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Displaying Morally Responsible Motherhood: Lone Mothers Accounting for Work during Non-Standard Hours

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Abstract:

This study examined how lone mothers rationalize their work during non-standard hours (e.g., evenings and weekends), which they perceive as problematic in terms of child wellbeing, and thereby as violating the culturally shared moral order of 'good' motherhood. The data comprise interviews with 16 Finnish lone mothers, analysed as accounts, with special focus on their linguistic features. The mothers displayed morally responsible motherhood through: (1) excusing work during non-standard hours as an external demand; (2) appealing to the inability to act according to good mothering ideals; (3) using adaptive strategies to protect child wellbeing; and (4) challenging the idea of risk. Our findings indicate that the moral terrain lone mothers must navigate is shaped by the ways in which their family situation contravenes powerful ideologies around good mothering, while their efforts to resist the ensuing stigma are constrained by the need to engage in work during non-standard hours.

Key words:

motherhood; single mothers; accounts analysis; stigma; nonstandard work

Word count:

8637

Introduction

> 'I feel that those around me think that [because] I am a lone mother, I have two children, and I work during nights, too, it is like, oh my God, she is a bad mother.' (Emma)

The words above are those of a lone mother interviewed for the present study and aptly illustrate how, according to prevailing cultural understandings concerning 'good' motherhood in Finland and many other Western societies (Hays, 1996; Perälä-Littunen, 2007), lone mothers' work during non-standard hours (e.g., evenings and weekends) can be seen as posing a triple risk to child wellbeing. Not only does lone motherhood violate a core cultural understanding of the nuclear family as the ideal environment for child upbringing (May 2008, 2011), but 'modern familism' (Jallinoja, 2006: 154) in Finland tends to value family time and emphasize maternal care as the best way of ensuring young children's wellbeing (Repo, 2010). Furthermore, the issue of maternal non-standard working hours as a possible risk to child wellbeing has received considerable attention in academic literature (e.g., Han and Waldfogel, 2007; Hsueh and Yoshikawa, 2007; Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016), also reflected in public debates in Finland (Jallinoja, 2006). Due to this triple risk, it is likely that lone mothers' work during non-standard hours is understood as violating the moral order of good motherhood (see Juhila, 2012), which is likely to make the rationalization of such work particularly pressing for lone mothers. However, we know little about how lone mothers deal with the paradox created by cultural expectations attached to good mothering and current working time demands, namely, non-standard work hours.

This study examines how Finnish lone mothers who work during non-standard hours account for their working hours and the effect these might have on the wellbeing of their children. A lone mother is defined here as a mother who does not have a residential partner and who has primary responsibility for both the upbringing and care for her child(ren) as well as for the everyday

reconciliation of work and family life. Drawing from an ethnomethodological category analysis approach (Jayuusi, 1999; Juhila, 2012), we ask (1) *how lone mothers perceive the relationship between their non-standard working hours and their children's wellbeing*, and (2) *how the mothers account for their work during non-standard hours*. We argue that the accounts told by our research participants allowed them to construct a sense of themselves as morally responsible mothers and to make their working comprehensible in the eyes of themselves and others (see Buttny, 1993; Scott and Lyman, 1968). This paper contributes to the literature concerning definitions of good mothering, which has shown a diversity of ways in which mothers with differing work practices respond to and thus transform such cultural expectations (e.g., Christopher, 2012; Johnston and Swanson, 2006). Our data allow us to investigate how well the mothers' own definitions map on to dominant understandings of good mothering and whether these understandings are changing in response to non-standard work hours that, although increasingly wide-spread, remain under-researched in the context of mothering.

Working lone mothers and the moral order of good motherhood

Motherhood as a social construction is perceived and evaluated according to the ideology and practices of socially appropriate child-rearing characteristic for each society (Hays, 1996). In the present paper, *the moral order of good mothering* refers to these social practices and culturally shared knowledge of appropriate child-rearing and mothering. This moral order is constituted by the rights and responsibilities attached to the category of 'mother', which in turn contribute to the moral expectations and presumptions that are used to determine who is acting 'normally' or 'appropriately' in a society, and who is defined as deviating from the norm (Jayuusi, 1991; Juhila, 2012).

A clearly dominant mothering ideology in Finland and other Western societies is that of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), which defines child-centred child-rearing as socially appropriate. Accordingly, a good mother bears the primary responsibility for her child and is expected by the prevailing 'moral imperative' (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2000: 789) to prioritize, listen to and respond to the needs of her child(ren), something which requires considerable time and energy (Hays, 1996; Perälä-Littunen, 2007). Lone mothers are perceived as violating this moral imperative in most Western countries where, in light of psy-discourses that question lone mothers' ability to ensure optimum child development (e.g., May, 2008), lone motherhood is still characterized as problematic and even stigmatised (May, 2011).

