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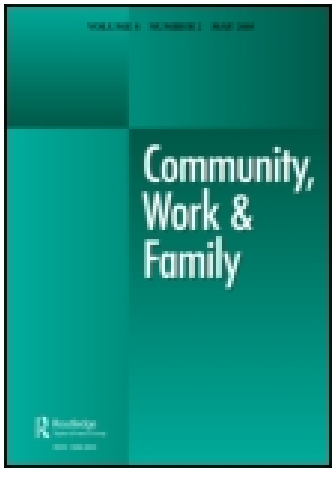

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Mothers and work-life balance: exploring the contradictions and complexities involved in work-family negotiation

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Mothers and work–life balance: exploring the contradictions and complexities involved in work–family negotiation

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This article presents data from a project exploring women's experiences of work and care. It focuses primarily on work–life balance as a problematic concept. Social and economic transformations across advanced post-industrial economies have resulted in concerns about how individuals manage their lives across the two spheres of work and family and achieve a work–life balance. Governments across the European Union have introduced various measures to address how families effectively combine care with paid work. Research within this area has tended to focus on work–life balance as an objective concept, which implies a static and fixed state fulfilled by particular criteria and measured quantitatively. Qualitative research on women's experiences reveals work–life balance as a fluctuating and intangible process. This article highlights the subjective and variable nature of work–life balance and questions taken-for-granted assumptions, exploring problems of definition and the differential coping strategies which women employ when negotiating the boundaries between work and family.

Keywords: work–life balance; women; paid work; care; gender

Cet article présente des données venant d'un projet d'exploration des expériences des femmes concernant de travail et des responsabilités familiales. Il se concentre principalement sur l'équilibre entre le travail et la vie privée, comme concept problématique. Les transformations sociales et économiques aux pays possèdent des économies avancés et post-industrielles ont suscité des préoccupations sur la façon dont les individus gèrent leur vie à travers les deux sphères du travail et la famille, et comment elles atteindront un vrai équilibre travail-vie personnelle. Les gouvernements à travers l'Union européenne ont mis en place diverses mesures pour résoudre la façon dont les familles peuvent combiner efficacement les soins familiaux avec un travail rémunéré. Les recherches dans ce domaine ont tendance à se concentrer sur l'équilibre travail - vie privée comme une notion objective qui implique un état statique et fixe, remplies par des critères particuliers qui peuvent être mesurée quantitativement. La recherche qualitative sur les expériences des femmes révèle que l'équilibre travail-vie est un processus fluctuant et immatériel. Cet article met en évidence la nature subjective et variable de conciliation travail-vie et remet en question les suppositions qui ont été préalablement acceptées, en explorant les problèmes de définition et la variabilité en stratégies d'adaptation utilisés par les femmes lorsqu'elles négocient les frontières entre travail et famille.

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Mots-clés: Les femmes; l'equilibre travail vie; le travail; la famille; egalite entre les sexes

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The issue of work–life balance

In recent years, work–life balance has emerged as a definitive concern amongst employers, trade unions, academics and policy-makers (CIPD, 2003; Dex, 2003; DTI, 2003b; Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea, & Walters, 2002; Taylor, 2001). Technological advancement, globalised economies and the decline in secure 'standard' employment have rendered work an increasingly demanding and stressful experience (Taylor, 2001). Working experiences are thus often characterised by work intensification (Burchell, Lapido, & Wilkinson, 2002), atypical working hours (Hyman, Scholarios, & Baldry, 2005) and long hours working in the UK (Eurostat, 2002; Labour Force Survey [LFS], 2003). Such changes have occurred alongside changing family forms and the growth in women's employment in the latter half of the twentieth century which emphasise work–life balance in terms of managing work and care (Auer, 2002; Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen, & Smithson, 2001; Crompton, 2001). Taylor (2001) argues that focusing on working parents 'remains much too narrow an approach for our understanding of the importance of the work–life debate' (p. 7). However, women's increased entry into paid employment and the rise in dual earner households now means that divisions between unpaid and paid work are no longer straightforward, and this has resulted in a 'crisis of care' (Fraser, 1994). This renders negotiating these boundaries especially problematic for those with caring responsibilities (Duncan, 2002; Glass & Estes, 1997).

The post-1997 Labour government in the UK adopted a more supportive discourse towards work–life balance than the previous Conservative government. It was acknowledged that the state had a role to play in these matters (Lewis, Knijn, Martin, & Ostner, 2008), with policy focusing on supporting parents to combine care for children with paid work. Non-legislative initiatives such as the 2000 Work–Life Balance Campaign aimed to encourage employers to adopt flexible working arrangements both for working parents (DfEE, 2000) and as part of The Work and Families Act, 2006, this was rolled out to adult carers (Laurie, 2007). Legislation also provided opportunities for leave and flexible working arrangements (DTI, 2000b, 2003a), as well as enhanced maternity and paternity entitlements (DTI, 2003b, 2005). Policy also focused on the economic inactivity of lone parents who are likely to find combining work and care especially problematic (DTI, 2003a; Wattis et al., 2006); working tax and child tax credits aimed at raising employment amongst lone mothers and addressing the issue of child poverty (Stewart, 2009). Indeed, the New Labour government embraced a child-centred discourse pledging to address child poverty (H.M. Treasury, 2004a) and provide access to childcare within every community via its children's centres (H.M. Treasury, 2003). It also introduced free nursery places for three and four-year olds and pledged to provide wrap-around school-based care for all 3–14 year-olds by 2010 as part of its 10 year strategy (H.M. Treasury, 2004b). The election of a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 is likely to see a reversal of the previous government's supportive policy on work–life balance and child poverty initiatives. Whilst the new coalition government's discourse and rhetoric have been supportive of flexible working practices and leave arrangements (FPI, 2010; Watt, 2011), changes to

taxation and benefit cuts introduced in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (H.M. Treasury, 2010), are likely to have a detrimental effect on combining work and care in terms of access to childcare and loss of income (Fawcett Society, 2010).

The conflict between the spheres of market and caring means that any real commitment by governments and employers to work–life balance and family-friendly policy is unlikely (Crompton, 2002). This is evident within certain employment sectors and occupations which promote individualised performance and competition and render higher level occupations as 'those least compatible with employment and caring' (Crompton and Birkelund, 2000, p. 349). Flexible working patterns, especially those involving shift work, frequently benefit employers rather than parents and are introduced as a means to increase productivity above all else. This is reflected in the continuing prevalence of long hours working in the UK and the failure of legislation to effectively address this problem. Any commitment to addressing the issue of care is further impaired by the current economic situation where market forces and productivity are seen as the economic and social priority (Groves, 2011).

Commenting on the previous government, Hantrais (2004, p. 161) argued that in the UK 'family policy has not become a legitimate and fully institutionalised policy domain'. At the time this was reflected by weak statutory leave, lack of entitlement to state funded early years education and no statutory right to reduced working hours (Moss, 2001). State provision for childcare has been patchy, and when women work full-time, childcare is generally provided by the private sector or informally, a trend which is likely to increase under the coalition government's move to reduce the size of the public sector and 'shrink' the state. Furthermore, the concept of the 'Big Society' in which civil society takes over many of the roles and functions of the state, will make working parents more reliant on family or costly private provision, which has implications for the reconciliation of work and care. Indeed, as Moss observed in (2001): 'the constraints of childcare will remain a strong influence on the labour market decisions of parents, particularly mothers of young children' (Moss, 2001, p. 223). Moreover, the withdrawal of higher rate tax relief for childcare provision and cuts in support for childcare costs from 80% to 70% may be a significant work disincentive for many women.

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Women, work and care

Men and women experience the demands of work and family differently as it is generally women who assume greater responsibility for domestic and caring work whilst participating in paid work (Gatrell, 2004). The principal means by which many women manage dual roles is to work part-time (Bang, Jensen, & Pfau-Effinger, 2000; Fagan, O'Reilly, & Rubery, 1999; Lewis, 2001). Childcare responsibilities are a key factor contributing to women's fragmented labour force participation and a significant barrier to occupational mobility (Dex, 1987; MacRae, 1993). Generally, women will opt for marginal jobs with fewer hours and no career prospects, or more qualified women will choose to halt progression within organisations, because managerial positions place excessive demands on time which conflict with caring responsibilities (Lewis & Lewis, 1996; Marshall, 1991). This situation is exacerbated by a lack of adequate formal childcare provision which would enable more effective work–life balance (Moss, 2001), and also by gendered assumptions which continue to define women as primary carers despite their labour market participation

(Crompton, 2001; Crompton, Lewis, & Lyonette, 2007; Duncan, 2002; Lewis, 2001; McKie, Gregory, & Bowlby, 2002). In this way, ideological and material factors encourage women to take on the bulk of caring responsibilities and to integrate care around work. This has led Crompton (2002) to argue that there has been no fundamental change in the gendered division of labour and no real decline of the 'male breadwinner model' – women may now work, but they do so in a way that enables them to combine this with care and domestic work (Lewis, 2001; McKie, Gregory, & Bowlby, 2001).

The marginal status of care makes work–life balance problematic and perpetuates labour market inequalities based on gender. For instance, Ball (2004, p. 19) notes that 'how mothers *feel about* caring for children has been given insufficient attention in current childcare and gender equality policies'. Others have observed that care must become a more valued activity in both social and economic terms (Fraser, 1994; Hantrais, 2004; Land, 1999; Williams, 2000). This is firstly in recognition that it is an activity which women have historically done, continue to do, and continue to want to do (Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Alldred, 2003). And secondly, if care were recognised and rewarded, men would be more likely to become involved in it (Fraser, 1994; McKie et al., 2001). Furthermore, work and family continue to be viewed as separate spheres, whose interconnectedness is denied (Taylor, 2001). This occurs, 'despite the fact that it is increasingly accepted (indeed, expected) that women should be in paid employment, they are also likely to shoulder the major responsibility for "work" within the domestic sphere' (Crompton et al., 2007, p. 5). It is assumed that family responsibilities will not impinge upon work commitments; however, the demands of employment continue to disrupt individuals' and especially father's participation in the domestic sphere where 'spillover' from work to home 'is a consistent outcome of work within the contemporary economy' (Hyman et al., 2005, p. 797). Crompton (2006, p. 213) has also argued that 'many "valued" (i.e., higher level) employees, particularly women, fail to take advantage of work–life policies [. . .] for fear of damaging their prospects for organisational advancement- or, in some cases, job security'. In terms of professional occupations, it is frequently home life that becomes highly structured and determined by particular task allocations, so as not to interfere with work, whereas 'paid work has the character of more open and fluid time' (Lyon & Woodward, 2004, p. 207).

The following discussion focuses on women's experiences of combining work and care. It argues that work–life balance as an objective and measurable concept is problematic given women's variable and subjective responses to work–family negotiation. The article explores various themes which highlight the ambivalent and contradictory nature of such experiences. It is based on data from a project funded by the European Social Fund exploring the barriers to women's employment progression and the potential for government family-friendly policy and flexible working to enable women to balance work and care effectively.[1] The research took place prior to the 2010 UK election and is underpinned by the policies of the post-1997 Labour government. Although the paper does not focus on policy explicitly, the changing political landscape and the position of the current coalition government are acknowledged. This paper is based on data collected in the UK.

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Research data

The data for the article are taken from 67 in-depth qualitative interviews carried out in the UK with employed mothers (ages of children varied from 18 months to 15 years) working both full and part-time in a diverse range of organisational contexts, occupations and at varying levels. Approximately one-third of the sample worked in administrative, service and retail occupations; based on NS SEC Analytic Class Categories (ONS, 2010), 20 women in the sample were located in categories five to seven. Interviews were carried out primarily in 2005, but some were conducted in the spring of 2006. The majority of women were working full-time; 24 of the women worked part-time hours; working hours ranged from 15 to 40 + hours. Ages ranged from 27 to 50 with the majority of participants in their early to mid-30s. The women were mainly living in London and the Southeast, and in the Northwest of England. Different family formations are present in the sample; 11 of the women in the sample defined themselves as lone parents and received varying degrees of practical and financial support from former partners.

Although the sample is not random or statistically representative, it includes women in differing circumstances from a range of backgrounds and provides some valuable comparisons (Mason, 1996) about the way women negotiate work/care boundaries and manage dual roles. Interviews focused on the workplace and access to flexible and family-friendly working practices, engagement with government policy, care strategies and means of support, as well as exploring women's employment histories and attitudes towards childcare and work. The data were coded and analysed thematically using the *Nvivo* analysis package. Coding themes were developed initially from the original aims and objectives of the project and the interview schedule, as well as existing literature. New themes were also formulated throughout analysis along the lines of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Examples of pre-planned coding categories or 'nodes' were the practical and emotional conflicts involved in managing work and care; whereas a theme developed during analysis was the positive value of work for many women. During analysis it became evident that data supported findings from previous studies which highlight: the weak nature of family policies at both government and organisational level (Hogarth, Hasluck, Winterbotham, & Vivian, 2000; McKie et al., 2001, 2002); the efficacy of employer initiatives in female-dominated occupations (Dex & Scheibl, 2002); the pervasiveness of care ideologies for working mothers (Ball, 2004; Duncan, 2002; Duncan et al., 2003); unequal division of domestic labour and organisation of care in dual earner households (Gatrell, 2004; Hochschild, 1989; Lewis, 2001); and the presence of the 'mommy-track' in many women's employment/career profiles (Lewis & Lewis, 1996). Replicating existing studies merely strengthens the need to reconceptualise the relationship between the spheres of work and care and how this impacts upon gender inequality; however, this paper is an attempt to draw something more original from the data and approach these themes from an alternative perspective.

Defining work–life balance

Although meaning and definition remain unclear (Guest, 2001), official policy and debates on work–life balance treat it as unproblematic with 'numerous attempts to

operationalise the concept' (Crosbie & Moore, 2004, p. 225). Much of the literature is quantitative and focuses on work–life balance policy in the workplace (Dex and Bond, 2005; Dex and Smith, 2002; Hogarth et al., 2000; LFS, 2003). However, objective 'one size fits all' approaches do not get at the subjective nature of these experiences (Crosbie & Moore, 2004) and the variable reactions and coping strategies of different individuals to work–care conflicts. A clear example of this is the way in which formal organisational policy aimed at promoting employee work–life balance is negated by more informal workplace cultures (Bond, Hyman, Summers, & Wise, 2002; Dex & Smith, 2002). McKie et al. (2002, p. 912) have highlighted how UK family-friendly policy views work–life balance in narrow and objective terms which do little to address the wide range of issues faced by those attempting to manage lives across two spheres. They argue that 'we live our lives in a multiplicity of time frames' and that 'the significance and the interrelations of these different temporalities of care are ignored in much policy concerning care in general and childcare in particular'. Gambles, Lewis, and Rapoport (2006) have also argued that the term work–life *balance* is problematic because work and care are not necessarily antithetical to each other, nor do they always need to be 'balanced'. In addition, the word 'balance' suggests an oversimplification of the everyday negotiations of work, care and leisure activities. 'Work-life balance' is not a fixed state but a complex and contradictory set of processes captured most effectively by qualitative research. This article will examine women's accounts of the ways they manage work/care boundaries and the complexities and contradictions involved in these negotiations.

We use the term negotiation to refer to the lived experiences of women in combining work and care. It refers both to negotiations with individuals in the private sphere (partners, grandparents and the like) and the public sphere (managers, colleagues and the like). In addition, it refers to the individual negotiations women make with themselves regarding their needs, preferences and abilities to manage their dual roles as employees and carers, fulfilling what Hochschild aptly named 'the second shift' (1989). Data from the research highlight the changeable conditions under which women negotiate the boundaries of work and the rest of their lives, and the varying positions which they adopt to do so. Accounts show that quantitative methods cannot determine objectively and definitely if individuals achieve work–life balance using checklists about work-related stress and long hours working (Dex & Bond, 2005). In this way, the attainment of work–life reconciliation should not be viewed as a fixed experience, but as the continued negotiation of a set of practices which is likely to fluctuate on a daily, weekly or on a more long-term basis due to employees' changing circumstances (McKie et al., 2002).

Conflicts between work and care

As noted by Van der Lippe and Peters (2007, p. 1) 'Many people feel torn between work and family not just because their households increasingly juggle competing responsibilities, but also because job expectations and parenting standards have become more demanding'. Women's accounts reveal the difficulties involved in negotiating the dual responsibilities of work and care, but reveal how some women discuss experiences of both conflict and balance. This variability of experience relates to the differing situations, contexts and relationships which are involved in the

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everyday negotiation of work and care. It also highlights subjective differences in women's responses to similarly problematic situations and the coping strategies they employ such as working less hours, support from partners or other family members or outsourcing care. In addition, coping strategies may also refer to the way in which women reconcile work and care psychologically – perhaps by rationalising their need to work on economic grounds. There were some largely optimistic examples of women who appeared to be managing work and care effectively, mostly because they had good support or had opted to work part-time. The following account highlights how care and work were managed via the part-time strategy and demonstrates the negotiation of work and care on both an individual and a household level:

> I like the job I am doing. It fits in well with my home life. And I think I have a good work–life balance to be honest . . . It's brilliant, it could be a lot harder and I am very aware that we have a good balance and between us, I think we manage it quite well. (Lily, 34-year-old programmer: works 25 hours)

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However, in general, accounts were more likely to refer to work–family negotiation in problematic rather than positive terms. The failure of organisational structures and care provision to adapt to women's entry into the labour market (Moss, 2001) is reflected in women's problematic accounts of their negotiation between work and family. Similar factors shape women's experiences: inflexible workplaces and long hours cultures; unsupportive partners; absence of informal support; prevailing gender and work–care structures. The interplay of such factors is variable amongst women but experiences underline the evident conflicts between work and care (see also Crompton, 2002, 2006) which impact upon individuals' quality of life and reveal the difficulties in combining dual roles. Comments such as this were fairly typical experiences for many of the women interviewed:

> I've actually felt well these past couple of weeks. But in the past I've felt really drained and I've put on weight . . . I wish we could both work less hours. It's very tiring. Sometimes you just feel like it's one lifelong struggle and you only sit down to say hello to each other on a Saturday night because we're alternating. In the week you don't get that much time. (Aileen, 41-year-old IT/business consultant: works between 40 and 50 hours a week)

Furthermore, the data highlight work–life balance as an ongoing process which is shaped by women's changing circumstances:

> And the childcare. So it's a very, it's always very sort of perilous. I don't know if your other respondents have been in this position but we do always feel we are sort of juggling the next 6 months . . . . So it is constantly changing and evolving. (Christine, 50-year-old business analyst: works 31 hours)

On the face of it, differentiating work–life balance from (im)balance and conflict are straightforward. However, in-depth analysis reveals that ascertaining experience is less clear-cut. This is evident within all aspects of work–care negotiation and women's differential reactions and coping strategies. The remainder of the article will focus on some of these ambiguities.

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Time and space outside of childcare

Within contemporary labour markets, work has become increasingly prioritised at the expense of personal and leisure time, culminating in individuals in certain sectors and occupations working longer and more intensively (Burchell et al., 2002). Due to the pressures of contemporary working experiences, work–life balance should be viewed as a general concern for employees rather than just a problem for parents and carers (Lewis, 2003; Taylor, 2001). However, within debates over work and care, the additional concern of personal time is often lost sight of (DTI, 2000a; Tyrkko, 2002; Williams, 2000). Williams (2000) argues work–life balance represents reconciliation of three spheres – 'personal time and space, care time and work time and space' – rather than just work and family. However, evidence from the data indicates how work–life balance was mostly viewed as a duality where resolving temporal disparities and demands between the two spheres of work and care was often stressful and tiring, and left no room for personal time and leisure. Women's accounts show that personal time and leisure time away from both work and family was a marginal concern which most did not even consider. Some women viewed leisure as time they spent with the children. As one 32-year-old lawyer commented: 'My me time is when I'm with the baby'. This was especially the case for several professional women who felt the need to compensate for working long hours during the week by spending all of their available free time with their children. The following comment illustrates this point:

> What we have both kind of sacrificed if anything, is that we don't really do anything. I mean I have my hair cut once every six weeks and that's a big treat – two hours without any of them. Probably once a month I will meet up with someone after work and whatever . . . So in the week we do work and the kids and that's it. But the weekends yeah we do socialise a lot, but it's generally a circle of family friends rather than our own stuff really . . . We tend to turn things down if the kids can't go. (Jenny, 38-year-old IT/ business consultant: works between 40 and 50 hours)

Often women appeared satisfied that they were achieving work–life balance if they were coping with two spheres. However, accounts show that anything additional to this is less straightforward. Some women were attempting to create some time for themselves and 'work' on their work–life balance – as one woman commented: 'I have to work hard at the leisure thing, to achieve some'. However, at times this placed additional pressure on individuals and became another demand to be met rather than a means of relaxation and personal fulfilment. This is illustrated in the following quote where Diane talks about how her partner was keen for her to take up activities outside of work and family and the difficulties this involved:

> And it's things like 'you don't do anything in the evenings'. Well it's pretty difficult because she's not in bed till about seven . . . I've now called his bluff and signed up for yoga and yoga is 7.15 till 9.15, but if he's not home or if he's not having her I'm now in the realms of 'can I get grandma to come around and baby sit for me? Can I find a sister or a brother?' The extra pressure you put on yourself to make yourself a more rounded person can ultimately end in tears . . . Is it all going to be worth it I feel. (Diane, 34-year-old advertising accounts manager: works 30 hours)

There is a tendency to assume that for working parents or carers, work–life balance is merely a matter of coping with paid work and care with no consideration of personal space and time (Dex, 2003). Government policy has focused on work–life balance as a concern for working parents (DTI, 2000b). However, the inability to move beyond work–life balance in terms of the work–care nexus leads to problems of conceptual definition and also loses sight of the implications for wider society and 'social cohesion' (Taylor, 2001) if individuals' time is limited to merely balancing obligations and responsibilities.

Problems with working hours

Working part-time is a common strategy employed to manage dual roles (Fagan et al. 1999; Hakim, 2000; Yerkes, 2009). Of the 67 women interviewed, 24 were working part-time, although this varied between 15 and 30 hours. [2] For some women, ambivalent experiences originated from the working arrangements they had adopted in order to manage caring responsibilities. Some of the women interviewed worked evening and split shifts in order to manage childcare around the availability of their husbands who generally worked full-time hours during the day. In practical terms, this resulted in shift parenting – women looked after children during the day or were on hand when children finished school and their partners took over when they went to work in the evenings. If work–life balance is defined as the effective management of care and work then such experiences represent positive accounts of work–life balance. It is evident from the data, however, that working evenings and weekends was a source of conflict for women, with significant implications for quality of life:

> Well I try to [achieve a balance], I do try you know as I say that's why I work six till nine just to try and achieve that balance to be home for them and here for them . . . Me personally probably not but on a family scale I try to balance it . . . Yeah if I had the choice to not go out at six o'clock I would gladly take it but I haven't got that choice at the minute. But what can I do you know, we're fine. (Samantha, 39-year-old mail sorter: works 15 hours)

Women working part-time in service, retail and elementary occupations often do so to manage their caring commitments. Although this type of employment enables women to 'shift parent' with partners, it is likely to offer the least flexibility and employee autonomy. Employees are generally required to work rigid hours which are dictated by the demands of their workplace – often at evenings and weekends. Although working reduced hours may result in the management of childcare, if childcare arrangements alter, employers may not be amenable to women's changing circumstances. This is illustrated in the following comments from a woman who needed to change her hours because of her partner's new shift patterns:

> I have asked for different hours but they can't accommodate me, so they're just trying to work around me at the moment . . . I'd prefer to have different hours to be honest because every week I don't know what I'm doing. (Janine, 27-year-old supermarket bakery assistant: works 18 hours)

In addition, working evenings to manage childcare results in women having a particularly long 'working day' and often end up working more hours when paid

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work hours are aggregated with time spent on care and domestic labour (Sullivan, 1997, 2000). This may be heightened further because women also take on the responsibility for co-ordinating and organising solutions when care-related problems arise (Hochschild, 1989).

Working reduced hours also appeared to be problematic for women working within professional occupations. Again, some women had opted to work less hours in order to cope with caring responsibilities, but some found they had similar workloads to full-time employees but with less time to get work done. As one woman commented: 'they pay me less but I do a full-time job'. Women have less time to do the same job and part-time workers may encounter a lack of acceptance within organisations where full-time standardised hours are the norm. Some women talked about how they were harassed by colleagues and were telephoned at home on days off; others were expected to attend late meetings outside of their working hours. This was a source of stress and frustration, and highlights how a measure or strategy aimed at promoting 'work–life' balance actually runs counter to this and becomes a source of conflict. This is reflected in the following comments from a woman who had formerly worked a four-day week but had resumed working five days:

> If you do a four day week, you end up doing, you end up just being horribly busy all the time and you end up missing things. You end up feeling under pressure. I mean I did enjoy my Fridays off but I just felt very very busy the rest of time and it was easier from the point of view of being a worker to actually do the full time hours that everyone else was doing, because the workplace was not built around being part time. (Marianne, 38-year-old lawyer: works standard full-time hours)

From the above experiences we can see that rather than enabling a better 'work–life balance' often strategies adopted to cope with dual roles such as working reduced hours may result in added stress and conflict in women's negotiation of work and family. This further highlights the ambivalent nature of 'work–life balance' and the fact that apparent solutions like part-time hours may actually become the problem. Furthermore, women's negative accounts of their working arrangements reveal differences based upon occupational level and class. For instance, women in lower level occupations worked shorter but inflexible and unsociable hours, whereas the organisational contexts of professional women often demonstrated an inability to accept and accommodate part-time hours as a credible mode of working.

Emotional versus practical reconciliation

The inadequacy of ascertaining work–life balance in objective terms is highlighted when practical measures are in place but this does not necessarily lead to emotional reconciliation. Negotiating dual roles will inevitably have negative psychological consequences such as stress if practical issues are difficult to resolve. However, some accounts indicate this to be the case even if practical problems were absent. In some women's accounts, emotional conflicts were evident because of their participation in both full and part-time work which led them to view themselves as inadequate mothers because they were unable to perform what they perceived as a sufficient

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caring role. This can be attributed to the pervasiveness of the 'male breadwinner model' and traditional gender roles (Crompton, 2002) which continue to connect women to caring roles despite their participation in paid work (Lewis, 2001; McKie et al., 2001). Some women were generally positive about 'practical work–life balance' in terms of flexible working arrangements, positive relationships with colleagues and managers, and egalitarian household and childcare strategies. However, they still talked about the emotional difficulties of negotiating the demands and boundaries of home and family which highlights the prevalence of gendered care ideologies and the way that work and care continue to be viewed as separate spheres:

> I think you need a huge amount of strength to carve out the boundaries between work and home and to get both things working quite well . . . I feel guilty about the kids when I am at work and I feel guilty about my work when I am at home. (Genevieve, 47-year-old managing editor/producer: works standard full-time hours)

This may also lead to feelings of fragmentation with regards the multiple roles and identities which individuals, and predominantly women are required to carry out within post-industrial labour markets:

> Well to be perfectly honest with you, sometimes I feel like I'm sort of short-changing her you know? And well it's the same with everything, sometimes I feel I do bits of everything. Bits of my job and bits of being a mum, and then sort of trying to fit in being a wife at the end of it. I mean she says sometimes when she's tired you know 'oh mummy I wish you were there to take me to school every day', and then I feel awful. (Catrina, 38-year-old credit policy manager: works between 40 and 50 hours)

The above accounts highlight the experiences of women who enjoyed work and wanted to work but experienced internal conflicts because gender, work and care have not been reconstituted to accommodate women's equal and unproblematic access to the labour market. Internal conflicts relating to work–family negotiation were especially evident where women demonstrated strong caring preferences and wanted to work less to spend more time at home caring for children, or in fact did not want to work at all. These women were in the minority – most women in the sample wanted to work, although this was interspersed with feelings of guilt. Some women with older children recalled their work–care histories which had involved strong caring preferences and staying at home when children were young – however, once children started school, being a full-time, stay at home mother was viewed as unnecessary. Most women did achieve some degree of practical and emotional reconciliation by working part-time. One woman commented that when she was working full-time 'I missed out on some of their issues'; by reducing her hours she now felt that she had 'done the right thing by my children'. However, some women would have preferred to stay at home at least while children were young, but this may not have been possible due to financial and career pressures.

> It feels like it's my job, it should be my job to look after her and so I'm giving away my job and not doing it all by letting someone else look after her. So torn isn't a word for it. You literally feel, 'I should be doing it full stop'. I should be there at home with her right now. And when work's stressful and then you go 'what am I playing at? Why am I here?' (Ailsa, 32-year-old associate solicitor: works standard full-time hours)

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Strong preferences to care were largely overlooked by the previous New Labour government (Duncan et al., 2003) which advocated a discourse of citizenship based upon paid work (Rake, 2001). Reframing care and reformulating gender roles would go some way to addressing work–life balance in emotional terms. For instance, making care a visible concern to be taken on board by organisations would result in a more general acceptance of reduced working hours and extended leave periods in order to fulfil caring responsibilities. However, the ideological nature of these debates highlights that systemic change at a variety of levels (state, organisations, and gender relations within families; see Crompton et al., 2007) is required in order to resolve work–life tensions in any real way.

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Overlooking the positive value of work

Amidst concerns about juggling dual roles, negative experiences of work often become the focus. The demands of the workplace are depicted as intruding excessively into personal and family life and impeding individuals quality of life (Hyman et al., 2005; Lewis, 2003). However, this loses sight of the value and sense of self-derived from participation within paid work. Care and who does it requires re-evaluation, but paid work should not be constantly cast as the villain of the piece. Spillover effects from work can even have a beneficial effect on some aspects of family life (Treas & Hilgeman, 2007). Many of the women's views and experiences highlight the positive effects which work had upon their lives in terms of stimulation, self-esteem and an alternative space. Some women talked about the social aspect of work and how paid work provided a much needed break from childcare and the isolation of the domestic sphere:

> I think it does a woman good to go out to work. I think that sometimes you need the company. There are times when you think 'I've just got to get out of this house'. You know like when they were little you know you think 'God roll on five-o-clock when I can go to work. When they've driven you up the wall and they're fighting and you just want it to stop. (May, 44-year-old mail sorter: works 18 hours)

Work appears as less demanding than caring responsibilities:

> I think its because with your first, you're stressed all the time, I was quite pleased to have three hours, you know, peace. (Pauline, 29-year-old mail sorter: works 17 hours)

Other women talked about enjoying being part of the world of work and the routine of work. Many mentioned financial independence, although this varied according to occupation and class where many women were not actually economically independent. For instance, women on lower incomes enjoyed 'having their own money'; although this was part of a one-half earner model and did not constitute a 'living wage'. Work also gave women a sense of status and an alternative identity to that of mother. As one woman commented: 'I always chose to be something other than somebody's mummy'. At the same time, some women felt work enabled them to be better mothers, both financially and 'because they [her children] get a more rounded me'. The following woman's comments illustrate the sense of exclusion, lack of 'status' and loss of identity

she experienced when she was not working. The quote also draws attention to the perceived separation of the two spheres, and the lack of value afforded to care:

> There is a kind of status element. Now that was one thing that I did notice when I wasn't working, when I took that sabbatical, I would be perhaps driving to a town or along a motorway and you would see office blocks, and you would feel excluded. I used to be in that world and now I am not. What opportunities did I not follow up and who am I? (Christine, 50-year-old business analyst: works 31 hours)

This sense of status appeared to be particularly significant for some of the lone mothers within the sample. As one woman commented: 'My life's changed in terms of the way people look at me - because I've got a job now'. Others subscribed to dominant policy discourses and felt that employment and education provided a positive role model for their children:

> It's self-achievement that does wonders for your self-esteem that you actually, and then what are you going to say to your kids? You know, I see it that when my kids struggle and they say mum, I can't do this and I can't do that, I'll say look come on, you know, when I had three of you, five and under and I still managed to get up, go to college every day, study, get all my qualifications, go and get a job, I juggled but we managed, you never went hungry, you always have fashionable clothes, so if I can do that with three of you on my own, then you can do that and there's just one of you. Now these people sitting at home on their bottoms, what are they going to tell their children? (36 year-old administrative assistant for a PCT)

By emphasising the positive aspects of paid work, there is a danger of lapsing into previous New Labour discourses which espouse paid work as the central means of achieving personal fulfilment and legitimate citizenship (McKie et al., 2001; Morrison, 2003; Rake, 2001). Furthermore, in so doing, non-market activities such as care giving are given limited consideration and status. Both McKie et al. (2001) and Crompton et al. (2007) note that women are now expected to work and subscribe to a 'work ethic', but are still principally perceived as carers and must assimilate paid work with caring, which often leads to fragmented labour market participation in terms of working hours and employment trajectories. The implications of which are gendered labour market inequalities and earning disparities across the life course (Ginn & Arber, 1998). However, many accounts from the data show the centrality of work in women's lives and the ways in which work can become a means of coping more effectively with caring responsibilities. Furthermore, the emphasis on work as a break from care underlines the status of care as *work* and the significant demands it places upon women. Having said that, the role of work should not be overstated; many of the women interviewed were working part-time in professional occupations, as well as in administrative and service roles. Work may have had many positive effects, but women working within the one-and-half model remain principal carers and economically dependent.

Discussion

When framed as an issue of work and care, work–life balance is highly gendered (Crompton et al., 2007). Women are now expected to be economically active (Lewis, 2001; McKie et al., 2001; Rake, 2001), but care continues to be viewed as a feminine

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activity which women must balance with paid work. This article has argued that the concept of work–life balance is problematic, as frequently meanings are unclear and objective measures may prove methodologically inadequate for exploring women's lived experiences (Crosbie & Moore, 2004). It has been argued that the concept of work–life balance is conceptually narrow (Gambles et al., 2006), and in both policy and research terms may merely serve as a rhetorical device which bears no relevance to lived experience.

The article highlights the subjective nature of work–life balance and the way in which experiences of conflict and balance are not fixed, but fluctuate as result of changing circumstances and coping strategies. It identifies several issues which underline the inadequacies of a 'one size fits all' approach to this issue. For instance, policy debates have tended to focus on the practical reconciliation of work and care and have ignored women's attitudes and preferences towards care (Ball, 2004; Duncan et al., 2003). This reflects a lack of consideration of the prevalence of traditional gender constructs and the interconnectedness of the public and private. A broader definition would provide more effective solutions to negotiating work–life boundaries. In order to provide those with caring responsibilities, who are invariably women, with the means to firstly manage work and care more effectively, and secondly, the potential to pursue employment progression concurrent with caring, both government and employers need to acknowledge how the two spheres connect both materially and ideologically, and respond accordingly (Williams, 2000).[3]

When focusing on carers' experiences of work–life balance, there is a tendency to view this as a duality limited to the work–care nexus with lesser consideration given to carers' access to time and space outside of childcare. Evidence from the data supports this view. In general, women were too preoccupied with care and paid work to consider personal time and leisure activities away from family responsibilities. Women's accounts highlight the difficulties involved in finding time for themselves outside of paid work and care. It appeared that personal time was something women had to 'work' on and as a result of the effort required, positive effects were often lost. Dualistic notions of work–life balance are an incomplete definition because they frame the issue in terms of the fulfilment of obligations, which has implications for individuals' quality of life, as well as wider social life (Taylor, 2001).

Other themes from the paper highlight inadequacies in potential solutions offered to resolve dual roles. For instance, the effectiveness of part-time work as a solution to work–life balance has been discussed. This mode of working is frequently represented as a central coping strategy for women juggling work and care. Research data support this view, but also illustrate how part-time working may negate how women manage dual roles as often part-time hours are uncompromising and unsociable, and organisations may be hostile to working times which deviate from standard full-time patterns. Part-time working can be an effective solution to dual roles, but negative accounts suggest many organisations still operate within the format of full-time, standard working arrangements and that attitudinal change is required. In addition, part-time work remains a double-edged sword in regards to career development and social security rights over the long term (Crompton et al., 2007; Yerkes, 2009).

The article supports a reformulation of the gender care/work dynamic and reveals the positive role played by work. Accounts highlight that going out to work may actually be a source of coping with additional responsibilities which in turn

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emphasises the significant demands of the caring role. Women benefit considerably from economic participation; however, it is easy to lose sight of this within work–life balance debates which tend to emphasise the inadequacies of work structures and formal care provision. Having said that, there is also a danger that in emphasising the value of paid work one slips into an over-prioritisation of economic activity as the key means by which individuals make any tangible contribution to society and to their own fulfilment (Morrison, 2003). Further, many women, both in professional and lower-level occupations were working part-time and supplementing the full-time earnings of their partner within an adapted male breadwinner model (Crompton, 2002; Lewis, 2001). For instance, many professional women were happy to take on a lesser working role in relation to their partner's in order to prioritise the domestic sphere and had opted for the 'mommy-track' (Lewis & Lewis, 1996). Women on lower incomes appeared to enjoy the economic and social aspects of work, but they were not economically independent and demonstrated few career ambitions. Accounts from this data show how the interplay of external and internal factors (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004), and material and ideological factors (Crompton & Birkelund, 2000) shape women's attachment and attitudes towards paid work in a much more complex manner than individual and voluntaristic choice (Hakim, 2000). It is important to reframe this debate and acknowledge women's positive attitudes to paid work; however, one must not lose sight of women's lack of progression and unequal labour market position and how they contribute to gender inequality.

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Notes

1. The research also focuses on the Netherlands as a potential model of good practice due to the standardisation of part-time employment as a means of achieving work–life balance. For a critical analysis of the Dutch model of part-time work (see Yerkes, 2009). For a more detailed discussion of these findings see Wattis et al. (2006).
2. Establishing part-time work in terms of hours is problematic. The European Framework Agreement on part-time work defines a 'part-time worker' as an employee who works less hours than someone defined as a full-time employee. However, there were women within this sample who worked less hours in comparative terms but viewed themselves as full-time employees. Defining what constitutes part-time work can be problematic and can vary when this is based on number of hours worked. This study adopts the Eurostat (2005) definition which categorises full-time working as 30 hours or more.
3. Despite rhetorical compromises such as reformulating leave arrangements (Watt, 2011); the ideological and policy stance of the current coalition government in the UK manifest in cutting public sector jobs and the shrinking of the state is likely to reverse the idea that the state has a role to play in the reconciliation of work and care (Lewis et al., 2008), and will leave women with fewer 'choices' in how they manage dual roles (Fawcett Society, 2010).

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