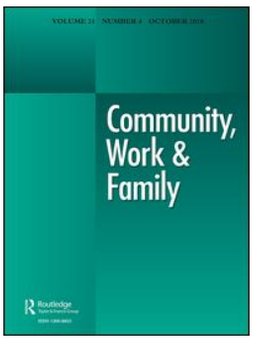

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Does flexible work 'work' in Australia? A survey of employed mothers' and fathers' work, family and health

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ABSTRACT

Workplace flexibility is perceived to benefit parents yet evidence of the effectiveness of formal work arrangements in promoting parents' health is mixed, and few have evaluated informal flexibility. This study investigates Australian mothers' and fathers' use of formal (employer-provided) and informal (self-directed) work arrangements and associations with work-family conflict and health outcomes (psychological distress, occupational fatigue, burnout). Online survey data from a national cross-sectional sample of 4268 employed parents (one or more children ≤18 years) were collected in 2016. Standardised measures of health outcomes were reported. Analyses were stratified by gender given the gendered division of work and care in Australia. Multivariate linear regression analyses showed greater use of flexible work arrangements (e.g. flexitime, flexiplace) was associated with lower fatigue and less burnout for fathers and mothers. Conversely, higher use of flexible leave arrangements (e.g. purchased leave) and informal arrangements (e.g. performing family-related tasks at work) were each associated with poorer health outcomes. Findings contribute novel evidence on the status of workplace flexibility for Australian fathers and mothers. Flexible work arrangements may have some health benefits, yet the widespread use of informal arrangements suggests flexible workplace provisions alone are not meeting parents' needs for family-related support.

RESUMEN

La flexibilidad laboral se percibe como un beneficio para los padres pero aún así hay evidencias mixtas en cuanto a la efectividad de las condiciones laborales formales en la promoción de la salud de padres, y muy pocos estudios han evaluado la flexibilidad laboral informal. Este estudio investiga el uso de condiciones formales (dictadas por el empleador) e informales (auto-impuestas) en madres y padres australianos, así como la relación entre los

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conflictos trabajo-familia y la salud (estrés psicológico, fatiga ocupacional, agotamiento). En 2016 se recogieron datos de una encuesta en línea de una muestra nacional transversal de 4 268 padres (uno o más hijos menores de 18 años). Se reportaron medidas estandarizadas de resultados de salud. Los análisis se estratificaron por género debido a la división de trabajo y cuidados según el género que se da en Australia. Análisis mediante regresión linear multivariable arrojaron que un uso mayor de condiciones laborales flexibles (ej. flexibilidad de horarios y del lugar de trabajo) estaba relacionado con niveles inferiores de fatiga y agotamiento tanto en padres como en madres. Por el contrario, un uso mayor de regímenes vacacionales flexibles (ej. vacaciones sin sueldo) y condiciones informales (ej. realizar en el trabajo tareas relacionadas con la familia) se asociaba con resultados de salud más pobres. Las conclusiones arrojan evidencias nuevas en cuanto a la flexibilidad laboral para padres y madres australianos. Disfrutar de condiciones laborales flexibles puede tener beneficios para la salud, pero el uso generalizado de condiciones informales sugiere que los acuerdos laborales flexibles como medida única no cumplen con las necesidades de apoyo familiar de los padres.

Introduction

The rise in dual-earner households in income-rich countries has made it normative for mothers and fathers to combine work with family care. Despite income provision and improving gender equity, this combination can be incompatible due to competing demands of time, energy or attention. Work-family conflict sits at the heart of the work-family interface and refers to the challenges associated with juggling competing role pressures, whereby participation in the work role is made more difficult by participation in the family role, and vice versa (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Work-family conflict is reported by one in three Australian parents and shows consistent adverse associations with work performance, parent and child mental health, and family functioning (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Strazdins, O'Brien, Lucas, & Rodgers, 2013). Given the potential toll of work-family strains, it is important to understand if work-place flexibility, perceived as beneficial to employed parents, is effective. This paper addresses three types of arrangements Australian parents use to manage work-family conflicts: *flexible work arrangements* and *flexible leave arrangements*, the workplace arrangements provided by employers (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2013); and *informal work accommodations to family*, the day-to-day adjustments parents make to work practices to accommodate family needs (Behson, 2002). Using data from a large cross-sectional sample of employed Australian parents, we examine how these strategies are associated with mothers' and fathers' work-family conflict, psychological distress, occupational fatigue and burnout.

Formal family-friendly workplace arrangements

In Australia, over two-thirds of mothers with dependent children are employed (Baxter, 2013) yet paid work and caregiving continue to be gendered. Fathers are typically

employed full-time and on average work 42 h per week, while most mothers work part-time, on average 29 h per week (Skinner & Pocock, 2014). This 'one and a half' earner model, together with longer full-time hours, increasing non-standard schedules and men's increasing involvement in caring responsibilities, has contributed to all parents needing more 'family-friendly' workplace practices and policies (Pocock, Charlesworth, & Chapman, 2013).

These include flexible work arrangements (FWAs), defined as work options that permit employees to have some control over work hours, pattern or location (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2013) such as flexitime (flexible work hours), flexiplace (e.g. telecommuting), changing total hours and job-sharing. Australian workplaces may also offer employees flexible leave arrangements (FLAs), including unpaid leave or purchased leave (e.g. 48/52, where employees take four weeks additional leave by reducing their salary to 48 weeks spread over the year). Long service leave, an entitlement unique to the Australia labour market, may also be taken by parents to reconcile work and family (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). Normally, eligible employees (i.e. those with caring responsibilities) have the right to request flexibility under Australian workplace policy (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2009); mothers use these more than fathers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Skinner & Pocock, 2014).