Lone mothers who engage in paid work are further seen to violate expectations that define good mothering because time at work is seen as time away from the children. Although maternal work is the norm and therefore socially accepted in Finland, modern familism, which emphasises mothers' responsibility for caring for their young children, has gained popularity and has led to widespread public concern over the lack of family time in families where the mother is employed outside the home (Jallinoja, 2006; Repo, 2010). Consequently, the moral dilemma for working lone mothers with young children is whether they are harming their children by leaving them in the full-time care of other people, and whether they are doing so too early according to cultural understandings.

Although there is plenty of evidence to show the continued dominance of the intensive mothering ideology, contemporary research does indicate that as maternal employment becomes increasingly acceptable and prevalent, definitions of good mothering are diversifying. Research conducted in the USA (e.g., Christopher, 2012; Johnston and Swanson, 2006) shows that, in response to differing work practices, mothers themselves develop versatile definitions of good mothering and even challenge the expectations attached to intensive mothering. Christopher (2012) for example found that lone mothers were able to navigate between the demands of work and good

mothering by developing the notion of extensive mothering. They could, for instance, justify their work by emphasizing, not only the benefits to their children, but also the personal benefits they themselves received from working.

Lone mothers' decisions around paid work are thus affected not only by the cultural ideologies regarding good mothering but also by changing attitudes towards women's labour market participation and by family policies (Hakovirta, 2006). In Finland, the state's stance on the role of mothers as primary caregivers is ambivalent, which makes Finnish family policy rather unique compared to many other European countries where maternal part-time work is a more prevalent strategy to facilitate the combination of maternal work and family responsibilities (Beham et al, 2018). On one hand, maternal full-time work is supported in Finland with comprehensive and affordable childcare provision. Under-school-aged children have the right to receive government-subsidised early childhood education and care (ECEC). A particularly progressive aspect of the Finnish childcare system is that ECEC services are provided also during non-standard hours in municipal day-and-night care centres (see Rönkä et al, 2017). In principal, all municipalities are obliged to organize such 24/7 care to which families are entitled to if both parents (in two-parent families) or one parent (in lone-parent families) work(s) non-standard hours. On the other hand, the child home care allowance enables mothers of under three-year-olds to care for their child at home (Repo, 2010). This article argues that this apparent paradox in family policy can give rise mothers experiencing contradictory expectations. However, lone mothers who rely on the home care allowance face the risk of poverty (see Krok, 2009), which may leave little room to actually make a choice between staying at home and seeking paid work. Indeed, in 2017, 21% of lone-parent families fell below the margins of poverty compared with 5.1% of two-parent families (Mukkila et al, 2017: 4).

Moral order – fragmented by lone mothers' work during non-standard hours

The moral dilemmas experienced by working lone mothers, we argue, have been intensified by the demands of the contemporary labour market. The working time demands characteristic of the 24/7 economy, especially non-standard working hours taking place during early mornings, evenings, nights, and weekends (Presser, 2003), have complicated the challenges that mothers face in reconciling work and family (e.g., Moilanen et al, 2019). Non-standard working hours are common, for example, in the female-dominated service and health sectors characterized by shift work (Parent-Thirion et al, 2007). In Finland, some 26.9% of women work in shifts (Eurostat, 2018). Although existing statistics in Finland do not specify the number of lone mothers working non-standard hours, some international studies have indicated that lone parents are particularly likely to work such hours (e.g., Presser, 2003).

Mothers' non-standard working hours contravene general norms in industrialised societies regarding 'family time', according to which weekdays are for working, while evenings and weekends are seen predominantly as family time and nights as time for sleep (Daly, 2001). In Finland, the young children of lone parents working non-standard hours are often cared for in day-and-night care centres (Rönkä et al, 2017). Such children are spending their family time away from home and apart from their mothers more often compared to children living in corresponding two-parent families in which the parents can share childcare responsibilities (e.g., Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016). Mothers' non-standard work hours have re-ignited concern over the wellbeing of children of working mothers, which finds support in a number of studies. The potential risks that these schedules pose to the wellbeing of young children comprise the unpredictability in everyday family routines (Sevón et al, 2017), such as meal times, and irregular sleeping rhythms that result in insufficient amounts of sleep (Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016). Further possible risks relate to the irregularity in childcare (Sevón et al, 2017) and long periods of time children spend in day-and-night care (Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016), which may hamper young children's socioemotional

wellbeing. Furthermore, lone mothers' work in rotating shifts is possibly associated with an increased likelihood of reduced mother-child closeness and interaction, as well as lack of family time (Han and Waldfogel, 2007; Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016), all of which are understood to be potentially harmful to children. Hsueh and Yoshikawa (2007) also found that when parents worked variable non-standard schedules, children showed more externalizing behaviour problems. Although previous studies have mainly focused on risks, it is noteworthy that not all findings on the relationship between parents' non-standard work hours and children's wellbeing are negative (see e.g., Han and Waldfogel, 2007; Hsueh and Yoshikawa, 2007; Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016; Sevón et al, 2017).

