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The effect of mothers' experience of extended work-life tension on child outcomes

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Context

Losoncz (2009): ongoing work-life tension is associated with paradoxical attributes.

Positive:

Higher level of education

Higher job satisfaction

Negative:

Poorer health outcomes

Find parenting difficult

Does this affect child outcomes?



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Context

Strazdins et al (2008): high levels of work-family conflict for parents predicted poor child wellbeing.

- It explained equal or more variance than household income, parental education, or regular childcare.
- The effect held for both mothers and fathers, but was stronger for mothers.



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Methodology

Sample:

1,366 mothers in paid employment from the child cohort of LSAC who gave valid answers to the work-life balance questions in all three waves.

Approach:

The initial plan was to use cluster analysis for comparability to earlier work.

Instead, two of the items were used to create a scale to capture 'spillover' of work into family life (high – medium – low) in each wave.

Because of my work responsibilities, I have missed out on home or family activities that I would have liked to have taken part in.

Because of my work responsibilities, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured.



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Methodology (cont.)

Child outcome measures:

Mental (PPVT, matrix reasoning)

Physical (BMI, parent's report of child's health)

Emotional (SDQ sub-scales)

Main predictor - *Ongoing experience of work-life tension*

Four categories:

1. High – experienced high tension in two or more waves and never low (n=406)
2. Moderate – experienced medium tension in two or more waves (n=358)
3. Low – experienced low tension in two or more waves and never high (n=371)
4. All remaining cases, not examined (n=231)



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Methodology (cont.)

Other predictors/controls:

Mothers' characteristics e.g. parenting style, physical and mental health

Socio-economic status e.g. occupation, household income

Mothers' work characteristics e.g. hours worked, flexibility

Child characteristics e.g. gender, siblings



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Methodology (cont.)

Statistical methods

Descriptive analysis of high/medium/low work-life tension groups

ANOVA to test for significant relationships of outcomes and controls across ongoing tension groups

Hierarchical multiple regression (HMR) using only variables that were statistically significant in the ANOVAs.

HMR is a variant of multiple regression in which the researcher specifies the order in which the variables are entered to test the effects of certain predictors independent of the influence of others.



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Results

Characteristics of ongoing work-life tension categories

	High	Medium	Low
Percent of each group who...			
Completed a bachelor degree or higher	51.30	46.70	37.20
Worked more than 35 hours	43.80	36.40	18.00
Working in a managerial or professional role	52.30	41.20	36.50
Able to temporarily change hours	43.07	52.39	62.23
Feel that job is insecure	18.00	8.70	5.20
Rated own health as excellent or very good	63.0	74.9	85.2

Note: All variables above differed significantly between the high and low tension categories.



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Results (cont.)

Wave 2 self-report scales by ongoing work-life tension categories

		High	Medium	Low
Mental health (1 poor 5 good)	M	4.36	4.61	4.70
	SD	0.56	0.45	0.41
Hostile parenting (1 low 10 high)	M	3.22	3.11	2.92
	SD	1.34	1.23	1.31
Warm parenting (1 low 5 high)	M	4.37	4.45	4.55
	SD	0.49	0.44	0.46
Difficulty of life (1 low 5 high)	M	2.76	2.43	2.16
	SD	0.80	0.74	0.68
Coping ability (1 low 5 high)	M	3.54	3.80	3.95
	SD	0.67	0.66	0.67
Feeling rushed (1 always 5 never)	M	1.87	2.24	2.43
	SD	0.67	0.71	0.74

Note: All variables above differed significantly between the high and low tension categories.
No significant differences: income, relationship status, ability to permanently change hours.



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Results (cont.)

Wave 3 child outcomes in ongoing work-life tension categories

	High	Medium	Low
Physical Health			
Excellent	55.67	59.50	69.27
Very good/Good	41.63	39.94	29.38
Fair/Poor	2.70	0.56	1.35
BMI			
Mean	16.50	16.50	16.34
SD	2.16	2.06	1.92
Matrix Reasoning			
Mean	10.63	10.61	10.59
SD	3.13	2.88	2.95
PPVT			
Mean	75.24	74.91	74.67
SD	4.97	4.97	4.81

Note: Of the above, only physical health differed significantly between groups.



