



Timing ambition: How organisational actors engage with the institutionalised norms that affect the career development of part-time workers[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the debate on the career development of part-time workers. First, it shows how institutionalised norms concerning working hours and ambition can be considered as temporal structures that are both dynamic and contextual, and may both hinder and enable part-time workers' career development. Second, it introduces the concept of 'timing ambition' to show how organizational actors (managers and part-time employees) actually approach these temporal structures. Based on focus-group interviews with part-time workers and supervisors in the Dutch service sector, the paper identifies four dimensions of timing ambition: timing ambition over the course of a lifetime; timing in terms of the number of weekly hours worked; timing in terms of overtime hours worked; and timing in terms of visible working hours. Although the dominant template in organisations implies that ambition is timed early in life, working full-time, devoting extra office hours and being present at work for face hours, organisational actors develop alternatives that enable career development later in life while working in large part-time jobs or comprised working weeks and devoting extra hours at home.

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1. Introduction

Working reduced hours is often considered to indicate lower career ambition. It has further been perceived as an obstruction to the career development of women workers in particular (Edwards & Robinson, 1999, 2001; Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2003; Lane, 2000, 2004; Pas, Peters, Doorewaard, Eisinga, & Lagro-Janssen, 2011; Román, 2006; Tomlinson, 2006). However, several studies have shown that part-time workers do not consider working reduced hours to imply reduced career ambition (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Lane, 2004; MacDermid, Lee, Buck, & Williams, 2001; Tomlinson, 2006). In view of these somewhat contradictory findings, several authors have explored how organisational processes "structure full-time and part-time workers' access to rewards and opportunities" (Tomlinson, 2006: 68). These studies

have mainly found organisational processes that hinder career development for part-time workers, such as cultural norms on gender, working hours and ambition (Benschop et al., 2013; Benschop, Van den Brink, Doorewaard, & Leenders, 2013; Dick, 2010; Sools, Van Engen, & Baerveldt, 2007). In contrast to such findings, some organisations seem to support rather than hinder part-time workers' career development (Lee, MacDermid, & Buck, 2000; Tomlinson, 2006). Furthermore, the roles of organizational actors in either of these processes remain under-researched (Dick, 2015: 16). In view of this gap in the literature, this paper contributes to the scholarly and societal debates on the career development of part-time workers in two ways. First, we show how institutionalised norms concerning working hours and ambition can be considered as temporal structures that are both dynamic and contextual, and that may both hinder and enable part-time workers' career development. Second, we reveal four dimensions of what we will label 'timing ambition' to show how organizational actors (managers and women and men part-time employees) actually approach these temporal structures in their organisations. On the one hand, they may reproduce these institutionalised norms, but, on the other hand, they may change them, thereby opening up new possibilities for part-time workers' careers.

In the next section, we will elaborate on the unresolved issues in the literature on part-time workers' career development that we

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have briefly sketched in this Introduction. Thereafter, we will explain the methodology of our empirical study. Then, we will present the analysis of our data. In our concluding section, we will summarise our findings and discuss the contributions of our study to the scholarly and societal debates on part-time workers' career development, and we will present the study's limitations and implications.

2. Literature review

In this section, we present a review of the literature on part-time workers' career development and the explanations that have been given for the scholarly findings on this subject. We identify three gaps in the literature and explain how we intend to address these gaps in our empirical study.

2.1. Part-time workers' career development relative to their career ambition

While part-time work is supposed to support the reconciliation of work and private life and thus foster diversity, inclusion, and gender equality in organisations (Bleijenbergh, De Bruijn, & Bussemaker, 2004; Lee et al., 2000; Ryan & Kossek, 2008), it is also considered to negatively affect workers' career development (Edwards & Robinson, 1999, 2001; Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2003; Lane, 2000, 2004; Román, 2006; Tomlinson, 2006); also because part-time workers are predominantly women, part-time work is also considered to have a negative impact on gender equality. The research on part-time work has shown that professionals who work part-time have less access to career development opportunities than full-time workers (e.g., Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010, 2014; Edwards & Robinson, 2001; Lane, 2004; MacDermid et al., 2001). For example, due to the availability requirements that are commonly associated with these positions (cf., Edwards & Robinson, 2001; Lee et al., 2000), part-time workers may have less access to managerial positions. Additionally, 'hegemonic work place cultures' (Tomlinson, 2006: 83) and, more specifically, stereotyped views on part-time workers' career ambition (e.g., Benschop et al., 2013; Dick, 2010; Pas et al., 2011; Sools et al., 2007; Tomlinson, 2006) may restrict part-time workers' career development.