Lone mothers' breach of the moral order of good motherhood, as explained above, creates the practical necessity for them to reflect on and offer an *account* of their actions to mend the apparent discrepancy between their working hours and the expectations attached to good motherhood (Buttny, 1993; Juhila, 2012; Scott and Lyman, 1968). Damaske (2013) stresses that differentiating between the actions that women have taken and how they rationalise these actions enables a better understanding of the moral ideologies attached to work and family practices. Therefore, we situate the accounts provided by the lone mothers in our study in their broader socio-economic context. According to Wajcman (2015), working mothers are likely to feel the sharp end of having to manage family life within the constraints set by the demands of the labour market. It is mothers who tend to be responsible for housework and childcare and for coordinating the varying timetables of family members. Studies have found that instead of identifying the broader economic and policy context as the source of their difficulties in combining work and (lone) motherhood, mothers tend to see these as problems for which they must find individual solutions (Collins, 2019; Utrata, 2017). We argue that lone mothers working non-standard hours are particularly likely to experience pressures in their efforts to combine family life and work.

Methods

Participants and data collection

The data comprise semi-structured qualitative interviews collected as part of the "Families 24/7" research project. The study included one-to-one qualitative interviews conducted with 55 Finnish parents with at least one child aged 12 or under[1]. The data for the present study comprise a sub-sample of interviews carried out with 16 lone mothers. The average age of the lone mothers was 37 years, ranging from 22 to 52 years. The mothers were defined as lone mothers if they did not have a residential partner and bore the primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of their child or children and for the reconciliation of work and family life. The roles of the fathers in their children's lives varied. In nine cases, the father was not at all involved in the child's life due to bereavement of the father, a geographical distance or other reasons. At the other end were two families in which the parents had made weekly rotating living arrangements so that the child(ren) lived one week with the mother and one week with the father, and in two families the children saw their fathers on daily basis (but did not necessarily spend the nights in the father's home). Many mothers received help with childcare from the children's grandparents but the frequency of this help varied from occasional assistance (e.g., holidays) to a more frequent everyday assistance and taking care of sick children. Only two lone mothers did not receive any help with childcare from the child's father or grandparents. Furthermore, in Finland, non-residential parents are liable for paying child support, which is paid by The Social Insurance Institution in case the non-residential parent does not pay for it. The allowance, however, is marginal and allocated mainly to cover basic living costs. As a result, lone mothers may struggle to get by financially without income received from paid employment.

We gained informed consent from the participants. The interviews were tape-recorded, and conducted in the homes or workplaces of the participants, or in public places, such as cafes. The

interviews encompassed themes such as the mother's work and working times, childcare arrangements, everyday family life, motherhood and the wellbeing of the mother and the child. Because not all of the mothers could easily be categorized in terms of social class, we distinguish between two groups of mothers based on their educational background and occupation. Eleven mothers had attained secondary education through vocational training and were mostly employed in low-paid occupations in health, service, and industrial sectors, many of them working in rotating shifts (see Table 1). Four mothers had completed first stage tertiary education and they worked in various sectors representing different non-standard working time patterns.

'Table 1 here'

Data analysis

After transcribing the interviews, we first searched for instances where the mothers discussed their perceptions of the connections between their work during non-standard hours and child wellbeing, and observed that such talk was often filled with concern or worry. In such 'worry talk', the mothers constructed their working during non-standard hours primarily as *problematic* in terms of child wellbeing (Juhila, 2012). It is noteworthy, however, that in general, they characterised their children and their family life as happy, joyful, and in many ways fulfilling. Second, the mothers were found to offer explanations for their working. These observations led us to focus our analysis on *accounts*, that is, statements with which the mothers rationalized their work during non-standard hours in order to explain their seemingly problematic behaviour (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Because the analysis focused on accounts in relation to child wellbeing within the context of non-standard working hours, other aspects (e.g., the mothers' own enjoyment of work) were excluded from the final analysis. Furthermore, instead of providing accounts as a response to direct questions, the mothers produced accounts spontaneously in the interview. This can be seen as a potential

limitation or strength of the study as on one hand, the accounts did not emerge as responses to accusations or blame occurring in a natural real-life setting. On the other hand, the interview situation allowed the mothers to actively construct and formulate themselves what they deemed to be viewed as problematic. (see Buttny, 1993; Juhila, 2012.)

