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Abstract

Work-life balance debates continue to proliferate but give relatively little critical attention to managerial workers. This article draws on research into the experiences of managers in a local government organization revealing an intricate, multifaceted and heterogeneous picture of fragmentation, conflicting demands, pressures and anxieties. The study highlights the importance of paid work for public sector managers; the concomitant difficulties in controlling working hours for those in managerial roles and the extent to which shifts in work orientation occur during managers' careers. Research findings suggest that in practice work-life balance initiatives may only serve to increase managerial anxieties and pressures, the very opposite outcome to that intended. These themes do not feature in many work-life balance debates, which tend to assume the perfect manager who is able and willing to create a symmetrical balance between different spheres of life.

Keywords

contradictory demands on workers, managerial identities, managerial work, orientation to work, public sector managers, work-life balance

Introduction

Interest in work-life balance (WLB) continues to increase, with a plethora of initiatives designed to encourage employees to reconcile the competing demands of paid work and home life. Where earlier debates concentrated on equality of opportunity and family-friendly policies, current discourses use the language of enhanced choice, greater flexibility and the attainment of WLB (MacInnes, 2008; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). In a

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recent critique of WLB debates, Warhurst et al. (2008a) pinpoint three major shortcomings. The first relates to a persistent mismatch between employer aims for WLB and employee experiences of these approaches. The second refers to the purported distinction between 'work' and 'life'. Some commentators have critiqued this distinction as a 'ghastly and meaningless neologism' (Donkin, 2010: 14) that seeks to separate the inseparable, 'work' from 'life'. The third relates to assumptions that work 'steals' time away from employees' real lives, and that 'life' beyond paid work revolves around family or child care alone. Healy (2004) argues that WLB debates are shaped much more by the perceived benefits to the employer, which suggests that alleged worker-friendly approaches mask conflicts of interest between employers and employees behind an apparently benign, humanitarian facade (Legge, 2001).

While these critical accounts recognize the empirical and conceptual weaknesses of ongoing WLB research (see also Eikhof et al., 2007; Ransome, 2007; Roberts, 2007), managerial employees have typically been omitted from such critical considerations. This article suggests that managers' long working hours require closer exploration. It seeks to contribute to WLB debates by exploring empirical research on the experiences of managers in a UK local government council which reveals an intricate, multifaceted and heterogeneous picture of fragmentation, conflicting demands, pressures and anxieties. Many accounts of WLB have ignored managerial staff, seemingly because of the latter's privileged status in organizational life. Yet, the position of managers is particularly pertinent to WLB debates for a number of reasons.

First, managers' typical employment contract does not formally specify their hours of work and informally often incorporates expectations that they will work unlimited hours. Second, as more women move into managerial positions, issues of WLB have become especially relevant. Statutory maternity leave is a case in point. While male managers also face WLB dilemmas, these questions have traditionally been associated with 'women's employment'. One consequence of the growing feminization of managerial labour (Calas and Smircich, 1995) is the recognition that WLB is a key issue for all managers. Third, the managerial function is closely associated with the control of organizations. Managerial control covers all organizational processes such as finance, HR and marketing, and includes expectations about managers' ability to control their own lives and identities. Not only do managers have to manage other people (e.g. employees, suppliers and customers), they also have to manage themselves and report to those in senior positions who evaluate their performance. Accordingly, in managerial work, control and identity are frequently inter-linked.

This article addresses two different, competing notions of managerial control and identity construction that are both relevant to WLB. Frequently associated with the male breadwinner identity, traditional forms of control are deeply masculine and involve the privileging of paid work over home. In this perspective, managers are expected to demonstrate their total commitment to the organization by prioritizing employment above family and domestic responsibilities. Seeking to enhance career prospects and performance evaluations, managers often comply with organizational pressures to work long hours. The alternative WLB perspective currently gathering momentum advocates re-drawing the line of control in a way that facilitates a more symmetrical balance between home and work. Individuals are encouraged to resist the demands of paid work

to make more time for family and leisure. Emphasizing the value of diversity, WLB discourses comprise a different set of expectations about how employees and managers (should) exercise control over their work and family lives and construct their identities. Exhorting individuals to juggle multiple pressures in order to achieve a balance between work and home, this espoused WLB offers a new, less masculine and more rounded notion of effective workplace performance and personal fulfilment, but one which still values managerial control and compartmentalization.

