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Rational or emotional decisions? Parents' nonstandard work hours and the justifications for using informal childcare

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether the number of weekly childcare arrangements for under-school-aged children is associated with parental nonstandard hours (e.g. evenings, nights, or irregular schedules) and the reasons and justifications parents working nonstandard hours give for using informal care arrangements. Using cross-sectional survey data of 359 Finnish parents with children aged 0–6 years, we found that nonstandard work hours, compared with standard daytime hours, were associated with a higher number of weekly care arrangements for children under 5 years old. Qualitative parental interviews ($N = 27$) further revealed three justifications for using informal care: 'Leaning on parents' values and desires', 'Disclaiming from actions potentially harming the child', and 'Balancing parents' needs and the moral aspects of using informal childcare'. Our findings highlight that parents of young children tend to rely on multiple childcare arrangements during nonstandard work hours even in a country with a comprehensive institutional early childhood education and care (ECEC) infrastructure and affordable tax-based provision of around-the-clock care (i.e. extended hours ECEC). Furthermore, emotional-based reasons related to ensuring child well-being were emphasised over rational-based ones when parents provided justifications for using informal arrangements during nonstandard hours.

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Childcare decisions; early childhood education and care (ECEC); emotional choice theory; informal childcare; nonstandard work hours; rational choice theory

Introduction

In families with parental nonstandard work hours (e.g. evenings, nights, weekends or irregular hours), informal childcare in the form of care provided by grandparents or relatives, for example, is an important source of care (e.g. Boyd-Swan, 2019; Cosson et al., 2021; Hepburn, 2018; Kim & Liu, 2021; Lammi-Taskula & Siippainen, 2018; Richardson et al., 2023). Although grandparental care, for instance, can benefit both the grandparent and child by creating a close relationship between them (Cosson et al., 2021; Igel & Szydlak, 2011), using informal care has also been associated with a risk of multiple care

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arrangements (e.g. Boyd-Swan, 2019; Harknett et al., 2022; Kim & Liu, 2021) that can make childcare arrangements more complex and unstable (Hepburn, 2018; Peltoperä et al., 2022) and further hamper child well-being (e.g. Morrissey, 2009; Pilarz & Hill, 2014). This is due to transitions in social and physical spaces (Peltoperä et al., 2022) as children need to adapt to shifting rules, routines and expectations provided by changing caregivers and places (Pilarz & Hill, 2014). Given these opposing influences of informal care on child well-being, it is important to understand how parents working nonstandard hours justify their decisions to use such care.

According to previous research, there are several reasons why parents decide to use informal childcare during nonstandard hours. For example, when formal care during nonstandard hours is not available, flexible enough or if families cannot afford such services (e.g. Cosson et al., 2021; Plantenga & Remery, 2009; Richardson et al., 2023), parents must rely more on their informal care networks. In such cases, the decision-making concerning childcare often depends on rational aspects, for example, the availability, accessibility, and affordability of childcare and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Plantenga & Remery, 2009; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Childcare decisions, however, are also shaped by emotional aspects, which are intertwined with normative or moral understandings about, for example, when, where and by whom young children should be cared for (e.g. Meyers & Jordan, 2006). For some coupled parents, for example, off-shifting (i.e. taking turns in childcare) is a conscious strategy for maximising parental care, time spent with children, and father involvement (Pagnan et al., 2011), which may be seen to denote more emotional-based reasons, whereas other parents make more rational-based decisions about off-shifting arrangements owing to job requirements or if they wish to reduce money spent on childcare (Pagnan et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2023).

Although reasons for the use of informal childcare during nonstandard work hours have been investigated (e.g. Enchautegui et al., 2015; Lero et al., 2021; Pagnan et al., 2011; Peltoperä et al., 2023), more understanding is needed about the parents' justifications for using such arrangements, especially in a context with a comprehensive childcare infrastructure where the availability, flexibility and cost for formal childcare are not an issue. In the present study, we aim to address this gap by focusing on the justifications of Finnish parents. Finland is, indeed, one of the rare countries that provide tax-based, centre-based childcare in the form of extended hours ECEC for under-school-aged children whose parent(s) work(s) during nonstandard hours (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Despite this affordable and high-quality provision, in Finland (Hietamäki et al., 2018), like in many other countries (Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Han, 2004), maternal or home-based care is a commonly preferred form of care for the youngest children during nonstandard hours. This contradiction is further highlighted in Finnish childcare policies, which show a strong desire within the political sphere to expand participation in ECEC (Kuusiholma-Linnamäki & Siippainen, 2021) acknowledging the wide benefits of attending ECEC for the child and the society (Melhuish et al., 2015). At the same time, however, home-based care of young children is supported by the child home care allowance, which enables the parent to care for a child younger than three years at home (Repo, 2010), in addition to which there has been some concerned public discussion over the well-being of young children being cared for in extended hours ECEC for some time now (Jallinoja, 2006).

Given the above-described contradictions in Finland concerning what form of care is considered the best for the child, we draw from the rational and emotional choice theories (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Markwica, 2018) in exploring parents' reasons for using informal childcare during nonstandard hours and the justifications they provide for these decisions. The main contribution of this study, thus, is the provision of a deeper understanding of the parents' decisions concerning childcare arrangements in the context of parental nonstandard work hours. Moreover, due to the particular lack of research on why parents decide to use informal childcare in a country such as Finland, where extended hours ECEC is widely accessible and the use of informal care is, overall, comparatively rare (OECD, 2021; Plantenga & Remery, 2009), we also examine the extent to which Finnish parents working nonstandard hours rely on informal childcare compared to parents working standard daytime hours. With this question, we aim to establish whether the findings from previous international studies (e.g. Boyd-Swan, 2019; Harknett et al., 2022; Kim & Liu, 2021) concerning the positive association between parental nonstandard work hours and the number of care arrangements hold true for a Finnish sample and extend the previous literature by focusing on the number of the weekly care arrangements of children in different age groups. In terms of the prevalence of nonstandard work hours, in 2023, about 31.7percent of the total employment in Finland took place during nonstandard hours, which corresponds fairly well to the EU average, that is, 33.9 percent (Eurostat, 2024). This indicates that a significant proportion of employees, including parents, work during nonstandard hours.