Informal work accommodations to family

The 'informal' aspects of workplace family support have been conceptualised in several ways. Informal organisational practices may promote a culture of integrating employees' work and family roles (e.g. managerial support; active promotion of formal family-friendly policies) (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002). Organisations may have informal policies that permit employees to work flexibly without formal documented approval (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Eaton, 2003; Hall & Atkinson, 2006). Others define informal flexibility as being able to change work times at short notice (Hall & Atkinson, 2006) or using arrangements occasionally (Richman, Civian, Shannon, Hill, & Brennan, 2008). In this paper, we use the construct put forward by Behson (2002) as *informal work accommodations to family* (IWAFs). IWAFs are 'a set of behaviours in which employees temporarily and informally adjust their usual work patterns to balance work and family responsibilities' (Behson, 2002, p. 326). Examples include performing family-related tasks at work (e.g. phone calls; errands) or leaving work early but completing unfinished work after hours. Informal arrangements are generally undocumented and literature reporting IWAF use is extremely sparse. Available evidence suggests informal arrangements are widespread, highly regarded by employees and link to greater schedule control (Behson, 2002; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Hall & Atkinson, 2006), and may be psychologically important in helping employees manage work and family commitments.

We consider IWAFs as distinct from formal family-friendly arrangements. FWAs and FLAs are generally situated within a formal policy framework and are provided by employers to manage general, persistent work-family strain. They typically involve ongoing changes in work structure and/or demands, requiring the employee to request the change in writing to management as well as human resources and payroll. In contrast, IWAFs are temporary, adaptive, self-directed strategies initiated by parents to resolve specific day-to-day conflicts,

often at short notice. While some IWAFs may require discretionary approval by a supervisor, their use is generally unofficial or 'invisible' (Behson, 2002).

Consistent with current evidence (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017), we note some overlap between formal and informal constructs as similar strategies can be used on a formal and/or informal basis, such as finishing early or working at home (permanently or ad hoc). Likewise, parents may use these in combination. Therefore, this study investigates the strategies parents use to balance work and family – clustered as 'formal' or 'informal'. We consider these arrangements overall as general workplace resources, irrespective of the specific type of formal or informal arrangement used, and assess if greater use of FWAs, FLAs or IWAFs is beneficial to parents.

Relationship between work arrangements and parents' mental health and wellbeing – theoretical and empirical background

Flexibility is touted as key to supporting employees to manage work and family responsibilities and promote employee wellbeing. However, evidence of the effectiveness of a range of flexible strategies on work-family conflict and mental health is mixed, including for mothers and fathers of dependent children. FWAs are protectively associated with lower levels of stress and burnout (Chandola, Booker, Kumari, & Benzeval, 2019; Grzywacz, Carlson, & Shulkin, 2008; Jung Jang, Zippay, & Park, 2012) and lower depression and work-family conflict (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Byron, 2005; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006), including in Australia (Cooklin et al., 2016; Skinner & Pocock, 2014; Troup, 2011). Other studies report either no association between FWAs and employee health or work-family conflict (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015; Allen et al., 2013; Avendano & Panico, 2018; Lapierre & Allen, 2006), or an adverse effect such as higher exhaustion and conflict (Brough, O'Driscoll, & Kalliath, 2005; Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005; Higgins, Duxbury, & Julien, 2014). Literature describing the relationship between FLAs and parent health are very limited, with studies examining parental leave, annual leave or sick leave only (Allen, Lapierre, et al., 2014; Brough, O'Driscoll, & Biggs, 2009).

In the absence of an empirical consensus, we draw on boundary management theory to link parents' use of these various strategies to health. Boundary management theory describes the management styles individuals utilise to maintain boundaries and organise time and effort across differing roles, environments and demands to mitigate stress and support performance (in this case, work and parenting) (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kossek et al., 2006). Management styles are typically characterised along a continuum from separation to integration, or a hybrid (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012), and includes strategies to separate (or integrate) work and home physically (by location), temporally (by work/non-work hours), behaviourally (by 'logging off' email) or communicatively (by setting expectations about availability) (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). Individuals *enact* their boundary management strategies according to their own preferences, identities and values about work and family roles. Enactment is equally shaped by the organisational cultures and context in which people work, or in our case, the degree to which parents' jobs allow them to 'customise' their work to match personal boundary management ideals (Chen, Powell, & Greenhaus, 2009; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kreiner et al., 2009), via use of flexible work arrangements.

While matching flexibility use to boundary management preferences is beyond the goal of this study, we pose that organisations which supply more *formal* flexibility (including FLAs) or support *informal* flexibility allow parents to customise their work-family strategies and enact boundary management preferences. Using more flexibility grants higher perceived control to an employee, regarding work schedules and location for example. Perceived control is a resource, helping employees to meet work and family demands in ways that best suit them and their boundary management style (Hall & Atkinson, 2006; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kossek et al., 2006). We pose that this perceived control and congruence, or person-environment fit, is what links flexibility to optimal wellbeing.

