



# Timing ambition: How organisational actors engage with the institutionalised norms that affect the career development of part-time workers<sup>☆</sup>



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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

it is especially important for part-time workers to demonstrate their ambitions to realise them. However, Sools et al. (2007) showed that demonstrating ambition is not that easy. In their study on Dutch managers, they concluded that, in general, ambition must be displayed in a subtle way. While the managers perceived their own ambition to be unrelated to their working hours, part-time women managers with children felt that they had to challenge the dominant belief that they were (or had become) less ambitious due to their working part-time. These women managers experienced a so-called 'double bind'. On the one hand, they had to display their ambition in a subtle way, just as their men colleagues did. On the other hand, however, they were compelled to express their commitment explicitly, rather than subtly, to counter the prevailing organisational view that mothers lose their sense of ambition after switching to part-time work.

The studies that are described above suggest that organisational processes justify reduced career development for part-time workers. However, some organisations seem to support rather than hinder part-time workers' career development (Lee et al., 2000; Tomlinson, 2006). According to Lee et al. (2000), organisations' openness to change in general has the potential to support part-time workers' career development. The same may hold for the increasing flexibility of organisations that are associated with the so-called "New Ways of Working" (cf., Van der Heijden, Peters, & Kelliher, 2014). Along similar lines, Tomlinson (2006) showed that the active adoption and implementation of part-time friendly legislation enhanced part-time work arrangements in organisations as well as co-workers' and supervisors' perceptions of part-time employees' work and career commitment. Additionally, employees' 'micro-political' resistance (Dick, 2015: 16) against relegating part-time workers to less prestigious work should be noted. However, Dick (2015: 16) found that "there is very little research that has directly examined how part-time professionals address co-workers' and managers' potentially negative perceptions".

### 2.3. Addressing the gaps

Our review above reveals three gaps in the literature. First, it remains unexplained why the normative perceptions of part-time workers as being less committed to work and career are persistent, despite evidence to the contrary. Second, the evidence concerning the organisational processes that pertain to the career development of part-time workers is ambivalent. While organisational processes, both on a discursive and a material level, apparently restrict part-time workers' career development, under certain conditions, they may actually contribute to the recognition and realisation of part-time workers' ambitions and hence their career development. Clarification is needed on when and how organisational processes support the career development of part-time workers. Third, the roles of organisational actors in these organizational processes demand more exploration.

In order to address the above-mentioned gaps, our study focuses on how organisational actors engage with institutionalised norms concerning the relationship between working hours and ambition, thus identifying areas for change, albeit minimal (Dick, 2015) and provides clues to enhance part-time workers' career development. First, we employ an open conceptualisation of 'ambition', which allows for the inclusion of all of the meanings of the concept that are used by organisational actors. Second, in line with Orlikowski and Yates (2002), we consider institutionalised norms concerning working hours and ambition as social structures, and, more specifically, *temporal structures*, on which organizational actors routinely draw to "make sense of, regulate, coordinate and account for their activities" (2002: 686). Third, we explore how organisational actors both reproduce and change

these temporal structures "to guide, orient, and coordinate their ongoing activities" (2002: 684). Recent studies have emphasised the importance of gaining understanding of the temporality of organisations as an illustration of how futures and pasts are continuously and mutually co-constitutive (Hernes, Simpson, & Söderland, 2013: 45). Considering institutionalised norms as being temporally structured allows us to explore how the constraining and enabling role of these institutionalised norms may take place simultaneously. As in Perlow (Perlow 1999: 57), we consider the work patterns of workers to be interdependent and assume that workers' enactment of time affects other workers and, ultimately, organisations as a whole.

### 3. Methodology

Given the relatively unexplored nature of the issues that are discussed above, we undertook an inductive case study, using 'ambition' and 'temporal structures' as sensitizing concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In this section, we explain the methodology of our study, including case selection, data collection, and analysis.