Literature review

Parental nonstandard work hours and childcare decisions

Nonstandard work hours occur outside the standard working day, which is from 9 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday. As shown in Table 1, in Finland, working in rotating shifts and during weekends is more common among women than men, whereas men do somewhat more night-time work. The prevalence of working nonstandard hours has predominantly declined to some extent between 2013, when the data collection of the present study took place, and 2023. There has been a notable decrease in work done on Saturdays and Sundays, whereas the frequency of other forms of nonstandard work (such as night work) has remained relatively unchanged. In 2023, about a third – which denotes

Table 1. Employees Working Different Forms of Nonstandard Hours as a Percentage of the Total of Employees in Finland in 2013 and 2023 (%).

	All		Female		Male	
	2013	2023	2013	2023	2013	2023
Shift work	22.3	21.9	25.5	25.6	19.0	17.9
Evenings ^a	21.1	19.9	20.9	20.4	21.3	19.3
Nights ^a	7.5	6.4	6.4	5.2	8.5	7.5
Saturdays ^a	23.1	16.5	24.3	18.8	21.9	14.2
Sundays ^a	17.3	13.5	18.4	15.7	16.3	11.3

Note. The table shows the statistics from the latest year (2023) and year 2013 when the data for the present study was collected.

Source: Eurostat (2024); ages: 15–64 years

^aUsually works during these times

a significant proportion – of those in employment worked during these hours (Eurostat, 2024).

Across Europe, Finland included, the educational background of the worker plays only a small role in the likelihood of working nonstandard hours (Gracia et al., 2021; Riekhoff et al., 2021). Accordingly, contracted nonstandard hours in the form of two – or three-shift work, along with regular evening work, can commonly be found in blue-collar occupations, for instance, in female-dominated service and health sectors (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007) or male-dominated construction and transport sectors (Wright, 2014). Uncontracted nonstandard work hours can be a feature in the work of professional or managerial personnel, namely in white-collar occupations, in the form of, for example, overtime work or work-related travel (e.g. Ikonen et al., 2024).

Parental work hours may be central when parents make decisions about childcare arrangements. Previous research (e.g. Alsarve, 2017; Moilanen et al., 2019; Pagnan et al., 2011; Roman, 2018) indicates that working nonstandard hours may be a financial necessity instead of a choice if, for example, work with standard hours is not available or the work during nonstandard hours pays better. In a Finnish study, some lone mothers, for example, perceived that ‘family life had to accommodate working times, not vice versa’ (Moilanen et al., 2019, p. 9), which may indicate that there are families in which childcare arrangements are, indeed, shaped by the parental work hours, not vice versa. However, working non-standard hours can also be a personal choice. For example, in two-parent families, where one or both parents work nonstandard hours, they may take turns caring for the child(ren) and choose such work schedules to reduce the need for nonparental care (Presser, 2003).

Rational – and emotional-based childcare decisions

In this paper, we draw from the rational choice theory (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997) and emotional choice theory (Markwica, 2018) in exploring childcare decisions during parental nonstandard hours. According to the rational choice theory, parents make educational decisions based on rational considerations, such as weighing the costs and benefits of economic or social investments to maintain the family’s social status (Steinberg & Kleinert, 2022). This paper adopts a broader perspective on rational choices rather than only focusing on ECEC as a pedagogical or financial investment. We consider that the rational-based decisions about care arrangements are also shaped by structures and practicality, such as the availability (i.e. the supply of services), affordability (i.e. the cost), and accessibility (i.e. whether childcare is located close to families) of childcare (see Duncan et al., 2004; Plantenga & Remery, 2009; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014).

The quality of childcare is crucial for child development (Melhuish et al., 2015) and, consequently, influences parental decision-making (Kampichler et al., 2018; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). In addition to structural and practical aspects, childcare quality can be considered a rational-based reason, as participating in high-quality ECEC can be seen as an investment in the child’s educational path. The quality of ECEC is traditionally divided into process quality including the pedagogical and interactional aspects of ECEC and structure quality referring to the frames that shape the possibilities of providing quality ECEC (Slot, 2018). The pedagogical approach to care plays a significant role in parents’ childcare decisions (Coley et al., 2014), particularly for older children and

parents with high incomes (Davidson et al., 2022). Also, well-functioning educator interaction with children and parents is important to parents (e.g. Davidson et al., 2022; Kam-pichler et al., 2018).

Previous research indicates that rational-based choices alone are insufficient in understanding the complexity of childcare decisions, as deciding on childcare also involves an emotional aspect (e.g. Meyers & Jordan, 2006). According to the emotional choice theory, which originates in diplomacy (Markwica, 2018), emotional choices are shaped by biological emotions and social norms. From a social norm perspective, parents' childcare choices are often related to care ideals, such as spending time with their child and family (see e.g. Pagnan et al., 2011). All parents, but especially those with nonstandard work hours, balance work and childcare needs with their desire to spend time with their children, as work often occurs when family members *should* be at home (e.g. Peltoperä et al., 2022). However, some lone mothers, for example, have been found to choose to work during nonstandard hours to ensure daytime interactions with their children although many find it hard to combine nonstandard work hours with their everyday life with young children (Alsarve, 2017; Moilanen et al., 2019).

On an ideological level, cultural norms around family time (Daly, 2001), the child's age, and cultural understandings of, for example, the child's best interest (Ellingsæter & Gul-bransen, 2007) and 'good' parenthood are combined with work duties (e.g. Karlsson et al., 2013; Moilanen et al., 2019; Vincent & Ball, 2001) when parents make childcare decisions. Thus, the understandings of high-quality ECEC that shape parents' decisions about childcare arrangements during nonstandard hours are often morally and culturally shaped (Duncan & Irwin, 2004; Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Given that, across the Western world, a 'good' parent is expected to prioritise and take primary responsibility for the well-being of their child (e.g. Faircloth, 2014; Karlsson et al., 2013), parents may be hesitant about care arrangements perceived as potentially hampering the child's well-being. Moreover, parents may be more comfortable leaving their children overnight to someone they know and trust (Bell et al., 2005). In practice, the freedom to choose between work and childcare needs and formal and informal care is not always straightforward. Typically, parents end up with 'good enough' solutions (Vincent & Ball, 2001). Moral considerations come into play when parents seek alternative care arrangements outside the home – especially beyond regular institutional care hours and regarding the youngest children.

Finland as a care context

Finland has a dualistic childcare policy, as both homecare (for children under three years; Repo, 2010) and institutional ECEC for under-school-aged children are state-supported, giving parents the freedom to choose between formal and home-based care. According to the Nordic welfare state model, municipalities are obliged to provide ECEC, and in Finland, including during nonstandard or extended hours. The responsibility for organising childcare is assigned to society reflecting the defamiliarization policies, which aim to reduce individuals' dependence on their families and social networks (Mathieu, 2016). In contrast, in many other countries, such as the UK, organising childcare is seen as a parental duty (Repo, 2004).