After having identified the accounts, we categorized them, following Scott and Lyman's (1968) typology, into 'excusing' and 'justifying' accounts. What distinguished these two categories from each other was who or what the mothers saw as responsible for their non-standard working hours. Excusing accounts were ones where the mother admitted the detrimental nature of her working times but placed the ultimate responsibility for these to some external actor (e.g., employer) or matter (e.g., family's economic situation). In justifying accounts, the mother accepted the responsibility for her work hours but denied their damaging nature. During the coding process, we came across several accounts that did not entirely fit in either of the two categories. Therefore, we extended the analytical frame of Scott and Lyman with a third category of account, which we have called defending accounts (see Buttny, 1993) in which the mother acknowledged the possibility of risk to child wellbeing and took responsibility for it while striving to defend herself as a mother by demonstrating that she prioritized child wellbeing.

Finally, we further nuanced our analysis by focusing on the linguistic features of the talk, specifically modality. Modality refers to the mothers' expressions illuminating the perceived obligations and necessities (e.g., should / need to / have to), possibilities and abilities (e.g., can / could), or volition (e.g., will / would) (Biber and Quirk, 1999) in relation to work and mothering. This analysis resulted in four types of account that we discuss below. All of the interviews, transcription and data analysis were carried out in Finnish. The data extracts in this paper were translated into English by the authors.

Findings

Worry talk and encountered criticism as indicators of the problematic

When talking about the relationship between their working times and child wellbeing, all but two of the lone mothers expressed an awareness of the perceived risks that their non-standard working hours posed to the wellbeing of their child(ren). Although they also mentioned positive effects of their working times on their children's wellbeing, the mothers' concern was palpable, with some even talking about their children suffering as a result of maternal working times.

> '[E]vening shifts are nice, but it is a long time for the child to spend in day-and-night care. And then he is really over-tired. And then he won't fall asleep immediately after we get home.' (Iris)

> 'The only time I don't sleep well is [when] I start to stress about my [two-year-old], about how hard it is for him. If he doesn't go nicely to bed in the evening, [I mean] help, [he needs to] get up at 6am; how will he manage all day.' (Amanda)

The two quotes above are representative of the 'worry talk' among mothers of under school-aged children found in our data. Iris refers to her child's tiredness and long childcare hours resulting from her work hours. Amanda voices a concern that was typical for mothers working in rotating shifts, namely that consecutive evening-morning shifts would disturb the stability of their children's everyday rhythms. Other descriptions included worry over the lack of family time and young children's exhaustion, feelings of insecurity, pining, tearfulness and restlessness that resulted from irregular everyday rhythms along with concerns over school-aged children being at home without adult supervision.

Such worry over the wellbeing of their children aroused feelings of insufficiency and guilt in the mothers. These negative feelings may result from an awareness of their actions running against the expectations they themselves or others have of them as mothers. Indeed, some mothers, exemplified by Emma's comment at the beginning of this paper, had encountered explicit criticism or had sensed a critical attitude from their surroundings concerning the perceived risk to child wellbeing posed by their working times, in combination with their status as lone mother. It is thus clear that the mothers in our study were aware of contravening key aspects of good motherhood and thus of the potential that their children's wellbeing was being put at risk. Accordingly, we interpret such worry talk as reflecting the mothers' view that their actions deviated from the moral order of good motherhood (Buttny, 1993; Juhila, 2012).

Ways of accounting for working

The mothers produced four types of account in rationalizing their work during non-standard hours: (1) excusing work during non-standard hours as an external demand; (2) appealing to the inability to act according to good mothering ideals; (3) using adaptive strategies to protect child wellbeing; and (4) challenging the idea of risk. The complexity of the demands attached to mothering was reflected in the fact that most of the mothers produced all four types of account.

Excusing work during non-standard hours as an external demand

In the first type of account, the mothers excused work during non-standard hours by appealing to external demands as the reason for why they worked such hours. This gave the mothers a chance to relieve themselves of the responsibility for their seemingly questionable conduct (Scott and Lyman, 1968). They used expressions that highlighted obligation or necessity for working non-standard hours, which indicated the mothers' lack of control over the decision about whether or not to work such hours. Although most of the mothers talked about the personal benefits gained from work (see

Hakovirta, 2006; May, 2011), when discussed in the context of child wellbeing and family life, work during non-standard hours was often referred to as *a must* instead of a choice. Several mothers, such as Ella, described their work during non-standard hours as an economic necessity:

> 'At some point, when I was really tired with this job, I thought that […] I would reduce my hours, […] for the family. I haven't done it because there is the financial aspect to it. I have to think about how to get bread on the table.' (Ella)

When asked whether they would choose other working time patterns if possible, some mothers said they would, and some were even studying alongside work so as to one day be able to work during standard hours which would ease their everyday family life (see Alsarve, 2017). Others appealed to their obligations as the sole breadwinner. Even if more 'family friendly' working time arrangements were available, economic necessity forced the mothers to work 'family unfriendly' hours which were better remunerated.

