

# Tipping the Balance: The Problematic Nature of Work–Life Balance in a Low-Income Neighbourhood

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## **Abstract**

The article attempts to locate the contested notion of work–life balance within the context of global trends and recent policy developments. It describes a small-scale qualitative study of work–life balance as it is experienced within a low-income neighbourhood in the UK. The study findings are used to inform reflections on the powerlessness experienced by many working parents seeking to accommodate family life with paid employment; and on the nature of the calculative responsibilities that are imposed upon working parents by recent shifts in social and labour market policy. It is contended that policy makers should tip the balance of the work–life equation from the current preoccupation with business interests in favour of wider social responsibility concerns.

## **Introduction**

‘Work–life balance’ is a protean term. It can signify at one extreme a managerial strategy designed to maximise employee performance (Employers for Work–life Balance, 2006), or it may at the other portend an opportunity to re-evaluate the ethical basis of social welfare provision in post-industrial capitalist societies (Williams, 2001). This article will identify the key controversies that surround the idea of work–life balance, before outlining findings from a study of the experiences of work–life balance in a low-income neighbourhood in the UK. The article will draw on that study in order: first, to discuss the relative powerlessness of many workers and the inherent unpredictability of their experiences of work–life balance. Second, it will discuss the ambiguous ways in which social policies are calibrated to achieve work–life balance and the particular difficulties experienced by working parents in calculating how to combine paid employment with family life. The conclusion will argue for an approach based not on the business case, which will invariably tip the balance in favour of economic productivity, but upon the needs of households, which would tip the balance in favour of social responsibility.

## Contexts

Earlier notions of work–family reconciliation and family-friendly employment policy were ostensibly driven by concerns for gender equality, but the policy agenda has lately been firmly concerned with notions of ‘work–life balance’ and more generally with labour market behaviour (Lewis, 2002). The work–life balance agenda lies at the intersection of two secular trends: one, a shift in global political and economic orthodoxies from a Keynesian demand-side approach to monetarist supply-side policies; the other, social-demographic shifts associated with a tendency in post-industrial capitalist societies toward a decline of the male breadwinner household and a corresponding rise in both dual-earner and lone-parent households. Work–life balance is therefore set in the general context of labour market policies concerned with maximising labour flexibility and labour market participation, and policies aimed at adapting social welfare provision to the changing dynamics of the household economy (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 2002).

In the specific UK context, the New Labour government has repeatedly indicated a concern with policies intended to make it easier to combine paid employment with the responsibilities of family life (Department for Trade and Industry, 2000, 2005; Home Office, 1998). This has entailed explicit employment measures relating to rights to maternity and paternity leave and pay; provision for parental leave; and a right for parents with young children to request flexible working arrangements. More generally, the government promoted a national Work–Life Balance Campaign by which it has sought voluntary compliance by employers with the principles of a work–life balance approach (Department for Trade and Industry, 2001). The wider context of these initiatives, however, has been a triumvirate of ‘joined-up’ policy initiatives addressing labour market participation, income maintenance and childcare provision, respectively.

### Welfare-to-work policies

On the premise that paid employment is the best remedy for family poverty (Department of Social Security, 1998), the government created ‘New Deal’ programmes intended to compel certain unemployed groups to engage with the labour market, while also enabling and encouraging other groups, such as lone parents, disabled people and the partners of unemployed people, to do so. Engagement with such programmes has since become compulsory for most welfare recipients of working age and there are proposals for extending this (Department for Work and Pensions, 2006). The approach is consonant with a wider European Employment Strategy, which sets targets for labour market participation (European Commission, 1997, 2002, 2006).

### Policies to ‘make work pay’

Complementing the ‘stick’ of welfare-to-work has been the ‘carrot’ of a national minimum wage and a new system of tax credits (that replaced previously