#### 3.1. Case selection

We selected the Dutch service sector as a critical case. We assume that if opportunities for part-time workers' career development cannot be found in this reasonably 'favourable' context for part-time work (Mescher, 2011), it is likely that they will not be found anywhere. In the Netherlands, since the introduction in the 1980s of labour-market regulations that were aimed at combating discrimination against part-time workers in terms of pay and social protection, the acceptance of part-time work has increased (Bleijenbergh et al., 2004). Dutch women and men are the European champions of part-time work, which is defined as a maximum of 35 h per week (Merens & Van den Brakel, 2014: 67). Eurostat figures (in Merens & Van den Brakel 2014: 68) have shown that, in 2012, 77% of the women and 26.3% of the men in the Dutch labour market worked part-time (the EU-average being 62.3% and 9.4%, respectively). As the family is perceived to be the most suitable care provider, Dutch public institutions only take on part of child care. Gender-role expectations imply that men usually hold full-time or large part-time jobs, whilst women hold small to large part-time jobs (Merens & Van den Brakel, 2014). This so-called 'one-and-a-half-earner model' has also shaped the temporal-spatial organisation of Dutch society, affecting both institutions, such as schools and public services, and work and career attitudes and behaviours (cf., Van Engen, Dijkers, Vinkenburg, & De Rooy, 2009). Women may extend their working hours when their children have become more independent (Cloin, Keuzenkamp, & Plantenga, 2011). The Dutch service sector specifically employs many part-time workers of middle and higher educational levels (Visser et al., 2009) in jobs with career development potential. In this setting, we might expect organisations to be relatively conducive to the realisation of part-time workers' ambitions.

#### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

We held eight focus group interviews that comprised twenty-five employees and ten of their supervisors, all of whom were employed either in public health or in private financial services. The participants in the focus groups were invited by intranet and e-mail and by snowball sampling to discuss part-time work and ambition. We explicitly invited part-time workers and their supervisors to participate. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were invited to encourage colleagues to participate. In

total, nineteen women employees and six men employees, six women supervisors and four men supervisors participated in the focus groups. Sixteen of the participants were employed in public health and nineteen in financial services (see also Table 1).

We used the focus groups to explore how the participants are affected by and affect their organisations' institutionalised norms concerning the relationship between working hours and ambition. All of the focus groups were guided by two researchers and a research-assistant. To support confidentiality, we conducted focus groups with employees and supervisors separately. Using open questions, we asked the participants about their jobs, numbers of working hours, and living situations. After these introductory questions, we asked the participants what 'ambition' meant to them. We also asked about their personal ambitions, both at work and outside of work, and how these related, if at all, to their number of weekly working hours. We asked which factors fostered or impeded these ambitions. Moreover, we asked the participants to characterise ambitious employees in their organisations. Finally, we asked how the participants perceived the relationship between gender and ambition.

The focus groups lasted 1.5–2.5 h. With the permission of the participants, the focus group meetings were voice-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. We analysed the transcripts employing content analysis according to a grounded theory approach, using 'ambition' and 'temporal structures' as the sensitising concepts to guide our analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Each transcript was coded independently by three researchers: the two researchers who had facilitated that particular focus group and one researcher who had a more outsider perspective on the material. Through a process of 'constant comparison' (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), the concept of 'timing ambition' emerged from the data. We defined 'timing ambition' as the way in which organisational actors are influenced by and have an impact on their organisations' temporal structures, i.e., their organisations' institutionalised rules, norms, and routines concerning the temporal dimensions of the relationship between working hours and ambition. The concept of 'timing ambition' and its four dimensions that we identified through our data analysis enabled us to show how institutionalised norms concerning working hours and ambition affect the recognition and realisation of part-time workers' ambitions as well as how part-time workers and their supervisors are able to actively change them.

#### 4. Results

First, in the focus groups, we discussed the participants' jobs, numbers of working hours, and living situations. In public health, the participants worked as nurses, nurses' assistants, analysts, administrative employees, and supervisors. In the financial sector, they were account managers, controllers, financial and policy advisors, coordinators, administrative employees and supervisors. Table 2 shows that the participants' ages ranged from 24 to 56 years. It is noteworthy that the women in public health, both employees and supervisors, worked in smaller jobs (ranging from 16 to 36 h per week) than those in the financial sector (ranging from 24 to 38 h per week). The weekly working hours of the male

participants, both employees and supervisors, did not differ largely per sector. The two men in public health worked 36 h per week. The working hours of the men in financial services ranged from 32 to 38 per week. Most of the participants (27/35) were married or cohabiting, and most of them (25/35) had children who are under 18.

##### 4.1. Part-time work

What struck us in the data was that the meaning of part-time work varied. Four employees in the public health sector who worked 36 h per week considered themselves to be full-time workers. This is in accordance with the Dutch Bureau of Statistics, which considers jobs with 36 or more weekly working hours to be full-time (Merens & Van den Brakel, 2014). These participants reported that they registered for the focus groups because they were interested in discussing the relationship between working hours and ambition. In contrast, four (out of seven) employees in the financial sector who worked 36 h per week considered themselves to be part-time workers because they worked a comprised work week of four weekly working days of nine hours (4 × 9) working time, with one day off per week. Based on these findings, we conclude, firstly, that the turning point between full-time and part-time differs based on sector and, secondly, that in addition to the number of weekly working hours, the number of working days per week is an important determinant of whether an employee considers him- or herself to work part-time or full-time.