In Finland, all children have an unconditional right to state-supported ECEC from the end of parental leave until they start primary school, which is the year they turn seven

(Närvi et al., 2020). Moreover, all 6-year-olds in Finland attend preschool in ECEC settings or primary schools. Each municipality must offer ECEC for all parents with under-school-aged children who need it due to work or study (Act on Early Childhood Education [540/2018]). This includes extended hours ECEC, which is available in early mornings, late evenings, nights, and weekends, compared with the regular ECEC times between 6 am and 6 pm. Extended hours ECEC is typically provided in municipal or sometimes private ECEC centres that are open either every day around the clock or from early mornings to late evenings (usually 5 am to 10:30 pm) (Rönkä et al., 2017). Extended hours ECEC is also affordable for families because it is heavily subsidised by the state, and the cost equals that of regular ECEC hours (Peltoerä et al., 2017). However, some families, for example, those living in rural areas where distances are greater, may encounter problems with accessing the services centralised to certain ECEC centres (Rönkä et al., 2017). In the Finnish context, informal childcare is not a commonly used care arrangement (OECD, 2021; Plantenga & Remery, 2009) in general, but may be used as a supplemental arrangement in families with parental nonstandard work hours when formal services fail to cover the entire 'workday' (Moilanen et al., 2019) or when formal arrangements lack flexibility (Peltoerä et al., 2022), in which cases wraparound care (e.g. picking the child up from ECEC) are provided by the informal network (Kröger, 2010).

The quality of extended hours ECEC in Finland can be considered high because it follows the same regulations, acts, and curriculums as regular hours ECEC. Furthermore, ECEC services follow strict child – staff ratios and group size regulations, along with strong pedagogical approaches with highly educated educators, where the care and education of children are strongly intertwined (Karila, 2012). That being said, Finnish extended hours ECEC has been characterised as home-like in many recent studies (Peltoerä et al., 2017, 2022, 2023; Salonen et al., 2020) and, thus, criticised for not meeting children's pedagogical needs, that is, not following the expectations of the national curriculum especially during the evenings when ECEC nurses work without teachers' pedagogical support (Peltoerä et al., 2023; Siippainen et al., 2023). However, the home-like surroundings can be comforting, particularly for young children and their parents (see Bell et al., 2005).

Finland has a long history of maternal full-time employment, and nonparental care is considered socially acceptable (Salmi, 2006). However, there appears to be a discrepancy between the social norms of accepting nonparental care and prioritising parental care, which can influence parents' emotional choices. Parents – especially those with the youngest children – may hesitate to take their child to centre-based care during times such as late evenings or nights, which can be considered family time (Daly, 2001) that they see *should be* spent at home (Moilanen et al., 2019; Siippainen et al., 2023). Relatedly, parents may worry over the well-being of their young children being in centre-based care during nonstandard hours; long care times; irregular or unstable daily rhythm causing discontinuity in relations with peers and educators; and being in nonparental care or somewhere else than at home at nights (e.g. Koivula et al., 2023; Moilanen et al., 2019; Siippainen et al., 2023). These findings help in understanding why Finnish parents are found to prefer (maternal) home-based care during nonstandard hours (Hietamäki et al., 2018). In sum, the Finnish childcare context can be characterised as ambivalent: On one hand, extended hours ECEC is widely available and affordable, and on the other hand, there exists a discrepancy between societal norms of 'good parenthood'

and the acceptance of nonparental childcare. Thus, Finland provides a unique and interesting context to study the rational – and emotional-based decisions parents make regarding the use of informal care during nonstandard hours.

The present study

The present study has three research questions. First, with a quantitative design, we examine whether the number of weekly childcare arrangements for children aged 0–2, 3–4 and 5–6 years is different for parents working nonstandard compared to standard hours in Finland. Because informal childcare is shown to be an important source of care in families with nonstandard work hours (e.g. Boyd-Swan, 2019; Cosson et al., 2021), also in Finland (e.g. Kröger, 2010; Lammi-Taskula & Siippainen, 2018), and associated with the risk of multiple care arrangements (e.g. Boyd-Swan, 2019; Harknett et al., 2022; Kim & Liu, 2021), we expect that parents with nonstandard work hours report more weekly childcare arrangements compared with those working standard hours. We argue that the child's age is an important aspect of childcare decisions, as cultural values, and expectations, which are integral to these decisions (e.g. Karlsson et al., 2013; Meyers & Jordan, 2006), are strongly connected to the child's age.

Continuing with a qualitative design for our second research question, we examine the reasons parents working nonstandard hours give for using informal care arrangements in addition to (extended hours) ECEC. Finally, with our third question, we further nuance our qualitative analysis by exploring how the parents working nonstandard hours justify their decisions to use informal care arrangements. We are particularly interested in whether their reasons and justifications are based on rational, emotional, or both considerations.

Methods

Quantitative methods

Survey data collection and participants

The present study utilises both survey and interview data collected as part of an international research consortium 'Children's socio-emotional well-being and daily family life in a 24 h economy' (Families 24/7). The survey data were collected with a web-based questionnaire directed at Finnish, Dutch and British parents of children aged 0–12 years. In the present study, we used the Finnish subsample ($n = 544$). In Finland, the survey data collection took place between November 2012 and January 2013, and the survey respondents were recruited discretionally by asking for childcare organisations (including extended hours ECEC centres), labour unions and employers to promote the study to their members or employees.

One aim of the project was to address the need for European comparative data on families where parents work nonstandard hours. Therefore, the data recruitment purposefully targeted parents who worked these hours. As a result, respondents working nonstandard hours (vs. standard hours) are overrepresented in our data. The project also aimed to target parents living in diverse family forms; hence, because of the low frequency of lone parents in the first data collection, another wave of recruitment directed at lone parents was collected between April and June 2013 by advertising the study on

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Background Characteristics for the Sample (N = 359).

Background characteristic	Range	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Age of responding parent (years)	24–52		35.42 (4.99)
Gender of responding parent: Female (%)	0–1	297 (82.7)	
Age of the target child (years)	0–6		3.67 (1.39)
Family type: lone-parent family (%)	0–1	112 (31.2)	
Educational level of the parent: Tertiary-level education ^a (%)	0–1	152 (42.3)	
Family's financial situation ^b	0–10		5.13 (2.18)
Place of residence			
A big city		63 (17.5)	
The suburbs or outskirts of a big city		85 (23.7)	
A small city or town		140 (39.0)	
A country village		55 (15.3)	
A farm or home in the country		15 (4.2)	
Parental work hours: Nonstandard hours (%)	0–1	260 (72.4)	
Weekly work hours: Full-time (> 30 h/week) (%)	0–1	279 (77.7)	

^aTertiary level education corresponds to ISCED levels 6–8 (ISCED, 2012).

