hours that individuals engage in; and third, it provides insight into the differences between men's and women's experiences of working long hours.

Meanings of time and long work hours

The main focus of the long hours literature to date has been to explore the reasons why managers and professionals work long hours. Research findings suggest that the major motivation for this is to meet organizational workload demands and fulfil exacting professional norms (Feldman, 2002). In an increasingly uncertain work environment, individuals deem it necessary to spend long hours on work to maintain their professional credibility and further their career (Ng and Feldman, 2008). A number of studies have shown that, the more important an individual believes work to be in terms of job involvement (Brett and Stroh, 2003) work commitment (Wallace, 1997) and career identity salience (Major et al., 2002), the longer the hours they are prepared to work. Despite such insights, important questions that relate to the experience of working long hours remain unanswered.

First, little is known about how people experience and feel about working long hours. Some research suggests that working long hours may be widely resented because of the effect it has on other aspects of an individual's life: in a recent study, 80 per cent of the UK workforce indicated that they would like to spend more time with their family and 66 per cent said that the demands of their job sometimes interfered with their family life (Crompton and Lyonette, 2007). Other research suggests, however, that some managers and professionals work long hours willingly and enjoy doing so (Hochschild, 1997; Lewis, 2003; Hewlett and Buck Luce, 2006). For such 'work enthusiasts', the positive benefits of working long hours, such as job and career satisfaction, seem to outweigh any disadvantages (Burke, 1999).

Second, little is known about how and why individuals engage in different patterns of long work hours. For example, some people may work long hours on occasion to meet deadlines at work (Lingard et al., 2010), whereas others work long hours all the time because they find their job enjoyable and absorbing (Mainemelis, 2001). Existing research focuses on general measurements of work hours, but has not examined when they take place, how they are distributed over the working week, month or year, and why different patterns of long work hours may exist (Beckers et al., 2008).

Third, differences between men and women who work long hours are not yet fully understood. Most studies have found that women work shorter hours than their male colleagues, especially if they are married and have young children (e.g. Wallace, 1997;

Powell and Greenhaus, 2010). However, well-educated female managers and professionals work longer hours than women in other kinds of jobs (Maume and Bellas, 2001; Seron and Ferris, 1995). While one explanation for their behaviour is that they believe their careers will suffer otherwise, some studies suggest that women's motivation to work long hours may be more complex, being partly driven by higher levels of conscientiousness and willingness to put in discretionary effort, compared with men (Morrison, 1994; Kmec and Gorman, 2010).

One reason why existing studies tell us little about people's experience of working long hours is that they treat work time purely as an objective and quantifiable phenomenon (e.g. Brett and Stroh, 2003). From this perspective, time is a finite, linear commodity that can be spent on different activities within and outside the workplace. However, work time also has a qualitative dimension that is important in terms of understanding attitudes and experiences relating to long work hours. From the qualitative perspective, work time is not value neutral but a socially constructed state to which individuals ascribe subjective meanings (Daly, 1996; Hassard, 1996; Tietze and Musson, 2002). As a consequence, work time can mean different things to different people, for example, 'passionate commitments, resented obligations, aimless puttering, or carefree entertainment' (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001: 22).

The qualitative dimension of time provides a useful lens through which understanding of the long hours phenomenon may be deepened, since 'qualitative' notions of work time are likely both to reflect and to shape feelings and behaviour related to 'quantitative' work hours (Daly, 1996; Roberts, 2008). Although individuals work the same number of hours, they may experience them in different ways; the subjective meanings ascribed to work time are a manifestation of this difference and therefore should provide insight into differences in attitudes and behaviour relating to long hours (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001; Bluedorn, 2002; Perrucci and MacDermid, 2007).

For young professionals, the subjective meanings that they ascribe to work time, how they experience long hours and the patterns of long hours that they engage in are likely to be linked to socio-temporal norms and values relating to their occupation and profession. The use of time at work has been shown to have close links with core professional values (Zerubavel, 1979) and the development of professional identity early in the career (Coffey, 1994): in professional jobs, spending a long time on work is a temporal norm that is supposed to reflect commitment to clients, to the profession and to the organization, but which also represents a form of management control (Grugulis et al., 2000; Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Kunda, 2006).