Jessica, a lone mother of a two-year-old, explained that due to financial reasons, she had to return to work as soon as her son learned to walk. This indicates that for some lone mothers it would be a struggle to get by financially as a stay-home mother by means of the child home care allowance. As research has shown, lone mothers who rely on the child home care allowance face real risks of falling below the margins of poverty (Krok, 2009). Therefore, mothers may feel they have to accept any job that is available. Although the mothers indicated their willingness to work (see Hakovirta, 2006), they did not necessarily have the luxury to choose when or where to work. Both mothers with lower and higher educational background experienced difficulties in combining working times and what the mothers perceived as the ideal kind of mothering (see Roman, 2018). Whereas mothers working in low-income occupations were likely to ascribe this to the lack of financial freedom to choose their working times, for mothers with a higher educational background

it was more often either the heavy workload or the work time demands originating for the nature of their work that created these difficulties.

There was also talk about a need for the mothers to adapt themselves and their family lives to the demands of the labour market. Many mothers said that family life had to accommodate working times, not vice versa. The mothers further rationalized their working hours by appealing to some external actor, for example, 'employer' or 'society' requiring them to work. Amanda identified a paradox faced by Finnish mothers who must try to square the circle of conflicting expectations: "*On one hand mothers are encouraged to immediately start work [after parental leave] and on the other, one should be there, at home*." As noted above, this paradox is partly caused by contradictory family policy measures, which tend to support either mothers' full-time work or full-time motherhood. This can create a particular pressure for lone mothers, who have to navigate between these contradictory demands, often in combination with financial stress.

Appealing to the inability to act according to good mothering ideals

In the second type of account, the mothers defended themselves against anticipated criticism by highlighting that their *intentions* to prioritize their child's needs conformed to what is expected of good mothers and by emphasizing their *inability* to act according to these good intentions due to their working times. Ribbens McCarthy et al (2000) note that intentions alone are indicators of mothers caring for their children, and reflections of their moral character (also Buttny, 1993). While expressing their aim to maintain child wellbeing, the mothers blamed their working times as posing challenges to their ability to perform good mothering:

> 'We always try to eat dinner together, but I don't necessarily manage to do that. So, the children are there [at home] eating with somebody, and I am not necessarily there. But we have tried to maintain proper meal times and morning routines, of course.' (Anna)

Anna illustrates that despite her efforts to have dinner with her school-aged children, this is not always possible because of her working hours. Despite her absence from family dinners, she assures that she has at least tried to ensure 'proper' meal times for her children. Although unable to perform motherhood to desired standards, the mothers used moral language attached to motherhood as a way of demonstrating their sense of responsibility for their children. In stating what they as mothers 'should' do, they were displaying their knowledge of the cultural expectations attached to good motherhood:

> 'I guess it's the feeling of insufficiency. Just that you are supposed to be good at your work, and good at home, to be present and to listen. That you should feel up to be interested in everything, support, and teach, be an example, and also take care of your own well-being. Yeah, really good phrases! It is the balancing between everything that is a constant challenge. Just that when I have hundreds of things going on in my mind, and he is drawing something lovely there beside you, and you should be present.' (Helena)

Helena's comment illustrates how the expectations the mothers attached to good mothering were often in conflict with their work-related responsibilities, consequently giving rise to feelings of insufficiency or guilt. Such conflicts between expectations and reality were also depicted when the mothers of young children talked about their preferences to stay at home by using the expression 'would rather', by which they highlighted that they valued their roles as mothers above that of workers, as demonstrated by Marianne:

> 'Perhaps the challenges [are], when you are working in the evening and you know, for example, my parents are there [at home] with him, and my mother sometimes says that he

asks, when is mom coming home, so I feel a bit sad being at work; I would rather be there, at home than here [at work].' (Marianne)

Using adaptive strategies to safeguard child wellbeing

The third type of account, which was the most frequent, referred to by all of the mothers, emphasized the value that the mothers placed on their families. In contrast to the second type of account, these accounts highlighted the mothers' *abilities* and success in implementing their intentions to prioritise their children's needs and thereby acting according to good mothering expectations despite their working hours. Indeed, the focus lay on the *adaptive strategies* that the mothers had actively implemented, thereby demonstrating that they had done their best in compensating for or countering any risk posed to their children's wellbeing by their working hours.

The 'moral imperative' of parenthood was echoed in such talk, as the mothers prioritized their children and motherhood above work (see Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2000: 789). Prioritizing the child was often voiced through strong volition:

'The thing with lone parenting is that when I am not working, I make sure that I'm with my child. […] He spends some of my working days with his father, and so then he naturally spends my days off with me. And if I have those days off, I do want to spend them with my child. I don't want to go anywhere, like to a bar, because I don't feel the need to do that.' (Jessica)

The mothers demonstrated in several ways how they actively sought to put the needs of the children first. The mothers had often made 'trade-offs' to prioritize their children's needs and time spent with them ahead of their personal time, sleep, and housework or over paid work and money (see Damaske, 2011).

