



Conversations with the Experts

The Dutch Situation: Work-Family Issues in The Netherlands



Bram Peper, Ph.D.

Bio: Dr. Bram Peper is a researcher at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Department of the Social Sciences. He studied sociology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) and the University of Maryland at College Park (USA). In 1998, Dr. Peper completed his Ph.D-thesis, entitled, *Sociale Problemen en de Moderne Samenleving. Een Cultuursociologische Beschouwing* [Social Problems and Modern Society. A Treatise in the Sociology of Culture] at the Erasmus University. He is a member of the board (secretary) of the Dutch professional association of the Social Sciences ([NVMC](#)) and Editor of the *Tijdschrift voor Herstelrecht* [Journal for Restorative Justice].

Dr. Peper's most recent research (with Laura den Dulk) is on "Changes in Work and Life: The implementation of work/life policies in the European workplace". He also works together with Dr. Laura den Dulk and Professor Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes in the "TRANSITIONS" project.



Laura den Dulk, Ph.D.

Bio: Dr. Laura den Dulk got her Ph.D. in sociology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. She studied sociology at the EUR and Manchester Metropolitan University (UK). Her Ph.D. project was a cross-national study in the Netherlands, Italy, the United Kingdom and Sweden on the presence of work-family arrangements in organizations. The research project was partly funded by the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO). During her Ph.D. project, Dr. den Dulk co-edited (together with Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes and Joop Schippers) a book on work-family arrangements in Europe. In 2001, she completed her Ph.D. in Social Sciences on work-family arrangements in organizations.

Presently, Dr. den Dulk works as a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University (sociology department), on an international research project regarding implementation, utilization of work/life policies and the integration of work and private life. In this project "Changes in Work and Life", Dr. den Dulk works with Dr. Bram Peper from the Erasmus University, to collect data in nine organizations located in three different countries and with Dr. Judith de Ruijter to conduct a vignette study on managerial decision-making regarding the use of work/life policies. She also participates, together with Professor Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes and Dr. Bram Peper, in an EC research project on "Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace: Young Adults Negotiating the Work-Family Boundary" (TRANSITIONS coordinated by professor Sue Lewis (MMU, UK)).

Editors Note: Since 2000, Dr. Bram Peper has been working in the work/family field. Before this, he wrote his dissertation on theories of social problems (completed in 1998), and he conducted with others a large scale evaluation study on experiments with community mediation in the Netherlands. Dr. den Dulk has been working in the work/family field since the early nineties. Her dissertation (completed in 2001), was a cross-national study in the Netherlands, Italy, the United Kingdom and Sweden on the presence of work-family arrangements in organizations.

Presently, the two are working as postdoctoral researchers on an international research project regarding implementation, utilization of work/life policies and the integration of work and private life. They are collecting data in 9 organizations located in three different countries, the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden. Dr. Peper and Dr. den Dulk graciously took the time to comment on the Dutch situation in regard to work-family issues.

An Interview with Bram Peper, Ph.D. and Laura den Dulk, Ph.D.

The number of dual-earner families in the Netherlands is increasing rapidly, with the percentage of mothers in the labor market having doubled to 57 percent between 1990 and 2001. However, debate about whether child care is good for children continues and most people in the country feel strongly that children should spend no more than three days per week in a day care center. To accommodate this, the majority of mothers in the labor force work part time (70 percent).

Dutch culture holds a strong norm that parents (mostly mothers) assume full care of their children. Therefore, most dual-earner families in the Netherlands are in fact one-and-a-half earner families with the man working full time and the woman part time, says Dr. Bram Peper and Dr. Laura den Dulk.

While there has been an increase in available child care in the last decade, it is still in short supply and, according to Peper and den Dulk, is expensive. Instead of leading to a large degree of externalization and commercialization of day care, the rise of women in the labor force has led to a shortening of working hours. The Dutch government has improved the position of part-timers by removing the working hours threshold for minimum wage, and by requiring employers to give part-timers the same benefits, bonuses and training as full-time employees. Dutch people have been given the right to either reduce or increase their working hours when it does not interfere with business needs. Additionally, the last decade has seen a tremendous increase in flexible working time, especially in the service and knowledge sectors. Like in other European countries, employers increasingly introduce work-life policies in order to facilitate the integration of paid work and personal life. Most popular are flexible work arrangements such as flexible start and finishing times. Dutch employers are, compared to other countries, also active in the field of childcare. In particular large employers and public sector organizations offer financial support for childcare costs or hire childcare places in day care centers for their employees. This is related to the Dutch system in which a tripartite responsibility (i.e. government, employers and parents) is advocated. Also in the new Basic Act on Childcare (which should come into force in 1 January 2005) employers are again stimulated (but not forced) to contribute to the costs.

Discussions are prevalent in the Netherlands about how to fit managerial and higher staff positions into a four-day work week, or into work weeks of about 30 hours. Government organizations and banks have already introduced a 36-hour work week, making possible a four, nine-hour day scheme or one day off every two weeks. Whether these four-day, full-time jobs will become more common in the future is uncertain because of the current negative economic climate in the Netherlands.

Peper and den Dulk note that an important condition for the part-time-friendly culture in the Netherlands is the lack of economic pressure in many households to earn two full-time incomes. But because it is typically men who hold the full-time jobs while women work part time, the economic and social inequality between the two genders persists. In the Netherlands, the number of women in important and visible positions is very low, both in the public and private sectors. Additionally, women do the majority of unpaid work of caring for children and the household. On average, Dutch women have their first child at age 29. Consequently, working parents with young children are becoming older on average and as a result are more likely to have elderly parents who need care.

Because more mothers are in the work force, working parents are experiencing more time pressures and the stress of trying to work while caring for children or elderly parents. The Socio-Economic Council, a Dutch governmental advisory board of employers, union representatives and government officials, is discussing ways to ease the stress, including increasing the number of childcare facilities and shifting the intensity of work to other, less demanding times of employee's lives.

Peper and den Dulk say it will be a challenge to maintain the provisions and policies of this so-called "life course perspective" of employment given the economy and the fact that the Netherlands is facing major social restructuring, as are other European welfare states.

"It will be very challenging to see if and how the life course perspective in social policy will work out," Peper and den Dulk wrote. "Will this provide the solutions it seems to promise? If the workload is more spread across the life course, will this create possibilities for women to increase their working hours?" If so, this may lead to greater equality between men and women in pay and positions, enabling more women to be economically independent. Directly related is the increased attention to fatherhood in the Netherlands. The government and other non-profit organizations are encouraging fathers to spend more time with their children and there's a growing body of literature about fatherhood. However, there has been no significant increase in the last decade in the amount of care fathers give to their children.

"As long as men in practice will not actively participate in caring tasks and/or part time work, the one-and-a-half-earners family model will persist in favor of the dual-earner model," Peper and den Dulk wrote.

Another work/life challenge in the Netherlands is the risk among women to experience disability. Research shows that women of all ages are at higher risk than men for psychological disability, with women between 25 and 40 being three to four times more likely than men of this age group to be psychologically disabled. Women have longer work absences due to illness; have more difficulties returning to work after an absence; and find their integration into work more complicated after a period of disability.

For more information about Peper and den Dulk's research on the implementation, utilization of work/life policies and the integration of work and private life in the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden, visit their website at <http://www.fss.uu.nl/soc/cwl/index.htm>.

To learn more about TRANSITIONS, the EC research project on Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace: young adults negotiating the work-family boundary, visit <http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions>

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.



E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-4033 / 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-1080

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation