

## **Research plan:**

### **Families' strategies for mastering time pressure**

This brief paper is describing relevant previous research and planned studies for my project about families' strategies for mastering time pressure. During the conference in Rennes, 1-3 September 2005, I hope to get straightforward reactions on my approach and the different research design alternatives, along with suggestions of relevant theories and empirical work. The project started in 2004 and so far two papers have been produced, briefly described below. It will be the base for my doctoral thesis which is planned for 2009.

#### **Time pressure**

Two out of three Swedish parents experience big difficulties in managing everything they have to do (SCB 2003). The causes behind time pressure are complex, relating both to personal ambitions and societal structures. The extra load of raising children was earlier often handled by mothers working part time. Today a considerable part of mothers work full-time. The share of Swedish families where both parents work full-time has increased from 33% to 49% in ten years (SCB 2004). Fathers are today also expected to take active part in their children's daily lives and do more of the household work. In addition to this, parents are expected to maintain their professional competence, be loving partners, spend time with friends and relatives, be active in associations, stay in physical trim, care for their material belongings, be eco-minded etc. The situation for contemporary parents has been described as a matter of "surviving their children's childhood" (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997). Severe time pressure does not only correlate with low well-being and mental health problems (Roxburgh 2004) but it is often a central aspect in life situations which generates mental problems (SOU 2000:91).

#### **Aim**

The overall purpose of this study is to increase the knowledge about strategies for mastering families' time pressure and to analyse these regarding structural conditions. Four specific research questions will be dealt with in the studies described below:

1. what time use patterns are related to time pressure for parents with small children?
2. what strategies do parents use in order to master time pressure?
3. what are the structural conditions (gender, work conditions etc.) which govern families' time pressure?

#### **Previous research**

Efficient strategies for overcoming time pressure must focus on fundamental causes of time pressure. Our own research overview (Larsson 2004) shows that many explanations revolve around escalating demands in work life, e.g. caused by demands of increased productivity. The full-time structure of the labour market also makes it hard for parents to choose the preferred amount of working hours.

In addition to activity overload in work there can also be activity overload in private life. The need for coordination is a source of time pressure as well (Southerton 2003). Most social interaction demands that we are at the same place at the same time, and societal institutions create time related demands, e.g. job deadlines and dentist appointments. Yet other explanations concern how technology is changing our daily lives, e.g. through by making us reachable everywhere and at all times.

This relates to the *demand-control theory* (Karasek and Theorell 1990) which stipulates that in order to manage high demands in work life without getting stressed one needs a high degree of control and social support. This predominating theory in stress-related research has also been found to work well for understanding time pressure (Roxburgh 2002) and for understanding health factors not only at work but in the whole life situation (Härenstam 2000). In this project I have developed a model for understanding time pressure which is inspired by the demand-control theory (Larsson 2004). The logic of the model is that the experience of time pressure prevails when the demands exceed the resources. The demands are built up by activities which seek to fulfil basic and socially constructed demands (support oneself, care, household work, consumption etc.), as well as demands originating from the need to coordinate oneself with other people (family dinners etc.) and with the time frames of institutions (bus schedules etc.). The available resources are basically one's own time but also, depending on the degree of influence, the time of family members and of one's social network. Other resources such as money, technology or communicative/reflexive abilities can also be used in order to cope with the demands. Strategies for mastering time pressure can either be oriented towards lowering the socially constructed demands or towards increasing the utilisation of available resources. This model, which still is preliminary, is used as the theoretical baseline of the project.

Another perspective in research on time pressure stresses the gap between cultural ideals and the individual's reality. Having plenty of time together with ones' children is a widespread ideal. Kristjánsson (Kristjánsson 2001) argues that it stems from the 50s middle-class family form with a housewife, as well as from scientifically supported theories that small children need plenty of time together with their parents. The gap between one's factual time situation and the cultural ideal can cause an experience of time pressure but also become a driving force for change.