^b0 = The worst possible financial situation – 10 = The best possible financial situation.

the websites of organisations aimed exclusively at lone-parent families. This data collection resulted in a booster sample of 69 additional survey responses. Together, the main and booster samples comprised 613 Finnish participants.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of our survey sample, which comprised 359 Finnish parents (58.6% of the total sample of Finnish parents) who had at least one child aged 0–6 years living with them, were employed at the time of the data collection, and provided information about their work hours. When asking the parents about the childcare arrangements, we included only those who responded that the past week had been typical or quite typical of their childcare arrangements. Of the respondents, the majority were female, and the average age of the parents corresponds fairly well to that of the parents of about 4-year-old children in Finland (Official Statistics Finland [OSF], 2024a). If the respondents had more than one child, they were asked to think about the child under school age and closest to 4 years old when answering the questions concerning childcare arrangements; Table 2 shows the mean age of these target children. Most parents lived in two-parent families, and the minority were lone parents (i.e. had no residential partner). Regarding education, slightly less than half of the respondents had attained tertiary level education (i.e. ISCED levels 6–8; ISCED, 2012) as the highest level of education. On a scale from 0 (The worst possible financial situation) to 10 (The best possible financial situation), the respondents evaluated their financial situation as average. Most respondents lived in urban areas rather than rural areas.

Regarding working times, most respondents worked nonstandard hours (Table 2). Most respondents also worked full-time hours and this proportion is slightly less than the average share of 35–44-year-old employed persons in Finland working full-time in 2013 (91.2%) (OSF, 2024b).

Measures and variables

Number of weekly care arrangements. The respondents were asked, 'In the last week (past seven days), which of the following forms of childcare did you use (for more than one hour) in the care of the target child when you were working? Please include commuting time and work-related travel'. The respondents were given various options of

caregivers in three different settings of which they chose the ones they had used (0 = no, 1 = yes): in centre-based care (e.g. ECEC, extended hours ECEC), at the responding parent's home (e.g. the other residential parent, a relative, nanny, etc.) and outside the responding parent's home (e.g. the non-residential parent, a relative). For the analysis, the number (or sum) of weekly care arrangements was calculated by summing up these variables. From the sum variable, we excluded care provided by the other residential parent in the child's home, along with the options 'child was at home with siblings or friends' ($n = 14$) and 'child was at home alone' ($n = 1$). This was done because we defined informal care as care provided either outside the responding parent's home or by some caregiver(s) other than the immediate family members in the responding parent's home. Hence, the value 0 indicated that the child only received parental care at the responding parent's home.

Parental work hours. To establish whether the parents worked standard or nonstandard hours, the respondents were asked, 'What is your working time pattern?' From the six alternatives, they could select the one that best suited their situation. Based on these answers, a dummy variable was created taking a value of 0 if the parent worked standard daytime hours (i.e. regular day work) and 1 if the parent worked nonstandard hours (i.e. two – or three-shift work, regular evening, regular night, regular morning work or irregular working hours).

Age of the child. The age of the target child was measured in years. For the analysis, we categorised the respondents into three groups based on the age of their target child: 1 = 0–2 years, 2 = 3–4 years, and 3 = 5–6 years. This categorisation was based on the increasing participation rates of children in municipal ECEC when children get older and, relatedly, on the cultural prevalence of home-based care for the youngest children (Hietamäki et al., 2018) that can reflect on childcare decisions. Accordingly, in 2015 (with no change from 2012 to 2013), children under 1-year-old were mainly in home-based care, whereas about 40 percent of 1–2-year-old children attended municipal ECEC. For children aged 5 and 6 years, the proportions were 79 and 71 percent, respectively (Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2016).

Statistical analysis

In the analyses concerning the first research question, the number of weekly childcare arrangements was used as the dependent variable, and the independent variable was parental work hours. Given the nonnormality of our dependent variable, the binary independent variable (0 = standard hours, 1 = nonstandard hours) and the group size below 20 for parents working standard hours who had a child aged 0–2 years, a nonparametric Mann – Whitney U test was used as the analysis method. Separate analyses were performed for children aged 0–2, 3–4, and 5–6 years. The analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28).

Qualitative methods

Qualitative data and participants

The qualitative data consist of 27 parents working nonstandard hours and using extended hours ECEC. Most of the parents who participated in the interviews were recruited through their consent to participate in the survey ($n = 22$), and a few via the social networks ($n = 5$) of the researchers involved in the project. The interview data encompassed semi-structured, one-to-one qualitative interviews conducted with 24 mothers and three fathers who worked during nonstandard hours and had at least one child aged 0–6 years who attended (extended hours) ECEC. The number of children in the families varied from one to four. Of the interviewed parents, 14 lived in two-parent families, and 13 were lone mothers. Regarding parents in two-parent families, we included only those living in dual-earner families. The parents worked in several fields, primarily in the social and health sector, performance art and art education, and national security. The mean age of the parents was 33 years old, ranging from 25 to 44. Eighteen parents had their children in extended hours ECEC and nine in regular hours ECEC. Informed consent was gained from the participants before the interviews, which were tape-recorded and typically carried out in the participants' homes or workplaces.

The project researchers, including the authors of this study, conducted the interviews. The interviewers were trained for the interviews, which followed a structured set of themes and related questions. However, the order of the questions sometimes varied to accommodate the parents' flow of conversation. The interview themes included parent's work and working hours, childcare arrangements, everyday family life, parenthood and the well-being of the parent and the child. The reasons and justifications we are examining in this paper appeared in parents' talk about the childcare arrangements, but we did not ask them explicitly. Data and procedures have met all ethical guidelines and standards from our institution.

Qualitative analysis

A qualitative analysis method was applied to explore the reasons (RQ2) and justifications (RQ3) parents constructed when talking about using informal childcare in addition to (extended hours) ECEC. We started by reading the transcribed interviews and marking the extracts where parents discussed their childcare arrangements. First, we used qualitative content analysis to analyse and categorise reasons parents chose informal childcare arrangements (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With reasons, we refer to short descriptions denoting the choice(s) to use informal childcare. They are the 'because of' causations of the rational-based or emotional-based consideration behind the childcare choices (e.g. 'we use grandparents because we want to avoid long hours in care') (Demirciođlu, 2021). We found nine reasons for using informal childcare, separating these into three main categories (see Table 4).