Drawing on detailed empirical research, this article questions the underlying assumptions on which WLB exhortations are often based. It asks how managers cope with these potentially competing and contradictory expectations that exhort individuals to be totally committed, more balanced and more in control both at work and at home. Do these expectations ask too much of individuals, particularly when many of the problems they face may actually be more structural and cultural? Rather than provide a broad critique of current debates (see Calan, 2007; Dex and Bond, 2005; Fleetwood, 2007; Healy, 2004; Hyman et al., 2005; Warhurst et al., 2008b), the focus here is on the value of exploring public sector managers and managing in relation to WLB debates. Before presenting the empirical research, earlier writings on the changing nature of managerial work are considered, particularly in relation to WLB. The article then presents the empirical research findings, on the basis of which various conclusions are developed that highlight the contradictory nature of WLB discourses for managerial employees.

Managers and work-life balance

The 20th century saw the emergence of professional management as a function responsible for the coordination and control of organizational processes (Jacques, 1996). This development also gave rise to a view of managers as 'heroic figures' worthy of high rewards and status: a view reinforced by the political and economic environment of the early 1980s and 1990s which encouraged an enterprise culture (Burrell, 1992). Promoted under Thatcherite policies, this view still prevails in some sectors although the current recession and ongoing economic crisis (and many recent managerial scandals) lessened its impact. Constant restructuring and financial uncertainty in public sector organizations has signalled a return to more regulated managerial environments, frequently reinforced by policies such as those associated with WLB.

Over 20 years ago Scase and Goffee (1989: 179) described how middle managers had to work 'under more tightly monitored circumstances'. They depicted managers as increasingly instrumental and calculative in their approach to work; working harder under reduced promotional prospects, but also switching their attention to life outside work. Similar themes were reported by Watson (2001) (in an ethnography that inspired the title of this article) who found that managers' enthusiasm and loyalty were being eroded by greater regulation imposed by the organization. Collinson and Collinson (1997) document important changes in managers' employment from being privileged employees enjoying long-term career prospects to becoming much more disposable, insecure and at risk of delayering. Managers therefore experienced themselves as both managers and managed, controllers and controlled. Those who survived delayering were expected to work very long hours and be seen as ever present at work by their colleagues

and more senior managers. Similarly, managers were required to be in work much earlier than the rest of the workforce and to stay long after official end times. Such actions are typically construed as demonstrating managers' organizational loyalty and work commitment (Roberts, 1997).

Hence, there is now growing evidence of persistently long working hours for managers (see also Bonney, 2005; Warhurst et al., 2008b). Indeed, Park et al. (2007) suggest that senior managers and professionals are most likely to argue that work does interfere with their private lives. For managers there is a particular paradox here. Research evidence suggests that managerial workers enjoy significant discretion over their working hours but it is they who are under considerable pressure. Rather than using flexibility to fit in family and recreation, managers are reported to be opting for long working hours thereby reducing personal and leisure time (Lewis, 2003; Perlow, 1998).¹ Doing this not only heightens the centrality of work in their lives, but also raises important questions about the gendered dynamics of managerial work (Collinson and Collinson, 1997). The pressure of long working hours and high performance expectations can reinforce traditional masculine cultures in management, which separate and demarcate paid work and domestic life. Feminist analyses highlight the centrality of work and family boundaries, and the complex inter-connections between them. Martin (2002: 357) questions why the 'false dichotomy' between public and private lives goes unchallenged, referring to the 'inextricable interlocking' and interdependence of the two spheres (Pocock et al., 2008). Work and family conflict can result from expectations that managerial employees should conform to the hegemonic male model of employment which tends to disregard responsibilities faced by individuals (frequently women) outside employment (Gatrell and Cooper, 2008; Wajcman and Martin, 2002).

Epstein and Kalleber (2004) argue that it is men rather than women managers who are predominantly overachievers and workaholics. Clearly some women fit this profile, but research indicates that this is frequently seen as a male model of managerial work, such that the type of behaviour deemed appropriate for managers coincides with dominant notions of masculinity, centring on detached rationality, control and competitiveness (see Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Ford, 2006). Indeed, Watts (2009) found in the construction industry that cultural issues of visibility combined with an ethos of 'presenteeism' served to limit opportunities for women managers unless they adopted male norms and behaviours. However, she notes that even when women assume this approach, they tend to be marginalized or excluded by other (male) managerial colleagues.