Possible risks posed by non-standard working times to child wellbeing were offset by being responsive to the children's needs (see Johnston and Swanson, 2006), for instance, by creating a stable family environment (see Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2000). For the mothers of young children this, for example, meant maintaining regular routines for the children, as exemplified by Julia: "*When the children are with me, we stick to a regular schedule because of my work, for one thing.*" In accordance with the expectations of good working mothers (Hays, 1996), the mothers also assured that they had ascertained that they left their children in the care of skilful caregivers: "*I am just that kind of a protective mother in that I leave my children in the hands of trustworthy [childcare] professionals*" (Iris). Most of the mothers could also rely on their social networks, mainly the grandparents and in some cases the father, for childcare. Four mothers of young children talked about how this help reduced the number of hours – especially night-time hours – their children spent in a day-and-night care centre (see Alsarve, 2017).

The mothers tried to further compensate for any potential harm to their children's wellbeing by making changes to their work schedules in favour of family time or maintaining a stable everyday rhythm. For some mothers in low-paid occupations, such measures were enabled by making flexible working time arrangements with employers such as ending an evening shift earlier, working fewer evening shifts, not working night shifts, and not having consecutive evening-morning shifts:

> 'I have requested a shift pattern that would avoid evening shifts followed by morning shifts. For the sake of my youngest alone, so that he wouldn't have to spend such a long time in childcare.' (Amanda)

Flexibility was clearly an important means by which these mothers could successfully reconcile work and family. Nevertheless, one of the more highly educated mothers, Helena, although able to

determine her own working times, faced conflicts between an excessive workload and a lack of time with her child (see Roman, 2018). As a result, she often worked on her laptop while her child was asleep, thus cutting down on her own sleep instead of mother–child time.

The mothers also demonstrated maternal responsiveness through openness and emotional accessibility (see Johnston and Swanson, 2006), that is, by sensing and openly discussing with their children about the children's worries and difficulties, for example in relation to irregular daily rhythms or spending too much time in childcare. By explaining to their children what would happen in the near future, the mothers tried to make any inconsistencies in the structure of everyday life more manageable and predictable for the children.

In addition to flexibility and adaptability, creativity was required in getting the children to school on time when the mothers were working early morning shifts, such as setting an alarm clock to notify the children when it was time to leave. The importance of mobile phones in enabling the mothers to be in contact with their children during work hours was revealed in Laura' reference of them as a 'saving grace'. This shows how mothers, in general, are expected to be accessible at all times, even when working (Johnston and Swanson, 2006). Moreover, some mothers working on evening shifts prepared dinner for their school-aged children beforehand (see Alsarve, 2017) or let the children prepare their own dinner, which usually comprised ready meals heated in the microwave.

Challenging prevailing norms and the idea of risk

The fourth type of account posed a challenge to the normative perception that maternal non-standard working times are automatically detrimental to child wellbeing. The accounts comprised justifications, in that the mothers aimed to assert the positive value of their work during non-standard hours or to neutralize the questionable act of working such hours and their consequences on child wellbeing (Scott and Lyman, 1968). In these cases, morality was displayed by denying or

diminishing the putative harm, instead highlighting how their working hours might benefit their children and contrasting their situation with those who have it worse.

The mothers justified working by denying either completely or partially that their working times posed a risk to their children's wellbeing. This type of justification bears resemblance to what Scott and Lyman (1968: 51) termed 'denial of injury', in that the mothers asserted that their children had not been injured by maternal non-standard working hours or, in cases where the mothers did feel that their working hours possibly had negative consequences for their children, these consequences were presented as trivial. These accounts surfaced, for instance, when the mothers talked about their school-aged children being at home without adult supervision or young children being cared for in a day-and-night care centre – an issue that has aroused some concerned public discussion over child wellbeing (Jallinoja, 2006):

> 'I feel that [my child] is nonetheless relatively balanced despite, if you know what I mean, having to be cared for in day-and-night care.' (Sara)

The above extract from Sara's interview illustrates how on one hand, mothers may express their concern over child wellbeing but on the other, assure that their child is faring well in spite of *having* to be cared for in a day-and-night care centre. By delegating childcare to others and by defining this as not posing harm to children, the mothers were challenging the idea of intensive mothering, which sees maternal caregiving as the best or even only way to ensure good-quality care (see Christopher, 2012). The mothers of young children emphasized the importance of day-and-night care for successful work–family reconciliation and the genuine trust and appreciation they felt towards the professional caregivers. That their children were doing fine in the care of others also offered the mothers a justifiable way to talk about their work as benefitting their own wellbeing, as exemplified by Sara:

> ‘My work is kind of therapy for me. And especially now that I am working in the evening, I don’t need to worry about the children while I’m at work [because] I know that they are in good care.’ (Sara)

Another way the mothers justified that their children were not harmed by being cared for in a day-and-night care centre was by comparing their own and their children’s situation to those who have it worse, thereby diminishing the possible harm caused to their child (see Scott and Lyman, 1968). Below, Jessica compares her actions, that is, only occasionally leaving her 2-year-old in day-and-night care, to those of other lone mothers whose children spend several consecutive nights there:

> ‘There are parents and lone mothers who, for example, work night shifts only or several consecutive night shifts and the child spends several nights in day-and-night care. And then I’ve heard stories about parents working on cruise ships and their children spend a week in childcare. So, I think that [my child] spends relatively little time there.’ (Jessica)

The mothers also presented any risks to child wellbeing as minimal by pointing out that because of their days off following shift work, the children did not spend too many days in day-and-night care in any one month (see Sevón et al, 2017).

The mothers further highlighted the beneficial effects that their working times could have on their children, which was another way to challenge the view that maternal non-standard working times are necessarily detrimental to child wellbeing. Working hours, for example, permitted some of the mothers to spend more time with their children (see Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016) or encouraged the independence of school-aged children who were given responsibility over

housework and preparing their own meals. Emma illustrates how she does not consider her work during night shifts as injuring her son, who spends the nights that Emma is at work in a day-and-night care centre, but actually as something that enhanced his wellbeing:

> 'My child doesn't need me during the night, so I don't feel that my working hours are in any way harmful. I am always accessible when [he is] awake. I think it is merely positive.' (Emma)

Emma assures that she is always accessible when her child is awake, something that all of the mothers considered an important factor facilitating child wellbeing. The viewpoint of Emma, that a mother–child-relationship is not developed during the night-time, differs greatly from some of the other mothers, who did not feel comfortable in leaving their children in childcare overnight. Emma is challenging the normative view of family time, according to which mothers and children should sleep at home during the night (Daly, 2001). However, Emma constructs the meaning of maternal accessibility on the basis of her working hours by modifying the mothering expectations to reconcile them with her working times (see Johnston and Swanson, 2006), which helps her to meet the expectations of good mothering.

The mothers voiced how they tried to remain positive by thinking that their children would benefit from the present situation in the future, as exemplified by Jessica:

> 'My child has had to be extremely flexible from very early on, because he doesn't have that kind of a rhythm according to which certain things are done at a certain time every day. But maybe it can turn out to his benefit. I have to think that way, because otherwise I would have such a bad conscience.' (Jessica)

This kind of positive thinking seemed to relieve some of the guilt caused by the feelings of worry over their children, which worked as a kind of absolution and hope for the best.

Discussion

This paper examined how Finnish lone mothers account for their work during non-standard hours in light of child wellbeing. The paper makes an important contribution to the literature concerning definitions of good mothering by exploring how these mothers deal with the paradox between good mothering expectations and work time demands characteristic in 24/7 economies. The experienced paradox was reflected in the worry talk in relation to child wellbeing that nearly all of the mothers produced in their interviews. Echoing findings from research on the effects of maternal non-standard working hours on child wellbeing (e.g., Han and Waldfogel, 2007; Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al, 2016), this worry typically related to irregularity in children's everyday rhythms, long childcare hours, and the inaccessibility of the mother during evenings, nights and weekends, times that are conventionally understood as 'family time' (Daly, 2001). The intensity of the worry talk was an indication that the mothers viewed the relationship between their working hours and child wellbeing as problematic (Juhila, 2012). We argue that this, together with the perceived criticism of or doubt about their capacity to sustain their children's wellbeing, created the necessity for them to offer accounts for their work during non-standard hours. The mothers produced four types of account by excusing and justifying their work hours and defending themselves as responsible mothers (Buttny, 1993; Scott and Lyman, 1968).

The findings showed that the lone mothers defined good mothering in the context of non-standard work hours by largely conforming to the idea of intensive mothering. Conformity surfaced, firstly, through the defending accounts, 'Appealing to the inability to act according to good mothering ideals' and 'Using adaptive strategies to protect child wellbeing', with which the mothers

emphasized the importance of prioritizing the needs of the children (Hays, 1996; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2000). Although in general, the mothers talked about the personal benefits they gained from work, which can actually be seen as an indication of the mothers challenging the intensive mothering ideal (see Christopher, 2012), when their talk focused on non-standard work hours, work was seen to fit poorly with notions of good mothering. Indeed, several mothers voiced their preferences for either caring for their children full-time at home, working in the daytime or reduced hours. Yet, the excusing accounts showed that these were not feasible options because of the financial pressure in which many of the mothers found themselves as sole earners (see Mukkila et al, 2017; Roman, 2018) and the relative lack of jobs offering standard hours. Instead, the mothers relied on their personal resources (e.g., sleep, time) and adaptability in responding appropriately to the needs of their children, on their social support networks (see Alsarve, 2017; Roman, 2018) and on negotiating flexible hours with their employers in striving to protect child wellbeing while having to work non-standard hours.