What work time signifies to young professionals and how they experience long hours might also be expected to be associated with the extent to which they find their work enjoyable and absorbing. If work represents an opportunity to engage in activities which an individual enjoys and finds intrinsically rewarding, then their attitudes to and experiences of time spent on work are likely to be positive (Daly, 1996; Thompson and Bunderson, 2001; Reynolds and Aletaris, 2007). This may also be linked to particular patterns of working long hours: deriving a deep sense of enjoyment from work is said to lead to the experience of timelessness, a loss of consciousness of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mainemelis, 2001), which is associated with working long hours continuously because work is so absorbing (Ylijkoki and Mantylu, 2003).

This article explores and discusses the meanings young professionals working in the construction industry assign to work time, with the aim of addressing the following research questions:

1. What meanings do young professional men and women employed in the construction industry ascribe to work time?
2. How do these meanings shape individuals' attitudes to and experience of long work hours?

Method

The research was conducted using a sample of young professionals working in the UK construction industry. This sector is well-known for the long hours worked by those employed in it, especially professional staff (Rethinking Construction, 2002; Lingard et al. 2010), and so it was seen as providing an interesting research setting for a study exploring meanings of work time and their relationship with working long hours.

Three organizations were selected to participate in the research. These were an architecture practice, a structural engineering firm and a construction company. All are considered to be leading firms in their sub-sector. A sample of 40 was used for the research. Each firm was asked to identify between 10 and 15 professional and managerial staff aged 35 and under who were willing to take part in the study. This age group was chosen because it would provide an opportunity to explore issues relating to work–life balance for non-parents as well as those with childcare responsibilities. Information about the sample of 40 used, including the pseudonym given to them for the purposes of the study, their age, tenure, position and average hours worked, is shown in Table 1.

In the UK, long hours are normally defined as 48-plus hours a week (Kodz, 2003), in line with the European Working Time Directive. Sixteen of the 40 research participants said that they always worked 48 hours or more a week. Seven of these worked for the construction company, seven for the architecture practice and two for the structural engineering firm. While the other participants reported lower average weekly hours, they all said that they worked 48 hours or more a week on regular occasions. Therefore, as expected, given construction industry norms (Rethinking Construction, 2002), all of the participants were deemed to work long hours on a regular basis.

The research was conducted from a neo-empiricist perspective (Johnson et al., 2006), its aim being to gain understanding of the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to work time and how these meanings shape their experience of the hours that they worked. A qualitative approach was taken to data gathering and analysis. This approach was taken because of the nature of the research questions and the issues of meaning that these questions address. The research questions are exploratory in nature and qualitative research methods have been shown to offer the best means of answering such questions (Cassell and Symon, 1994). Qualitative research methods are also seen as the most effective means of gaining insight into the meanings individuals attach to phenomena and experiences, such as the meanings of time being explored in this study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Table 1. Research participants and the meanings they associate with work time.

Pseudonym	Age	Firm	Tenure years	Position	Average hours	Enjoy	Profession behaviour	Conscientious	Learning	Creativity	Career	Family	Resent
Anne	34	Arch.	12	Project architect	50			×					
Barbara	25	Arch.	.5	Asst. architect	50								×
Carol	33	Arch.	5	Project architect	40			×					
Diane*	29	Arch.	2.5	Asst. architect	50	×	×			×		×	
Andrew	34	Arch.	2.5	Project architect	45	×		×				×	
Brian	31	Arch.	1.5	Asst. architect	45	×					×	×	
Conrad	28	Arch.	2	Asst. architect	40	×	×		×				
Derek	27	Arch.	3.5	Asst. architect	45	×	×			×		×	
Ewan*	31	Arch.	2.5	Asst. architect	45	×			×	×	×	×	
Frank* p	29	Arch.	4	Asst. architect	42	×	×			×	×		
Gordon* p	32	Arch.	7	Design manager	55		×						
Harry*	33	Arch.	7	Project architect	50	×					×	×	
Ivor	27	Arch.	1.5	Asst. architect	50	×			×	×		×	
Keith	31	Arch.	6	Project architect	50	×	×				×	×	
Luke*	24	Engin.	2	Struct. Engineer	37.5								×
Mark	24	Engin.	2	Struct. Engineer	45	×	×	×				×	
Nigel	25	Engin.	2	Planner	43	×	×		×			×	
Oliver	24	Engin.	1.5	Struct. Engineer	45	×		×			×	×	
Paul*	27	Engin.	2	Energy engineer	45	×			×				
Rob*	26	Engin.	3	Struct. Engineer	45								×
Saul*	28	Engin.	3	Electric. Engineer	55	×		×					
Tony	26	Engin.	3	Electric. Engineer	37.5								×
Uri	22	Engin.	1	Mech. engineer	40	×			×				
Victor	27	Engin.	3.5	Asst. proj. man	44				×	×	×	×	
Emily*	26	Engin.	3	Field engineer	45	×		×					