A common explanation for part-time workers' limited career development is that working reduced hours amounts to lower career ambition (cf., Pas et al., 2011), a lack of career orientation, lower levels of commitment to work and career (Dick, 2010, 2015; Hochschild, 1997; Tomlinson, 2006), and a more 'home-centred' orientation (Walsh, 1999: 179). Hence, it has been suggested that part-time workers are less interested in having a career (see also Benschop et al., 2013; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Hakim, 1998; Lane, 2004; Smithson, 2005; Sools et al., 2007), and this has been found for part-time working men even more than for part-time working women (cf., Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Smithson, 2005; Vinkenburg, Van Engen, Coffeng, & Dijkers, 2012).

Although normative perceptions regarding part-time workers are persistent, several studies have shown that part-time workers do not consider working reduced hours to imply reduced career ambition. For example, from her study on full-time and part-time working nurses, Lane (2004: 259) concluded that "part-time female nurses do not 'invest less' in their careers in terms of qualifications and experience than their full-time counterparts. Neither are part-time nurses relatively 'uncommitted' to their careers compared to full-time nurses". Similarly, Tomlinson's (2006) study on women part-time workers' career transitions in the UK showed that part-time women workers in the hospitality service sector may 'accept' rather than 'prefer' the lack of career development that is associated with part-time work, which

indicates that part-time work does not necessarily imply a reduced commitment to work, nor a reduced level of work or career ambition. These results confirm earlier findings by MacDermid et al. (2001: 311) that the majority of the women part-time workers in their study "had given up some upward mobility in their careers, usually in the short term" to be able to take care of their children. They generally showed satisfaction with this 'trade-off', but they also indicated that their performance did not suffer – in fact it even improved – after switching from full-time to part time work (MacDermid et al., 2001). Their supervisors, however, were shown to have doubts about the possibilities for the career development of part-time workers. In fact, they considered it impossible to fulfil jobs in the higher echelons of the organisation while working reduced hours (MacDermid et al., 2001). In a related vein, Durbin and Tomlinson (2010) showed that part-time women managers in the UK voice frustration concerning the perceived lack of career opportunities and access to high-quality management jobs.

The studies that are reviewed above suggest that part-time workers' reduced career development cannot be explained by lower levels of career commitment. In view of these findings, several authors have explored the role of organisational processes to explain part-time workers' career development.

2.2. Organisational processes and part-time workers' career development

Focusing on the socially constructed nature of part-time workers' ambition in organisations, Benschop et al. (2013) revealed four discourses of ambition. The dominant discourse of ambition was 'ambition as a resource', which refers to employees' willingness to take on extra tasks for an organisation. This dominant discourse marginalised three other discourses: ambition as a form of 'upward career mobility', 'individual development', and 'mastery of the task' (Benschop et al., 2013). As a result, ambition was generally attributed to full-time workers and men, which resulted in an implicit but structural intersection of the inequalities between full-time workers and part-time workers, and between men and women. Consequently, part-time working women in particular experienced severe obstacles regarding the realisation of their ambitions (Benschop et al., 2013).

In another study, Dick (2010: 512) analysed how the transition to motherhood and part-time work affected the psychological contract between part-time women police officers and their supervisors in the UK, particularly with regard to the 'social construction of time'. On the one hand, the part-time women police officers felt privileged not to have to work long hours and not to be 'always available', which their professional norms prescribed. On the other hand, however, they felt that they were viewed negatively by co-workers and managers because of their reduced workload, which was perceived as a loss of work commitment (Dick, 2010). Although most of the part-time women police officers insisted that working part-time did not affect their commitment, some felt that their managers failed to optimally utilise their skills and abilities as they were assigned less attractive tasks after having switched to part-time work (Dick, 2010: 519). Dick (2010) found that the professional norms in the police service served to legitimise the reduction of part-time workers' career development opportunities. Her study confirmed Tomlinson's (2006: 83) finding that the workplace practices that reduced part-time workers' access to training and career opportunities were legitimised and justified by managers and continuous full time workers [i.e., workers who had no experience with temporarily working part-time, AUTHORS].

To the extent that organisational processes situate part-time workers as being less committed to work and career, it appears that

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