##### 4.2. Ambition

Our analysis of the meaning that the participants attached to 'ambition' revealed that both the supervisors and employees in the focus groups identified themselves unreservedly as 'ambitious in a broad sense'. They associated ambition with 'drive', 'passion', 'developing oneself', 'achieving something', and 'being motivated to deliver good quality'. The participants also mentioned 'exerting influence' and 'making a positive contribution to the organisation' as being aspects of ambition. The participants claimed that this broad definition of ambition differs from 'merely working for money' and 'having a nine-to-five mentality'.

Strikingly, however, the institutionalised ('taken for granted') norms that concerned a more narrow definition of ambition as striving for upward mobility were also clearly visible. Several of the participants observed that they considered part-time work to be incompatible with being ambitious, even after having made convincing arguments to the contrary earlier in the discussion. Hence, they demonstrated an awareness of institutionalised norms concerning the relationship between working hours and ambition. Both the supervisors and the employees showed a tendency to *infer* ambition from the number of working hours, while, at the same time, they rather critically reflected on the way that this tendency represented a powerful template both in their organisations and in Dutch society.

We illustrate this finding with a conversation from one of the focus groups in the public health sector in which Katja had identified herself earlier as being ambitious in the broad sense of wanting to contribute to high quality care in her organisation by keeping up and "knowing everything there is to know" about her field.

Katja I just discussed it with a colleague today [...] that I work 36 h, but let me tell you, if I had a husband, I'd love to work a little less! (Laughs). I'd happily... three days seems so wonderful to me! [...] Well, I just don't want to sacrifice financially, so I opt for this [working 36 h per week, AUTHORS] and I love doing it, but let me tell you that's what I said today. So,

**Table 1**  
Participants to the focus groups.

Sector	Employees		Supervisors		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Public Health	12	1	2	1	16
Finance	7	5	4	3	19
	19	6	6	4	35
Total	25		10		35

**Table 2**

Participants to the focus groups in more detail.

Pseudonym of participant	Sector	Function	Age <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Working hours	Number of children	Children's age	Marital status <sup>b</sup>
Public Health								
<i>Employee</i>								
Ans		Nurse	43	F	32	3	9, 17, 19	Married
Mary		Nurse assistant	54	F	24	2	27, 29	Married
Kees		Male nurse	24	M	36	0	NA	Single
Tessa		Analyst	30	F	36	0	NA	Single
Katja		Nurse	44	F	36	0	NA	Single
Ruth		Nurse	52	F	36	0	NA	Single
Anna		Nurse assistant	44	F	28–32	3	10, 12, 15	Single
Jos		Nurse	?	F	24	2	5, 7	Married
Lisa		Nurse	?	F	24	3	7, 10, 11	Married
Irene		Nurse	?	F	18	3	7, 10, 10	Married
Ria		Nurse	27	F	20	1	2	Married
Dorien		Nurse	38	F	18	3	4, 8, 10	Married
Anita		Administrative employee	39	F	16 (2 × 8)	1	10	Married
<i>Supervisor</i>								
Klaas		Department head	?	M	36	0	NA	Married
Wilma		Head laboratory	?	V	28	2	5, 7	Single
Els		Team head	? 40	V	36	0	NA	Single
Finance								
<i>Employee</i>								
Barbara		Account manager	?	F	24 (3 × 8)	3	1, 4, 6	Married
Patricia		Business Controller	36	F	36	2	2, 4	Married
Roos		Financial Advisor	41	F	30	3	5, 5	Married
Merel		Coordinator	46	F	32	2	9, 11	Married
Jet		Actuary	46	F	28,8	2	11+, 4+	Married
Eva		Trainer	30	F	?	0	NA	Married
Toos		Coordinator	?	F	32 (4 × 8)	0	NA	Married
Johan		Policy advisor	55	M	36 (4 × 9)	4	23, 23+, 23+, 33	Married
Leo		Coordinator	45	M	36 (4 × 9)	2	14, 16	Married
Rob		Administrative employee	56	M	32	0	NA	Married
Hans		Account manager	37	M	36 (4 × 9)	2	2, 4	Married
Bob		Financial Advisor	50	M	36 (4 × 9)	3	8, 11, 12	
<i>Supervisor</i>								
Brigit		Manager	41	F	36	2	2, 4	Married
Hendrik		Manager	53	M	?	1	32	Married
Astrid		Manager	37	F	38	2	8, 8	Married
Yvon		Head office	31	F	36	1	1	Married
Louise		Manager	40	F	38	3	?	Married
Daan		Manager	36	M	38	0	NA	Married
Nico		Managers	37	M	38 (4 × 9,5)	3	1, 3, 5	Married

<sup>a</sup> Some of the facilitators did not ask participant's age.

