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Editorial: work-life balance: a matter of choice?

Gregory, A and Milner, SE

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Editorial: Work–life Balance: A Matter of Choice?

Abigail Gregory and Susan Milner

Work–life balance has come to the forefront of policy discourse in developed countries in recent years, against a backdrop of globalization and rapid technological change, an ageing population and concerns over labour market participation rates, particularly those of mothers at a time when fertility rates are falling (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004). Within the European Union the reconciliation of work and family has become a core concern for policy and encouraged debate and policy intervention at national levels.

From as far back as the 1960s studies have proliferated (Lewis and Cooper, 2005, p. 9) on the linkages between work and family roles, originally concerned mainly with women and work–family stress. New concepts emerged, such as work–family conflict or interference, work–family accommodation, work–family compensation, work–family segmentation, work–family enrichment, work–family expansion and, of course, work–family balance (for full definitions, see Greenhaus and Singh, 2003; see also Burke, 2004). This last concept preceded that of work–life balance and implies ‘the extent to which individuals are equally involved in- and equally satisfied with — their work role and family role’ (Greenhaus and Singh, 2003, p. 2), thus suggesting that by giving equal priority to both roles, work–family conflict — mutually incompatible pressures from the two domains — could be rapidly resolved. By focusing on employees with family responsibilities, however, the notion of work–family balance was considered in practice as triggering off a backlash in the workplace among non-parents (Haar and Spell, 2003).

The term ‘work–life balance’ gained widespread use in English language research and policy arenas, enabling a wider understanding of non-work concerns to be encompassed in employment research. As Alan Felstead and his colleagues note (Felstead *et al.*, 2002, p. 56), work–life balance can be defined as ‘the relationship between the institutional and cultural times and spaces of work and non-work in societies where income is predominantly generated and distributed through labour markets’. Work–life balance practices in the workplace are therefore those that, intentionally or otherwise, increase the flexibility and autonomy of the worker in negotiating their

attention (time) and presence in the workplace, while work–life balance policies exist where those practices are intentionally designed and implemented.

‘Work–life balance’ is, however, a contested term. For some, the term ‘balance’ suggests that work is not integral to life, and implies a simple trade-off between the two spheres. It encourages quick-fix solutions that do not address fundamental inequalities, and that therefore shift responsibility for balancing work and home life onto individuals (Burke, 2004; Lewis *et al.*, 2007). Other terms that suggest the mutual reinforcement of the two spheres, such as work–personal life integration, work–life articulation, or work–personal life harmonization, are therefore preferred (Crompton and Brockmann, 2007; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Rapoport *et al.*, 2002). However, this terminology too remains contentious: ‘integration’, while creating the image of more positive organizational change, nevertheless implies the two spheres must be merged, leading to fears of a contamination or the domination of personal life by the demands of paid employment (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). ‘Work–life harmonization’ and ‘work–life articulation’, while promising, came to prominence after our call for papers and have not to date been widely used in the English language literature. For this reason we have retained the original, long-standing, and easily-understood term, ‘work–life balance’ throughout this special issue.

The popularity of work–life balance research was confirmed at the 2005 conference of Gender, Work and Organization, when we received more than double the expected number of paper submissions for a stream under that title, and a similar response met our subsequent call for papers for this special issue.¹ The presentations and discussions in the 2005 conference stream demonstrated the vitality of research in this area, as well as the breadth of methodological approaches (qualitative and quantitative, comparative and single-country case studies, sectoral and organizational studies, individual and organizational perspectives).

In formulating our call for papers for the special issue we decided to focus particularly on issues of choice and constraint. Work–life balance policies are predicated on perceived or recorded employee preferences for certain types of work arrangement, relating to their time and presence, and in policy discourse today it is often taken for granted that the work–life balance should be formulated in terms of a win–win situation, where employees’ preferences coincide with their employers’ desire for greater flexibility of working practices, particularly working time. However, many of the papers presented in 2005 raised questions about such assumptions; whether in relation to entrenched gender attitudes in organizations (notably, the choice between male career patterns or the ‘mommy track’: see also Smithson and Stokoe, [2005]), gendered sectoral cultures, the advantages and disadvantages of particular work–life balance measures, or cultural attitudes and the negotiation of gender roles in the household and at work.

A further concern in our selection of papers for the special issue was to examine how far the work–life balance, traditionally seen through the lens of female employment, has broadened to include men’s as well as women’s negotiation of the demands of paid employment and personal and domestic life. This concern, reflected in the terminological shift noted above from the work–family to the work–life interface, corresponds to research findings that suggest that a holistic approach is more likely to mobilize workplace support (thus avoiding the risk of backlash) and effect wider organizational change than policies aimed solely at women or those with childcare responsibilities. However, researchers need to be alert to differences in the way that men and women take up such measures.