Hochschild (1997) discovered that for some employees, work has become the place in which feelings of belonging, accomplishment and stimulation are engendered whereas home is associated with sheer hard work, particularly for parents of young children. Other studies report that technological developments (such as email and mobile phones) facilitate considerable permeability in boundaries between employment and home, making paid work more pervasive and possibly addictive (Pocock et al., 2008; Warhurst et al., 2008a). Enhanced possibilities of working at home as well as in the workplace tend to lead to longer working days: this reinforces the blurring of boundaries and can even make the two almost indistinguishable (Lewis, 2003).

This article builds on earlier research in relation to managerial workers, focusing specifically on the neglected issues associated with WLB for public sector managers at a time of considerable turmoil in this sector (Ford and Collinson, 2009). In recent years

additional regulatory controls in the UK public sector have served to intensify managerial accountability, particularly through government audit and accountability frameworks and performance monitoring (Collinson and Collinson, 2009; Ford and Collinson, 2009). This has resulted in work intensification for public sector managers, which in turn has discouraged their take-up of opportunities to work flexibly, to reduce working hours or to pursue any opportunities under WLB policies. Seeking to contribute to broader debates on WLB, this article now explores the research findings which examine how public sector managers experience, make sense of and seek to balance the competing pressures of work, career, long hours and personal life.

The research

This study took place within a large UK district council. In the public sector broadly, and local government in particular, employees are more likely to have access to a wide range of flexible working arrangements. Yet take-up by managers of opportunities to work flexibly or reduce hours (or to seek any opportunities under WLB policies) is extremely low (Dex and Smith, 2002; Perlow, 1998; Wacjman, 1998).² Indeed, the trigger for access to such policies is frequently related to grade of employee. Managerial employees are typically expected not only to have considerable discretion over their working time but also to work longer hours and demonstrate high levels of commitment and visible presence in the organization.

As the study was inductive in nature, a qualitative in-depth approach was adopted (following Cassell and Symon, 1994; Mason, 2002). The research sought to explore how senior and middle managers within the Council described their experiences of work in relation to the rest of their lives. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured format, which sought to explore managers' biographical accounts of their working lives, career progression and how they made sense of their work. The research is based on interview data with 25 managers. The interviewees were drawn from three levels of management within the council, as follows:

- (1) Executive directors (senior managers, including five men and one woman)
- (2) Heads of service (middle managers, including six men and four women)
- (3) Principal officers (first line managers, including five men and four women)

Interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and were conducted within the Council offices. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and participants were provided with a brief overview of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Transcripts were analysed through close reading and re-reading, resulting in the emergence of several related themes repeatedly highlighted by the managers. The three overriding themes included the significance of notions of leadership (and the contradictory claims of macho and post-heroic approaches); professional and managerial career progression; and explorations of work in relation to the rest of their lives. Earlier articles have addressed the first two themes (Ford, 2006, 2010; Ford and Collinson, 2009) and the focus of this article is the third theme which explores how these managers think about work in relation to the rest of their lives.

Findings

Three major WLB themes emerge in the findings which are referred to below as *prioritizing work*; *addicted to work*; and *rebalancing work and life*. Each theme is characterized by internal tensions that reflect a complex inter-relationship between the experiences, roles and expectations through which these managers construct and describe their work and non-work lives. Respondents drew on different, often competing and at times contradictory discourses to construct and describe their lives. There were clear indications of both collision and slippage within and between the ways managers used contradictory and fragmented accounts of their working lives and broader experiences, including the complex and dynamic inter-relationships between paid work and home.

Prioritizing work

All but one of the managers interviewed described how they arrive at work very early (often by 6.30am) and stay until 7pm or beyond, with most reporting their average working week as between 50 and 70 hours. Meetings were regularly held in the early morning or evening – particularly those involving local councillors, and this seemed to be an accepted part of managerial working patterns. The exception was one of the most senior managers, Kevin, an Associate Chief Executive. Seeking to portray himself as a role model for other managers, Kevin described how he sought to develop a better balance:

I think this whole thing around controlling your work-life balance, making sure you don't work yourself to death, not being burnt out, taking responsibility for your own behaviour ... er ... people 'boss watch' don't they? ... so people see me coming into work in the morning, they see me going home at night ... going off to play squash at lunchtime and I hope that they think that, 'Well, if Kevin is playing squash at lunchtime it's okay for me to play squash at lunchtime', instead of you know, 'Oh I mustn't go home before seven o'clock because there's a light still on in the boss's office.'