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Firm	Tenure years	Position	Average hours	Enjoy	Profession behaviour	Conscientious	Learning	Creativity	Career	Family	Resent
Flora	24	Engin.	1	Struct. Engineer	45								×
Greta*	26	Engin.	2	Services engineer	43	×		×			×		
Helen	25	Engin.	2	Struct. Engineer	50	×		×			×		
Imogen	26	Engin.	3	Hydrogeologist	45			×					
Jane p	25	Builder	3	Quantity surveyor	48	×		×					
Kate	30	Builder	2	Site agent	55	×		×					
Lucy* p^	29	Builder	4	Manager	35			×					
Mary	27	Builder	4	HQ supply chain	40	×							
Nora*	31	Builder	13	Project manager	60	×		×			×		
William	29	Builder	7	Section manager	60	×		×			×		
Alan* p	31	Builder	8	Manager	55	×					×		
Bob p	32	Builder	11	Technical writer	40	×							
Carl*	32	Builder	1	Dep. proj. manager	60	×	×						
Doug	31	Builder	13	Engineer	45	×		×					
Elton	26	Builder	2	Section engineer	60	×		×			×		

Notes: * = married/living with a partner; p = parent; ^ = works part-time.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in order to gain an 'authentic' understanding of the young professionals' descriptions of and meanings assigned to work time (Silverman, 1993). Data were collected in 2003 before the current economic crisis. Each research participant was interviewed for approximately one and a half hours. Interviewees were asked about the number of hours that they spent on work, their experiences and feelings about time spent on work, what they thought that work time meant to them, and how their feelings about time spent on work might relate to the hours that they worked. The interviews were taped and transcribed in full and the data analysed with the aim of identifying themes, issues and relationships that emerged from the data, in order to answer the research questions posed.

Analysis followed the process of abstraction, that is moving from raw data by means of coding to the development of more general categories, from which higher level theoretical concepts are generated (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1984). It included the five interconnected stages identified by Ritchie and Spencer (1994): familiarization with the data; identification of a thematic framework or index; indexing (or coding); charting, where a picture is built up of the data as a whole within the emerging thematic framework; and mapping and interpreting, where theoretical concepts are defined and typologies created. In practice, the analytical process did not follow these stages in a linear fashion but was more iterative. Interview data were revisited and re-interrogated as analysis progressed in order to check and confirm the coherence and relevance of emerging categories and concepts relating to meanings of work time.

Findings

Analysis of the data identified four kinds of meanings that the research participants ascribed to work time. These could be grouped under the following headings: work time means enjoying yourself; work time means being professional; work time means being part of a work family; and work time means fulfilling a resented obligation. Information about which meanings each participant associated with work time is provided in Table 1.

Work time means enjoying yourself

To most of the participants (29), in particular the men, work time meant enjoying yourself. All but one of the male architects experienced work time in this way, chiefly because they found the work that they did intrinsically enjoyable. The high level of enjoyment that they experienced was a result of the conjunction between strong personal interests that had encouraged them to choose architecture as a career and the challenging nature of their work. They were happy to spend long hours on work when they were given interesting and absorbing tasks to do. As Conrad explained, 'One week I did 130 hours ... I was enjoying it. There wasn't any aspect of the work that was drudgery, everything was new ... it was very exciting'.

For some of the architects, experiencing work time as enjoying themselves sometimes tipped over into a state that was more akin to experiencing work time as engaging in a passion which dominated their lives. They willingly worked long hours most of the time;

for them work did not feel like work, as Brian described: 'It's just so nice to actually realize that the thing that you do is kind of a hobby and kind of something that you love'.

