Gender and Working Time in the Gig Economy

Elaine McCrate

In August 2014, the New York Times described the erratic work schedule of Jannette Navarro, a single mother who worked for $9 an hour at a part-time job at Starbucks. Her earnings would have been near poverty level even on a full-time schedule. But because her total hours varied from week to week, she could never count on a stable income, rarely bringing home more than $1,000 per month.

And because her work schedule changed frequently, seldom with more than three days’ notice before the start of the work week, she could not finish her degree, she had chronic childcare crises, and she had recurring conflicts with members of her extended family who were often called upon at the last minute to provide childcare.

She would sometimes arrive at work as scheduled, only to be told that business was slower than expected and she should return home. She was reluctant to ask for a more stable schedule because she feared being assigned fewer hours of work (Kantor 2014).

Ms. Navarro has plenty of company.

Recent data for the entire country and a broader age group are not yet available. However, examining all civilian American employees aged 18 to 65 in 2004, both those paid by salary and those paid by the hour, I conservatively estimated that 11.5 percent of them worked variable starting and stopping times that they had little control over, up from 6.6 percent in 1997 (McCrate 2012). In the original fifteen countries of the European Union, in 2010, 17 percent of all employees aged 18 to 65 worked this kind of schedule (my calculation from the European Working Conditions Survey).

This scheduling is not work/life flexibility for workers: among young Americans who are paid by the hour and whose hours vary from week to week, about 50 percent reported that their employer determined their schedule unilaterally. Another 45 percent enjoyed some discretion, or consultation by their employer, in setting hours (Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014).

Employers in Europe and North America increasingly demand flexibility from their workers, even while they are providing flexibility for more of their white collar workers. Although many work/family activists have rightly decried the “standard” work day as rigid—which it usually is for pink and blue collar workers, denying them the...
ability to respond to sick children and no-show babysitters—its regular, predictable rhythms are beginning to look like a good deal compared to schedules that involve constantly changing days and times of work, and short notice of changes.

Workers on these schedules cannot respond effectively to unforeseen contingencies in their own lives and their families’ lives nor can they plan regular activities with others outside of work hours. Unstable schedules are especially problematic for workers who are paid by the hour because their total hours and income fluctuate unpredictably from week to week.

For economists, work/family advocates, and labor practitioners, this entails thinking about labor supply and demand in new ways: not just about total hours but also about the coordination of time with others, and thus the specific placement of labor time in the schedule. Firms want to pay for only the hours when the expected increment to revenue will be greater than the worker’s wage. This calculation may depend on other workers being around for closely coordinated activities or on customers showing up. Often, workers’ time is more valuable than their wage only at varying, noncontiguous hours.

Employers increasingly prize availability: the willingness to work around the clock and at different times, as demand rises and falls or as supply logistics require. In industries where the output cannot be easily inventoried (think retail trade or personal services) or where firms have strategically sought to reduce physical inventory that would otherwise serve as a buffer against unexpected surges in demand, availability is the ubiquitous buzzword.

Social activists in Europe call it something else: unsocial hours. Unsocial hours blur or even shatter the normative line between work time and personal time. Social life requires that people reserve regular times for many of the things they do with other people—family activities, religious observance, schooling, and the local softball league or Friday night poker club. The softball team can’t have the pitcher showing up for practice on Monday and the catcher on Tuesday. Parents need to know when they can be with their children or when they will require childcare.

We are beginning to learn about the consequences of parents’ unstable schedules for children.

Controlling for a variety of varying and fixed influences, Rucker Johnson and colleagues (2010) found that children’s externalizing behaviors such as bullying increased significantly when their mothers were exposed to unstable work schedules. Wen-Jui Han (2005) examined a broad range of mothers’ nonstandard schedules, including variable schedules, and found that they retarded children’s cognitive development.

Who Works an Unstable Schedule?

Employers prize both part-time work and overtime as important mechanisms of flexibility. According to the University of Chicago study, variability in total weekly hours was nearly ubiquitous among 26- to 32-year-old workers, except for those usually working 35 to 44 hours, the traditional “standard” work week.

