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Work–Life Balance in Times of Recession, Austerity and Beyond

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Chapter 11: Towards a triple agenda for work–life balance beyond recession and austerity

Deirdre Anderson, Jonathan Swan and Suzan Lewis

Introduction

This book reflects enormous ongoing interest in work–life balance (WLB), as well as pressing concerns about the impacts of post-2008 recession on individuals, workplaces and societies. Traditional gendered workplace cultures, and expectations about ideal workers and the separation of work and non-work lives, have been exacerbated by global competitive capitalism and technological connectedness, making it even more difficult for many people to manage their work and personal lives. Nevertheless, prior to the financial crisis and subsequent turbulent economic times, workplace policies and practices to support time flexibility and combining working and caring were growing in many contexts. This book explores the challenges for WLB and related workplace practices and social policy when governments are following austerity policies, and considers the implications for the achievement of the triple agenda of meeting the needs of employees, employers and social justice. Below we discuss three key terms and themes used throughout the book: austerity, work–life balance and the triple agenda, before introducing the aims and chapters of the book.

There is no simple agreed definition of financial austerity but this usually refers to government spending cuts to reduce budget deficits, following a period of recession or poor economic performance. Many politicians and economists view austerity as the only way that national economies can recover from the ongoing impact of the 2008 financial crash, whereas others view it as a value-laden political strategy that disproportionately impacts on women and vulnerable sectors of society (Walby, 2015; Guerrina, 2015). The chapters in this book explore the implications of national and/or workplace responses to difficult economic contexts for aspects of WLB, including employer policies and practices, experiences of working and caring, employment relations, health and well-being, workplace innovation, fairness and social justice.

WLB is usually defined in terms of having the time (and energy) for both work and personal life activities, that is without work dominating people's lives. However, although the WLB discourse is widely used by scholars, policy makers, employers, the media and the general public, its meaning is contested (Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007). A very basic criticism is that work (paid and unpaid) is part of life and not something separate to be balanced with life (Gambles et al., 2006). Suggestions for alternative terminologies, which attempt to counter this false dichotomy, include the integration or harmonisation of paid work and personal life (Gambles et al, 2006). However, these terms do not trip off the tongue in the same way as WLB. Moreover, the language of WLB, however problematic, has focused awareness on issues raised by current trends, including the intensification of work and blurring of work–non work boundaries by technology. Given its persistence in popular discourse, we use the term WLB in this book, applying a critical lens where appropriate. In fact, there is no single understanding or use of the term WLB. Rather, multiple and overlapping WLB discourses are dynamic, shifting over time and place (Lewis et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2016). WLB can be used as a noun to refer to an outcome or aspiration to be achieved by individuals, or as an adjective to describe practices or other means of contributing to such outcomes. The former usage typically implies that WLB is an important but often elusive aspect of well-being which is a major focus of this book. The latter is commonly used in relation to workplace initiatives, such as flexible working arrangements, for managing time and work–non work boundaries. These are often referred to as WLB policies, provisions or practices, which are also discussed in a number of chapters.

There is also a growing critical literature which argues that the use of the term workplace WLB policies or practices implies an employee-led focus or "favours" which can mask the employer benefits of some so-called WLB policies and practices (Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007;

Lewis et al., 2016; Özbilgin et al., 2011; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Gatrell and Cooper, 2008), as well as masking the effects of wider global competitive capitalism and spread of neo-liberal values (Fleetwood, 2007). This raises issues of fairness and social justice. The WLB discourse has also been criticised for implying gender neutrality (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Lewis et al., 2007). However, austerity is deepening gender inequalities (Walby, 2015) and gender inequity is a key aspect of social justice, considered in this book.

The impact on WLB of financial turbulence and austerity is examined through a triple agenda lens throughout the book. That is, authors consider, in various ways, the impact of the economic context on three important outcomes: individuals' WLB and well-being, workplace effectiveness, and social justice. The notion of a dual agenda of both workplace effectiveness and WLB (and especially gender equity) is not new (Rapoport et al., 2002; Bailyn and Harrington, 2004) and is similar in some respects to the business-case agenda for WLB support, in so far as it emphasises that both the business and WLB agendas are equally important. The triple agenda, which has the potential to extend debates about WLB by foregrounding aspects of fairness and social justice, is more challenging.

This book is based on an Economic and Social Science Research Council research seminar series, 'Work–Life Balance in the Recession and Beyond,' which took place in the UK in 2014–15. The main aims of this interdisciplinary seminar series were, first, to understand the WLB challenges for employees, employers and policy-makers posed by the recession and subsequent economic challenges and, secondly, to provide a forum for academic researchers and a range of research users, including employers, policy-makers, unions, charities and non-governmental organisations, to debate how to address these challenges post-recession. These aims are mirrored in the aims of the book which includes research on how WLB and WLB policies and

practices have been affected by the 2008 recession and associated austerity programmes. We have also endeavoured to incorporate some of the ideas emerging from the practitioner–academic discussions. Like the seminar series, the book aims to move beyond documenting problems in supporting WLB and concludes by focusing on ideas for strategies for sustaining a triple agenda to support WLB.