<sup>b</sup> Marital status: Married includes cohabiting; single includes divorced.

I'm not that ambitious (laughs). Yeah, that seems wonderful to me. I noticed it the past weeks, having time off from work on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Well, wonderful!

Ans: Now you're making the connection to working hours again. You're making the same mistake now as I did.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Ans: You say: "Ambition and number of working hours".

Interviewer: You say: "I'm not that ambitious!"

Katja: That is what I think, then, more or less.

Ans: And that's the general idea about ambition.

Katja: Working a lot, moving up, earning more . . . increasing status, increasing authority.

Ans: At a certain point, we realised that is not what it is, actually, and now we immediately return to what we all . . . what is always being said. It's funny! (Katja, woman, age 44, nurse, 36 h/w, health care; Ans, woman, age 43, nurse, 32 h/w, health care)

This excerpt shows how the powerful template regarding working hours and ambition easily crept back into the conversation. It implies that part-time workers are not considered to be ambitious and, therefore, have poorer career opportunities than full time workers ("and that's the general idea about ambition").

However, the excerpt also shows the participants' awareness of this temporal structure and their critical attitude towards it (" . . . we realised that is not what it is, actually . . . "). In the next subsections, we will elaborate on our findings concerning the reproduction and/or change of institutionalised norms regarding working hours and ambition through the concept that we have coined, '*timing ambition*'. On the one hand, we will show how powerful templates continue to be reproduced. On the other hand, however, we will show how alternative temporal structures have begun to emerge. We will discuss how this finding affects part-time workers' career development. Based on our analysis, we found four dimensions of '*timing ambition*': timing ambition over the course of a lifetime; in terms of the number of weekly hours worked; in terms of overtime hours worked; and in terms of visible working hours.

#### 4.3. Timing ambition over the course of a lifetime

The first dimension of timing ambition relates to *the course of a lifetime* in which career ambition is articulated and enacted. The participants in our study related their accounts on their ambitions to the temporal structures in their private lives, which involved childcare, their partners' careers, and their social environment (cf.,

Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) as well as conditions and circumstances such as illness, divorce, and taking care of parents.

As we show in Table 2, most of the part-time workers in our sample had children under 18. One employee concisely explained how her working hours and days varied with her children's ages.

I've always been working in the public health sector, that is, for 16.5 years in the same public health organisation, as a part-time worker. I started working on a zero-hours contract and could work when it suited me. That was, when I had young children. So I worked in the weekends or evening shifts. And when the children grew somewhat older, I started working day shifts and when the children grew up further, I could easily work more hours. (Mary, woman, age 54, nurse assistant, 24 h/w, health care)

The participants in the public health organisation reported that part-time work had become common practice for nurses and nurses' assistants, whereas the participants in the financial sector explained that the organisation provided employees with opportunities to work flexible hours and to work from home. For example, one employee reported having been able to extend her working hours after her second child was born from 24 to 36 h because of the opportunity to work flexible hours.

Since the 1st of January last year, I have become a financial business controller and I am, so to speak, functionally steering the group of controllers. For me, the point was, I returned to work after my second son was born. I had in mind to work three days a week, since that is how it should be when you are a mother: 3 × 8 h. But it turned out that in actual fact I didn't like that very well. Since the 1st of January last year, I have started to work more hours again, and now I work 36 h a week".

Interviewer And in reality?

In reality a little bit more. But I use my hours at home to check my mail and to check on Sunday where I have to go the next day. (Patricia, woman, age 36, business controller, 36 h/w finance)

The employees in the financial sector organisation reported that, in particular, the opportunities to work flexible hours and to work from home have enabled them to work 4 × 9 h ("Fortunately, it's a position that enables me to work fairly flexibly") and to have a day off to be at home with their children. Despite this, several participants in the financial sector reported how combining work and child care had caused them to put their work and career ambitions 'on hold'. One supervisor, for example, explained that the realisation of his ambitions had to be attuned to his partners' ambitions and their child-care demands.