The distribution of time pressure has been analysed in quantitative studies in the US showing that time pressure is related to factors as full-time work, children living at home, giving care to others as well as work situations with high demands and low levels of control (Roxburgh 2002). A large Swedish study (Härenstam 2000) about health factors in people's whole life situation indicates that time related factors are specially problematic for two groups. One group with "limitless" working conditions, like journalists or lawyer, have an unbalance between work and free time and too little time for relaxation. The other group with "locked" working conditions, like bus drivers or work in shops, is time bound and has non-standard and irregular working hours. The large variation between groups is important to pay attention to because coping with their different life situations may demand different strategies.

There are few reports about family strategies for coping with time pressure. However Tyrkkö (Tyrkkö 1999) briefly describes parents' different adjustment strategies. Regarding work life they are e.g. to come late/leave work early when needed, decline overtime/business trips/further training/new tasks, change working time schedules, shorten working hours or change work. Private life strategies involve e.g. restricting the number of children, sharing home work with partner, buying household services or using one's social networks. Hanson (Hanson 2004) deals with the cognitive dimensions of strategies for overcoming time pressure, in particular individual strategies for managing jobs without time regulation. In order to avoid that work overtakes family life she points out the importance of a "moral competence", i.e. to know one's priorities and to let them influence one's actions and decisions.

As a prelude to this research project we did a qualitative study of the advice for mastering time pressure in self help books (focusing on individuals, not on families). The study will be presented in coming article *Self help books on avoiding time shortage* in *Time & Society* (Larsson and Sanne 2005). The abstract reads as follows "Self-help books are tokens of our reflexive individualized society. The widespread experience of too high a pace in daily life and too little time for recovery and for social relations has resulted in books focussing on avoiding time shortage. In our analysis of the advice in such books we found time management categories, like streamlining activities and buying services. Other identified categories focus on life management strategies, like setting limits to time-consuming aspirations. Questioning personal aspirations in areas such as work and consumption appears to be adequate ways of avoiding time shortage and increasing one's quality of life but this is also a challenging task due to the importance most people attach to these areas for identity creation and social acceptance."

### **Planned studies and methodology**

In order to fulfil the aim of the project and to reach reliable scientific results I am planning to combine several different methods, i.e. triangulation. My plans include a quantitative study along with the main qualitative study/studies.

#### *Quantitative study: Time use patterns and time pressure*

This quantitative study aims at illustrating how time use patterns are related to time pressure for parents with small children. It will be based on a large time study involving 6000 individuals carried out by SCB in 2001. The parents' activities during two days were (self)-reported and their life situation was scrutinized. This has been partially presented (SCB 2003) but many variables relevant for time pressure are left out. Our study will identify how time pressure is correlated with such factors as type of job, working hours, spacing and flexibility in working times and the amount of time for household work, with children, in voluntary work, for support to relatives, in social networks etc. Our approach is based on role theory and implies an assumption that having several roles (as workers, parents, in associations, etc.) may have negative consequences due to conflicts between one's roles but also that it can have positive consequences due to the experiences linked to the different roles.

#### *Qualitative study: Strategies for mastering time pressure*

Through qualitative studies I will investigate what strategies parents use for mastering time pressure. Qualitative studies will be the main method in the project aiming for an in-depth understanding of the role time pressure plays in the respondents' life and how they cope or try to cope with the time pressure. There are several dimensions to this. Practical dimensions of strategies are what changes parents do, or consider doing, in terms of paid work, unpaid work, spare time activities and social networks. Cognitive dimensions of strategies includes relevant changes in attitudes and thinking patterns for mastering time pressure, e.g. regarding realism in one's time planning, personal priorities in life etc.