Parents may perceive less work-family conflict and distress within organisational climates that allow flexibility, because they feel in control of boundaries and have the ability and autonomy to manage work-family responsibilities (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). Indeed, congruence has long been shown to reduce work-family conflict and enhance positive spillover into family (Chen et al., 2009; Kreiner et al., 2009). Organisations that provide FWAs and FLAs send at least a modest message that they are 'family-friendly' and that employees can customise their work and leave arrangements in some way, without penalty. Perceived control, congruence and fit, including studies that operationalise this via the use of flexible arrangements, also link with an array of positive outcomes including work-family enrichment, fewer depressive symptoms and job satisfaction (Allen, Cho, et al., 2014; Carlson, Ferguson, & Kacmar, 2015; Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Kossek et al., 2006). Conversely, lack of control and incongruence confer higher work-family conflicts, exhaustion and stress via actual or anticipated boundary violations, with negative spillover into family (Danner-Vlaardingerbroek, Kluwer, van Steenbergen, & van der Lippe, 2013; Kreiner et al., 2009).

IWAFs are potential resources for parents to enact boundary management preferences too. Within boundary management perspectives, IWAFs tend towards integration rather than segmentation. Parents using IWAFs share work and home demands across time, location and attention (e.g. taking family calls at work). Literature linking IWAFs and mental health is sparse, but suggests higher IWAFs use reduces work stress associated with family-to-work conflict (Behson, 2002). Preferences notwithstanding, there is some evidence that *integration* yields effective transitions between work and family, mitigating work-family conflict and increasing engagement (Allen, Cho, et al., 2014; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012). Conversely, evidence indicating integration comes with a personal cost, including greater exhaustion, depression and work-family conflict (Allen, Cho, et al., 2014; Kossek et al., 2006; Wepfer, Allen, Brauchli, Jenny, & Bauer, 2018).

In this study, we contribute to literature linking workplace flexibility to employee health, focussing on the 'amount' of formal and informal arrangements employed Australian parents use to manage work and family. We argue that more flexibility will benefit parents, consistent with boundary management theory which suggests that optimal health outcomes are linked to parents' opportunities for customisation and control (Allen, Cho, et al., 2014; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012).

We additionally pose that informal strategies may buffer parents from a perceived lack of control (Hall & Atkinson, 2006), even in work environments which are less supportive of work-family customisation. IWAFs are more proximal to parents' needs and may align more closely with individual requirements and boundary management styles (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Such coping strategies could mitigate against high conflicts

and poorer health outcomes when formal work-family support is not provided or encouraged, as indicated by 'low' FWAs use; a possibility we explore.

The current study

This study aims to investigate the associations between workplace flexibility, whether formal or informal, and parents' health in a national sample of employed Australian mothers and fathers (with one or more children aged 18 years or under). First, we describe the flexible work, leave-based and informal arrangements used by parents to manage work-family demands. We then investigate the relationships between these arrangements and work-family conflict and key health outcomes. Finally, we extend our investigation on informal flexibility, assessing associations between informal arrangements and parent health when formal provisions are lacking.

We consider four key indicators of parents' health and wellbeing. *Work-family conflict* is an established mechanism linking parents' jobs to their own health, and that of their families (Amstad et al., 2011; Cooklin et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2017; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). *Psychological distress* is the primary symptom indicator for the likelihood of depression and anxiety (Kessler et al., 2003). *Occupational fatigue* and *burnout* are two complementary indicators of chronic physical and emotional tiredness that result in exhaustion and disengagement (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Winwood, Lushington, & Winefield, 2006). Together, these are salient outcomes for parents, and for employers who bear the potential costs of poor workforce health and may consider flexibility as a mitigation strategy. These health indicators are likely inter-related; yet given the paucity of evidence about the potential health benefits of workplace flexibility, we treat them as separate outcomes.

We hypothesise the following:

Hypotheses 1a–d: Use of more FWAs will be associated with lower work-family conflict, and lower psychological distress, occupational fatigue and burnout.

Hypotheses 2a–d: Use of more FLAs will be associated with lower work-family conflict, and lower psychological distress, occupational fatigue and burnout.

Hypotheses 3a–d: Greater use of IWAFs will be associated with lower work-family conflict, and lower psychological distress, occupational fatigue and burnout.

Hypotheses 4a–d: For parents with lower FWA use, greater IWAFs use will be associated with lower work-family conflict, psychological distress, occupational fatigue and burnout.

Methods

Study design

An online survey of employed Australian parents was conducted from August–November 2016. Eligible parents were residing in Australia; ≥18 years of age; parent of ≥1 child(ren) aged 18 or younger; and in paid employment. Approval was by La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee (S16–112).

Recruitment was via Facebook using a combination of paid and unpaid advertising targeting working parents, mothers and fathers Parents were invited to complete a survey

about 'balancing work and family'. Further details of recruitment procedures and sample are reported elsewhere (Bennetts et al., 2019). Interested parents were directed to the survey page to provide electronic consent.

Measures

Measures of work arrangements, health indicators, and demographic and employment characteristics are outlined in Table 1.

Statistical methods

Data were analysed using StataSE 14. Analyses were stratified by gender. Mean imputation was used to account for missing data at the item-level (if <25% items missing per scale). Parents' use of work arrangements was described using summary descriptive statistics. Associations between the three arrangement types were assessed using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Associations between work arrangement use and health were tested using unadjusted linear regressions (Model 1). Where there was initial support for an association (i.e. $P < 0.05$), separate multivariable linear regressions were performed with each outcome as the dependent variable (i.e. four models per gender). Models were adjusted for relevant demographic and employment characteristics (Model 2). Models were repeated with the inclusion of an interaction term (FWAs × IWAFs) to assess the effects of FWAs on primary outcomes for differing levels of IWAFs (Model 3).