Unstable work schedules are especially common among young people, who often do not yet have children or parents old enough to require special attention and who constitute a large pool of relatively unencumbered workers (Figure 1). However, young workers often have difficulty combining unstable schedules and education (McCrate 2012; Henly and Lambert 2014). We do not yet know if these young people will be able to work their way up to stability over the course of their careers or if advancement will require even greater availability and instability.
Unstable work schedules are also more common among African Americans, especially African American men (Figure 1). The dark bars show the distribution of schedules by gender and race/ethnicity, and the light bars show the differences among women by marital status and motherhood. Along with immigrants, black men often provide a large supply of workers who are just desperate enough to trade off their family time and social life for income.

For workers paid by the hour, “desperation” is often not too strong a word. My coauthors and I found that among Canadian workers paid by the hour, there was a strong association between workers’ unstable schedules and underemployment—that is, their employers giving them fewer hours of work than they wanted (McCrate, Lambert, and Henly 2015). Ms. Navarro was reluctant to ask for more stable hours because she was afraid she would get fewer hours. As she discovered, the hunger for hours drives greater availability. As economists have known for a long time, black workers, especially black men, are more likely to report themselves as underemployed than white workers—and it is not surprising that they are far more likely to experience unstable schedules (McCrate 2012).

In Canada in 2004, when hourly employees switched into a job where the core hours (that is, hours excluding overtime) varied, average weekly hours fell. When they switched out of this kind of job, average hours increased. This finding was true even when my coauthors and I controlled for a large number of fixed and varying personal characteristics that affect the number of hours worked. And it was even true among the workers who had reported that they wanted more hours in 2003 and had strong incentives to increase their availability (McCrate, Lambert, and Henly 2015). For many of these workers, getting enough hours is like the Holy Grail—they can never quite reach the goal, unless they change jobs. In the middle of a severe recession and in the wake of the Great Recession that has left behind an elevated rate of involuntary part-time employment, it is easier said than done.

Thus, many workers on unstable schedules, like Ms. Navarro, would like to work more hours. But erratic schedules don’t just affect short-time workers. Over-time is also strongly implicated in unstable hours. In a 2003 sample of prime-age Canadian workers who usually worked overtime and who were paid by the hour, nearly three out of five learned about their overtime schedules less than one day in advance, and more than four out of five learned about their overtime schedules a week or less in advance (Table 1).

Partly because of the very demanding nexus of long hours and unpredictable hours, men are more likely than women to work unstable schedules in many countries (McCrate 2012, 2015). Dan Clawson and Naomi Gerstel (2014) found that both professional and working-class men actually embraced variable hours, certainly when they provided more overtime with overtime premiums, as was the case for the emergency medical technicians in their study—but also even when the jobs were salaried, as was the case for the male physicians in the same study.

Many family caregivers probably set limits on availability. Probably also, some employers assume mothers will be insufficiently available and categorically refuse to consider mothers in jobs with unstable schedules. Figure 1 shows that white married mothers in the United States were the least likely of all the demographic groups examined to work unstable schedules.

Although it would be quite difficult to tell whether women’s relatively stable schedules result from their own decisions or employers’ decisions, it nonetheless remains true that unstable schedules reinforce a traditional gender division of labor between paid and unpaid work.
gender division of labor between paid and unpaid work (McCrate 2012, 2015).

Having said that, there are some big differences between the unstable overtime schedules that men are more likely to work and the unstable part-time schedules that women are more likely to experience.

First, overtime work gets overtime pay (or in some countries, time off in lieu) (Horrell and Rubery 1991). When core hours, excluding overtime, varied from week to week in Canada, workers didn’t get paid any more for the temporal disruptions and economic insecurity. This finding was true even though my co-authors and I controlled for a variety of fixed and varying worker characteristics that could possibly obscure the relationship between unstable hours and wages (McCrate, Lambert, and Henly 2015).

Second, women’s schedules have a much wider range of hours compared to their average hours. In Canada in 2003, among women who were paid by the hour and who worked a different number of hours from week to week (excluding overtime), the difference in hours between the longest and the shortest week was equal to the length of the average work week. For men, the range was about two-thirds of the average (my calculations, Workplace and Employee Survey).

In short, men’s unstable schedules are more likely to look like real jobs—sometimes you have to work longer than you expected, but you get paid more for it. You also have a better chance of getting benefits. But unstable part-time schedules, more often worked by women, resemble the worst of the gig economy: all over the temporal map at the behest of the employer, very insecure, and without any monetary recognition of what people in these jobs endure.

What to Do?

Ms. Navarro was finally able to negotiate a better schedule with her employer. Workers’ input into schedules can be more easily mobilized with modifications of the software that helps employers devise erratic schedules. Workers can input information about their scheduling preferences just like employers can input theirs. Technology can be a worker’s friend, allowing workers to request and swap shifts more easily (Messing et al. 2014).

But individual negotiations often don’t produce results for workers who are afraid of losing hours or losing their jobs. Workers might not be willing to reveal their preferences if it is understood that broad availability is a prerequisite for getting work. What might help them?

Economists always want to get the price right and often assume that markets will do the job—in this case, by setting the wage just high enough to get the number of workers that firms want to pay for in jobs with unstable schedules. But we can’t assume that markets will compensate people for bad schedules. As I mentioned earlier, my co-authors and I found no evidence for that among hourly workers in Canada.

The Obama administration recently took a big step to limit unpaid overtime, and therefore the unpredictability that often accompanies overtime, by raising the salary threshold below which all workers become eligible for overtime pay, from $23,660 to $47,476. Employers won’t be able to expect overtime from their affected workers—with or without reasonable advance notice—unless they think about the price.

That, however, doesn’t help the part-time gig workers with erratic schedules. One possibility is “show-up” pay, a specific amount that must be paid to workers when they come to work as required, then are sent home. Provincial Canadian labor laws mandate this, and some union contracts also require show-up pay in the United States. This expectation is completely reasonable for workers, given that they’ve gone to the trouble of showing up for work. But enforcing a statutory disincentive for all kinds of unstable schedules—different starting and stopping times, different total hours per week, last-minute notice—would be difficult.

Some activists have recommended giving workers a right to refuse unstable schedules. Quite a few European countries and Australia have enacted a right to request more stable work for specific purposes such as family needs. (Businesses may refuse on grounds of business necessity.) But the problem with the right to refuse and the right to request is that employers may reduce hours when workers reduce availability.

Unions are important because they can negotiate contracts that are tailored to the competing needs of specific workers and employers. For example, by examining a sample of collective bargaining agreements, Crocker and Clawson (2012) found that represented nurses (mostly women) were primarily concerned about limiting overtime and fairly distributing vacation times. In contrast, represented firefighters (mostly men) were more concerned about equal access to overtime opportunities and overtime pay.

The nurses and the firefighters negotiated very different contractual provisions for the allocation of overtime. Employers who really do need highly variable schedules can prioritize this in negotiations—and something else (such as higher wages) for broad access to their workers’ time. American workers typically are not covered by collective bargaining agreements, but unions and worker centers are beginning to tackle employers’ demands for greater availability (see, for example, Luce and Fujita 2012.)

Maybe nothing works as well as having a country’s norms and laws just say “no” to erratic hours for everyone, so that individuals who limit their availability don’t have to compete with those who are desperate enough to work at

Continued on page 75
Michael Dunn

Michael Dunn is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. His main research interests are work, labor markets, organizations and occupations, and economy and society. His dissertation is focusing on the intersection of technology and contingent work and is examining the dynamics that affect job quality in the gig economy. He received his MBA from the University of California–Irvine and his MA in sociology from UNC–Chapel Hill.

any time with short notice. Besides, any society needs to reserve some time for coordinated social life outside of work. Religion has traditionally been a bulwark against unlimited availability and unsocial hours, always setting Sunday or the Sabbath off limits for work and doing all workers a favor in the process. (Unions provided a big assist here.)

However, with so many women in the labor force, some evening and weekend hours, which are strongly associated with variable schedules, are here to stay. Women used to do their grocery shopping while men were at work, but this is no longer possible for most families.

As Alain Supiot and Pamela Meadows (2001) realized, it will take a broad social conversation about schedules to address the competing interests of workers and employers, workers and consumers, men and women. Fortunately, it seems to have begun.

REFERENCES


Elaine McCrate

Elaine McCrate is a member of the Economics Department and Women’s Studies Program at the University of Vermont. A shorter version of this article appeared in the Center for Popular Economics blog (http://www.populareconomics.org/blog).