Second, we applied discourse analysis (Potter, 2003; Taylor, 2001a, 2001b) to investigate the justifications parents constructed in their talk to make sense of their reasons for using informal childcare arrangements and the links between the justifications and the broader socio-cultural context (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006). Therefore, we understand parents' talk about their childcare choices in relation to historically and culturally shared norms, expectations, and language use (Burr, 2003; Taylor, 2001a). With justifications, the

Table 4. Reasons Why Parents Used Informal Childcare.

Reasons of interest	Decision type	Example quote
Time and timing of ECEC		
Avoiding long times in ECEC	Emotional	'They sleep the night in the ECEC centre and then my parents pick them up in the morning. Later, when I wake up [after a night shift], I pick them up from my parents' place.' (Mother of a 5-year-old)
Avoiding night care	Emotional	'Grandparents pick up the child from extended hours and bring them home for the night'. (Mother of a 3-year-old)
Infrequent need for extended hours ECEC	Rational	'We have flexible work schedules, so relatives help as we need the extended hours care so rarely'. (Father of a 3-year-old and school-aged child)
Fostering a stable daily rhythm for the child	Emotional	'Someone picks the children up [from the ECEC centre] earlier in the evening so they can relax at home before bedtime'. (Mother of a 1 – and 4-year-old)
Features of home-based care		
Maximising time spent with parents or at home	Emotional	'If children were in ECEC for the night, they would not see their parents during the whole week'. (Mother of a 5-year-old)
Convenience of informal care	Rational	'My sister lives close to my workplace and often takes care of my children' (Mother of a 2-year-old and a 3-year-old)
Features of extended hours ECEC		
High turnover of educators in ECEC	Emotional	'There would be unfamiliar adults in ECEC during the night'. (Mother of 1 – and 4-year-olds)
Inaccessibility of extended hours ECEC	Rational	'The only extended hours centre of the municipality is far'. (Mother of 5 – and 6-year-olds)
No friends in ECEC at the same time	Emotional	'Children do not enjoy their time in ECEC during the weekends because there are no friends then'. (Mother of 5 – and 6-year-olds)

Note. Emotional = emotional-based reason or decision, Rational = rational-based reason or decision

parents rationalised the reasons for using informal care. The justifications, sometimes referred to as rationalisations, are typically more complex, longer, and more argumentative than reasons (Demircioğlu, 2021). In our analysis of the justifications and their linguistic construction, we examined the linguistic features with the aid of a textbook on Finnish syntax (VISK, 2008). This textbook served as a guide in understanding and analysing the diverse meanings expressed through the parents' choice of words such as certain verbs and their nuances (e.g. 'children *have to* be there overnight' has a different meaning than just stating that 'children *are* there overnight'). We found three justifications parents used when talking about the reasons for using informal childcare in addition to (extended hours) ECEC. Furthermore, directed by the results of our first research question,

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Mann – Whitney U Test Results for the Number of Weekly Care Arrangements for Children Aged 0–2, 3–4 and 5–6 Years, according to Parental Work Hours.

	Standard daytime work hours					Nonstandard work hours					U	p	η^2
	n	Md	range	M	SD	n	Md	range	M	SD			
Children aged 0–2 years	12	1	0–2	1.00	0.60	65	2	0–5	1.83	1.02	198.00	.004	.09
Children aged 3–4 years	48	1	1–4	1.50	0.85	135	2	0–6	1.89	1.22	2642.00	.041	.02
Children aged 5–6 years	39	2	0–4 ^a	2.31	1.34	60	2	1–5	2.02	1.03	1011.50	.235	

Note. The average number of care arrangements for each group is presented with means (M) in addition to medians (Md) to highlight the group differences.

^aOne respondent with a child aged 5–6 years and working standard hours reported having as many as eight different weekly care arrangements. This respondent was included in the analysis but in the table, we have removed the case as an outlier when reporting the range of weekly number of care arrangements to show the typical empirical range in our sample.

we focused on whether and how the child's age was talked about in the reasons and justifications parents provided.

Results

Number of weekly care arrangements according to the parent's work hours

Our first research question inquired whether the number of weekly childcare arrangements – provided by someone other than the residential parent(s) – for children aged 0–2, 3–4 and 5–6 years differed according to the parental work hours. The results of the Mann – Whitney *U* tests (Table 3) showed that the number of weekly care arrangements for children aged 0–2 and 3–4 years was statistically significantly higher when the parent worked during nonstandard hours compared with standard daytime hours. Hence, the parents working nonstandard hours used more weekly care arrangements than their counterparts who worked standard daytime hours. On average, parents of both 0–2-year-olds and 3–4-year-olds reported typically using about two arrangements, but some parents of 0–2-year-olds, for example, reported using as many as five. Regarding the parents of children aged 5–6 years, our results did not indicate a difference in the number of weekly care arrangements between those working standard and nonstandard hours.

Reasons and justifications for using informal childcare

With our second research question, we explored the reasons parents provided for using informal care arrangements in addition to (extended hours) ECEC. All interviewed parents had the right to use formal extended hours ECEC services and had access to informal care (i.e. they had relatives or friends living nearby). However, the frequency of using informal care ranged from slight to substantial. We identified nine diverse reasons for using informal care, categorised into three main groups: 'Time and timing of care', 'Features of home-based care' and 'Features of extended hours ECEC'. The reasons relating to these categories, along with example quotes and their frequencies in the data, are presented in Table 4.

Decisions to use informal childcare were influenced by both rational and emotional reasons. Rational-based reasons included three reasons, namely 'Infrequent need for extended hours ECEC', 'Convenience of informal care', and the 'Inaccessibility of extended hours ECEC' (Table 4). We interpreted these reasons as rational because they refer to the availability and accessibility of care in terms of practicality and easy use of informal care especially in situations where extended hours ECEC fails to provide care flexible enough. Conversely, the rest of the reasons (e.g. avoiding long times and night care in ECEC, maximising time spent with parents or at home, and the high turnover of educators) were interpreted as emotional-based, because these reasons comprised parents' principles and desires and genuine or anticipated worries about the well-being of the child, including concerns about maintaining consistent routines and relationships.