Sample selection and characteristics

Of the 5197 who consented to participate, 474 were excluded due to self-employment and 11 did not identify as male or female. Of the remaining 4712 parents, 444 participants were excluded due to missing data ($n = 51$ parents did not report work hours; $n = 393$ parents had >25% incomplete data on outcome variables). The final sample for this study was 4268 parents (82.1%).

Characteristics of the total sample and for mothers and fathers are presented in Table 2. Around one third (31%) were male. The majority were married (86%), in a dual-earner household (75%), born in Australia (81%) and university educated (66%). Most worked in a manager/administrator or professional occupation (70%). Parents worked a mean (*SD*) of 37.0 (13.1) weekly hours, with fathers working longer hours. Psychological distress and burnout were similar between mothers and fathers. Mothers reported higher work-family conflict than fathers; fathers reported greater occupational fatigue.

Results

Parents' use of work arrangements

Parents' use of FWAs, FLAs and IWAFs are reported in Tables 3 and 4. Flexitime, changing work hours, flexiplace and taking leave without pay were the most common arrangements. Most mothers (78%) and fathers (69%) used at least one FWA to balance work-family demands; fewer mothers (42%) and fathers (35%) had used any FLAs.

Table 1. Study measures.

Formal family-friendly work arrangements	Use of 10 strategies (De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott, & Pettit, 2005) in the past 12 months to manage work-family demands (0 = No; 1 = Yes). Counts of *flexible work arrangements* (FWAs; six items, total score 0–6) and *flexible leave arrangements* (FLAs; four items, total score 0–4) derived.
Informal work accommodations to family (IWAFs)	Total score 12–48, derived from 12 items on a 4-point scale (1 = Seldom/never; 2 = Monthly; 3 = Weekly; 4 = Daily). Higher scores indicate greater frequency of IWAF behaviours (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$). Item responses also dichotomised to identify use on 'daily-weekly' versus 'monthly-seldom/never' basis. Measure adapted from Behson (2002), see online supplement.
Health indicators	
Work-family conflict	Total score 1–5, derived from four items on a 5-point scale, adapted from Marshall and Barnett (1993). Two items assessed employment-related constraints on family life (e.g. 'Because of my work responsibilities, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured') and two assessed family-related constraints on employment (e.g. 'Because of my family responsibilities, I have to turn down work activities or opportunities that I would prefer to take on'). As work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict share a strong positive relationship, responses were averaged to derive a single global construct ($\alpha = 0.67$) (Westrupp et al., 2015). Higher scores indicate greater work-family conflict.
Psychological distress	Total score 10–50, derived from 10 items on a 5-point scale regarding anxiety and depressive symptoms (e.g. 'nervous', 'worthless') in the past four weeks (Kessler et al., 2002). Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress ($\alpha = 0.91$).
Occupational fatigue	Total score 0–100, derived from five items on a 7-point scale (e.g. 'I often dread waking up to another day of my work'), per the Chronic Fatigue subscale of the Occupational Fatigue Exhaustion Recovery scale (Winwood et al., 2006). Higher scores indicate greater occupational fatigue ($\alpha = 0.88$).
Burnout	Total score 1–7, derived from three items on a 7-point scale (e.g. 'I feel emotionally drained from my work'), per the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Higher scores indicate greater burnout ($\alpha = 0.88$).
Demographic and employment characteristics	
Gender	Male; Female
Age	Age, years
Marital status	Married/de facto = 0; Single = 1
Country of birth	Australia = 0; Outside Australia = 1
Educational attainment	University qualification (Bachelor, Graduate Diploma/Certificate or Postgraduate Degree) = 1; Post-school qualification (Diploma, Trade Certificate) = 2; Year 12 or below = 3
Household income type	Dual-earner = 0; Single-earner = 1
Number of children	Number of children $\leq$18 years in household
Age of youngest child	Infant (<1 year) = 1; Pre-school (1–4 years) = 2; Primary school (5–12 years) = 3; High school (13–18 years) = 4
Occupation	Manager/administrator/professional = 1; Trade/labourer = 2; Clerical/service = 3; Other = 4
Employment contract	Permanent = 1; Fixed-term = 2; Casual = 3
Work hours	Number of hours worked/week
Partner's work hours	Number of hours partner worked/week
Individual income	Weekly income, before tax. <$800 = 1; $800 to $1249 = 2; $1250 to $1999 = 3; > $2000 = 4
Usually works shifts	No = 0; Yes = 1
Currently on leave	No = 0; Yes = 1
Relative socio-economic disadvantage	Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) used to assign a SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) score based on postcode (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Scores were ranked and divided into quintiles. Most disadvantaged quintile = 1; Middle quintiles = 2; Least disadvantaged quintile = 3

Common IWAFs included phoning and emailing family at work, working through breaks, or using break times to attend to family matters. Eighty-six percent of parents used at least one informal arrangement on a daily-weekly basis.

