Reflecting on impact, changes and continuities. Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge?

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the paper *Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge?* published in this journal in 2001.

Design/methodological approach

The impact of the paper is considered within a framework that takes account of national discursive and political contexts in the UK in 2001 and in the present and uses a gendered organisation lens.

Findings

The 2001 paper demonstrates that progress towards changes in culture and practice to support gender equity engenders new issues, which, in turn, also need to be addressed. Reassessing these issues at the end of the decade it is clear that there are some changes but also some continuities, rooted in deeply engrained gendered workplace (and family) assumptions.

Practical implications

Further culture change will be needed to overcome persistent barriers to effective work-life policies. This will involve challenging gendered assumptions about ideal workers and ideal working patterns. More support from public policy that recognises

men's work and family needs and responsibilities is also needed to overcome inequities among male and female dominated workplaces.

Originality/value

These reflections and the original paper highlight the non linear nature of change towards gender equity in the workplace. New solutions raise further problems to be addressed. Gender equity is a process not an end point so constant evaluation and innovation are needed.

Keywords work-life, flexible working arrangements, gender, organisational culture, public policy

Paper type. Reflective analysis

The paper *Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge?* published in this journal in 2001, discussed a case study of an organisation which was addressing issues of workplace culture in relation to work-life policies and gender equity. The *work-family challenge* in the title of this 2001 paper was first elaborated in a book that I co-edited with one of my sons (Lewis and Lewis, 1996). It referred to the challenges presented by profound and ongoing changes in families, workplaces and the nature of work. The editors and contributors to the book recognised that if work-family initiatives were to move from the margins of organisational practice to the mainstream (Lewis, 1997: Kossek, Lewis and Hammer, 2010) the challenge was to move beyond policies towards systemic changes in workplace structures, cultures and practices. At that time there was a substantial literature on the problems of managing work and family, largely in the work-family conflict tradition, a growing literature on what were then variously called work-family or family friendly policies and some examples of so-called but often contested good workplace practices.

However less attention was paid to the processes whereby organisations that were committed to supporting gender equity and meeting the work family challenge managed change, the barriers and facilitators experienced and the learning that took place in these contexts. A case study approach is useful for providing insights into such processes and stories. "*Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge?"* was an early attempt to provide the story of one such organisation addressing these challenges.

This case study of a progressive public sector organisation (the Council) committed to working towards gender equality illustrated how it was possible to challenge some taken for granted assumptions about gender and the nature of work. Considerable progress had been made towards mainstreaming and valuing flexible ways of working. Moreover this was increasingly becoming legitimatised for men as well as women, including managers, which is crucial if policies are to move away from the margins. The changes taking place at the Council produced new stories and metaphors, which are an essential element of systemic workplace change (Smithson and Stockoe, 2005). However, the case study also demonstrated the incremental and circular nature of change. Changes in one system or part of a system bring about new challenges that require further changes and innovative solutions.

Before considering the issues raised in the Council case study and their impact it is important to note that the context and timing of the paper is significant in a number of ways. Below I first consider the context for the work-family challenge at the beginning of the decade in terms of dominant discourses, UK government initiatives. I then reflect on the three emergent issues in the Council case study in this context and

in the light of some subsequent developments in policy, implementation, culture and practice .

Context, language and UK government initiatives

Although the 2001 paper uses the term work-family in the title and refers to family friendly policies, it also shifts to more gender neutral terms; work-life policies, flexible working arrangements and diversity. This ambivalent use of such terms in the paper and in the Council at the time reflected current debates as well as later discussions of the importance of language in shaping how we construct everyday meanings and experiences (Smithson and Stockoe 2002; Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007) There was an optimistic view at that time that changing the language from work-family to work-life would help to shift the focus from women to women and men and from parents to entire workforces. In particular a focus on flexibility, especially within the business case discourse was viewed as reorienting the debates to focus on workplace practices and changes rather than individual needs. Since then the terminology of work-life balance has become increasingly part of everyday discourse although it is criticised, not least because it perpetuates a myth that organisations and work-family issues are gender neutral and that women and men's differential take up of work-life policies are individual choices rather than constrained (Smithson and Stockoe, 2005; Lewis, Brannen and Nilsen, 2007). The discourse matters because these assumption can perpetuate and reproduce inequities. However, work life balance remains the dominant and largely uncontested terminology used in public policy and HRM discussions.

The work-life terminology was adopted by the UK government in 2000 (as the 2001 paper was being written) to frame a work-life balance campaign and policy developments. The government adopted a two pronged approach of establishing a base line of entitlements to, for example, family leaves, to comply minimally with EU regulations while focusing on a business case for workplace change to support work-life balance and encouraging the development of flexible working arrangements. So these discussions were a very live and dynamic part of the context for the Council case study

Reflections on the issues emerging in the 2001 paper and subsequent continuity and change

Progress in the implementation and legitimisation of work-life policies and practices at the Council highlighted three emerging issues relating to i) working time and equity, ii) policy as a potential barrier to culture change, and iii) inequity between organisations arising from the ongoing impact of gender inequity in the home . Progress on all three issues require changes in deeply ingrained values and assumptions which underpin workplace culture.