Regarding our third research question, we identified three primary justifications parents used when discussing their reasons for utilising informal childcare in addition to (extended hours) ECEC. The three justifications were aroused by six reasons for

using informal care (see Table 4). Four of these reasons related to the main category 'Time and timing of care' (i.e. 'Avoiding long times in ECEC', 'Avoiding night care', 'Infrequent need for extended hours ECEC' and 'Fostering stable rhythm of the child'). The other two reasons that prompted the need for justifications were 'Maximising time spent with parents or at home' and 'High turnover of educators in ECEC'. Together, these six reasons highlight the needs or well-being of the child that the parents perhaps try to protect by choosing informal childcare and, thus, require justification. Also, these reasons were related to the cultural expectations about where and by whom young children should be cared for, especially outside the regular ECEC hours. All six reasons that lead to justifications can be considered emotional-based, which created a greater need to justify them compared to the more rational-based reasons. In other words, rational-based reasons were pragmatic in the sense that these reasons were, perhaps, taken for granted per se and did not provoke further justifications in parents' talk (see Table 4). Next, we introduce the three main justifications parents provided in their talk in relation to the emotional-based reasons for using informal care.

Leaning on personal values and desires

In the first justification, the parents explained why they used additional informal childcare by explicitly expressing reasons related to their values, feelings and desires. This justification was connected to the reasons 'Avoiding long times in ECEC' and 'Avoiding night care'. The parents stated, for example, that 'grandmother sometimes helps by dropping off or picking up the children [to and from ECEC]. This is because I don't want to take children to ECEC [early in the morning] when they are asleep' (Mother of 5 – and 6-year-olds). Using the verb 'do not want', often used in this type of justification to avoid long times or night care in ECEC, is a strong statement expressing a person's attitude towards the action at hand (VISK S469).

In addition to not wanting to take their children to extended hours ECEC, parents expressed their feelings in this justification. As one mother of 3 – and 6-year-olds described, 'I have been thinking, that they could go to night care, but I find it difficult. I would prefer that someone picked the children up from ECEC early enough to put them to bed at home.' Perhaps a more rational choice would be to take the children to extended hours ECEC for the night, to avoid the presumably more complex organisation of informal care. However, in this case, the decision to use informal care is emotional by nature, guided by the strong emotion of the mother, as she refers to finding the option of night care in extended hours ECEC as difficult. In these data extracts, the parents were not only neutrally describing not taking their children to ECEC, but instead emphasising by specific word choices ('I do not want' or 'I find it really difficult') that it was an unfavourable thing to do from the viewpoint of their personal values and desires.

Disclaiming from actions potentially harming the child

The second justification included the talk of children being taken to diverse childcare venues presumptive *against their will*. This justification was mainly connected with the reasons 'Avoiding long times in extended hours ECEC', 'Avoiding night care' and 'Maximising time spent with parents or at home' as follows:

'There has not been a need for night care yet, or maybe they [children] *have had to* spend one night there [in extended hours ECEC centre]. And my mother-in-law visits us a lot; she is from [another city] and has been babysitting a few times'. (Father of 2- and 6-year-olds)

In the data extract, the parent introduced the children's grandmother as a person who would drive from another city to take care of the children so that night care in extended hours ECEC could be avoided. Besides the grandmother, this family also used other informal childcare arrangements. The verb, 'have to', is a strong claim that attending extended hours ECEC during nighttime is unfavourable (VISK, §1334). However, both parents (interviewed separately) of this family described how excited the children were to stay overnight in extended hours ECEC. This discrepancy in the parents' talk can be interpreted as describing the cultural preference of evening and nighttime being spent at home instead of institutions, even though the children would enjoy attending extended hours ECEC.

Another parent extended the justification for avoiding night care by stating that they had not needed it, and 'the child would probably refuse to go' (Mother of 1 – and 4-year-olds). This is another strong assumption about the child's response to night care, as there have not been any actual experiences with it yet. This parent was the only one who made a direct reference to the child's age by stating that 'it feels really nasty to take an 18-month-old to an unfamiliar person in ECEC centre' when both parents were working during the night. She continued saying they 'are lucky to have relatives living nearby'. As seen, this justification related to, besides avoiding night care, the features of extended hours ECEC and possibly the high turnover of educators as reasons to use informal care. It further highlights the parent's preference for a familiar caregiver during nighttime (also Statham & Mooney, 2003). This justification, related to 'Avoiding night care', was especially evident in the talk of parents with the youngest children (under 3 years old) indicating a reluctance to take the youngest children to night care outside the home.

Besides the reasons 'Avoiding night care' and 'Avoiding long hours', this justification was also connected with the reason 'Maximising time spent with parents or at home'. Especially night care in extended hours ECEC, as indicated above, but also additional informal care, was constructed against the child's will, including assumptions about what the child wanted. For example, one mother of a 5-year-old stated, 'The child *has to* spend time with grandparents when I am working' (Mother of a 5-year-old), which appears to highlight the primacy of parental care. The justification also included dramatic descriptions, such as those from two mothers, both of whom used grandmaternal care as additional care to ECEC: 'It is easiest, however, when the father is at home; children are then in order, and *we don't need to drag them* anywhere' (Mother of 2 – and 3-year-olds). The other mother used grandparents to avoid '*pulling* the kids to different sections [children are typically placed in age-related groups during daytime but gathered together for extended hours] of the extended hours ECEC centre' (Mother of 1 – and 4-year-olds).

Using strong word choices such as 'refusing', 'dragging', 'pulling' and 'nasty' along with referring to the educators as 'unfamiliar' are clear indications of a preference for a familiar care provider and home surroundings over centre-based care for a young child during the night. In these justifications, the parents also highlighted their acknowledgement and adherence to the norms surrounding 'good parenthood' by emphasising their desire to

prioritise and protect the child's needs – in this case, the stability of care and familiarity of caregivers.

Balancing parents' needs and the moral aspects of using informal childcare

The third justification revealed that, even though parents wanted to use informal childcare for several of the reasons described in Table 4, they weighed when and how often using such care is suitable. This justification included considerations, such as 'Is this [asking help from an informal care network] really necessary' (Mother of a 4-year-old). Regarding this justification, using relatives as caregivers were connected with the reason 'Infrequent need for extended hours ECEC', and parents stated that asking for help from relatives was justifiable if the need was not constant.

When describing this justification, the parents used negative word choices, such as 'we don't want to *push* the responsibility of childcare to other people' (Mother of 1 – and 4-year-olds) or that parents did not want to 'bother' or – even a more negative word choice – 'harass' (Mother of 2 – and 3-year-olds) the grandparents. This kind of talk supports earlier research (Richardson et al., 2023) stating similar worries by parents working non-standard hours about placing a strain on relationships with relatives regarding long-term childcare. However, later in the interview, the mother who did not want to bother grandparents continued that 'at least grandmother claims it [childcare] is fun'. This shows that asking for help for childcare from relatives might be easier if the parents perceive that relatives enjoy providing the care. However, 'at least (...) claims' included a doubt about whether it was true that the grandmother enjoyed performing childcare.