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

	Total ($n = 4268$) *n* (%)	Fathers ($n = 1318$) *n* (%)	Mothers ($n = 2950$) *n* (%)
Age, *m*(*SD*)	40.2 (6.5)	40.8 (7.4)	40.0 (6.1)
Married/de facto	3649 (85.5)	1187 (90.1)	2462 (83.5)
Dual-earner household	3186 (74.7)	846 (64.2)	2340 (79.3)
Individual weekly income[a]			
<$800	737 (17.3)	84 (6.4)	653 (22.1)
$800 to $1249	903 (21.2)	193 (14.6)	710 (24.1)
$1250 to $1999	1350 (31.6)	487 (37.0)	863 (29.3)
>$2000	1134 (26.6)	509 (38.6)	625 (21.2)
Born in Australia	3473 (81.4)	1065 (80.8)	2408 (81.7)
SEIFA IRSD quintile			
Most disadvantaged area, lowest quintile	376 (8.8)	134 (10.2)	242 (8.2)
Least disadvantaged area, highest quintile	1409 (33.0)	415 (31.5)	994 (33.7)
Education			
Year 12 or below	394 (9.2)	197 (15.0)	197 (6.7)
Post-school qualification	1051 (24.6)	473 (35.9)	578 (19.6)
University qualification	2823 (66.1)	648 (49.2)	2175 (73.7)
No. of children, *m*(*SD*)	2.03 (0.91)	2.11 (0.98)	2.00 (0.87)
Age of youngest child			
Infant (<1 year old)	368 (8.6)	154 (11.7)	214 (7.3)
Pre-school (1–4 years)	1590 (37.3)	493 (37.4)	1097 (37.2)
Primary school (5–12 years)	1696 (39.7)	464 (35.2)	1232 (41.8)
High school (13–18 years)	614 (14.4)	207 (15.7)	407 (13.8)
Occupation			
Manager/Administrator/Professional	3003 (70.4)	817 (62.0)	2186 (74.1)
Trade/Labourer	223 (5.2)	201 (15.3)	22 (0.8)
Clerical/Service	598 (14.0)	89 (6.8)	509 (17.3)
Other	444 (10.4)	211 (16.0)	233 (7.9)
Employment contract[b]			
Permanent	3440 (80.6)	1158 (87.9)	2282 (77.4)
Fixed-term	511 (12.0)	82 (6.2)	429 (14.5)
Casual	279 (6.5)	69 (5.2)	209 (7.1)
Weekly work hours			
<20	353 (8.3)	22 (1.7)	331 (11.2)
≥20 to <30	739 (17.3)	31 (2.4)	708 (24.0)
≥30 to <40	1151 (27.0)	275 (20.9)	876 (29.7)
≥40 to <50	1318 (30.9)	576 (43.7)	742 (25.2)
≥50 to <60	465 (10.9)	254 (19.3)	211 (7.2)
≥60	242 (5.7)	160 (12.1)	82 (2.8)
Partner's weekly work hours, *m*(*SD*)	35.0 (17.7)	22.4 (17.1)	41.1 (14.4)
Usually works shifts	875 (20.5)	378 (28.7)	497 (16.9)
Currently on leave	407 (9.5)	107 (8.1)	300 (10.2)
Psychological distress, *m*(*SD*)	19.40 (7.15)	19.67 (7.63)	19.28 (6.92)
Occupational fatigue, *m*(*SD*)	46.05 (24.44)	47.86 (24.94)	45.25 (24.17)
Burnout, *m*(*SD*)	4.29 (1.57)	4.29 (1.58)	4.29 (1.56)
Work-family conflict, *m*(*SD*)	3.40 (0.78)	3.27 (0.78)	3.45 (0.78)

[a]Note $n = 144$ (3.4%) participants responded 'Prefer not to say'.
[b]Note $n = 38$ (0.9%) were employed on 'Some other basis'.

Correlation analyses showed a moderate, positive association between FWAs (count) and IWAFs ($r = 0.38$; $P < 0.0001$), with a stronger association for fathers ($r = 0.43$; $P < 0.0001$) than mothers ($r = 0.36$; $P < 0.0001$). Correlations between parents' use of IWAFs and FLAs (count) ($r = 0.07$; $P < 0.0001$), and between FWAs and FLAs ($r = 0.10$; $P < 0.0001$), were significant but small.

Table 3. Parents' use of formal family-friendly workplace arrangements in the previous 12 months.

	Total ($n = 4266$) *n* (%)	Fathers ($n = 1316$) *n* (%)	Mothers ($n = 2950$) *n* (%)
Flexible work arrangements (FWAs)			
Flexible work hours/Flexitime	1869 (43.8)	557 (42.3)	1312 (44.5)
Changed start and/or finish times on an ongoing basis	1754 (41.1)	495 (37.6)	1259 (42.7)
Work from home/offsite/telecommuting on a per needs basis	1673 (39.2)	525 (39.8)	1148 (38.9)
Changed total working hours on an ongoing basis	1384 (32.4)	265 (20.1)	1119 (37.9)
Working from home/offsite/remote or telecommuting regularly	805 (18.9)	252 (19.1)	553 (18.8)
Job share	313 (7.3)	30 (2.3)	283 (9.6)
Total FWAs (count), *m*(*SD*)	1.83 (1.52)	1.61 (1.48)	1.92 (1.52)
Flexible leave arrangements (FLAs)			
Leave without pay	1109 (26.0)	268 (20.3)	841 (28.5)
Accessing long service leave	572 (13.4)	192 (14.6)	380 (12.9)
Purchase additional leave (e.g. 48/52)	350 (8.2)	113 (8.6)	237 (8.0)
Long service leave on half pay	182 (4.3)	45 (3.4)	137 (4.6)
Total FLAs (count), *m*(*SD*)	0.52 (0.76)	0.47 (0.75)	0.54 (0.76)

Table 4. Parents' use of informal work accommodations to family on a daily-weekly basis.