It is my ambition to live up to that [new role at work, AUTHORS], but much depends on your private situation, such as having young children. And also on my wife's ambitions, and finding balance. Then you realise that you can't possibly work 70 h per week, that's just impossible. I don't know whether that slows down your career, but it is a known fact. Maybe, I should not have that much ambition for some time, given my situation. Maybe, in a couple of years, when the children are all in school, it may be different, it might become easier. (Nico, man, age 37, manager 38 h/w (4 × 9.5), finance)

However, the focus groups also revealed that it is not self-evident to realise the ambitions that have been postponed until later in life. The supervisors especially reported that postponing ambitions with the intention to realise them later in life would require extra work from the employees ("if you keep that up one way or another") such as keeping oneself informed about the developments in one's profession and keeping in touch with the relevant networks at work.

I think you need to be open for new developments. I think it is part of being ambitious to look beyond your current position. Keep an eye on where the organisation is going, ehm, some networking is also part of it. Being noticed, knowing what is going on. Even if you reduce your working hours temporarily, if you manage to keep that up one way or another, you may more easily return. (Yvon, woman, age 31, head office, 36 h/w, financial sector)

Our analysis showed several cases in which supervisors favoured the realisation of the ambitions of subordinates who fit the current and powerful template regarding the timing of ambition. That is, some of the supervisors were strongly inclined to offer opportunities for professional development specifically to employees who were young, worked full-time, and were visible in the organisation.

It is true that, say, young people get more opportunities. I am in this particular [high, AUTHORS] potential group and the oldest person participating is 45. (Daan, man, age 36, manager, 38 h/w, finance)

While this quote reflects the reproduction of the dominant template of temporal structures, the focus groups also showed that some of the supervisors were aware of this situation and encouraged their part-time working employees to realise their ambitions later in life by allowing them time for professional development and by actively encouraging them to take on supervisory roles. Especially in the public health sector, the focus groups revealed the effect of supervisorial encouragement and support. The following quote provides an example of the supervisors' proactive attitudes and how they potentially change the organisation's temporal structures. The part-time working nurse in this quote had only just discovered that she was able to take on an executive role ("And I did it for one year and thought, oh, I like it much more than I expected") when her supervisor invited her to do so.

Then someone dropped out and a position became temporarily vacant [ . . . ]. And I did it for one year and I thought, oh, I like this much more than I expected! [ . . . ] So that's the funny thing about developing and trying something. You're asked to do it [by supervisor, AUTHORS] and other people notice your potential and you start seeing it yourself too. (Lisa, woman, age unknown, nurse, 24 h/w, health care)

Also in the financial sector organisation, employees were supported to realise ambitions later in life after they had temporarily diminished their working hours due to care-giving tasks in their private lives. This practice influenced how supervisors considered ambition ("I never realised that").

Recently, I had an eye opener with a woman in her fifties whom we hired. She has a family, kids, et cetera, and she said: "Well, I put my ambition on hold when the kids were small. I wanted to be at home. And when they left the house, I was able to return to work full speed. This simply is my second youth, my second chance". Then I thought, gee, that's a way to look at it. I never realised that. (Astrid, woman, 37, manager, 38 h/w, finance)

These examples show that by articulating expectations beyond the institutionalised norms or simply by hiring or promoting people over 40 years of age, supervisors have the power to provide part-time workers with alternative temporal structures regarding working hours and ambition. This can encourage part-time workers to realise that they actually have the ambition to work in a supervisory function, even when they initially did not think so. Here, our 'timing ambition perspective' allows us to show how the relationship between working hours and ambition may be

redefined and possibly changed over time when organisational actors produce alternatives.

#### 4.4. Timing ambition in terms of the number of weekly hours

The second dimension of timing ambition relates to the *accepted minimum number of weekly working hours*. In line with previous research (cf., Benschop et al., 2013; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Sools et al., 2007), the number of weekly working hours appeared to play an important role in how ambition is being perceived. As we showed above, however, the participants also critically reflected on the powerful template that relates working hours to ambition. In principle, they agreed that ambition and the number of working hours should be unrelated. However, they also agreed that a certain minimum of working hours is required to develop, sustain and realise ambitions at work as well as fulfil a supervisory position. Strikingly, however, the required minimum was lower in public health than in the financial sector. In the financial sector organisation, both supervisors and employees considered 32 h to be the minimum number of weekly working hours that are required to realise one's ambitions. They contrasted this to 24 h, which they considered to be too low to function properly in jobs such as account manager or controller. As one of the employees in the finance sector organisation explained:

Speaking about part-time hours, I can imagine that in certain jobs, although this may sound cliché, 24 h is insufficient to work effectively. Then you can't [do the work AUTHORS] any more . . . then customers make remarks that the account manager is not accessible. So, that's the drawback. (Roos, woman, age 41, policy advisor, 30 h/w, finance)

The minimum number of weekly working hours that are necessary for a management position in the financial sector was also considered to be 32. The supervisors in this sector clearly argued that working 24 h would not be sufficient for upward mobility towards a management position ("such a responsible job") within the organisation.