existing means-tested in-work supplements for low-paid workers with families). The national minimum wage was symbolically significant, but its impact was limited since it was initially set at a very modest level. Despite more recent increases, it is currently barely half the national average wage (Department for Trade and Industry, 2006; Exell, 2001). The new tax credit system is substantively more important, not least because it has had a significant redistributive effect and has played some part in reducing or containing the number of children who live in poverty in the UK (Hills and Stewart, 2005). Subject to a means test, the Child Tax Credit is available to all families with children, and the Working Tax Credit is available to all households in which one or more adults are in full-time employment. The original precursor of the tax credit scheme had been introduced in 1973 by a Conservative government which, faced by a growing problem of in-work poverty, elected for a selective wage supplement in preference to an increase in the universal family allowance (Dean, 2002b). At that time, the only precedent for such intervention had been the ‘Speenhamland system’ of poor relief introduced in parts of England in the late eighteenth century, when local magistrates used public funds to supplement starvation level wages that were then in payment to farm labourers: it was a system abhorred at the time by free-market liberals who contrived eventually to have it swept away under the more rigorous Victorian Poor Law (de Schweinitz, 1961). That something so like the Speenhamland system should have become attractive to free-market liberals in the post-industrial age is indicative of a supply-side economic orthodoxy that no longer has need of a reserve army of labour in order to keep wages low and which assumes that low-paying employers must be enabled to compete in a global market economy.

### **A national childcare strategy**

This was aimed at increasing the level of daycare provision, the expansion of early years education, the promotion of after-school clubs, the provision of childcare tax credits to offset the cost of registered childcare facilities, and special provision in deprived areas through the ‘Sure Start’ scheme. While the level of childcare provision has improved, it remains beneath that in other Western European countries (Daycare Trust, 2005). And, while there are now plans to roll out the provision of Sure Start centres throughout the country to provide for children under four years old and their parents, evaluation studies have suggested that the integrated services delivered by the Sure Start scheme have not necessarily benefited the very poorest families (Clarke, 2006; National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2005). It has been argued that the package of early childhood measures developed under New Labour was driven less by an understanding of the needs of young children and rather more – once again – by a preoccupation with the economic supply side, with a desire to improve the effectiveness of early years educational experiences, to limit the adverse effects which poverty was assumed

to have upon productivity in later life, and to enable adults more easily to combine paid employment with parenting (Moss, 2000).

From the policy makers' perspective, the promotion of work–life balance may be seen as a response to global pressures upon the structure and functioning of labour markets on the one hand and shifting patterns of household formation and in the age-mix of the population on the other (for example, Scharpf and Schmidt, 2000). It is necessary that post-industrialised economies should maximise the labour market participation of the working-age population, while recognising that certain labour market sectors will be characterised by work that is low-paid and/or insecure. From the employers' perspective, work–life balance may be seen as a means of maximising labour-force productivity (Bloom *et al.*, 2006; Dex and Smith, 2002). In a competitive economic environment, employers would like workers to be 'flexible' (which may entail part-time, irregular or anti-social working hours) and plentiful (because this helps keep wages low). To this extent, employers are likely to welcome anything that national governments do to help workers juggle their lives around their jobs or that enables those who might not otherwise have been able to work to do so. Such intervention assists the supply of low-skilled, low-paid labour required in service industries and throughout the labour market periphery. More particularly, however, in the high-skilled, high-paid core of the post-industrial economy, employers may be willing selectively to embrace the work–life balance agenda for themselves, since there is a 'business case' for doing so. Employers may be keen, for example, to offer concessions in order to retain the services of professionally skilled mothers, especially if the employer has previously invested in their training and careers (Dean, 2002a).

In one sense, work–life balance is about very different kinds of flexibility: the flexibility demanded by employers and the flexibility required by households. The balance of power between employers and households is such that it is households that must by and large adapt their survival strategies to accommodate the demands of the labour market. Richard Sennett has argued that the flexible nature of labour processes in the 'new' capitalism is inherently corrosive: not just because of 'the all too familiar conflict between work time and time for family . . . [but because] . . . the qualities of good work are not the qualities of good character' (1998: 21). His implication is that the changing nature of the work ethic puts new pressures on the nature of our caring relationships. Social policy has long played a critical role in mitigating the corrosive effects of the wage labour process, while also perpetuating particular forms of (patriarchal) household and shaping the relationship between work and home (Pascall, 1986). The debate about work–life balance encapsulates the ways in which these aspects of social policy are changing. This is about more than the direct regulation of terms and conditions of employment. At issue are the boundaries between the market and the household in terms of sources of income on the one hand and sources of care on the other.

Existing research would indicate clearly enough that household strategies are evolving to adapt to more flexible working patterns (Harkness, 2003) and that generally both employers and employees are supportive of work–life balance initiatives ((Hogarth *et al.*, 2003). In practice, however, there are indications that awareness of provision to facilitate work–life balance among employees and the willingness of employers to implement such provision remains inconsistent and often constrained (for example, Yeandle *et al.*, 2002). Noticeably, while employers may be willing to accommodate flexible working hours and pay generous childcare subsidies in the case of highly valued and highly productive technical and managerial staff, such policies do not necessarily apply to low-skilled and essentially expendable workers at operational or local branch levels (Dean and Shah, 2002; Hyman *et al.*, 2005).