Informal work accommodations to family (IWAFs)	Total ($n = 4257$) *n* (%)	Fathers ($n = 1310$) *n* (%)	Mothers ($n = 2947$) *n* (%)
Receiving or sending family-related phone calls or emails at work	2636 (61.8)	916 (69.5)	1720 (58.3)
Working through breaks to leave work on time	2504 (58.7)	679 (51.5)	1825 (61.9)
Using your break time to attend to family matters or errands	2021 (47.4)	524 (39.8)	1497 (50.8)
Doing household-related tasks while at work (e.g. paying bills or arranging plans by phone)	1775 (41.6)	631 (47.9)	1144 (38. 8)
Leaving work early, but completing the work later that day/week	1079 (25.3)	320 (24.3)	759 (25.7)
Working during a non-work day (e.g. weekend) to make up for a day of work you are planning to miss	585 (13.7)	153 (11.6)	432 (14.6)
Using your leave to deal with family matters	552 (12.9)	134 (10.2)	418 (14.2)
Leaving work early to attend a family event	357 (8.4)	149 (11.3)	208 (7.1)
Rearranging your work meetings	323 (7.6)	105 (8.0)	218 (7.4)
Taking a few hours off during the workday	192 (4.5)	79 (6.0)	113 (3.8)
Bringing your children into work	138 (3.2)	34 (2.6)	104 (3.5)
Arranging for a co-worker to cover for you or switch duties	114 (2.7)	42 (3.2)	72 (2.4)
IWAF scale, *m*(*SD*)	21.8 (5.3)	21.7 (5.4)	21.9 (5.2)

Associations between work arrangements and work-family conflict and health outcomes

Associations between work arrangements and work-family conflict are presented in Table 5 (fathers) and Table 6 (mothers). Hypotheses 1a, 2a and 3a were not supported. Unadjusted linear regression (Model 1) found no association between FWAs and work-family conflict, whereas FLAs and IWAFs were both associated with *higher* work-family conflict for fathers and mothers. These associations remained significant in multivariate analyses that adjusted for demographic and employment characteristics and other work arrangements (Model 2), with little change to the estimates (β), such that greater use of FLAs and IWAFs were both independently associated with higher work-family conflict. Lastly, an interaction term was added to assess the effect of FWAs on work-family conflict for differing levels of IWAFs (Model 3). The interaction terms were not significant for either gender. Hypothesis 4a was not supported.

Table 5. Unadjusted regressions and adjusted multiple regression models for fathers.

	Work-family conflict			Psychological distress			Occupational fatigue			Burnout		
	B	*SE* B	*β*	B	*SE* B	*β*	B	*SE* B	*β*	B	*SE* B	*β*
Model 1: Unadjusted												
FWAs	−0.03	0.01	−0.05	−0.11	0.14	−0.02	−2.72	0.46	−0.16***	−0.13	0.03	−0.12***
FLAs	0.12	0.03	0.12***	1.07	0.28	0.10***	2.20	0.91	0.07*	0.06	0.06	0.03
IWAFs	0.03	0.004	0.20***	0.17	0.04	0.12***	0.24	0.13	0.05	0.04	0.008	0.15***
Model 2: Full adjusted model[a]												
FWAs							−2.38	0.49	−0.14***	−0.20	0.03	−0.19***
FLAs	0.11	0.03	0.11**	0.55	0.29	0.05	2.00	0.93	0.06*			
IWAFs	0.02	0.005	0.16***	0.21	0.04	0.15***				0.06	0.009	0.20***
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.083****			0.070****			0.057****			0.089****		
Model 3: Full adjusted model including interaction between FWAs and IWAFs[b]												
FWAs	−0.08	0.08	−0.16	0.34	0.62	0.07	−4.01	2.02	−0.24*	−0.28	0.13	−0.26*
FLAs	0.11	0.03	0.11**	0.56	0.29	0.05	1.72	0.94	0.05			
IWAFs	0.03	0.008	0.20***	0.30	0.07	0.21***	0.67	0.21	0.14**	0.05	0.01	0.18***
Interaction	0.0005	0.003	0.03	−0.03	0.03	−0.15	0.03	0.09	0.04	0.003	0.005	0.09
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.095****			0.073****			0.074****			0.089****		

[a]Model 2 adjusted for parent age, marital status, household income type, individual income, country of birth, SEIFA IRSD quintile, education, number of children, age of youngest child, occupation, employment contract, work hours, current leave status, and work arrangements associated with outcome at the unadjusted-level ($P < 0.05$). Work-family conflict model also adjusted for partner work hours.

Note: For each outcome, additional analyses were performed to include *all* work arrangements (i.e. associations where $P \geq 0.05$ in Model 1, shaded cells). Overall patterns were similar with little change to the estimates; therefore, original data are reported here.

[b]As per Model 2, with inclusion of interaction term (FWAs × IWAFs).