Diane, the sole woman in this group, was the only architect who identified that experiencing work time as a passion could be dangerous as well as exhilarating. She was in her late 20s and was considering starting a family. She acknowledged that the long work hours associated with this level of passion might be harmful if one had important commitments to fulfil outside work. She anticipated that it would not be possible for her to engage with work in this way if she became a parent, but felt that she would have to 'end up doing it more as a job than as a passion'.

All but one of the builders associated work time with enjoying themselves. Again this was a result of the intrinsic rewards they obtained from their job more than anything else. This was especially true of those who worked on construction sites. They were happy to work long hours on a regular basis and said that they did not notice how long they spent at work because time seemed to pass so quickly, like William, who claimed 'I do enjoy all the 12 hours that I'm at work. I'm never watching the clock. It's normally four o'clock before I know it'.

The one person working for the construction company who did not associate work time with enjoying herself was Lucy, a mother who worked part-time. She struggled to contain her work within a three-day week in an environment where nobody else worked part-time or respected the temporal work boundaries that this should have entailed. Lucy was highly resentful of the long hours that she had to work, despite the fact that she had negotiated to work part-time in order to care for her daughter. She contrasted what work time meant to her now, compared with how she felt when she worked full-time before she became a mother: 'It's all one big pressure, it's all one big hassle, it's not enjoyable. I used to love going to work. I don't anymore really'.

Most of the structural engineers seemed less engaged in their work and talked much less about the intrinsic rewards they gained from it than the architects or the builders. This is perhaps why relatively few of them associated work time with enjoyment. A few individuals, however, did experience work time as a passion in a way that was similar to some of the architects. These people, like Greta, had jobs that were interesting and challenging enough for them to become totally absorbed in what they were doing at work. As Greta explained, 'you know there's no one else to blame working long hours on except yourself for choosing to have a job which is what you're interested in and passionate about'.

Many of the men (21 out of 26) associated work time with enjoying themselves, but only eight of the women experienced work time in this way. One explanation for this difference may be that some women, as Diane suggested, prefer to or need to view work time as a temporal space where they do a job rather than as an opportunity for timeless engagement in an interest or a passion. For example, seven of the female participants discussed the adverse consequences of working long hours in terms of not having time to do chores at home like housework or shopping; no male participant raised this issue. Men, therefore, were perhaps more able to 'get lost' in enjoyable, absorbing work, because they were less concerned about or took less responsibility for other parts of their life. For example, construction site manager William made it clear that he relied upon his fiancée, whom he described as 'very, very understanding

of how much I enjoy my work', to run their household: 'Before you know it, it's seven o'clock, and normally it's that time you get a call saying, dinner's going in, do you want to head home now?'.

Work time means being professional

To many of the participants, work time had complex meanings associated with aspects of professional behaviour. A total of five different meanings associated with being professional were identified: work time means behaving like a professional; work time means learning; work time means being creative; work time means being career-ist; and work time means being conscientious. There were differences between the architects, the structural engineers and the builders in terms of meanings. For the architects work time meant behaving like a professional, being creative and learning; for the structural engineers work time was more likely to mean being conscientious and learning; for the builders, work time meant being conscientious and being career-ist more than anything else.

The meanings that the architects associated with work time very much related to the requirements of architecture, described by them as a 'demanding' profession that 'needs a lot of time to be put into it'. Spending time on work signified that they were behaving like a professional, in terms of adhering to the time norms of their profession, which gave them little choice over the hours that they worked, as Keith described: 'I think if you become an architect even from university you know that you do a lot of hours. My mother's an architect as well so I've always known about architects doing long hours'.

The architects for whom work time signified behaving like a professional felt obliged to work long hours on occasions when their profession required it, usually to win new business or to meet project deadlines. The only person to query this was Diane, the one woman in the group, who questioned the motivation for working long hours and queried whether they were always required: 'I think part of it is a mentality that follows on from college that there's something worthy or fun about working late. I think on programme projects, which have a series of deadlines, it shouldn't be necessary'.