While Kevin portrayed himself as exerting control over how he spent his working week, his example was exceptional; most colleagues did not follow his lead. Others described how they adopted a work pattern that was long ingrained within the culture of the Council. For example, the Chief Executive was always at work by 7am and rarely left the building before 7pm or 8pm. Trudi (Director of a front-line service) attempted to justify long working hours in a different way:

I'm very conscious that I earn three times as much as a middle manager – it's a lot of money and the Council expects a big commitment for that – they expect to be able to ring you up in the middle of the night and for you to be able to do whatever needs to be done and I think that's a fair enough part of the deal, really. So, I think you forego a certain element of WLB.

Trudi describes feeling guilty if she eases off the pressure at work, and in discussing life outside work, she expresses her relief that her partner is at home full time, adopting what she portrays as the housewife role. Trudi outlines how she limits or avoids 'outside' influences encroaching on her working life, and explores ways in which she copes with the demands of a director-level role:

My family are very clear about supporting me as the breadwinner and have been for ... my husband is a writer and that doesn't make money, generally speaking, as you'll be aware and ... many years ago, we decided that it was better for him to be the homemaker and stay at home, so I have a wife and I couldn't do the job without it.

Motivated by career ambitions, Trudi maintains that in order to secure hierarchical progression, she needs the equivalent support of a (surrogate) wife while she adopts what could be seen as a traditionally masculine approach to employment. As the family breadwinner, Trudi conforms to the traditional gendered role of management which precludes opportunities for much involvement in family care and other activities. Trudi's work demands create knock-on effects for her life outside the Council: holidays have to be postponed and long hours are deemed necessary as work priorities take precedence. Recent research suggests that a growing percentage of women in UK employment are now working as family breadwinners (National Equality Panel, 2010).³

The prioritizing of employment has become a taken for granted practice for most managers in this organization. Working extended hours at weekends and not taking holiday entitlements has become the norm. Work for managers constitutes a primary component of their lives, and a key aspect of their identity. This prevailing work identity for managers who are family breadwinners reinforces the compulsion for long working hours which in turn reaffirms their identity. Hence, the privileging of work can become all-absorbing and self-reinforcing, with some managers thriving on the challenges, leading to work rituals that encourage obsessive or workaholic practices (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001).

This culture of long working hours is both a feature and a source of frustration in many of the accounts. It relates not only to the inescapable pressures of working as a manager but also to a set of rituals symbolizing a senior position in the organization. In some cases 'presenteeism' tends to be combined with a deliberate strategy of avoiding family-related chores at home. Managers preferred to work longer hours in the office rather than take on family responsibilities at home. During informal discussions with the management team, some described how they chose to stay at work into the early evening so as to avoid having to participate in bathing the children and reading bedtime stories. Hence this privileging of work and downplaying of domestic responsibilities illustrates a highly gendered orientation to both spheres of life. The whole notion of managers avoiding family demands and at the same time performing a set of rituals are so interwoven that it is difficult to separate them (Ford, 2006; Hochschild, 1997). These were a source of anxiety for a number of managers who felt unable to adopt more socially acceptable working hours. Some felt compelled to work longer hours and adopt the patterns they thought were expected of their role in the Council. Don (Deputy Director of a front-line service) depicted his life as one of constantly having to keep an eye on the next issue: 'I sometimes feel that I'm here, there and everywhere and once I've finished here it's like going to bed and you're back at work, and then the week's gone and where are you?'

By contrast, Timothy (Team Leader) explains how he seeks to delineate work and family time and where his domestic life has taken second place to work which has become 'the sole purpose of my being' during the week. He defends this approach by arguing that his recent promotion will ultimately benefit the family:

At the end of the day, it is going to be more demanding Monday to Friday, but I will have the weekends for the kids and that and I think ... what you're doing there is you're preparing for them in later life, so they can have the funds to be able to do things that you want to do.

Timothy focuses exclusively on his managerial responsibilities during weekdays, saving family life commitments for the weekend. Clearly, he can only achieve this because of the carer support provided at home by his partner. His account of ever greater presence at work accords with stories of other managers in this study. While only a few managers admitted that work is more satisfying than home, many claimed to be highly career-driven and to derive considerable satisfaction from immersion in their work.⁴ Nevertheless, this compulsion carries with it certain expectations imposed by the organizational culture of long-hours working. In its extreme form, work had taken over the lives of many managers.

Addicted to work

Work addiction was evident in some managers' accounts and these were considerably more complex than a basic dichotomy between work roles and home life. Some managers commented that the presumed divide between work and home was not only artificial and overly simplistic, but also a source of considerable tension. Alec (a Director of a service maintenance function) describes work as fundamental to his life, stating that:

I wouldn't be without it at the moment. If I do end up with days off at home I always have work to do at home even if I'm on holiday so within certain parameters I'm a bit of a workaholic.

Many respondents described a sense of guilt if they ever leave work early and a need to compensate for this by bringing work home with them. This guilt reinforces managers' commitment to work excessively long hours. The primacy placed on work appeared in many of the interviews, but for some this was especially obvious at earlier stages in their careers. James argues that he has arrived at a more realistic understanding of how the service would keep going even if he were not there to manage:

I used to be a great one for ... I didn't like to take two weeks' holiday in the 1990s 'cos I thought it would be too long and it would all fall to pieces, and you think, I'll leave my phone number where I am and I'd phone in during the two weeks away.

He referred to the mentorship of a colleague who advised him that, 'If I die tomorrow, my service will still carry on, whether I've put in 70 hours a week or 35 hours a week, I'll do what I can in the time available but no one's indispensable and you might think you are but things will still carry on.' Interestingly, despite this rhetoric of avoiding excess working hours and ensuring that he takes time for his family, James described his regular attendance at evening meetings and taking work home at the end of the working day.

The theme of work addiction was also evident in Robert's (Service Director) description of the impact of a shock in his family. His daughter developed a chronic health condition which forced him to re-evaluate what was important in his life. This had a

fundamental impact on how he interpreted work and career. In the past, work was his *raison d'être*, but family circumstances had changed that; as he asserts, 'It's meant that work has become quite different to me because of the importance of her illness.'

He described the high level of stress he felt while working as a senior manager and how in the six years since his daughter became ill he has taken stock of the centrality of work in his life, and has 'got rid of stress and started to become more realistic about what I can achieve'. He adds, 'Work is still important, but it's only work.' At this point in the interview, Robert appeared to be slightly uncomfortable with what he was saying, as if he was trying to convince himself that work was less important, and that he could be more relaxed about its impact on him. He added:

Well, I sometimes have to remind myself, but you know, because I can get obsessed, but I'm getting better at not being obsessed, and I probably have been a bit obsessed in my first ... I've been here four years now, so I'm learning to back off a bit ... I'm trying to teach myself to.

The competing and contradictory responsibilities of social and family life together with the obsession with work-related responsibilities illustrate some of the tensions between various identities: as senior managers and corporate directors aware of the co-existence of macho-management and post-heroic discourses; as managers ambitious for career development; and as parents and partners wishing to harmonize work and family life. It is also important to note the heterogeneity among the managers (irrespective of gender): some seek to avoid childcare and other domestic responsibilities, others actively participate in them, and yet others see their role as a combination of the two. Despite the protestations of some respondents, work continued to be hugely significant in their accounts. However, certain shifts were also apparent in the ways in which managers reported their work patterns at different stages of their careers and lives. Responses illustrated fluidity in relation to the perceived prioritizing of work or other factors in their lives.

Rebalancing work and life

The theme of rebalancing work and life emerged within many accounts. Stuart (Director of Support Services function) depicts numerous opportunities during his life to experiment with his orientation to work and other elements of his life. Stuart described how he chose to study at a university far from his hometown, in which he could re-create who he was and how he would be seen by others. He portrayed his recent involvement in the delivery of a programme supporting the personal development of early-career graduates; a role which he suggested was more fulfilling and meaningful than his substantive director role. This pleasurable experience seemed remote from the mundane and 'grinding' set of managerial responsibilities that he routinely faces. In terms of WLB, Stuart indicates a shift away from prioritizing work and towards life outside:

I think, I detect from what I've said I'm at a point in my life when I'm thinking ... yes, it matters, and yes I can bring a lot to it, but I don't have to bring all of me to it, but actually nobody is going to ... thank me for killing myself doing this job.

Similar periods of work overload were also highlighted by James (Assistant Director), especially in regard to his previous roles before he had his family:

I know that during the 1990s there were times when I'd be so dog tired that I knew I wasn't making the right decisions... or at least I wasn't thinking clearly enough before making a decision, and I've seen a couple of people who I knew when they got promoted... who either had full nervous breakdowns or turned to the bottle.

James describes how the birth of his children made him re-think the amount of time he spent at work, although he was at pains to point out that 'I still put in a lot more hours than I'm paid for'. He speculated about what his working week will be like when his children are older. Hence, not all the managers in the study sought to avoid their parental responsibilities, and yet James portrays his working week as involving long hours and at least two evening meetings per week.

This shifting, somewhat ambivalent orientation to work and career also appears in Mike's reflections. He reveals that in recent years he has spent too much time working to the detriment of his life outside work. The ability to access emails at home has exacerbated this situation, and yet he suggests:

If you've got a long-term relationship and if you've got children, then it puts some things into perspective and makes you realize actually this is more important. Nobody has on their grave they were a great efficient manager – it's about relationships with people, with family, with friends... there's nothing about work, ever.

In a similar vein to Robert, Stuart refers to a chastening experience that has had a fundamental effect on how he now approaches his managerial role:

At the lowest point a few years ago, the lowest points were one of... there was almost something self-destructive about it, that I was going to kill myself doing it, I was going to work and work and work until I made myself ill ... I think there was a point like an epiphany, it was like... well, if I go on like this it's going to end badly.

Robert describes this change as a turning point and a re-orientation away from work. He now refuses to allow work to encroach so heavily on his family and personal life. This had happened only in the last six months, and there was a continuing tension behind his optimism of work getting back to its 'rightful place' – there is a looming fear that this role is all he has to look forward to in the 12 or so years until he retires. Significant complexity characterizes these managers' work and non-work orientations and identities. Many competing accounts occur in Mike, Robert, James and Stuart's descriptions of their work, family and social responsibilities; these co-exist and are very much more in tension than separate and parallel. This finding contradicts much writing on the strict boundaries between 'work' and 'life'.

Managerial responsibilities are depicted as central to many interviewees' lives and yet a number of descriptions of other significant responsibilities also featured strongly in their accounts, encouraging some to re-evaluate what was important to them. Within the transcripts a shift emerged away from a work orientation and towards other influences

which could reflect the complexity of the life and career stages of these managers. Births of a child or children; chronic illness of relatives; breakdown in relationships at work and at home; emotional exhaustion and stress-related illnesses and absences; and not being promoted or selected for a job they thought was theirs, all featured in managers' accounts and caused some to challenge their view of the perfect and ideal manager.

For some, this culminated in spending more time at home with the family, in their caravan at weekends, on holidays or elsewhere, and less time at work. Their work responsibilities diminished in importance, and were competing with more pressing out-of-work responsibilities. For others, their prioritization of work collided with disillusionment in employment; prompting feelings of insecurity and anxiety and dreams of escaping from the clutches of the organization. Their accounts portrayed an intricate, multifaceted picture of conflicting demands, pressures and concerns, which rarely feature in WLB debates. Given the complex, at times ambiguous and clearly heterogeneous responsibilities of the managers, the unidimensional portrayals of WLB debates seem to miss the point. WLB is often held up as an ideal to be aspired to and yet there is little research evidence that indicates the considerable variation in permeability, imbalance and fragmentation between work and rest of life issues. For some managers, fluidity and flexibility between work, family and recreation are crucial to their lives and yet for others, clear boundaries and demarcations are equally vital.

Discussion

The foregoing findings highlight the dilemmas and paradoxes for managers when WLB discourses are simply bolted on to work processes with little or no adjustment in organizational structures, cultures, practices or expectations. Pressures on managers to work longer hours are typically growing in the UK public sector, particularly as a result of intensified regulation and the reform agendas of successive governments. In this context, discourses seeking to promote WLB seem to be fundamentally at odds with contemporary workplace processes. Furthermore, the research suggests that managerial identities are continually mediated by these increasingly disciplined, institutionalized circumstances of present-day life. Many managers have absorbed WLB as a core element of their identities to the extent that it operates as a form of control over their lives both within and outside work. Managers frequently feel under pressure to be 'balanced' both at work and at home.