I have not yet decided on any specific qualitative research design in order to gather data regarding what strategies do parents use order to master time pressure and what the structural conditions are which govern families' time pressure? Below I will briefly describe three alternatives:

- focus group discussions with time pressured parents
- interviews with parents who are successful in mastering time pressure
- a series of talks with time pressured, but change motivated, parents

One alternative is to collect data through focus group discussion with time pressured parents, i.e. regular parents since the majority experience problems with time pressure in the everyday life. Focus groups are a resource efficient way to involve a relatively large amount of individuals and stimulate them to share experiences and attitudes. In the focus groups I will initiate discussions among parents regarding their experiences of functioning strategies for mastering time pressure, as well as limiting structures. Discussions with others in a similar personal situation is likely to help respondents to identify relevant choices that were made a long time ago or actions and attitudes which, over time, have become taken-for-granted habits. I could hopefully collaborate with employers and arrange focus groups at the work place in order to catch time pressured parents.

Another alternative is to collect data through interviews with parents who, in their own view, manage well in overcoming the time pressure. I could hopefully find this type of parents – who report no significant problems with time pressure – either through media or to approach fathers who have taken out an unusually long period of parental leave. Obviously such a strategic selection does not create representativity but I expect to trade that for a deeper understanding through exploring the actions and attitudes of the small portion of working parents who are likely to have comprehensive and well-reasoned answers to our questions.

A third alternative is to have a series of talks with time pressured, but change motivated, parents. If I would have individual talks to parents, e.g. once a month during five months, I would be able to gain authentic data and avoid rationalizations which are hard to avoid in interviews/focus groups. If the respondents are motivated to try some changes in order to minimise the time pressure I would also be able to gain insight in their efforts in real life, what changes in behaviour and thinking they are trying, what the results of the changes are, what limiting structures they see, etc. This third alternative seems to be superior regarding finding data on exactly the strategies and structures of time pressure. It is however an unusual method in sociological research and an alternative full of uncertainties.

#### *Analyses of structural conditions*

In the empirical studies mentioned above I will identify and describe time use patterns and strategies relevant for time pressure but I will also continuously include structural conditions in the analysis and the interpretation. Structural conditions includes issues of gender differences and a number of factors linked to the work situation: regulations and workplace norms regarding working hours, work intensity and work/family orientation, as well as factors like job security and availability of jobs etc. All of these can affect time use patterns and experiences of time pressure. They also constitute difficulties that parents have to overcome in order to be able to cope with time pressure. Gender is also a factor in the negotiations between the parents: is it possible to point to more gender neutral strategies than the common one that mothers settle for part time job as a way to master the family's time pressure? The issue of structural conditions can be extended to a wide range of further factors that might be relevant for time pressure like day-care availability and quality, state family benefits, housing market, private income levels, infrastructure for commuting, consumption norms in one's peer group or norms regarding bringing up of children. The increasing diversity of family constellations – with many single parents and reconstituted families – also constitutes a special condition.

## Relevance

The ambition with this project is to produce results that can be relevant for use on different levels. For individuals/families who are seeking to overcome the time pressure. The increasing flora of articles and self-help books in the field might be able to spread the findings of the project. The results can hopefully also be used as a base for projects focusing on public health carried out by the health sector, NGOs and employers/unions. Finally the project aims to be a scientific base for political discussions on how the time pressure can be relieved and gender equality enhanced.

## Organisation

The project is financed by Formas which is a Swedish governmental funding agency.

I, Jörgen Larsson, am a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Sociology, Göteborg University and I am doing the main work in the project. My educational background is besides studies in sociology also a degree in business administration. I have previously worked as consultant for 11 years, three of them with time and quality of life projects. My e-mail is: [jorgen.larsson@sociology.gu.se](mailto:jorgen.larsson@sociology.gu.se)

I have two supervisors. One is Christer Sanne, associate professor at the Division of Urban studies at KTH, Stockholm, he is responsible in relation to the funding agency. The other supervisor is Anna-Karin Kollind, associate professor at the Department of Sociology, Göteborg University.

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