You do it the way you do it, and you may work at home, at night, during the weekend, it doesn't matter when. But you need to spend those four days. Otherwise you just can't make it. Then you just can't do such a responsible job. (Nick, man, age 37, manager 38 h/w (4 × 9.5), finance)

In contrast, in public health, working 24 h or three days per week was considered the minimum to realise one's ambitions, or to fulfil a supervisory role. Supervisors in public health considered working less (16 or 20 h) an indication of an employee's lack of ambition ("Then I just notice that this group [working 16 or 20 h a week, AUTHORS] [-] They're just there [at work, AUTHORS] to be out of the house for a while").

Elise You actually infer it [employees' ambition, AUTHORS] from the number of working hours already . . .

Wilma The work attitude . . .

Klaas The stage of life . . .

Interviewer 1 From the number of working hours, you say?

Elise Yeah, for the people I work with. I can tell it almost just like that, except for one.

Interviewer 2 And, what is the threshold?

Elise Well, two days? Two-and-a-half days. Then I just notice that this group, especially ehm . . .

Wilma They're just there to be out of the house for a while . . .

Klaas Well, no, yes, that's correct, they don't opt for 16 h for no reason, because: then I can just, indeed, keep up my other life outside work.

Elise Yeah, well, exactly!

Interviewer 1 At how many working hours is an employee considered ambitious?

Wilma Starting from 24 h, you're being taken somewhat more seriously. (Elise, woman, head of a team, 36 h/w, health care; Wilma, woman, head of a laboratory, 24 h/w, health care; Klaas, man, department head, 36 h/w, health care)

Similarly, the perceived threshold for part-time workers to hold a management position in nursing was considered to be 24 h per week. One supervisor in public health worked 24 weekly hours, as did two employees who were in training to become a supervisor. One of these trainees observed:

[Name supervisor], she works 24 h and she works fabulously. It's just a matter of attitude. And the way you hand-over things. And your own attitude. I think that just matters most. (Jos, woman, nurse, 24 h/w, health care)

Our analysis showed that the temporal structures concerning the relationship between working hours and ambition depended on context. In public health, a management or a policy officer position may be fulfilled in 24 weekly working hours. Rather than stating that part-time workers are not ambitious, the supervisors and employees argued that the potential issues that are associated with part-time work can be solved through good organisation. While both the supervisors and employees in the financial sector organisation perceived the need to hand over tasks as an obstacle to part-time executive work, in public health, such handovers were common practice because work in this sector continues around the clock.

#### 4.5. Timing ambition in terms of overtime

The third dimension of timing ambition relates to *devoting extra time to an organisation*. Scholars generally view taking on extra duties (Benschop et al., 2013) and devoting extra time as a yardstick for career commitment (Dick, 2010; Hochschild, 1997; Tomlinson, 2006). We found instances in which this powerful template was reproduced in the focus groups. For example, the employees compared being ambitious with demonstrating "a nine-to-five mentality" at work. Moreover, the supervisors stated that ambitious employees do not use expressions such as "It's fine with me the way it is. I can keep this up for the next twenty years". In both sectors, taking on extra duties and working overtime appeared to be common and were associated with wanting to do one's work well (ambition in the broad sense) or with striving to fulfil a management position (ambition in the narrow sense). At the level of temporal structures, 'being flexible about working hours' and 'doing extra jobs at home in your own time, such as checking e-mail and reading reports' were also associated with ambition.

Generally, the participants in both of the sectors reported more restrictions for part-time workers regarding the devotion of extra time to the organisation than for full-time workers:

I often hear it from full-time workers who say like: "Well, I'll stay . . . I'll just work another hour, so I'll have all the work done at the ward and I don't have to take it home". But, well, that doesn't apply when you are working part-time. Then, you have to take some more work home. (Jos, woman, nurse, 24 h/w, health care)

On the days that I usually have my part-time day [my day off, AUTHORS] and a customer calls . . . I feel responsible for that, because I don't want them to say, we have an account manager working three times eight [hours], but she is never accessible. So I am available. (Barbara, woman, account manager, 24 h/w, financial sector)

The focus groups revealed a powerful template in which devoting extra time to the organisation and being available outside of office hours are indications of ambition. Although the devotion of extra time was considered to be more difficult for part-time workers than it is for full-time workers, working part-time appeared to be compatible with ambition. Part-time workers who spend extra time for the organisation were considered to be more ambitious than those who did not. Furthermore, the temporal structure of teleworking enabled part-time workers in financial services to spend extra time for the organisation more easily than in public health, where patient care cannot be provided from home.