Smyth and Craig (2017: 120) note the importance of considering 'how parents' capacity to opt out of intensive parenting ideology is constrained by context'. Indeed, because of their stigmatized status, lone mothers may feel the need to consciously and persistently work on representing themselves as good enough mothers, and to assure their children are doing well (May, 2008, 2011). Furthermore, the perceived risks to children that the mothers associated with their work hours – which mirrored general perception of such risks (see Jallinoja, 2006) – and their ensuing worry over their children's wellbeing might also have encouraged conformity to the cultural ideal of good mothering.

In addition to conforming to good mothering expectations, some of the mothers challenged these expectations by excusing and justifying their work during non-standard hours. The excusing accounts, 'Excusing work during non-standard hours as an external demand', emphasized the financial stress that particularly the mothers working in low-paid occupations were in as sole

earners (see Roman, 2018) and the lack of choice over working hours, both of which can be seen to make these mothers less accountable to the cultural expectations of good mothering (see Christopher, 2012). The situation in which these mothers found themselves possibly highlights the ambivalent stance of Finnish family policy, which tends to support either full-time motherhood or paid work. In reality, due to the low level of financial support offered to full-time mothers in the form of the child home care allowance (Krok, 2009; Repo, 2010), even when combined with legally guaranteed child support from the non-residential parent or child maintenance allowance from the state, many lone mothers may have little choice but to work in order to adequately provide for their children. The justifying accounts, 'Challenging the idea of risk', again, enabled the mothers to justify their work while challenging the normative perception that non-standard working hours or the care offered in day-and-night care centres are harmful to child wellbeing.

Negotiating these contradictions led many of the mothers to express feelings of insufficiency and guilt (see Roman, 2018), indicating that they view the situation as an individual responsibility rather than one caused by broader structures, including the labour market and family policies (see Collins, 2019; Utrata, 2017). This then helps shed light on the pressures that many mothers face in contemporary neo-liberal societies. Consequently, we argue that any study on mothering must take into consideration the structural conditions under which mothers are trying to meet the expectations of good motherhood. We have shown that in the case of lone mothers working non-standard hours, the moral terrain they must traverse is shaped by the ways in which their family situation contravenes powerful ideologies around good mothering and the superiority of the nuclear family, while their efforts to resist the ensuing stigma are constrained by the need to engage in work during non-standard hours as a way of fulfilling another cultural requirement, namely to provide for their children. However, our findings also point to the transformative potential of such negotiations, as some of the mothers in our study challenged dominant cultural expectations by highlighting the positive aspects of their work hours and reassuring that these hours are not harming their children.

In solving the apparent mismatch between their family and work situations and child wellbeing, these mothers are contributing to new cultural accounts of what can constitute good motherhood in the face of social change such as is evident in the emergence of the 24/7 society.

Notes

[1] The "Families 24/7" research project included also a web-based survey administered in Finland, the Netherlands and the UK, which was directed at working parents with at least one child aged 12 years or younger. The parents interviewed for the present study had either participated in the initial survey and expressed their willingness to take part in the one-on-one interviews or were recruited through the Finnish research team's social networks.

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Table 1: The participants

Pseudonym	Ages of children	Work sector	Working schedules
Katariina	5	Service[S]	Evenings and weekends
Helena	4	Science and environment[T]	Early mornings, evenings, weekends
Julia	5, 6	Service[S]	Three-shift work
Olivia	9, 11, 15, 17	Service[S]	Early mornings, evenings, weekends
Marianne	5	Industrial[S]	Three-shift work
Anna	9, 11	Service[S]	Long shifts (11 to 14 hours)
Linda	5, 6	Service[S] + student	Three-shift work
Ella	8, 11	Art and culture[T]	Weekends, occasional evenings
Laura	8, 16, 16	Health[S]	Two-shift work
Iris	5	Health[S] + student	Two-shift work
Sara	3, 6	Health[S]	Three-shift work
Jessica	2	Health[T]	Three-shift work
Emma	5, 11	Health[S] + student	Only night-time work
Hanna	6	Art and culture[T] + student	Evenings and weekends
Amanda	2, 11, 15, 15	Health[S]	Three-shift work
Paula	< 7	Health[NA]	Two-shift work

Note. [S]Seconday education. [T]First stage of tertiary education. [NA]Educational background not informed.