B = unstandardised regression coefficient, *SE* B = standard error of coefficient, *β* = standardised regression coefficient. *$P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, ***$P < 0.001$, ****$P < 0.0001$.

Table 6. Unadjusted regressions and adjusted multiple regression models for mothers.

	Work-family conflict			Psychological distress			Occupational fatigue			Burnout		
	B	*SE* B	*β*	B	*SE* B	*β*	B	*SE* B	*β*	B	*SE* B	*β*
Model 1: Unadjusted												
FWAs	−0.002	0.009	−0.004	−0.14	0.08	−0.03	−1.67	0.29	−0.11***	−0.09	0.02	−0.09***
FLAs	0.07	0.02	0.07***	0.87	0.17	0.10***	2.96	0.58	0.09***	0.15	0.04	0.07***
IWAFs	0.04	0.003	0.25***	0.17	0.02	0.13***	0.36	0.08	0.08***	0.04	0.005	0.13***
Model 2: Full adjusted model[a]												
FWAs							−1.85	0.32	−0.12***	−0.10	0.02	−0.10***
FLAs	0.05	0.02	0.04*	0.98	0.17	0.10***	3.19	0.58	0.10***	0.18	0.04	0.09***
IWAFs	0.03	0.003	0.21***	0.20	0.03	0.15***	0.43	0.10	0.09***	0.03	0.006	0.09***
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.101****			0.082****			0.102****			0.131****		
Model 3: Full adjusted model including interaction between FWAs and IWAFs[b]												
FWAs	0.002	0.04	0.004	0.36	0.36	0.08	−1.21	1.25	−0.08	−0.08	0.08	−0.08
FLAs	0.05	0.02	0.05*	0.93	0.17	0.10***	3.19	0.58	0.10***	0.18	0.04	0.09***
IWAFs	0.04	0.005	0.28***	0.29	0.04	0.21***	0.49	0.15	0.10**	0.03	0.009	0.10**
Interaction	−0.002	0.002	−0.12	−0.03	0.02	−0.18*	−0.03	0.05	−0.05	−0.001	0.003	−0.03
Adjusted *R*-squared	0.109****			0.087****			0.102****			0.131****		

[a]Model 2 adjusted for parent age, marital status, household income type, individual income, country of birth, SEIFA IRSD quintile, education, number of children, age of youngest child, occupation, employment contract, work hours, current leave status, and work arrangements associated with outcome at the unadjusted-level ($P < 0.05$). Work-family conflict model also adjusted for partner work hours.

Note: For work-family conflict and psychological distress, additional analyses were performed to include *all* work arrangements (i.e. associations where $P \geq 0.05$ in Model 1, shaded cells). Overall patterns were similar with little change to the estimates; therefore, original data are reported here.

[b]As per Model 2, with inclusion of interaction term (FWAs × IWAFs).

B = unstandardised regression coefficient, *SE* B = standard error of coefficient, *β* = standardised regression coefficient. *$P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, ***$P < 0.001$, ****$P < 0.0001$.

For fathers (Table 5) and mothers (Table 6), there was no association between FWAs and psychological distress. However, higher FWA use was associated with lower occupational fatigue and lower burnout in unadjusted and adjusted regressions (Models 1 and 2). This does not support Hypothesis 1b but supports Hypotheses 1c–d. For fathers, higher FLA use was associated with greater occupational fatigue only (Model 2), and higher IWAF use was associated with higher psychological distress and higher burnout (Models 1 and 2). For mothers, higher use of FLAs and IWAFs were both consistently associated with higher fatigue, higher psychological distress and higher burnout (Models 1 and 2). As these associations were in the opposite direction to what we hypothesised, Hypotheses 2b–d and 3b–d were not supported.

There was no interaction between FWAs and IWAFs for fathers, although the association between FLAs and occupational fatigue was no longer significant. For mothers, a significant interaction effect was found for psychological distress: higher IWAFs use was associated with higher psychological distress when mothers used fewer FWAs. This association was in the opposite direction to what we hypothesised and does not support Hypothesis 4b for mothers. There were no interaction effects on other health outcomes for mothers.

Discussion

This is one of the first Australian studies to investigate parents' use of flexible work-family arrangements and associations with work-family conflict and health outcomes. Despite the introduction of policy and widespread implementation of workplace flexibility, there is limited evidence to evaluate whether flexibility improves parents' lives. We used data from a large sample of employed parents to address these gaps, analysing mothers and fathers separately given the gendered nature of parents' workforce participation in Australia.

Our findings provide national, contemporary evidence that mothers *and* fathers use formal family-friendly work arrangements and informal strategies. While more mothers had changed work hours or job-shared, similar proportions of fathers and mothers used flexitime, flexiplace and paid leave arrangements. IWAFs were also widespread. The patterning of descriptive results suggests that mothers typically worked part-time and accommodated family by compressing their workday, missing breaks and working after hours to fit everything in; fathers worked long hours and accommodated family within that time by performing family-related tasks at work.

FWAs were associated with less occupational fatigue and burnout for mothers and fathers: health benefits that may be highly salient to organisations. Our findings support existing research where employees with increased schedule control or flexibility have less emotional exhaustion, burnout and fatigue (Costa, Sartori, & Åkerstedt, 2006; Grzywacz et al., 2008; Moen et al., 2016). As burnout is linked to turnover, absenteeism and lower performance (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), our findings reinforce the importance of organisations offering parents FWAs to alleviate burnout and fatigue, which in turn may improve employee engagement. Findings show that FWAs are particularly beneficial for fathers, who typically work long hours and experience high occupational fatigue.