That work–life balance is a matter of bargaining power has been acknowledged, for example, in a summary report upon the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s extensive Work and Family Life Programme, though the research funded under that programme did not specifically focus on low-income households (Dex, 2003: 73). The study reported in this article, in contrast, was concerned with the experiences and expectations of work–life balance in a low-income neighbourhood. It sought to investigate local perceptions of the triumvirate of policy initiatives referred to above. In the prevailing climate, what effects might the pressure on working parents to engage with the labour market seem to be having on power relations between employers and employees at a local level? Can low-paid jobs, subvented by tax credits, effectively meet local aspirations and contribute to the regeneration of a low-income neighbourhood? When a more intensively commodified and professionalised nexus of childcare provision is visited upon a neighbourhood, to what extent is this valued by working parents?

### **The study<sup>1</sup>**

The neighbourhood chosen for the study was centred on an inner-London housing estate. In comparison to the national average, the estate had a relatively low level of employment participation but a high proportion of households with dependent children, and very high proportions of lone-parent households, households in social housing and Black/minority ethnic households. The neighbourhood has been the focus of several urban regeneration initiatives, including a Sure Start project. The aim had been to explore what residents understood by, or expected from, ‘work–life balance’ and whether they could substantively identify what might make for a better work–life balance.

The study entailed in-depth interviews with 42 economically active working-age parents: 35 women and seven men. It was decided that the sample should include a small number of men: while the work–life balance agenda has greater immediate salience for mothers than for fathers, key aspects of

the gender dimension can only be explored by considering men's as well as women's understandings and experiences. The sample also included a small number of participants (six) who were currently unemployed but who had past experience within the labour market and were currently seeking employment. Two participants described themselves as disabled, ten had children whom they described as disabled, and two were additionally caring for disabled adult relatives. The sample was evenly divided between partnered parents and lone parents. A majority of the sample were from Black or minority ethnic backgrounds. Most participants were on relatively low original incomes and, after housing and debt-servicing costs, it was clear that none enjoyed anything better than a modest income. The participants' families ranged in size and age composition, but most included two or more children, and one third had at least one child under school age. The interviews sought to explore the participants' experiences of education, work, benefits (including tax credits), childcare provision and other policy measures, but also their views on the importance and effectiveness of the facilities and services currently at their disposal.

Participants supported the idea of work-life balance but found it difficult to achieve. Stress and long hours were unavoidable in some jobs, or else income and prospects had to be forgone in order to obtain 'family-friendly' working conditions. Employment rights were poorly understood. Standards of management at work were inconsistent. Pay levels were thought to be insufficient and, though benefits/tax credits helped, they were regarded as impenetrably complex and badly administered. Childcare provision was certainly available, but quality and access were uneven. It emerged very clearly that what people in this neighbourhood wanted was more jobs, better managers, more accessible childcare (especially in the early morning and during school holidays), more efficient benefits/tax credit administration, and more extensive and effective advice and information provision.

In several respects the tensions experienced by working parents in this low-income neighbourhood would not appear to have been so very different from, for example, the 'broadly middle-income 1.5-earner households' (Dex, 2003: 76) who have tended to predominate in recent discussions of work-life balance. However, this study sought to focus on a social ecological context that featured a three-way tension between a polarised inner-London labour market (for example, Hamnett, 2002), a highly complex system of income maintenance and a fragmented and evolving nexus of childcare provision. Work-life balance was seldom experienced as a comfortable state of equilibrium so much as a way of managing a variety of intersecting tensions.

Systematic analysis of the interview transcripts suggested that participants had offered four broad kinds of account or narrative depending, first, on whether they described a situation in which they were adjusting their life to fit in with their work or their work to fit in with their life; and, second, whether they seemed

to be happy (or at least reasonably content) or unhappy (or perhaps ambivalent) about their situation. It is not suggested that there were four different kinds of participant, but four different kinds of story to be told about work–life balance in this particular neighbourhood. These corresponded to what might be called the ‘guilty worker’ scenario, the ‘reluctant carer’ scenario, the ‘grateful worker’ scenario and the ‘lucky carer’ scenario. Nor is it suggested that the narratives for each scenario are exactly the same, because they were not. Nonetheless:

- In the guilty worker scenario, work–life balance was not working for people. They were needing to put work before family and they felt unhappy about it. Seventeen of the 42 participants described such a scenario (15 women and two men). Some participants expressed forthright dissatisfaction with their employers’ failure to accommodate their needs. Others gave more ambiguous answers, but clearly were struggling to give priority to family life in the way they would have wanted.
- In the reluctant carer scenario, people were needing to care for their families when they would have preferred to put more into their work. Six participants described this scenario (five women and one man), all of whom were currently in search of employment.
- In the grateful worker scenario, people were putting work before family but they were grateful for the opportunity to work. Eight participants described this scenario. Half of these were fathers, none of whom were primary carers. The others were mothers, two of whom had gladly returned to paid employment in middle age when their caring responsibilities were significantly reduced. The other two seemed especially deferent towards their employers and represented perhaps the *only* exemplars in this particular study of what Hakim (1991) once described as the ‘grateful slave’ syndrome.
- In the lucky carer scenario, people were putting family before work and felt lucky that they were able to do so. Work–life balance was working for them, but they had achieved this as a matter of serendipity or chance, or because, fortunately, they felt able to forgo income and/or career opportunities. Eleven participants described this scenario. All were women. Some of these women were themselves working as childminders or as foster parents. The others were either working under especially exemplary managers or were working very short part-time hours.

This is, of course, a model intended for only heuristic purposes. It was recognised that experiences of the participants were changing and complex. At a subsequent feedback meeting held on the estate, several participants emphasised that much depended on the stage people were at in their lifecourse and on the ages of their children. It also emerged that there could be different interpretations for each scenario. While the guilty worker scenario was widely recognised and reflected a stage through which many participants felt they had gone, some

of the others were potentially ambiguous. The nature of the luck entailed in being a lucky carer would not necessarily be obvious at the time. The gratitude entailed in being a grateful worker might not stem from submissive satisfaction with one's employer, but from satisfaction with one's own achievements: people may be grateful for the chance to work even when they feel (or know) they are being exploited. Nonetheless, the model provoked lively discussion and it was agreed that it did capture something about the nature of work–life balance issues affecting the residents of the estate.

One important observation to be drawn from these qualitative data is that a majority of the economically active working-age parents in a sample drawn from a low-income neighbourhood were not wholly content with the work–life balance they had achieved under their current working arrangements. This contrasts with findings from a telephone interview survey conducted on behalf of the UK government which claim that 87 per cent of British workers are satisfied with their working arrangements (Hooker *et al.*, 2006).

More interestingly, perhaps, a majority of the participants in this study were polarised between those currently experiencing a guilty worker scenario and those experiencing a lucky carer scenario. Considering that in this instance none of the reluctant carers was currently employed and all but two of the grateful workers currently had relatively limited parental responsibilities, it is arguably the guilty worker and lucky carer scenarios that have the greatest salience for our understanding of work–life balance. In various ways, those experiencing these particular scenarios were subject not just to lack of opportunity, but a lack of control over their work–life balance. Guilty workers could not get what they wanted, while lucky carers got it just by chance or good fortune.

### **Powerlessness and (un)predictability**

This leads us to consider the general powerlessness that may afflict workers and the unpredictability of the economic and social environment in which they must negotiate their work–life balance. In the study described this was evident, first, in relation to the participants' experiences of management practices and, second, in relation to their lack of knowledge and understanding.

We have already observed that standards of management among the participants' employers were variable. Reflecting the peculiarities of the local labour market, two-thirds of the participants currently in employment worked either in the public or the voluntary/community sectors, and the other third in the private sector. It became evident that variations in management practice were quite considerable: not just between employers but even between different departments within the same employing organisation (cf. Bond *et al.*, 2002). Participants needed their bosses to be flexible so as to accommodate the often complex routines associated with childcare arrangements or the unexpected



demands associated with children's illnesses. What made a difference so far as the participants were concerned were not simply the policies officially subscribed to by their employers but the degree of 'understanding' exhibited by their line managers. Such understanding was not something that could be relied upon, although several participants suggested that much depended on whether their managers had had experience of bringing up children themselves. The difference between lucky carer and guilty worker scenarios depended in several instances on the degree of understanding demonstrated by line managers. It was clear that the culture in some employing organisations and the attitude of line managers could be conducive to a satisfactory work-life balance, but such experiences were not the norm. Some managers could be insensitive or even bullying, especially when workers needed time off work because of their own or their children's sickness. Of particular concern, however, were employers – particularly public and voluntary/community sector employers – who subscribed to work-life balance ideals in principle, but whose ethos at the everyday operational level demanded maximum personal commitment. Participants were often contractually entitled to flexibility in their working hours, but found it extremely difficult or were made to feel guilty when, for example, they sought legitimately to take time off in lieu of contractual hours already worked. The two male participants who described 'guilty worker scenarios', although neither was currently a primary carer, both regretted the long hours they felt obliged to work because of the lack of time they spent with their children. The long hours worked by some participants did not always result from the Gradgrind attitudes of employers, so much as more subtle pressures and a sometimes unthinking hypocrisy on the part of managers.

Compounding the problem of inconsistent employer practices was the participants' own uncertainty about the nature and extent of their employment rights. Most were vaguely aware of, or had at least heard about, rights to maternity and even paternity leave, although few had any idea as to the specific details or conditions attaching to such rights. Few were aware of their (somewhat tenuous) statutory rights to parental leave or to request flexible working, although those who had been able to exercise such rights – sometimes without any understanding as to their statutory basis – clearly valued them. The few who were at least partially aware of their rights would often lack the confidence to ask for them, since they had no expectation that their requests would be acted upon or because they felt vulnerable. Some participants were trade union members but none appeared to have received any clear advice or support from their trade union in relation to work-life balance issues.

If the participants' lack of awareness of their employment rights was worrying, their lack of awareness as to their rights to income maintenance through the social security and tax credit system was alarming. All the participants (or their partners) were receiving the universal child benefit (or, as some still call it, 'family allowance'). Most were receiving some other form of means-tested

income maintenance, although some who clearly were entitled to additional assistance – for example, through the child tax credit – were not claiming it, sometimes through ignorance and sometimes through choice. Most of those who had claimed the new child and working tax credits had had adverse experiences, often entailing overpayment and subsequent recovery proceedings. Many had at some stage in their lives had adverse experiences claiming other benefits, such as jobseeker's allowance or income support, and almost all expressed uncertainty, if not bafflement, as to the basis on which they should or should not be entitled, for example, to means-tested housing benefit and council tax benefit. So particularly lacking in transparency is the new tax credit system that the only participant truly to understand it happened herself to be a welfare rights adviser. Several participants acknowledged that they 'didn't have a clue' as to whether they were receiving everything they were entitled to.

Benefits systems are designed increasingly to tailor support to meet diverse individual needs. The UK government claimed when it introduced the tax credit system to be creating a 'seamless' system of support for families with children (HM Treasury, 2002), but while universal child benefit appears to provide a seamless (if skimpy) undergarment to which the participants were comfortably inured, the tax credit scheme was worn as a strange and clumsy outer garment that, while essential to many households, had been rejected by some because of the risk of overpayment and the fear that it might at any moment be snatched away.

The particular neighbourhood in which the study was conducted was not especially well served by advice and information facilities. The nearest Citizens' Advice Bureau, which was generally much respected by the participants, was some distance away and could only be accessed by appointment or, in an emergency, by being prepared to queue. Several of the lone parents in the sample had benefited from advice and support from Job Centre personal advisers. The neighbourhood itself boasted a 'One Stop Shop' offering periodic advice sessions provided by visiting staff from a variety of official agencies, but this was not well used by residents. Participants tended to rely on information direct from official agencies – often from the internet – when they had problems. It seemed, however, that if the residents of this neighbourhood were to begin to believe in their rights at work and their entitlements to benefits or tax credits, large quantities of indigestible information would not be enough. People's rights need to be simpler. Or when rights cannot be made simple, people need sources of information and advice they can trust and they need advocates who can effectively champion their rights.

One final aspect of the participants' powerlessness is that there was no apparent sense in which they shared or held their labour market experiences in common. Very few participants had anything but the vaguest idea about where their neighbours or other members of the community might be working. This is without doubt at least partly because of the nature of the labour market in an

inner-London neighbourhood, since this will inevitably be more metropolitan than ‘local’ in any conventional sense. The scale and volatility of such a labour market make it inherently unpredictable. While there was a certain sense of community on the estate, with a clear majority expressing themselves to be happy living there and many reporting engagement in voluntary activities on the estate, there was no awareness among the participants of where the economic foundations of that community might be located. Work–life balance requires that jobs should, so far as possible, be stable and that employment standards are consistent. There needs to be some shared sense in place and time that certain employment norms and practices are customary and a legitimate expectation. This is difficult to achieve in an inner-urban environment, especially if the jobs created – for example, by regeneration funding – tend to be neither permanent nor expertly managed.

If work–life balance principles are to become universally applicable, employment practices need to be more consistent, vulnerable workers must be afforded the means to exercise their rights and labour markets have to be more stable.

### **Calibration and (in)calculability**

This raises deeper questions concerning the fundamental ambiguity of current policy objectives and the extent to which the boundaries between labour market and household may be shifting. The calculations that workers must make are not merely complex, they are contestable.

Work–life balance appears to have been absorbed into the ‘Third Way’ social policy orthodoxy whose hegemonic influence reaches beyond the sphere of liberal/Anglophone welfare regimes to Europe and beyond (Bonoli and Powell, 2002; Deacon, 2003). The orthodoxy rests not so much on a facile compromise between New Right and Old Left as an inherent tension between competing notions of individual responsibility in relation to work and family respectively. Preoccupations with responsibility began with neo-conservative scepticism towards the ‘demoralising’ effects of the classic welfare state (Himmelfarb, 1995), but took an additional turn when champions of the new modernity began to argue that the role of the state was not passively to protect its citizens by pandering to their needs, but actively to enable them to manage their own risks and provide for themselves (Giddens, 1994, 1998). The result is a policy agenda that combines ‘new paternalism’ (Mead, 1997) with ‘advanced liberalism’ (Rose, 1999). New paternalism is characterised by more or less aggressive workfare policies (Lødemel and Trickey, 2000) and, more generally, the ‘creeping conditionality’ that attaches to the administration of social welfare provision (Dwyer, 2004). Advanced liberalism embraces a consumerist rather than a public service ethic (Le Grand, 2003) and aims to promote self-provisioning, prudentialism and an

individualistic ethic of self-responsibility (Burchell, 1996). Social policies may contradictorily encompass, on the one hand, a moral authoritarian insistence that able-bodied adults should be forced into work, however menial, while parents should be made to control the behaviour of their children; and, on the other, an ethical-individualist insistence that people should be enabled to enhance their human capital, while parents should be encouraged to promote their children's self-development. A study of recent trends in family law in the US and Britain draws attention to the 'contrast between endeavours to determine what *institutions* required of individuals [and] the multitude of ways of trying to make individuals act in a "responsible" way towards those with respect to whom they appear to have special responsibility' (Eekelaar, 2003: 117).

Work-life balance sits at the heart of this nexus of contradictions because working parents are required to be individually responsible for providing for themselves and their families and for bringing up their children, and yet many parents must depend on state subvention and institutionally regulated forms of childcare in order to do so. Legislating for work-life balance has entailed shifts in the 'calibration' (Pierson, 1996) of policy instruments, but this in turn entails shifts of locus so far as the calculations that working parents must make. Dividing lines between market income and state income, between childcare and child development, between personal aspiration and social obligation become, if not blurred, then increasingly fluid. This was amply illustrated in the study outlined above.

We have already observed that policies to promote childcare provision may reflect competing objectives: promoting parental employment on the one hand and enhancing child development on the other (see also Huston, 2004). There was a confusing variety of childcare options in the neighbourhood studied. Participants did not always find them accessible or affordable, and feelings about the standards of provision were mixed. There was a government-sponsored Sure Start project on the estate (providing, inter alia, childcare and parenting training), and a range of childminders, nurseries (including privately run nurseries), after-school clubs and holiday play schemes. Despite this, the most commonly used and the most valued form of childcare was informal care from family and friends.

Formal childcare provision was not meeting the needs of every parent. The UK government seeks to promote choice and diversity in childcare (Department for Education and Employment, 1998), but what seemed to matter most to participants was that childcare should be generally available and wholly reliable. Such findings are consonant with those of other researchers in demonstrating that organising childcare is time-consuming and stressful for parents (Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Working parents are not only grappling with practical issues of affordability and accessibility, but with moral considerations about what is right for their children (Duncan and Irwin, 2004). There were competing views about what constitutes 'good-quality' childcare. Different parents had different

priorities with regard to provision for children's emotional needs on the one hand, or their developmental needs on the other. It was clear that, for many, informal (that is, 'unregistered') childcare was and would remain a critical and valued part of their coping strategy. Where formal childcare provision is available, parents seek certainty as much as choice. The fluidity and perceived impermanence of formal childcare arrangements on the estate were problematic and undermined people's confidence in what was available. Some childcare providers were regarded not just as expensive but as exploitative.

In so far as childcare was a contested issue as far as parents were concerned, this was rooted in an awareness that policy and practice in relation to childcare were changing. This was most clearly illustrated by one of the older members of the sample, who herself worked as a registered childminder and part-time playworker (while also providing unpaid childcare for her grandchildren). She was able to look back on the time before childcare was formally regulated, when she had combined paid childcare work with caring for her own children. Asked how she managed in those days, she said 'No idea. It just all flowed.' The new regime, calculated to facilitate work-life balance, had reconstituted her role: not only because she had been required to undertake 'silly little bits and pieces' of training, but because she found:

Sure Start called me a 'service provider', and I'm like – 'what are you talking about?' . . . anything I do I don't see it as – that I'm a professional doing something. I just don't. I do it for the children. I don't see it as that. But yes, I am. And I've kind of adapted a little bit to it. But no, I still don't see it when they say it.

An informal economy of childcare on the estate is giving way to a commodified nexus of provision. Ambivalence towards the formalisation of childcare did not necessarily stem from mere nostalgia but could spill over into sometimes quite bitter resentment towards the particular approach fostered by Sure Start, which was attacked by some participants for being, paradoxically, exclusive. One participant accused Sure Start of promoting 'middle-class' parenting values, while neglecting the needs of the very poorest parents on the estate: an observation that has at least passing resonance with formal evaluations of Sure Start (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2005).

The formalisation of childcare has coincided with the explicit promotion of work-life balance. Childcare is now a calculable component of the relationship between labour market activity and the household economy. Historically speaking, moral obligations within households have been socially negotiated in spite rather than because of social policy interventions (Finch, 1989). Recent evidence concerning the decision making of lone parents has demonstrated that this is informed as much by moral rationality as by economic utility (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). And yet parents in the study described above demonstrated the way in which calculative processes could now extend across boundaries between

the labour market and the household. The difficulties of negotiating a change in household strategy were illustrated by one lone parent with two children aged two and 11. She had been prepared in the past to 'go into some menial job just to put some change on the table', but then three years ago chose to 'have time out to be with the kids'. Her 'time out [had] now run out' and, despite help from the Job Centre, she was struggling to find a suitable job again:

but when you have [to work] bank holidays and you have shifts when you're coming home at quarter to seven in the evening – that's not what I call a job. That's what I call working me down to the ground and I'm not doing it . . . I was thrown into an interview saying it was only 20 hours or 22 hours a week . . . Twenty minutes later got a 'phone call saying I got the job. When I was told the shift patterns . . . I baffled my brains. Me and my [11 year old] son's worked it out and I thought – I can't do this shift. I can't do it. I went to the nursery and they said they can't cover that . . . That means I've got to get up, go out, come back, cook, then leave again. Can't do it . . . I spent a whole two days trying to get it sussed out.

The negotiation she had unsuccessfully attempted involved employers, her childcare providers and even one of her own children. While some participants struggled with the incalculability of work–life balance equations, others had clearly learned, after a fashion, to cope with them. This was expressed by an articulate lone parent, now working for a local authority, who had four children aged between one and 15. Asked whether she had thought about requesting reduced hours when returning to work after the birth of one of her older children, she acknowledged that 'It really didn't enter my mind at that time. I think, being a single mum, hoping that things will work out, you know.' Following the birth of her latest child, however, she had negotiated reduced hours. She remained mindful on the one hand that she was being materially undervalued: 'at the end of the day, in truth, financially it really isn't worth stepping out of your house because you're working for the nursery, childminder [or] whatever child provision you're using. That's what you're working for – and your rent.' But on the other hand, she partly welcomed the driving force behind the work–life balance agenda: that employers and the government recognised the kind of skills she had as a mother and were seeking deliberately to harness them:

I've got how many children that I've got to get ready . . . it's about organisation; organisation skills and how do people account for their time. Where a lot of people think – that's why mums can go into management, or should be able to walk straight into work management because they do the budgeting, they do the . . . [mimes frenetic activity]. But [other] mums don't see it in that context: a skill that they can transfer into the workplace. And it's about confidence.

Other participants related accounts of what US commentators have called 'tag-team parenting' (Presser, 2004), whereby two-parent households mutually negotiate their working shifts so that one of them will be available to care for the children. There were, similarly, accounts of how the complex transport

logistics, sometimes associated with childcare arrangements, had to be factored into parents' calculations (cf. Skinner, 2005).

Overwhelmingly, participants wanted to work. Some rejoiced in the work they were doing. Repeatedly, however, they would utter variations on the mantra: 'my children come first'. And yet the scenarios they presented so often entailed trade-offs between flexibility and function: trade-offs that 'spilled-over' (Hyman *et al.*, 2005) or encroached not on the nature of their work, but the substance of their family life.

### Conclusion

A significant implication is that there can be no single or simple policy solution to the diverse needs and aspirations signified by the different scenarios identified in the study described above. Under the UK's prevailing policy regime, work–life balance is achievable only for some. As workers, the participants were ultimately powerless to control their work–life balance. As parents and carers, they appeared to be struggling with newly constituted calculative responsibilities. Once pressed to calculate, what has been described as a guilty worker scenario is one in which working parents feel they have miscalculated; the reluctant carer scenario is one in which they are still struggling to achieve a satisfactory calculation; the grateful worker scenario is one in which they make to the best of the calculation they managed to come up with; the lucky carer scenario is one in which they land, more or less, on their feet without much calculation.

The issue of work–life balance can be presented simplistically as a contest between what Bloom *et al.* (2006) have called the 'win–win' theory and the 'Chirac' theory: the former – which they attribute to the UK New Labour government – argues the business case for work–life balance, holding that it can increase productivity in a global free market; the latter – which they attribute to the European social model – argues that measures to promote work–life balance, even if they reduce productivity, represent a cost that should be borne in order to ameliorate the consequences of rampant economic competition. The 'win–win' or business case theory holds that flexible managers who accommodate workers' needs will get better results. However, evidence for the productivity gains to be had from family-friendly employment policies is complex and, at best, only modestly supportive (Dex and Smith, 2002). Bloom *et al.*'s analysis, based on quantitative data, suggests that while good management does indeed lead to better work–life balance outcomes, work–life balance does not of itself enhance productivity. But they also demonstrate that, subject to the quality of management, neither does work–life balance *harm* productivity, so neither the 'win–win' nor the 'Chirac' theory is completely right. On the basis of the qualitative/narrative data from the study outlined above, it may be argued that work–life balance would be best promoted as a part of the social responsibility

agenda, and not on the basis of the business case. In some instances, it was plain that the business case would be tenuous or non-existent. The skills and family circumstances of some participants were frankly such that if really suitable spaces were to be found for them in the labour market, the culture and dynamics of the work place might have to change in ways that would not provide short-term benefits for employers. This is a suggestion that resonates with related arguments about the desirability of a 'life-first' approach to welfare-to-work (see Dean, 2003) or a 'welfare-*in-work*' approach (Ridge and Millar, 2006). People should be enabled to work because, by and large, they need to do so: it is constitutive of our 'species being' (Marx, 1844: 328). But they also need to sustain and to be sustained by caring relationships.

There are issues here to be raised with employers' organisations, especially those who espouse the cause of corporate responsibility, and trade unions, whose practical performance appears from the study outlined to be disappointing. But the implications, perhaps, go beyond a 'Chirac' style call for social partnership.

Work-life balance remains a profoundly gendered issue. Jane Lewis has argued that rising levels of female labour force participation do not necessarily signal gender equality if women are being drawn into the labour market on men's terms. The discredited male breadwinner household model may increasingly be superseded by the 'adult worker model', yet the new model is premised on an essentially masculine understanding of the labour process (Lewis, 2002). It is women's behaviour and assumptions that are changing – far more than those of men (for example, Dermott, 2006). The findings from the study reported above suggest that feminising the management of employment might help to enhance workers' experience of work-life balance: the best managers, it seems, are those with first-hand experience of parenthood in general and motherhood in particular. Feminist theorists have lately argued for policy approaches that are concerned less with the fostering of a work ethic, and more with an ethic of care (Sevenhuijsen, 2000). Fiona Williams (2001) has suggested that the idea of work-life balance provides an opening for such a re-evaluation. This requires more than the feminising of management, since it goes to the question of responsibility and the need for an understanding of collective and individual responsibilities that is more 'balanced' and holistic than that offered by either the new paternalism or advanced liberalism. This requires what might be regarded as more of a 'paradigm shift' (Hall, 1993) than a recalibration of policy.

In the meantime, there is a case for seeking to tip the work-life balance scales in favour of workers rather than employers; caring responsibilities rather than productivity; and low-income groups rather than higher-earners. This would imply, wherever possible, an emphasis on the effective regulation of employers, a preference for universal forms of income maintenance and an insistence on reliable childcare provision.



## Note

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