Some architects associated work time with being creative, engaging in a creative process that was intense and frequently protracted. Experiencing work time as being creative was linked to working long hours at times when a creative solution was required. It was difficult to determine how long it might take to achieve this, especially because designs could be honed endlessly to satisfy the ideal of creative perfection that their architecture practice was seeking. This was accepted on the basis that 'it's just the amount of time that you have to spend trying to come up with a solution'.

Work time signified learning to a group of male architects and structural engineers early in their career. Members of this group were anxious to learn either how to do their job or to learn new skills: since it was often seen 'to take time' to learn such professional skills, they constantly worked long hours out of personal choice. This was particularly noted by two structural engineers and two architects, Victor, Paul, Ewan and Ivor. They were positive about working long hours when this presented an opportunity to learn, as

Paul indicated: 'I want to learn on the job and I wouldn't want to compromise or sacrifice work time for more leisure time'.

Associating work time with being careerist meant viewing it as an investment in one's career, not just in terms of professional learning and competence, but also in terms of using work time as a means of trying to stand out from one's peers. Participants to whom work time signified being careerist were happy to work long hours constantly in order to get ahead in their career, 'to go hard and fast', as one of the construction site managers described it. There were only two women in this group. The woman who worked for the construction company suggested that associating work time with being careerist was a consequence of trying to get ahead in a male-dominated industry:

> Some of the number of hours that I do is probably my own personal philosophy, and how I feel I'm being perceived by other people. I'm fairly ambitious in terms of wanting to get on, keen to prove myself really. I don't know whether being a woman in the industry does make you work that bit harder so that people can never use that as an excuse ... that's maybe one of the things that drives me to work that bit harder because I don't want people to think that way. (Nora)

The final meaning of work time linked to aspects of professional behaviour related to being conscientious. This meaning was endorsed by proportionally more women, more people in the construction company and, for the architects, those who were relatively more senior in the organization. Most people who associated work time with being conscientious tended to work a pattern of constant long hours. For the women, this was related to wanting to be seen as helpful, thorough and the kind of person who made a meaningful contribution at work. They did not resent this extra time spent on work, especially as some of them thought that being conscientious could help their career development, as Helen suggested: 'I want to move up the scale and I'm quite focused on my career, so you then have to put the time in really to make sure that the job gets done properly'.

When work time signified being conscientious to those who were more senior; this related especially to a sense of fulfilling their responsibilities at work. They were less likely to work long hours constantly, but more likely to do so when work commitments required it. Again, this was willingly accepted: 'If it means staying late, you do have to sacrifice going out that night or that weekend'.

The construction company employees for whom work time signified conscientiousness were those who worked on building sites. For them, again this reflected the management responsibility that they had on site, which required them to work constant long hours. Most members of this group were surprisingly positive about this, like Carl: 'I don't mind so much because the day goes very quick. The job's so varied – you're running around doing all sorts, on site, doing paperwork, it really does go quick'.

The range of meanings of time associated with being professional indicates that there are important differences between the men and women in terms of how they interpret being professional, especially at the beginning of their career. For the men, work time signified being careerist, behaving like a professional, being creative and learning. For

the women, work time was much more associated with being conscientious. This suggests that the men may be more focused on gaining tangible career advantages through the time they spend at work, where they learn important skills and try to further their career. Many of the women, on the other hand, seemed to be more concerned with simply being conscientious without any specific personal benefit.

Work time means being part of a work family

For a smaller number of the participants (eight architects, four structural engineers and only one woman), work time signified being part of a work 'family'. These people experienced work time as if they were a member of a supportive, like-minded but sometimes demanding family community, as described here by Derek, a young architect:

> You can get a real kind of community spirit going. This tends to be in the periods where you're working the hardest, when you are working those late hours. I don't think anybody would ever say this is your life ... but I'm made to feel a part of something bigger than merely a nine-to-five job. (Derek)

As Derek suggests, for the architects work time felt most like being part of a work family when a group of colleagues were working very long hours to achieve a common short-term goal. As such, this meaning of work time was linked to a specific pattern of working long hours, which was not continuous but related to project deadlines. The perception of work time as family time by the architects related to deliberate attempts by the firm founder to control the organizational culture by creating a 'family' atmosphere at work in order to encourage employees to work long hours when required. Staff engaged in social activities, such as weekends away and parties at directors' houses, and ate lunch together at one large table in a subsidized cafeteria. They were given leeway to take time off for studying and to take care of occasional domestic chores. This created reciprocal obligations to the work 'family' that were clearly understood by employees, as Harry explained:

> What this company favours is that everybody is a big family and we do a whole bunch of group activities together sometimes, and you're expected to work long hours when the time comes. It's very kind of free and easy, if you need to nip up the road to the opticians to get your glasses ... that's fine, off you go, no problem. Equally when the time comes and there is a critical period you might be expected to work all night. (Harry)

For the few structural engineers who experienced work time as family time, this also related to working long hours at times when it was necessary to meet project deadlines. However, experiencing work time in this way derived more from their organization's status as a partnership to which individuals were proud to belong because of the firm's reputation in the construction industry, rather than any deliberate attempt to cultivate a 'family' atmosphere at work. Furthermore, as Nigel suggested, the 'family' relationship also seemed less reciprocal to the structural engineers than it did to the architects:

It's not all take, there is some give ... if the washing machine man's coming you are quite at liberty to work at home ... I generally think there's more take than there is give but they're not employing me out of the goodness of their own hearts, they're in it to make money. (Nigel)

Experiencing work time as family time led to positive feelings about working long hours, partly because individuals wanted to reciprocate family obligations but also because working long hours was the time when people felt closest to their work 'family'. They tended to get along well with their work 'siblings', which made work enjoyable and blurred the boundary between work and non-work, so that spending time on work did not always feel like working. This was particularly true in the architecture practice.

Work time means fulfilling a resented obligation

A small number of people (four structural engineers and one architect) did not experience work time in a positive way, but rather associated it with a resented obligation. As a consequence, if a deadline or other work commitments meant that they had to work long hours, they found this onerous and disagreeable. In general, members of this group tried to minimize the amount of time that they spent at work as Luke described: 'I avoid overtime like the plague. I don't like work so I must admit I do come here for the minimum hours. I come in at nine and I leave at half five and take my hour for lunch'.

The members of this group were in the early stages of their career and all acknowledged that they were not sure if they were in the right career or profession. An important theme in their interviews was discussion about how their experience of work time might be different if they were in the right job. They acknowledged that work time could signify enjoyment, and expressed regret that it did not mean this for them in their present roles. They looked forward to being in a position where they might have a more positive experience of work time, as Barbara explained: 'I want to be doing something that I really love doing and I would hate the thought of spending my life just desperate to go home at 5.30 and not really enjoying what I was doing'.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to deepen our understanding of long work hours by exploring the qualitative meanings that individuals attach to work time. It contributes to the long hours literature by broadening our knowledge of how young professionals do not always view long hours negatively and by examining how the meanings they attach to work time are associated with particular patterns of work hours. The findings make three specific contributions to the literature on long work hours. The first is to shed light on how people experience long work hours. The findings show that, for most of those who took part in the research, time spent on work was not resented but rather was associated with enjoyment and fun. It is interesting to note that this enjoyment was 'organic' fun, relating to the intrinsic rewards of the work that the participants did, rather than official 'packaged' fun, manufactured by management to improve corporate performance (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). The architects worked on challenging and interesting projects from which they derived a great deal of enjoyment; the construction

company employees liked their work on site. Some people, mostly architects, were happy to work long hours continuously because they associated work time with indulging in a passion that dominated their lives to the extent that when they were not working they socialized with other architects or spent their holidays looking at buildings. Such people viewed work and the rest of their life as integrated and inseparable (Warhurst et al., 2008).

The high percentage of participants who associated work time with enjoying themselves may reflect the age and lack of parental responsibilities of most of the sample. Work time may seem less like endless indulgence in an enjoyable pastime when family responsibilities have to be accommodated in the daily routine. It is possible therefore that people, especially women, may emphasize this meaning of time less once they reach the stage in their life when they become parents. It is also important to note that all the participants volunteered to take part in the study, and therefore might be expected to be enthusiastic about their work.

Long work hours were begrudged by only a small group of participants, for whom work time meant fulfilling a resented obligation. They did not find their work interesting or rewarding and all expressed uncertainty about whether they had chosen the right profession. They did not derive intrinsic rewards from their work, which confirms that this is an important factor that encourages people to work long hours (Brett and Stroh, 2003) and makes them feel positive about the experience of doing so (Hewlett and Buck-Luce, 2006).