The examples above illustrate that using informal childcare may be perceived as contradictory, and the parents were, in this justification, constructed as the ones with the primary responsibility for childcare. It is worth noting that this justification was more common among parents with children aged three years or younger. In addition to the cultural preference for parental care for young children during nonstandard hours (Hieta-mäki et al., 2018), it is possible that caring for the youngest children would be considered the most demanding, so using grandparents would need justification. However, the interviewed parents of the youngest children also described more use of multiple childcare arrangements than parents with older children – perhaps to reduce the need for centre-based care.

Using relatives for additional childcare was sometimes constructed as an obvious choice: 'Of course, we use my husband's sister, she is studying to become a nurse, and she lives close by, so she sleeps over here quite often' (Mother of 1 – and 4-year-olds). Here, the word choice 'of course' is a strong indication that using a close family member instead of a nonrelative – or centre-based care – is the right thing to do. This parent also gave accounts helping justify such childcare arrangements; the aunt lived nearby, so it was easy for her to commute, and she was a student who needed experience in childcare and financial compensation. However, this mother continued to wonder about 'for how long she [the husband's sister] is bothered to pop by'. This doubt shows that informal childcare might be a more insecure form of arrangement than ECEC (see also Boyd-Swan, 2019; Harknett et al., 2022) and parents wonder how to compensate for the informal care (see also Cosson et al., 2021).

Discussion

This study had three main aims: First, we examined whether the number of weekly child-care arrangements for under-school-aged children differs for Finnish parents working nonstandard hours (e.g. evenings, nights, weekends or irregular hours) compared to those working standard daytime hours (RQ1). Second, we explored the reasons parents working nonstandard hours give for using informal care arrangements in addition to (extended hours) ECEC (RQ2) and third, how the parents working nonstandard hours justify their decisions for using informal care arrangements (RQ3).

Our results for the first research question agreed with our original hypothesis and previous findings (e.g. Boyd-Swan, 2019; Harknett et al., 2022; Kim & Liu, 2021) and indicated that – even in a country with a comprehensive childcare infrastructure and provision of tax-based extended hours ECEC – the parents of children under 5 years who worked nonstandard hours were particularly likely to use multiple caregivers to cover their childcare needs. Our qualitative results further revealed that out of the various reasons for using informal care, those related to child well-being were often justified by conforming to the cultural norms and ideals of childcare in Finland, family time (Daly, 2001), good parenthood and the primary responsibility of parents (Karlsson et al., 2013). Overall, in support of the emotional choice theory (Markwica, 2018), our findings highlighted that Finnish parents place particular importance on emotional-based reasons when making decisions about childcare during nonstandard hours.

The results for our second research question showed that the reasons for using informal care during nonstandard hours were related to time and timing of care (e.g. avoiding night care and long times in ECEC) and features of both home-based (e.g. maximising time spent with parents or at home) and centre-based care (e.g. the high turnover of educators). Most of the reasons highlighted the well-being of the child and thus reflected emotional-based decision-making. Specifically, the parents emphasised the importance of children spending time with their parents as a reason for using informal care (Pagnan et al., 2011; Peltoperä et al., 2022). They also expressed willingness to avoid long hours and certain times, such as nighttime, in institutional care.

These expressions may show a lack of trust for extended hours ECEC to provide good enough care, as trust has previously been shown to be an important factor in childcare decisions (see Navarro-Cruz, 2023), or imply parents' perceptions about home being the best place for a young child to be cared for, especially outside standard daytime hours (also Hietamäki et al., 2018) that can be considered as family time (see Daly, 2001).

Our findings about Finnish parents placing more importance on emotional – than rational-based reasons (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Markwica, 2018) when making decisions about childcare arrangements during nonstandard hours can partly be explained by their worries about child well-being, potentially aroused by the long-continued and concerned public discussion in Finland over young children being cared for in extended hours ECEC (Jallinoja, 2006). Another likely explanation for the infrequency of rational-based reasons is the Finnish provision of affordable, largely accessible, and relatively high-quality provision of center-based extended hours ECEC during nonstandard hours (e.g. Peltoperä et al., 2017, 2022; Rönkä et al., 2017). Indeed, none of the reasons voiced by the parents was related to a lack of available or affordable institutional care, as informal care was often used in addition to (extended hours) ECEC. However,

inaccessibility was voiced as one reason for using informal care if, for example, the only centre providing this type of care was far from the family home (also Rönkä et al., 2017). Moreover, parents did not talk about what their children gain from the pedagogical approach of formal (extended hours) ECEC although earlier research indicates that the pedagogical quality matters for parents' childcare decisions (Coley et al., 2014; Davidson et al., 2022; Kampichler et al., 2018). The rational-based reasons provided by parents were mainly practical (e.g. infrequent need for formal care, a relative living nearby) and thus differed to some extent from the original idea of rational-based reasons that view childcare decisions and the quality of childcare, for example, as investments to the child's educational path (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997).

The results of our third research question revealed that the parents provided three kinds of justifications for their decisions to use informal care during nonstandard hours. The first, labelled 'Leaning on personal values and desires', was the least frequent justification and highlighted the parent's own values and desires for using informal care over centre-based ECEC. The other two justifications, 'Disclaiming from actions potentially harming the child', which focused on the well-being of the child, and 'Balancing parents' needs and the moral aspects of using informal childcare', with a focus on the perspectives of the informal caregivers, were more common among parents' talk. The difference in the frequencies is in line with earlier research showing that parental needs are not as socially accepted justifications for choosing childcare as is the best interest, or here, the well-being, of the child (see e.g. Peltoperä et al., 2022; Repo, 2004; Terävä et al., 2018). Although in the first type of justification, parents talked from a personal perspective, stating for example, *what they want* and *what feels difficult* for them, according to the principles of socio-constructionism (Burr, 2003), we consider that these expressions reflect the wider social context of childcare-related norms. In all three justifications, parents strongly adhered to cultural norms regarding the care of young children. This emphasises the parent as the primary caregiver (also Hietamäki et al., 2018) and home as the primary place for the child during nonstandard hours, especially at night. Care provided by the relatives was the second-best option, followed by extended hours ECEC (see also Peltoperä et al., 2022).