This research therefore tends to confirm one of the dominant themes in the WLB literature, namely the tensions that can occur between work and personal life. These have long been a topic of interest within organization studies (Eby et al., 2005; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Powell and Greenhaus, 2006). Research evidence that is consistent with these reported findings identifies that it is those workers who have perhaps the greatest degree of discretion, control and flexibility over their working hours who tend to be under considerable pressure. Rather than seeking to use flexibility to fit in family and recreation, managers are using the time to work longer rather than fewer hours in ways that exclude personal life and leisure time (Lewis, 2001, 2003; Perlow, 1998).

This research contributes to WLB debates by highlighting the significance of work for managers; the associated difficulties in controlling working hours and the extent to which

shifts in orientation to work occur during managers' careers. These findings add further conceptual thought and empirical evidence to the debate, and propose a new direction for further research and theorizing. The study has described the multiple and complex ways in which managers view employment in relation to the rest of their lives, highlighting three notable features. First, employment is clearly an important part of managers' lives and identities and their accounts are replete with ways in which they use work to reinforce their sense of a 'successful' and 'professional' self. At the same time, work pressures in public sector organizations have intensified to the extent that many managers report an inability to catch up with increasing responsibilities without working excessive hours and allowing employment to dominate other parts of their lives. Refusing to work long hours may well be career limiting.

Second, working excessive hours is something that a number of respondents seek to redress. Yet, they acknowledge that re-balancing work and home is particularly complicated for those in managerial positions where the workload is high and reputation is important. Organizational structures, cultures and practices have not significantly been modified or relaxed to incorporate and facilitate such re-balancing. Third, there are emerging differences in managerial orientations to work and life outside. There are numerous shifts in the ways that work remains central to managers' lives. These shifts occur as managers face a range of influences, some relating to disillusionment with employment or with threats of more job losses that reinforce insecurities. Others relate to a more demanding job at work, with life outside employment taking a less significant role. Still others refer to changes in family circumstances, such as family illnesses, retirement of their spouse, or differing stages of development in their children which requires them to be either more or less available to the family.

WLB exhortations are frequently identified as emancipatory policies through which employees are afforded opportunities to work flexibly and to retain control and autonomy over their responsibilities both inside and outside work (Visser and Williams, 2006). Yet, this does not fit with the accounts provided by the managers within this study. The managers describe work pressures that exert greater control over managerial practices and identity. In this context WLB debates appear to operate as a monitoring device. Managers are evaluated and judge themselves on their ability to balance multiple, competing and contradictory pressures at work, at home, and in their leisure and pleasure pursuits. Paradoxically, it seems that WLB discourses have intensified the pressure on managers to strive to be the perfectly balanced human being.

This raises questions about whether WLB initiatives are seductive ploys adopted by employers seeking to lure employees into believing that it is possible to create a balance between work and life. Consistent with Pocock et al.'s (2008) research, this article questions whether such a balance is achievable. The managers constantly measure themselves against an image of 'the ideal manager'. Traditionally, this meant a manager who maximizes his or her time at work. With the influence of WLB, the notion of the perfect manager has changed. It is now someone who is also expected to be an ideal partner; the perfect parent; and the super fit sports enthusiast who enjoys a fulfilling life outside work. This article indicates that WLB can become another form of control over managers' lives, and one that many have internalized. The search to achieve this balanced, ideal manager not only restricts managers' discretion, but may also create additional anxieties

as managers can never hope to live up to these idealized, multiple and balanced identities as perfect parent, partner, friend, colleague, worker and manager.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the reductive nature of current WLB debates that are built upon certain presumptions and prescriptions about what are 'work' and 'life' (Pocock et al., 2008). WLB debates seem to presume that life goes on away from the physical place of employment, at which only work takes place (Warhurst et al., 2008a). The study suggests that 'life' goes on at work and 'work' goes on at home. Debates about WLB have tended to construct artificial boundaries within people's lives. While workers themselves may also compartmentalize their 'public' and 'private' lives in order to construct a sense of control outside employment (Collinson, 2003), findings in this article reveal that such boundaries can be exaggerated. What exist are embodied human beings with multiple identities that are alive both at the physical places of work and outside.