Despite these protective associations, using more FWAs did not link to lower psychological distress or work-family conflict, suggesting that the 'package' parents enact to manage boundaries does not mitigate work-family conflict nor provide a universally effective 'customisation' strategy (Kossek et al., 2006). This is consistent with research

showing mixed evidence about the effectiveness of flexibility in lowering work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2013; Lapierre & Allen, 2006; O'Driscoll et al., 2013). Common arrangements (e.g. flexitime, flexiplace) can *increase* work-family permeability and expectations that employees are constantly available (Higgins et al., 2014; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Lapierre & Allen, 2006). Future research is warranted to explore aspects of boundary management within the Australian context. For example, linking parents' preferences to particular FWAs and perceived control would shed light on which arrangements are salient to parents and effective for organisations to implement.

The second formal package under consideration here, FLAs, are truly underexplored in the literature. While not as prevalent as FWAs, some leave options were common (i.e. 26% of parents had taken unpaid leave to manage work-family demands). Overall, FLAs were associated with higher work-family conflict and poorer health for fathers and mothers. Parents experiencing high work-family conflict may utilise leave arrangements to resolve conflicts and strains.

IWAFs were also positively associated with work-family conflict, counter to our hypothesis, but consistent with Behson (2002) who found employees experiencing family-to-work conflict use IWAFs more frequently. Parents may utilise IWAFs in response to high family demands, so a reverse relationship to what we theorised is possible. Enacting family roles at work, or vice-versa, may not align with personal desires and this incongruence is likely to promote conflicts and interfere with parents' psychological availability after work (Chen et al., 2009; Danner-Vlaardingerbroek et al., 2013; Kreiner et al., 2009). It may also drain resources from one domain to the next if boundaries cannot be maintained (Furtado, Sobral, & Peci, 2016). Although mixed, prior research using boundary management theory suggests that integration, a feature of IWAFs, links to stronger *work* outcomes but poorer *personal* outcomes including work-family conflict and exhaustion (Allen, Cho, et al., 2014; Dettmers, 2017).

IWAFs were almost universally associated with poorer health for mothers and fathers, and were associated with high psychological distress for mothers in the context of less FWAs. The relationship between IWAFs and parent health may be bi-directional, with the most strained parents using more strategies. However, the presence of adverse associations may indicate inadequate organisational support for parents who use more IWAFs; rather than proximal, tailored support for customised work-family management behaviours as hypothesised. Managing consistent boundaries between work and home may be harder to achieve when formal supports are lacking; mothers may find that resorting to IWAFs daily makes it harder to retain any degree of segmentation, or to manage work-family integration according to their preferences. This blurring of boundaries is likely to confer conflict and strains, particularly for mothers who prefer more segmentation (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). Gaining a nuanced understanding of how parents utilise flexible work, leave-based and informal arrangements in combination, and how and why these patterns of use influence health and wellbeing, is required.

Strengths and limitations

This study addresses contemporary issues of high relevance to parents, workplaces, and the burgeoning workplace flexibility and health literature. We contribute new evidence from a large sample of Australian parents from different occupations and organisations

with different family demands, enhancing the generalisability of our findings to the broader Australian population. The inclusion of a considerable number of fathers, who are typically disinclined to participate in research (Davison, Charles, Khandpur, & Nelson, 2017), enabled us to examine work arrangements by gender. We used well-validated measures to investigate the synergies between work arrangements and critical indicators of parents' health. Analyses controlled for a wide range of covariates likely to influence parent wellbeing. Extending on previous work that measured availability or policy awareness, we provide valuable information on parents' *use* of work arrangements.

We acknowledge several limitations. Like others (Eaton, 2003), we used count indices of FWAs and FLAs. This assumes that using more flexible options is better than fewer, targeted options. Our findings show that parents use a gamut of formal provisions, too many to model separately; we therefore investigated flexibility as a general resource. While our sample is broadly representative of the Australian parent population (Bennetts et al., 2019), we used a convenience recruitment method (Facebook) rather than a population sample. We used self-reported study-specific measures which may be subject to reporting bias, over-estimating relationships between workplace factors and health.

Conclusions

We show that the use of FWAs provided by organisations have important and potentially positive relationships with mothers' and fathers' wellbeing. Conversely, higher use of FLAs were associated with poorer health outcomes, and more conflicts. We also show that most Australian parents engage in a range of IWAFs to respond to work-family demands yet higher IWAFs use was associated with poorer outcomes, particularly in the context of 'insufficient' or low FWAs for mothers. IWAFs were common, suggesting that family-friendly workplace provisions alone are not meeting the demands of working parents – a critical sub-cohort within the Australian working population.

Findings provide important impetus for two recommendations. First, ensuring equitable access to family-friendly workplace arrangements for fathers, along with mothers, will support women's access to paid work and men's access to caring for their children. Irrespective of causal direction, greater access to FWAs is linked to improved health outcomes. Second, we draw attention to the salience of informal flexibility for parents, an 'invisible' aspect of the work-family interface, as well as formal leave arrangements. A future research direction is to better understand parents' use of IWAFs considering boundary preferences, perceived control and congruence, and the interplay between these self-directed strategies and formal organisational provisions (FWAs/FLAs) in supporting parent health and effective work-family management.

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