#### 4.6. Timing ambition in terms of visible working hours

The fourth dimension of timing ambition relates to the *timing of an employee's visibility at work*. We found in the data that the recognition of ambition was affected by the temporal location of working hours. In the public health sector, where employees usually work 24/7 in shifts, “everyone is a part-time worker”, as one employee noted. Face hours appeared to relate to attending work meetings during daytime hours. The employees reported that they were able to showcase their ambitions by attending work meetings at times or days at which they were not expected to be in the workplace.

In the financial sector, however, the meaning of face hours differed from that of public health. The temporal structures regarding the temporal location of working related to working late and attending networking events after office hours (cf., Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010). This negatively affected the visibility of employee ambition for those who work early hours. As one employee explained:

That's what I mean by being visible you see. While my working day [is from 7:00 a.m. till 3:00 p.m., AUTHORS], someone else regularly comes in at 9:10 a.m. Sure, yeah, he is always in until 5:30 p.m. Well, of course he is. He also has to work his hours. You see, but then there is this perception, this view, that he is such a good one. And on top of that, he is a man, and he is here till 5:30 p.m. Great! (Merel, woman, age 46, coordinator, 32 h/w, financial sector)

This quote suggests that an employee who maintains an early schedule and leaves at 3 p.m. after completing a full day's work is perceived as being less ambitious than an employee who arrives later but stays until 5:30 p.m. (“He is such a good one”). The excerpt shows that not only the number of working hours but also the timing of visible working hours is crucial for part-time workers to be perceived as ambitious.

Our focus group with the supervisors in financial services revealed that being present at networking events is another temporal rule with regard to visibility at work. By attending network meetings, part-time workers may show their ambitions (“You do need that in order to belong, and to be in the picture”). However, combining the temporal structures of visibility at work and the temporal structures of private lives appeared to be complicated (“I do consider that an area of tension”).

Brigit

That is the difficult part that many of these networking events are in the evening hours and many women say: “I'm not going to attend those”. That is also my problem. I do attend them now and again. You do need that in order to belong and to be in the picture. But it's complicated. Actually, I always say: “I'll try to be at home between six and eight to see the children and put them to bed”. Well, here we go again. Last week, two nights. This week, two nights. Sigh. And ehm, you need to

make choices in that respect. I do consider that an area of tension.

Interviewer Complicated.

Brigit

It's not the number of working hours, but the things they just take for granted after office hours. That's what makes it complicated. (Brigit, woman, age 41, manager, 36 h/w, financial sector)

Our analysis showed the existence of powerful templates that associate ambition with workers' visibility in the workplace. They appeared to involve, firstly, the temporal location of working activities, i.e., particular hours during the day or week that one is present at work and, secondly, the type of working activities to which one should devote one's time such as work meetings and network events. While working flexible hours and teleworking provide the part-time workers in the financial sector with opportunities to work larger part-time jobs, no alternative structures regarding visibility at work seem to have yet evolved.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Our results add to the previous studies on part-time workers' career development (Benschop et al., 2013; Dick, 2010, 2015; Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Lane, 2004; Tomlinson, 2006) by revealing the temporal dimensions of institutionalised norms that both hinder and support part-time workers' career development and by showing organisational actors' roles in reproducing or changing these institutionalised norms. We introduced the concept of ‘timing ambition’ and identified its four dimensions: 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. This approach helped us to understand why the normative perceptions of part-time workers as being less committed to work and career are persistent, despite evidence to the contrary, and to show how organisational processes and the actors who are involved contribute to the recognition and realisation of part-time workers' ambitions and, hence, their career development. On the one hand, the dominant template of timing ambition implies that ambition is realised by articulating and pursuing it early in life, working full-time, devoting extra office hours, and being present at work for face hours. We found that both supervisors and employees reproduced these institutionalised norms that fail to include part-time workers' ambitions and hinder their career development. In contrast to Dick (2010), who found a mismatch between the beliefs of part-time workers and their managers, we found that both groups enact the dominant template in discussions about part-time workers' ambitions. On the other hand, however, organisational actors who articulate and pursue ambition later in life while they work at large part-time jobs or in the context of comprised working weeks [4 × 9 h per week] and devote extra hours at home are able to gradually change the dominant template of timing ambition, thus enabling part-time workers' career development. That is, both employees and supervisors regularly criticised and, sometimes, changed these institutional norms. Our findings are further discussed below.