Finally, in selecting papers for this special issue, we attempted to cover as many countries as possible. We were particularly interested in the potential for policy learning, notably in the context of EU policy recommendations. Country case studies offer valuable lessons about the relationship between policy and organizational practice, as well as the cultural attitudes that underpin both.

Work–life balance in organizational practice: gendered choices, or gendered organizations?

Existing literature casts the work–life interface in terms of three issues: time management; inter-role conflict (role overload and interference) and care arrangements for dependents. Preferences are shaped not only by individual values and predispositions but also by current reality and objective factors within each individual’s life (such as the public provision of childcare and the labour market situation). Thus, preferences take account of perceived constraints: they are ‘usually compromises between what is desirable and what is feasible’ (Bielenski *et al.*, 2002, p. 16).

Employees’ work–life balance priorities are considered to fall within three general categories: working time arrangements (total working hours and flexibility); and, for those with parenting or other care responsibilities, parental leave entitlements (maternity, paternity, parental and carers); and childcare (subsidies or direct provision) (McDonald *et al.*, 2005; Thornthwaite, 2004). Where these needs are met through organizational work–life programmes, employees are found to have increased organizational commitment and job satisfaction. A greater sense of control over their own work schedules leads to improved mental health (McDonald *et al.*, 2005). Further, work–life programmes that allow employees to have a greater involvement at home appear to be linked to employee wellbeing (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2003) for men as well as women (Burke, 2000). Organizations can benefit in a number of ways, including reduced absenteeism and better integration of women returners after maternity (McDonald *et al.*, 2005). Work–life balance measures can present

opportunities for organizations to learn new ways of working (Lee *et al.*, 2000; Lewis and Cooper, 2005).

Where employees' needs are not met, employees are expected to experience work-life stress, although it may be that, particularly for those without caring responsibilities, time stress is partially or wholly offset by other factors, such as material rewards or job enjoyment. European surveys suggest that unmet demand for work-life balance (especially a mismatch between desired and actual hours) is increasing (Gallie, 2005; Green and Tsitsianis 2005), with possible adverse consequences for employees' wellbeing and performance at work.

It is widely recognized that even where work-life balance measures are extensively available in organizations, such measures are not necessarily extensively utilized (Pocock, 2005). Take-up has been linked to the factors that make up the organizational work-life culture, such as the extent of manager and co-worker support, the career consequences of taking a work-life balance measure, organizational time expectations and gendered perceptions of policy use (McDonald *et al.*, 2005). The degree of use is also variable across groups of staff in an organization. These measures are often targeted at highly skilled people in an effort to recruit and retain key staff (Gray and Tudball, 2003). However, those with managerial responsibilities can find it difficult to take up work-life measures, whether because of explicit exclusions or because in practice they have to do whatever it takes to get the job done (Gregory and Milner, 2006; McDonald *et al.*, 2005).

More broadly, changing organizational structures, flexible work organization (lean production and supply chain management in manufacturing and retailing, and new service requirements in both public and private sector services) and work intensification throw up new challenges to work-life balance in the new economy (Brannen *et al.*, 2001; Perrons *et al.*, 2007). In the UK, although 'high-performance' management is found to be associated with the formal presence of work-life balance policies (Dex and Smith, 2002), there has been concern about the negative impact of such practices on the work-life balance of individuals, particularly men (White *et al.*, 2003). In his overview of organizational work-life balance policies, Steven Fleetwood (2007, p. 394) argues that the discourse 'no longer reflects the practice'; rather, a discourse of employee-friendly work practices disguises employer-friendly practices that enhance individual work-life balance only indirectly, if at all.

Organizational structures and cultures can therefore undermine formal work-life balance policies, leaving those who take them up undervalued and marginalized (Gambles *et al.*, 2006). Piecemeal measures that do not tackle organizational cultures may also reinforce gender segregation in the workplace, since the take-up of work-life balance measures is strongly gendered (Houston, 2005). Women with dependent children are most likely to take up measures such as part-time working and other reduced working-hour arrangements, and school term-time working (where it is available, mostly in

the public sector) is almost exclusively female. A number of barriers appear to limit men's take-up of such measures: the organization of the workplace (including perceptions of their entitlement, that is, perceptions that men's claims to family responsibilities are valid), the business environment and the domestic organization of labour in employees' homes (including the centrality of career for the father and mother and their degree of commitment to gendered parenting, both closely class-related) (Bittman *et al.*, 2004; Bygren and Duvander, 2006; Crompton and Lyonette, 2007; Duncan, 2007; Singley and Hynes, 2005). 'Organizational career cultures' prevent men from overtly choosing a work-life balance over their career. Consequently, men are often found using informal flexibility, or taking advantage of gender-neutral flexibility such as flexitime systems, to improve their work-life balance at the margins (Gregory and Milner, 2006, 2008).

Organizational cultures thus tend to reinforce the traditional separation of gender roles, leading to a polarization between the working experiences of men and women. Such organizational practices are established within and influenced by gendered societal norms about the 'ideal carer' and capitalism's norm of the 'ideal worker', usually defined in terms of presence and commitment (Cooper, 2000; Gambles *et al.*, 2006).

Gendered societal norms have, of themselves, been conceived as being the product of institutions such as the family, the labour market and the welfare state, along with power structures, gender role norms (and the value attached to them) and the division of labour in the family (Crompton, 2006; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). The terms in which the work-life balance agenda is cast at a national level through government policy and discourse, are shaped by welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999). In the liberal welfare states, for example, work-life balance has to be examined in the context of both a traditional reluctance to intervene in the private sphere, and at the same time relatively high employment rates. As a result, public childcare provision is relatively weak and the work-life balance agenda tends to be framed in terms of flexible working hours and the growth of part-time working. Scandinavian and continental welfare states, on the other hand, tackle work-life balance by focusing on reduced working time for all (Björnberg, 2000). In Scandinavian welfare states, the explicit objective of gender equality means that family-friendly measures target men as well as women. The liberal and continental welfare states are more likely to cast work-life balance in gendered terms.

Overview of the articles

This special issue looks through a gender lens at the ways in which both men and women negotiate the relationship between work and home life, particularly when they have caring responsibilities at home. It explores the

relationship between formal policies and their impact on men and women's ability to effect a choice in shaping their careers and their day-to-day commitments. Cécile Guillaume and Sophie Pochic examine the career and life choices of top managers in a French company with a specific, paternalistic culture. Their article demonstrates the structural constraints of an organizational culture which emphasizes employee availability, particularly through geographical mobility, and which is disruptive to family formation. As a result, it forces managers, especially women, to make choices about work and family. On the other hand, they find evidence of women developing strategies that enable them either to conform to or bypass organizational norms. Their research, based on access to company personnel data covering all employees as well as interviews with 60 managers (men and women), raises valuable questions about structure and agency and highlights the relationship between formal and informal routes to power.

No specific work-life balance policies are in evidence in the organization under study, although it has attempted to address the gender imbalance at higher levels through targeted recruitment policies. Guillaume and Pochic show that such policies are inadequate for tackling both the highly formal recruitment and promotion procedures, based on educational attainment through competition, and the informal processes that favour 'unencumbered' workers, or those with the kinds of relational resources making it possible for their spouse to follow them. Part-time work is devalued in career terms. Thus, the typical career pattern implicitly assumes that managers are male. Moreover, organizational practices are based on an underlying set of traditional gender values regarding the household division of labour which appear to be unchallenged in human resources practice.

The authors identify three types of strategy employed by women in response to this organizational culture. Some single women, and women in dual-career households, decide to pursue a typical male career pattern. They do not relinquish their careers because they earn enough to employ domestic carers, in a country where public provision of childcare is also relatively plentiful. Others choose an alternative career model, resisting forced mobility at the risk of an implicit 'withdrawal from the competition for power', or constructing joint mobility strategies with their spouse. Such individual strategies appear to be limited to those with exceptional leverage (extremely highly qualified individuals or couples) and to have little or no impact on organizational culture.

Like Guillaume and Pochic, Jacqueline Watts looks at strategies employed by women in a male-dominated profession in an engineering culture (although in the case of Guillaume and Pochic's French organization, the engineering culture has given way in recent years to a more commercial focus). Watts' interview-based research was carried out in the UK but the strong sectoral culture is likely to predominate across national cultural variations. It is nevertheless exacerbated by the UK's 'long hours' culture. Again,

the profession is dominated by values of availability and presenteeism — and increasingly, of geographical mobility — which implicitly assume an unencumbered male worker. Female interviewees pointed to deadline-dependent project work and ‘fire-fighting’ rather than strategic management as factors. As a result, those with childcare commitments experience work–life stress. In line with existing research on work–life adaptation of women in male-dominated professions (following Cockburn, 1991), Watts shows that traditional strategies adopted by women civil engineers — such as, on one hand, adopting male career strategies and outsourcing domestic work, or on the other hand, juggling through part-time working, self-employment and flexible work schedules — have brought mixed blessings. Adaptive strategies have no impact on men’s employment behaviour and may reinforce segmentation, excluding these women from career advancement or from decision-making roles. Some women interviewees felt able to resist at the margins (for example, by not fulfilling their colleagues’ expectations about socializing outside work) but, as in Guillaume and Pochic’s study, such strategies have limited impact.

Elin Kvande’s innovative study also examines the experience of working in ‘greedy’ organizations (Coser, 1974) whose claim on male workers’ presence and commitment is intensified by the demands of a globalized marketplace. As in Watts’ study, project-based work is identified as a feature of work in the new knowledge economy, which tends to reduce the amount of time available to employees for their life outside work. But she places this experience in the Norwegian and wider Nordic context, which, she argues is different from other western European contexts. In the Norwegian context the family-friendly welfare state, and specifically a father-friendly welfare state, gives parents unparalleled opportunities to combine work and family life. In investigating fathers’ time practices, Kvande discusses two specific cases drawn from different research projects. Both cases highlight the way in which organizational flexibility is internalized by employees, so that the work–life balance is felt to be a matter of individual organization and boundless work is seen as a problem that individuals must resolve. These experiences help to explain why, although the relatively generous provision of paternity leave in these countries allows men to spend more time with their children and to reflect on their working practices as a result, male employees are nevertheless not in a position to effect long-term change on their return to full-time employment. Parental leave therefore needs to be maintained and reinforced as a collective right if it is to have a boundary-setting function, rather than being a matter of individual choice.

In several countries flexible working arrangements are advocated as a means of balancing work and other commitments, and thus reducing work–life conflict and work pressure. Based on an analysis of the first national survey of employees in Ireland, Helen Russell, Philip J. O’Connell and Frances McGinnity examine the impact of three main types of flexible work

arrangements on employees' perception of work–life stress and their ability to carry out their caring responsibilities. Their basic hypothesis is that flexible work arrangements — flexitime, or flexible working hours, part-time work and working from home — will reduce work–life conflict because they give employees greater choice. In reality, part-time work and flexible working hours are the most common forms of flexible working, with the take-up of home-working being limited to a small percentage of employees (8 per cent). The authors observe that the take-up of flexibility is gendered, and that women are considerably more likely than men to work part-time or to experience other forms of flexibility that reduce their earnings, and men are more likely than women to work from home. The availability of flexitime also depends strongly on the sector, with public-sector employees having greater access than others to flexible working hours.

In this study a reduction in working hours appears to lessen work–life conflict for both men and women. Part-time work is also associated with reduced work pressure but it does so significantly only for women. The relationship between flexitime, reduced work pressure and reduced work–life conflict is significant only in the public sector, indicating that the effectiveness of flexible work practices depends on the institutional context. However, those working from home report significantly higher levels of work–life conflict. The authors suggest that this negative relationship between working from home and work–home conflict is partly due to long working hours but also to other factors, such as intrusion into family space. As Russell, O'Connell and McGinnity observe, the availability and take-up of flexible working arrangements have important consequences for the division of domestic labour. Their findings corroborate other studies that suggest that flexibility for men may mean increased working hours and reduce their availability to their family. This, in turn, has consequences for women's employment options, making their recourse to part-time work more likely. More optimistically, the authors also note that men working in organizations with a greater range of flexible work arrangements reported lower levels of work–life stress, suggesting that such measures may have beneficial effects for all employees, regardless of take-up.

Drawing on a strategic sample of structured interviews with 102 men from six countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Israel, Norway and Spain) working in either technical and financial organizations or social and health-related organizations, Sigtona Halrynjo analyses men's experience of work–life balance and the strategies they develop. Her analysis puts into a broader context Guillaume and Pochic's and Kvande's findings about organizational assumptions on employee availability (particularly on male availability), following Acker (1998). She finds that encumbrance is not necessarily a feminine hallmark. Within the all-male sample, segments of encumbered men struggling with varying degrees of 'competing devotions' are identified. Halrynjo uses multiple correspondence analysis to map her sample of men

according to their volume of work and volume of care. Her findings corroborate earlier findings on men and women's relational resources as a determinant of volume of work and care.

Referring to Mary Blair-Loy's 'work devotion schema' (Blair-Loy, 2001), the author identifies four ideal types in order to illustrate the various combinations of volume of work and care, and strategies for dealing with them. Men in the 'career' category find their work absorbing and fulfilling and are unencumbered by family duties, usually because their wife takes full-time care of the children or because the couple outsources childcare, while at the opposite pole men in the 'caring' category more closely resemble a traditional female working pattern: they work part-time and experience satisfactory work-life balance by spending more time with their family, but at the cost of lower wages, poor career opportunities and reduced job security. A third group of men attempt to combine care and career by working full-time, but caring for their children as much as possible outside work, and experience a 'time squeeze' and work-life strain as a result. Halrynjo's research is particularly innovative in identifying what she terms 'patchwork career men', who find their job stimulating but 'put work in its place', reject traditional career norms and combine part-time or temporary work with home responsibilities and with other leisure or artistic pursuits. These men are in a minority. Thus, men are shown to adapt to the different demands of work and family life in different, albeit gendered ways, which also presumably depend on negotiations in the couple.

Tracey Warren, Elizabeth Fox and Gillian Pascal, using data from the British Household Panel Survey, examine the ways in which the gendered nature of employment shapes the choices of low-waged women in England in relation to their caring and employed lives. Low-waged women represent a sizeable proportion of the female workforce and their employment is characterized by low hourly wages and a high preponderance of part-time work. Familiar work-life balance measures, such as flexitime or job sharing are not available to them. Since their partners are most often also in low-wage employment or not employed, these women also have limited access to private childcare. Warren *et al.* interviewed a smaller sample of (35) male-female couples in order to investigate their childcare strategies and found a variety of strategies based largely on informal care arrangements and shifting patterns of shared childcare in the couple, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Informal care and recourse to part-time work represent expressed preferences, but the authors argue that they also reflect financial and labour market constraints, in the relative absence of affordable formal childcare. In particular, long male working hours create strains on family life as well as on women's ability to access better-paid employment. Rather than greater provision of formal childcare, the authors identify a strong demand for working-time reduction and for parental leave policies in order to give both men and women a better balance between work and family, particularly for low-waged couples.

Exploring similar issues relating to the ways that men and women negotiate the relationship between paid work and other areas of life, Carol Emslie and Kate Hunt look more closely at caring responsibilities of Scottish men and women in mid-life, using a life course approach. They focus on the mutual interactions and spillovers between paid employment and home life which, they argue, are often interpreted in a gender-neutral way. Emslie and Hunt take another approach, seeking to integrate gender more fully into such interpretations, in particular Sue Campbell Clark's 'work-family border' theory, which aims to explain how people 'manage and negotiate the work and family spheres and the borders between them in order to attain balance' (Clark, 2000, p. 750). Their qualitative, small-scale research (based on a small, representative subsample of a larger longitudinal database) reveals how work-life strains were experienced by interviewees over the life course in a gendered way, with women using images of 'juggling' to describe their coping strategies and middle-class women, in particular, expressing their sense of sacrifice. The male interviewees, on the other hand, were found to accept work-life conflict as natural.

Emslie and Hunt's article, like that of Warren, *et al.*, also highlights the impact of social class position on work-life choices. The manual workers in their sample tended to display pragmatic attitudes towards paid employment and had a stronger sense than middle-class women of boundaries between work and home life. Thus, work-life boundaries are not only gendered but are also mediated by people's socioeconomic position, and in addition, as Emslie and Hunt show, they may shift over the life course as gender identities are reconfigured.

Work-life balance: a matter of choice?

In this special edition we have sought to address the question whether work-life balance is freely determined by individuals or whether it is constrained by a wide range of factors operating at a micro (individual), meso (organizational) and macro (national) level. The articles presented here draw us into the wider debate over the role of structure and agency in determining women's labour-force behaviour (Hakim, 2000). They demonstrate that individual choice is constrained by organizational culture, which in turn is strongly related to sector-specific cultures (as in engineering or knowledge work, for example). Individual choice is also circumscribed by prevailing national gender cultures and expectations and labour market opportunities. In addition to gender, the articles bring to our attention the variation in preferences and constraints available to individuals according to their socioeconomic group, and the stage in their individual life course. They also substantiate earlier research (das Dores Guerreiro and Pereira, 2007; Gambles *et al.*, 2007)

finding that organizations play a crucial mediating role in this complex and dynamic set of relationships.

The articles highlight the work–life balance challenges posed by new organizational practices and strongly gendered organizational and national cultures. At the same time they give us some pointers for improving employees' work–life balance. Most importantly perhaps, they demonstrate the limitations of adaptive strategies for achieving work–life balance and the need for collective rights to back up individual choice, as in the case of parental leave in the Nordic context. Giving fathers specific leave entitlements and framing rights to, for example, working-time reduction in a gender-neutral way can both represent a way forward for men and for women and help to rebalance the gender division of labour.

Note

1. It was unfortunately not possible to include all the papers in this special issue: others have appeared or will appear in future in other issues of *Gender, Work & Organization*.

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