Overview of the book

The main aim of the book is to assess the impact of recession and austerity policies on WLB and supports for it, and particularly how they affect our ability to achieve the triple agenda of individuals' WLB and well-being, workplace effectiveness, and social justice, drawing on state of the art research in the UK and elsewhere. In Chapter 1, Colette Fagan and Greet Vermeylen provide a European-wide overview of inequalities in employment and WLB since the onset of the 2008 recession, while also highlighting relevant country-level policy changes in the context of austerity. Using the European-wide European Working Conditions Survey, they outline differences by country, as well as by gender, age and occupational groupings. In Chapter 2, Gail Kinman and Almuth McDowall consider how features of the economic downturn, such as the intensification of work, increased job insecurity, financial hardship and non-standard or precarious work arrangements, coupled with longer-term trends in flexible working practices and technological change, may have detrimental effects for WLB, health and wellbeing. They argue that such negative effects are likely to be accentuated by the persistence of traditional gendered assumptions which associate long hours with career success and devalue certain types of flexible working. Chapter 3, by Lucy Stokes and Stephen Wood, focuses on the provision of WLB practices and management's attitudes towards WLB before and after the recession. Using data from Britain's Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) series, they show that the main changes took place within the public sector, as managers became less supportive

of employees' WLB needs and employees, who experienced recessionary action, were less likely than others to make use of some WLB practices. All employees who experienced such action had greater levels of work-nonwork conflict. Clare Lyonette, Deirdre Anderson, Suzan Lewis, Nicola Payne and Stephen Wood in Chapter 4 highlight the strategic use of what they call evolved flexible working arrangements, including enforced remote working, in order to manage austerity-related financial cuts in the British public sector. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with HR directors in local councils, they highlight that this strategy has been aided by the longer-term trend in IT developments, and they also discuss the implications for employees, line managers and service delivery. In Chapter 5, Nicole Busby and Grace James examine how changes in employment law, welfare provisions and public sector cuts impact particularly on women's capacity to work and care, and also exacerbate gender inequality. They challenge current conceptualisations of austerity and offer an alternative feminist response capable of guarding against the reversal of gains made in gender equality on the grounds of political ideology. Susan Milner in Chapter 6 discusses the impact of the economic crisis on trade unions' policies towards WLB. Comparing France and the UK, she shows that the ability of trade unions to develop and pursue WLB policies has been adversely affected by the recession. The legal protection for collective bargaining in France has meant that the effect has been lower in large companies; the general trend applies to both countries, however, and so the provision of WLB practices at the workplace remains concentrated in large organisations.

Tracey Warren in Chapter 6 focuses on the financial insecurity engendered by the recession. She argues that financial security is a vital and potentially neglected contributor to WLB, a neglect that reflects an over-emphasis on middle-class lifestyles in discussions (and research) on WLB and the time pressures associated with them. Laura Den Dulk, Anne Annink, and Bram Peper extend this discussion in Chapter 7, which concentrates on the neglected category

of self-employed workers. Using a comparative case study of independent professionals in Spain and the Netherlands, they highlight the financial and personal insecurities generated by the fluctuations in work and the difficulties of finding clients, and show that the role of the family in providing support is much stronger in Spain than in the

Netherlands. In Chapter 9, Ziona Strelitz examines the physical workplace, focusing on two trends that affect WLB in opposing ways: the consolidation of large organisations' workspace in single locations, which impose strains on employees through longer journeys to work that on-site lifestyle amenities fail to offset and the increasing use of third places to support working close to but away from the home. Both trends commenced before the recession but it has promoted them. If centralizing organizations adopt flexible work strategies, as some do, the impact of the first trend can be mitigated. Hyosun Kim, Lotte Bailyn and Deborah Kolb, in Chapter 10, note that employers often reverse their use of remote working in difficult economic times and argue that this reflects their emphasis on the control of labour, which is counterproductive. The authors present an alternative collaborative approach that aims to challenge traditional assumptions about working practices in order to reconcile the triple agenda of employee and employer needs and the gender equity aspect of social justice. This is illustrated with collaborative interactive action research cases in the USA and South Korea.

Finally, Deirdre Anderson, Jonathan Swan and Suzan Lewis in Chapter 11, draw on the findings from earlier chapters, as well as case studies of organisations from the public, private and small business sectors to consider whether social justice, insofar as it was ever implied in the WLB agenda, gets lost in turbulent economic times or whether the three prongs of the triple agenda can be reconciled. They note that although employers appear to find it difficult to articulate the third (social justice) aspect of the triple agenda, there have been some attempts to extend a fairness dimension, even in post-recessional times, leading to some promising

changes in workplace practices. However, in most cases these initiatives fall short of fundamental organisational change and tend to apply to relatively privileged workers, while the struggles of the most vulnerable, including those in low paid and/or precarious work remain less visible. National social policy and regulation are important bases for social justice in this respect. The chapter concludes by discussing ways of addressing the triple agenda and the challenge of extending debates on WLB by rethinking and redesigning work to achieve its three objectives.

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