The second contribution that the article makes is to help elucidate the patterns of long hours in which individuals engage. The findings suggest that the meanings that the young professionals ascribe to work time may be linked to different patterns of hours worked. People who associated work time with enjoying themselves worked long hours constantly as long as they had interesting work to do; they experienced timelessness as they became absorbed in their work, so that time spent on work appeared to pass quickly (Mainmelis, 2001). This was especially true of those who associated work time with indulging in a passion, who were happy to work long hours all the time. Professional career norms were linked to meanings of learning, being careerist and being conscientious early in the career, and these meanings also entailed patterns of constant long hours as participants at the beginning of their career tried hard to develop themselves and distinguish themselves from their colleagues in a highly competitive professional environment. In contrast, people who associated work time with behaving like a professional, being creative, being conscientious later in their career and being part of a work family did not work long hours all the time but on particular occasions when professional and organisational norms deemed it necessary (usually to meet deadlines or devise creative solutions).

This raises the question of how much power young professionals have to control the meanings that they attribute to work time, as well as the hours that they work. Since professional work is influenced by socio-temporal norms that prescribe how much time individuals are expected to devote to work (Seron and Ferris, 1995), many young professionals may feel obliged to associate work time with aspects of professional behaviour. Indeed, 31 of those who took part in this study did so. As discussed earlier, professional norms also oblige young professionals to work certain hours. Therefore in

this study those for whom work time meant behaving like a professional and being creative had little choice over the hours that they worked. The effect of professional norms was stronger for ambitious young professionals who associated work time with learning, being careerist and being conscientious, which meant they felt that they had to work continuous long hours if they wanted to get ahead in their career (Coffey, 1994). Those for whom work time meant family time also felt obliged to work long hours when their work 'family' required it. This was particularly true of the architecture practice, where the creation of a 'family' atmosphere was an explicit form of management control (Kunda, 2006). Associating work time with enjoying oneself implies more choice over hours worked; in reality, for most of those who endorsed this meaning choice was more regulated because they also associated work time with being professional and being part of a work family. The meanings that the participants endorsed complemented, overlapped with and reinforced each other, with the effect that those who worked the longest hours tended to associate work time with a range of meanings.

The third contribution that the article makes is to provide insight into the differences between men's and women's experiences of working long hours. The findings indicate that, while the young professional men and women who took part in this study worked similarly long hours, these hours signified different things to them, which was reflected in the meanings that they ascribed to work time. The men were more likely to associate work time with enjoyment, behaving like a professional, learning, being careerist and being part of a work family. The women were more likely to associate work time with being conscientious. This seems to support suggestions that women's motivations to work long hours may be partly driven by conscientiousness and discretionary effort (Morrison, 1994; Kmec and Gorman, 2010). The men, on the other hand, were more inclined to treat work time more as an investment in their career and an opportunity to 'lose' themselves in enjoyable work. This may reflect the domestic inequality that exists between the sexes even before they have children (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010), which means that women have more responsibilities in the home to fulfil than men. Moreover, women may be more conscious of ties with 'real' family and friends and therefore less inclined than their male colleagues to view work as a surrogate family experience or source of social entertainment and support (Dahlen et al., 2008).

Finally, the findings suggest that professional and organizational context are both closely linked to the meanings of work time that individuals espouse. The architects and the construction company employees were most likely to associate work time with enjoying themselves because of the intrinsically interesting work that they did. For the architects, this was related to the ethos of their firm, where design excellence was valued and rewarded much more than in ordinary architecture practices (Cohen et al., 2005). Associating work time with being professional meant different things in different professional contexts, reflecting the demands of the professions represented in the study. It also varied according to the organizational context: in the construction company, only those who worked on site associated work time with being conscientious, presumably because of the responsibility that their jobs entailed and the project deadlines that they had to meet. In the construction company, work time also did not mean being part of a work

family. This may be because it is more difficult for individuals working away from the office on construction sites to conceive of having a close and active relationship with their employer. Future research is needed to explore in detail the factors that influence the development of meanings ascribed to work time.

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