First, most of the women and men part-time workers in our study decided to put their ambitions on hold until a later stage of life due to childcare obligations (cf., Tomlinson, 2006). By the time their children demanded less time and care, usually when our participants had reached the age of 40 or over, these part-time workers expected to have the opportunity to realise the career ambitions that they still cherished. However, due to institutional



norms that associate ambition with being younger and working full-time, which typically reflects the traditional male breadwinner model, the recognition and realisation of the part-time workers' postponed career ambitions were not self-evident. The part-time workers' own awareness and the support that they received from their supervisors appeared to be of crucial importance (cf. Tomlinson, 2006) to enhance their career development. Especially in public health, some supervisors recognised and encouraged the ambitions of older part-time workers by granting them opportunities for professional development and encouraging them to take on supervisory tasks.

Second, all of the participants in our study considered a minimum number of weekly working hours to be an absolute necessity for employees to foster, sustain and realise their ambitions. Strikingly, however, the institutionalised norms regarding the minimum number of weekly hours that are necessary were context-dependent. More specifically, in the financial sector, working 32 h per week was considered to be the minimum to sustain and realise ambitions and to fulfil a managerial position, provided that one was prepared to work overtime. In public health, the minimum number of weekly working hours that are required to sustain and realise ambition was 24 h per week. This illustrates the socially constructed nature of these temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

Third, institutional norms of overtime hours and visible working hours seem to be the most resistant to change. However, our study suggests that the possibilities of working flexible hours and working at home enable part-time workers to devote extra time to work. The increasing use of electronic communication through e-mail, IP telephony services, such as Skype and telehomeworking (cf. Peters, Poutsma, Van der Heijden, Bakker, & De Bruijn, 2014) may provide alternative opportunities to engage in face hours, which could be explored in future research.

In sum, our results show that institutionalised norms concerning the relationship between working hours and ambition are contextual and dynamic, as they vary between sectors and over time. The case of the Dutch service sector shows the gradual emergence of alternative temporal structures that allow for career development in relatively large part-time jobs later in life, while working flexible hours. Both the relatively favourable context for part-time work in The Netherlands (Mescher, 2011), as illustrated by collective agreements to reduce full-time hours to 36 h per week and protecting part-time workers' social rights, as well as internal pressures in public health and financial services may explain the emergence of the alternative temporal structures that allow for the upward career mobility and professional development of part-time workers. For example, in public health, the dominance of part-time working professionals lowered the number of working hours per week that are required for professional development and advancement into managerial roles. In the private financial services, the use of electronic communication increased demands for telehomeworking and changed institutionalised norms about visible presence at the workplace. Thus, institutionalised norms in organisations may change when organizations adapt to societal demands and internal pressures (cf. Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; MacDermid et al., 2001).

Furthermore, our findings suggest that 'small actions' by organisational members (cf. Dick, 2015) such as a supervisor noticing a part-time working employee's capacity to fulfil a supervisory role, or the expression of ambition by a part-time working employee who returns to work after having raised children, should be considered to be 'small wins' (cf. Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006), which have the potential to eventually contribute to the emergence of alternative temporal structures.

Our analysis left the role of gender largely unexplored. Future research could investigate, among other issues, how gender is

enacted and why (cf. Eriksson, Henttonen, & Meriläinen, 2008; Fels, 2013) in the timing of ambition at various stages of life (cf., Jyrkinen, 2014). The role of socio economic class as well as conducting studies under conditions other than the Dutch organisational and societal contexts (cf., Durbin & Tomlinson, 2014; MacDermid et al., 2001) could be further explored, as well.

We conclude that, given its wide range of meanings, ambition should not be equated with work and career commitment at a single moment in time in terms of full-time work early in life, face time, or the taking on of extra tasks. Working reduced hours should not be construed to mean less commitment to work and a lack of interest in long-term career development. Awareness of and reflection on how organisational actors routinely draw on temporal structures to assess their own and others' ambitions are needed to support the recognition and realisation of part-time workers' ambitions. A contextual, dynamic perspective on timing ambition offers cues for both the continued theory development and human resource management that supports part-time workers and their supervisors to reflect upon and change the existing constraining temporal structures and thereby expand the part-time workers' options for career development to the satisfaction of both organisations and employees.

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