

"Work/life choices for senior women executives: a discourse of inclusion".

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Abstract

OVERVIEW

Much of the work-family literature has focussed on the dilemmas of balance. Key assumptions underlying the concept of work-life balance are that work and life are separate and that balance between the two spheres is sought. Work-life balance, however, represents a duplicitous discourse in which balance, while constituted as desirable, remains conceptually problematic and ideologically unchallenged.

Women's inability to achieve work-life balance has been part of a discourse of exclusion, particularly from senior management roles. Arguments for organisational changes that may be more inclusive of women's roles, serve to highlight this exclusion. Less overtly, this focus on exclusion bypasses women's negotiation of work-life choices and may even serve to reinforce unhelpful stereotypes of woman as primary caregiver or 'nurturer' in the life sphere. A counter discourse of inclusion, where balance is not a central concern, is currently absent within the gender and management research.

This paper examines the representations made by women who occupy senior management positions in public and private sector organisations. We argue that these women construct a discourse of inclusion, which displaces the myth of work-life balance, at least for senior executives and, instead, posits the concept of work-life choices. Our aim is not to deny the important contributions made through work-life balance initiatives to workforce policies and conditions. Rather we are concerned to explore senior executive women's construction of a discourse of inclusion, which reveals the multiplicity of aspirations, challenges, excitements and negotiated spaces that make up their work/life choices. We further suggest that the

experiences of these 'highly successful' women need to be included in gendered management literature.

THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE IDEAL

In order to develop a counter discourse, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual framework of the work-life balance ideal. While work-life balance is an intuitively appealing concept, it is one that has not been clearly defined. The definitions of work and life are slippery and shifting. Previously there was separation in time, geographic location and payment. We worked at a different time and place from home/life, and work activities were paid while home/life activities were not. The term 'life' has recently superseded 'home' for a variety of gender and equity reasons, such as the desire to include all organisational members in work-life initiatives, including males and those without dependents. This 'life' seems to equate to 'non-work', an expansive grouping that can include such categories as family, friends, pets, leisure, recreation, confinement to the private home site, unpaid activity, caring for children, and love-motivated activities.

Work-life balance is predicated on the separation of (paid) work from 'life'. The dichotomy is essential and explicit in the discourse and accordingly, work becomes oppositional. The ambiguity of this supposed boundary is apparent through the convention of using a hyphen i.e. *work-life* rather than *work/life* or *worklife*. This conceptual separation implies that organisational members at work are functioning in a realm that is not 'life', or even that 'work' is merely a means to experience 'life'. While this may well be the view of some workers, it ignores the interactions, satisfactions, excitements and sense of achievement individuals may gain from work and which may actually serve to cast their 'life' experience into the background. As an ideal, the work-life balance concept ignores the multiplicity of individual differences and choices.

A whole industry has been built upon the work-life conceptual framework, founded on a perceived conflict between the roles and activities required of 'work' and 'life'. Most Equal Employment Opportunity activities have become focused on work-family and work-life balance. There are audits, consultant activity, life coaches, advocates in the popular press, and academy style awards for organisations. Media reports present men as trying to address the 'imbalance' by taking on some domestic duties, or engaging in fitness activities to stave the threat of 'over-work' illnesses.

Associated with this pursuit of work-life balance, is the implication that the balance depends somewhat on an optimal distribution of time that can be monitored and altered. Time (and its understudy - money) is the commodity that is actively traded in each sphere; deals are cut, equivalences judged. Two hours of playing Monopoly with a child, can equate to four hours responding to emails. The promise is that balance, once achieved, creates contentment.

Yet even within work-life balance discussions there is evidence to suggest that the ideal does not accord with actuality. Increasingly people's ingenuity, work-life initiatives, plus academic analysis of organisational experience have revealed the permeability work-life boundaries (Clark, 2000; Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996). Studies of careers, emotional labour, sexuality, and harassment in the workplace all point to aspects of humanity (or 'life') that were previously shadows within management and organisational studies. The multitudinous research literature on organisational initiatives such as flexitime, job sharing, teleworking, also add to exposing the mythical work-life divide.

WOMEN IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT: DISCOURSE AND COUNTER DISCOURSE

A major trend within women in management research has been to highlight women's continuing under-representation in senior management. Inhospitable conditions for work/life balance in organisations, has been seen as one of the factors contributing to women's exclusion. On the one hand, the women (and men) CEOs of organisations are presented as 'having it all', having influence and remuneration at levels that symbolise high value. On the other hand, they are depicted as having to be 'overly' committed to the organisation, hence required to 'sacrifice' some aspect of life. At the same time, persuasive arguments for the inclusion of 'home/life' dimensions also imply that these aspects are accorded lesser value than the corporate world. This curious ambivalence towards executive representation is, we suggest, a product of the conceptual separation of work and life.

More specifically, research reports of women's experiences of the senior management culture have concentrated on the negative consequences for women (Marshall, 1995). Work-life balance and the 'long hours culture' have been seen as a means of excluding women from executive management positions unless they are prepared to sacrifice family to paid work. In other words, the literature has tended to maintain the work/life dichotomy and implicitly reinforce unhelpful stereotypes about women's care giving and emotional priorities.

We propose a counter discourse of work/life choices to this dichotomy by reducing 'balance' to one of the many possible choices for both women and men in the workforce, while suggesting the constant interplay between aspects of so-called work and so-called life. We suggest this counter discourse is especially appropriate for understanding executive experience. Senior management culture is one in which 'work' becomes embedded in extra-organisational activities (Sinclair, 1994); not only 'life' but 'work' depends on relationships, informality, extra-organisational networks, and the 'public' role encroaches far more on what might have been considered the 'private' world. Work deals are fostered in out-of-work hours and locations, seeming to include the supposedly personal hours and sites of home, clubs, yachts, sports fields, and so on. The engagement in these activities at leisure sites, moreover, can be constructed as positive, as work is intertwined within leisure and incursions into the home. Far from women executives working in a bleak work-life twilight, it may be that they view their lives as enhanced as they are charged by the power and excitement of negotiations in vibrant and challenging milieux. In focusing our paper on work/life choices we are concerned to examine how women who have gained inclusion in senior executive culture represent their experiences.

STUDY

Our paper draws on the perceptions and experiences, gathered through personal interviews, of 30 senior executives. Two-thirds of respondents were in the private sector and the remaining third were in the public sector. The women were predominately of Anglo-Saxon origins, three-quarters were aged 41-55, (average 46-50) and most were highly educated. Commensurate with their senior position these women were high-income earners, most earning more than five times the median income for women; half of them were also major income earners for their household. Three-quarters of the women were living in a long-term relationship, two-thirds had children, and just over half were caring for children or elderly dependents at the time of the study.

Results from our analysis of women executives' representations in this study suggest that, for some at the top of the organisation, the 'work' and 'life' divide is illusory. We suggest a counter discourse to the exclusionist underpinning of the traditional work-life balance

dichotomy, with its ideal of balancing two [ill-defined] spheres. This counter discourse is one of inclusion through choice.

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