When parents justified the use of informal care, they rarely made direct references to the child's age. Only one parent mentioned the child's age directly when discussing avoiding night care for an 18-month-old. Based on our quantitative results, we expected more explicit references to the child's age in parents' talk. However, the parents of the youngest children were likely to rationalise balancing between their needs and the moral aspects of using informal care. Overall, parental talk about nonparental childcare was somewhat contradictory. The child's best interest was cited as a justification to avoid night care in extended hours ECEC, for example, even when the parents might have described how their children enjoyed it. This finding is interesting, as it suggests that societal norms about where children should be cared for at night outweighed the positive experiences of the children. This demonstrates that language use reflects broader social culture, not just individual cognition (Taylor, 2001a). Additionally, some parents expressed doubts about whether grandparents were willing to provide care, even when this had been explicitly stated by the grandparents.

Furthermore, informal care was constructed as acceptable in parents' talk only when it was short-term. Parents may avoid placing strain on their relationship with their parents

by not asking for *too much* help with childcare (see Richardson et al., 2023). Additionally, informal care in general (OECD, 2021; Plantenga & Remery, 2009), or regular help from grandparents, is not customary in Finland, a country characterised as an individualistic society (Kekkonen et al., 2023). This likely explains some parents' hesitant attitudes towards long-term informal care.

Limitations and future directions

The most critical limitation of the present study is that the data, collected between 2012 and 2013, is relatively old. We acknowledge that since 2013, work during nonstandard hours has become less prevalent in Finland (see Table 1) and more broadly across the EU (Eurostat, 2024). Also, the proportion of children being cared for in Finnish extended hours ECEC has decreased, although very modestly, since 2013 (Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2016; Statistics Finland, 2023). Of note, however, is that the provision of extended hours ECEC or the law regulating it have not changed. Thus, despite the changes, the data offers an important opportunity to explore the reasons and justifications voiced by Finnish parents for using informal childcare in the context of the available, affordable, and accessible provision of extended hours ECEC. Moreover, it is important to note that COVID-19 may have recently influenced families' organisation of childcare – an issue our data cannot grasp. However, a recent study (Peltoperä et al., 2023) on childcare arrangements in the context of nonstandard work hours in Finland showed that parents strove to keep their childcare arrangements as stable as possible, also during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another limitation is that our findings are based on a single country, which may affect the transferability of the findings to other country contexts. In other countries, the use of informal care often results from the lack of a state-subsidised provision of affordable, institutional around-the-clock care (e.g. Halfon & Friendly, 2015; Plantenga & Remery, 2009; Richardson et al., 2023), but because of the unique provision of extended hours ECEC in Finland, the parents in our study rarely voiced such rational-based reasons for using informal childcare. Instead, our results indicated that the moral or emotional perceptions related to the shared cultural understandings about the child's best interest and 'good' parenthood are powerful in shaping childcare decisions during nonstandard hours. In addition, shared cultural understandings tend to change very slowly. Therefore, our data – despite being collected more than a decade ago – offers new insights into the complexity and various aspects of parents' childcare decisions during nonstandard hours. However, to evaluate the applicability of our results in other countries, further research on parents' justifications for childcare decisions in different contexts is needed.

Further limitations related to the quantitative part included using a convenience sample directed at parents working nonstandard hours, which may have caused sampling bias and limited the generalisability of the quantitative results to, for example, fathers, parents with lower levels of education or the overall population of working parents. Although the survey sample represented the target population of parents according to their average ages, future studies with samples showing more variability in parents' gender, educational background and parental work schedules are needed. Moreover, the quantitative analyses were simple and largely descriptive and, therefore, did not account for the background characteristics of the parents. Although the quantitative

results agreed with those of previous studies, it is crucial for future research to compare the number of care arrangements in case of nonstandard work hours between lone and couple parents as well as between parents working part-time and full-time hours. Future studies should also examine whether the work hours of partners in two-earner families affect the number of weekly childcare arrangements. Additionally, due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, our findings do not indicate any causal relationships between the studied phenomena. Regarding the qualitative part, the interviews covered several topics and thus, so a more specific focus on our research questions could have provided more comprehensive answers.

Theoretical implications

In this paper, we applied rational and emotional choice theories (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Markwica, 2018) to explain what parents base their decisions to use informal childcare during nonstandard hours. However, based on our findings, these two theoretical approaches are perhaps not sufficient *alone* in explaining the complexity of childcare choices, as, for example, practicality in forms of availability and accessibility (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014), as well as the social norms and moral aspects (Karlsson et al., 2013) of both formal and informal care play important and central roles in parents' decision-making. Specifically, we have interpreted the practical choices related to childcare (e.g. the convenience of informal care or having a caregiver living nearby) as part of rational-based decisions, because we consider them more rational-based than emotional-based. However, making childcare decisions from a practical point of view could also be viewed as an independent way to justify the use of a certain type of childcare when investigating parental childcare decisions.

Furthermore, the emotional-based reasons and justifications include and reflect several complex childcare-related societal norms (see also the emotional choice theory from Markwica, 2018). It is challenging to separate societal norms from emotional choices, especially in this paper, where we rely on socio-constructionism, according to which people's talk always reflects the societal context and cannot solely be attributed to individual thinking (Burr, 2003). To sum up the theoretical discussion of our paper, we suggest that childcare choices should be examined more holistically, considering rational, practical, emotional (individual) and normative (societal) perspectives that may be intertwined. For example, using grandparental care can be a rational, practical, normative, and/or emotional choice, depending on how parents justify it.

Practical and policy implications

As there is a political will in Finland to increase ECEC enrolment (Kuusiholma-Linnamäki & Siippainen, 2021), an important question based on our findings is why extended hours ECEC does not appear to be an appealing option for childcare during nonstandard hours. It is important to note that reducing the child's time spent in ECEC can hamper their participation in pedagogical activities and the establishment of close relationships with educators and peers (see also Peltoperä et al., 2022, 2023). These findings should thus be considered when promoting (extended hours) ECEC services for parents in municipalities' ECEC service counselling. It would also be important to acknowledge the

various needs for childcare and early education that parents, families and children have when considering suitable childcare options for families. Parental work hours denote only part of these needs. Our findings indicate that in Finland, parents' childcare decisions during nonstandard hours lean more on emotional reasons than rational ones. Given that extended hours ECEC can reduce the need for multiple care arrangements and serve as a stable arrangement for children and families, making extended hours ECEC an appealing choice for families, one that combines the families' needs, values, and desires, is an important aspect in the future, both in research and ECEC policies.

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