This study also highlights the value of researching managers in relation to WLB. It reveals that WLB discourses can generate considerable anxiety in managerial work (see also Ford, 2006, 2010). Anxiety is one consequence of managers seeking to protect their employment status and to cope with their burgeoning workloads. The research suggests that WLB discourses can operate as a form of internal control over managers' lives, as another performance pressure to prove they are a 'balanced' manager. Hence, WLB concerns can increase anxiety when managers believe they cannot deliver the expectations of being the perfect manager/parent/partner.

However, the disciplinary nature of WLB discourses was partly offset by other managerial interviewees who criticized the contradictory nature of these exhortations. In the context of intensified work pressures and the significant erosion of work/home distinctions, this research suggests that WLB discourses are fundamentally at odds with increasing expectations to work ever longer hours. WLB initiatives tend to be bolted on, rather than serve to challenge the key determinants of the current obsession with long-hours working that sustains work-life imbalances in the first place. In the context of hierarchical and career structures that remain largely unchanged, WLB policies embody contradictory expectations about workplace performance and domestic orientation. This article found that these two competing views about the relationship between 'work' and 'home' were simultaneously embedded and in tension in everyday practices. The contradiction here is that work, home and other responsibilities are now so often inter-connected that attempts to separate and compartmentalize them are highly unlikely to be successful and may even be counter-productive. Managers' multiple roles and responsibilities were present in kaleidoscopic ways in their accounts, with elements of work, social, family and other interests all colliding and intermingling at different points and in differing patterns depending on career and life course stages (Ford, 2006; Ford and Collinson, 2009).

In contemporary WLB debates these tensions arising from conflicting demands, pressures and anxieties are not given sufficient consideration. For these managers, tension and contradiction are ever present but in differing ways, reflecting multiple responsibilities. Some managers seek to avoid the family completely and immerse themselves in their working lives. Others express feelings of guilt at combining work and family life.

This guilt emerges while at home spending time with the family (feeling they should be working) and when at work (feeling they should be spending more time with their families). Several managers justify the primacy they give to work with promises of a better life for their families as a consequence. Others present work as an addiction, as something they live and breathe and without which they would be bereft. Still others see work as an encumbrance and something they would give up if they could, so as to spend more time on interests outside work. The notion of work-life *balance* does not exist at all for a number of managers because they are obsessed by work and career progress. For some, work is a drain on their lives and they need it to change. A series of jolts from life-changing events caused a number of managers to move in one direction or the other: either towards greater levels of involvement with their family and social lives or with more attention to work and longer hours.

Furthermore, managers frequently take personal responsibility (or blame) for their actions rather than seeking structural or other causes for the high volume of work and related time pressures. As a consequence, managers' unrealistic workloads go unchallenged as they seek more creative ways to improve their output or manage their time more effectively. Yet, WLB issues do not operate in a vacuum. Neither are they simply issues for individuals to address and resolve. To have a significant impact, WLB would need to challenge the workplace pressures endemic in traditional forms of control, performance evaluation and career structures. Hence, rather than WLB creating opportunities for managers to exercise greater control over when, where and how they undertake their multiple responsibilities, these debates can, paradoxically, reinforce the pressure on managers, the very opposite outcome to that intended.

In sum, these findings highlight the importance of WLB debates for managerial work. They reveal how, despite claims to be emancipatory, WLB can generate further pressure on managers, assuming the idealized manager who is able to create and maintain a symmetrical balance between different spheres of life. Managers are often expected to manage not only the workers who report to them, but also their own families, homes, relationships and leisure time, as well as the tensions between these potentially conflicting responsibilities. These conclusions highlight the potential value of further research on WLB in relation to managers, management and managing. Indeed in the current climate of austerity particularly within the UK public sector, the paradoxes and contradictions facing managers (as well as other employees) with regard to WLB are only likely to intensify.

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Notes

- 1 Lewis (2003) argues that this has been the case for some considerable time for groups of low paid workers – an issue supported by Pocock et al. (2008). Low paid workers have had little choice but to work long hours, frequently in more than one job, in order to make a living.
- 2 Recent research into professional, managerial and other 'knowledge workers' suggests that WLB policies for those groups may not be deemed to be necessary anyway, given the likelihood of access to considerable flexibility and support (Warhurst et al., 2008b).

- 3 Latest figures from the National Equality Panel (2010) show that the number of breadwinner wives has increased to 19 per cent, equal to around 2.7m women, with a further 25 per cent earning the same as their partner.
- 4 This emerges also in recent studies of professionals and managers at work (see Hochschild, 1997; Lewis, 2003).

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