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Results (cont.)

Child outcomes in ongoing work-life tension categories

	High	Medium	Low
SDQ Prosociality (0 - 10, low is good)			
Mean	1.87	1.66	1.39
Standard Deviation	1.74	1.59	1.61
SDQ Hyperactivity (0 - 10, low is good)			
Mean	3.33	3.13	2.52
Standard Deviation	2.41	2.37	2.16
SDQ Emotional Problems (0 - 10, low is good)			
Mean	1.69	1.37	1.13
Standard Deviation	1.77	1.51	1.47
SDQ Peer Problems (0 - 10, low is good)			
Mean	1.46	1.28	0.98
Standard Deviation	1.55	1.50	1.29
SDQ Conduct Problems (0 - 10, low is good)			
Mean	1.34	1.09	0.90
Standard Deviation	1.50	1.25	1.12

Note: All variables above differed significantly between the high and low tension categories.



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Results (cont.)

Beta Coefficients and R² for the Prediction of SDQ - Emotional Symptoms

Model	Adjusted R Square
1 - WL tension	0.013
2 - SES	0.024
3 - Mother	0.082
4 - Child	0.192
5 - Mother's work	0.192

	1	2	3	4	5
High tension	0.12	0.12	0.05	0.03	0.04
Income		0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Education		0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04
Relationship status	-0.10	-0.07	-0.04	-0.04	-0.05
Occupation	-0.05	-0.04	-0.03	-0.03	-0.02
Parental warmth			0.00	0.01	0.02
Hostile parenting			0.14	0.09	0.09
Difficulty of life			0.04	0.06	0.07
Coping ability			-0.04	0.00	0.00
Feeling rushed			0.00	-0.02	-0.02
Mental health			-0.13	-0.10	-0.10
Self-efficacy			-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Gender				0.03	0.03
Younger siblings				-0.04	-0.05
Older siblings				-0.12	-0.12
Childcare Wave 2				-0.01	0.00
W1 SDQ				0.32	0.32
Job security					0.01
FlexTemp					0.01
Hours					-0.04



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Results (cont.)

Beta Coefficients and R² for the Prediction of SDQs

	Prosociality (reverse coded)	Hyperactivity	Emotional symptoms	Peer problems	Conduct problems
Relationship status				-0.06	
Occupation				-0.07	
Parental warmth	-0.11				-0.06
Hostile parenting	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.06	0.22
Coping ability				-0.08	
Mental health			-0.10		
Child gender is girl	-0.20	-0.13			-0.07
Younger sibling		-0.07			
Older sibling			-0.12	-0.11	
Wave 1 score	0.41	0.51	0.32	0.36	0.38
Hours worked		0.11			0.11
Adjusted R Square	0.274	0.387	0.192	0.189	0.283

Note: Only values that were statistically significant (p < 0.05) are listed



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Discussion

Ongoing tension between work and life appears to be indirectly related to child emotional outcomes.

This study does not provide information on causal pathways, but it tends to indicate that the effect of ongoing work-life tension may be mediated by parenting style.

The large degree of variance explained by Wave 1 SDQ scores suggest that influences on earlier childhood may have the greatest impact on child outcomes (or at least, those tested in this study).



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Discussion (cont.)

Limitations and Implications for future research

Outcomes beside developmental ones – such as achievement at school – will be increasingly testable as LSAC continues.

The five SDQ scales have differing predictors and are provide more meaningful information if kept distinct.

Balanced panels can become increasingly unrepresentative in longitudinal research.



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Policy Implications

The level of employment security felt by mothers, along with long work hours, affects level of work-life stress and this has indirect consequences for children.

Mothers balance paid and unpaid work and caring. Effective policy needs to increase working fathers' uptake of flexible work practices.

Employment policy should perhaps consider the interaction between work and child wellbeing in addition to considering work-life stress.