The issue of working time and equity was associated with the adoption of reduced hours working at all levels including management. It was noted that despite efforts to treat the long hour's culture as a problem and a drive to focus on outputs rather than inputs, the greater efficiency of those who accomplish their work in reduced hours for reduced pay was not recognised. Reduced hours schemes rarely involved reduced workloads but rather the intensification and compression of work into shorter working hours. However the inequity of paying some workers less to do the same amount of

work as those spreading their work over five days on full pay was obscured by the traditional valuing of what is constructed as full time work. I wish that I could report that such inequities no longer exist, or are being widely addressed. Building on this paper a number of studies have focused on the trade- offs that some workers (mostly mothers) have to make to fulfil their work and family obligations, including loss of income, intensification of work and often lack of opportunities to advance (Callan, 2007; Kelliher and Anderson, (2010); Lewis and Humbert,(2010 in press). While the issues are more widely recognised than they were at the beginning of the decade, the full time male model of work and andocentric career model remain dominant and those who deviate from it often have to pay a price. In many respects the issue has been exacerbated by increased competitiveness, lean workforces and the need to get more work out of fewer people in many different national contexts (Gambles et al, 2006; Lewis et al, 2009). The global recession has brought about some changes. Arguably organisations that have embedded flexible ways of working are in a stronger position for weathering the downturn with a sustainable workforce. There is evidence that some companies are recognising the value of more efficient ways of working by cutting down on working hours rather than making people redundant so as to sustain their workforce in preparation for the recovery (Working Families, 2008). Others however argue that in fact many people are working harder than ever in the recession especially in terms of unpaid overtime (TUC, 2010).

The Council case study also demonstrated that work-life policies could actually become barriers to culture change. It was argued that policies such as job sharing, once considered to be in the vanguard of family friendliness, needed to be reconsidered insofar as they perpetuate standard models of working time rather than encouraging more innovative ways of looking at inputs and outputs. Since then

research has increasingly acknowledged that policies are not sufficient for radical change and the potentially negative impacts of policies on gender equity insofar as they are constructed as policies for women or mothers is now well documented (Callan, 2007; Lewis and Humbert, in press). This has helped to focus on the inadequacy of policies if implemented without a drive for culture change. In practice however change is slow and uneven. While many employers and HRM practitioners now pay lip service to the need to change cultures, in practice many continue to regard the solutions to staff work-life dilemmas rather uncritically in terms of policies alone.

Finally, in the 2001 paper the thorny question of how far radical workplace change can be achieved without comparable change within the family was raised. In the Council case study the personnel manager was aware that the persistent inequitable domestic division of labour in the home can have repercussions in the workplace for organisations with supportive work-family policies and a largely female workforce. Their (women) staff took advantage of entitlments to leave to care for sick children absolving the employers of their male partners from having to address these needs. Thus although the flexible work practices provide the Council with a competitive edge in terms of recruitment, there were also disadvantages to the organisation in terms of staff absences if family care was not shared with partners working elsewhere. Subsequent case studies also highlighted this issue (e.g.Wise and Bond, 2003). Some attempts were made at the Council to ensure that employees' partners did take some responsibility but there is a limit to what individual employers can achieve inths respect. There is an important role for public policy initiatitves here, as discussed later.

One impact of the 2001 paper lies in its contribution to the growth of organisational case study approaches to understanding how work-life policies and practices play out in specific workplaces This is an important approach complementing the more prevalent and often decontextualised survey methods . Subsequent case studies that I have carried out with colleagues (Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Lewis et al, 2009; Holt and Lewis, in press; Lewis and Humbert, in press etc) and case studies by other authors (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt, 2002; Callan, 2007; Wise and Bond, 2003; Nadeem and Hendry, 2003) demonstrate that while the impact of work-life policies are context dependent and cannot be generalised, a great deal can be learnt about processes that contribute to knowledge and practice. We have learnt for example, about the importance of making visible and challenging gendered assumptions that undermine work-life policies (Rapoport et al, 2002), even in national contexts where there is a high level of consensus about the importance of gender equity and policies to support this (Plantin and Back-Wicklund, 2009; Holt and Lewis, in press).

How have these insights been reflected in UK government policy within its work-life balance framework? The issues of working time and equity and of work life policies as potential barriers to change are both underpinned by the persistence the male model of work that continues to overvalue workers who do not need to modify traditional working patterns for family or other non work reasons. The government has continued to encourage the development of flexible working arrangements as a way of supporting changes in working practice and culture. Perhaps the most innovative initiative was the work-life balance challenge fund set up in 2003 which offered financial support to fund advice from specialist consultants for companies that wished to develop tailor made work life balance policies and practices . Although

the outcomes were mixed and the time scale relatively short, this initiative did focus on the need for context specific win-win solutions that in some cases looked beyond policy to ways of achieving culture change. A later initiative, the implementation of the rather weak Right to Request flexible working arrangements (which employers must consider but can reject for business reasons) also helped to put flexible working arrangements on workplace agendas. The number of such requests have steadily grown, However, many involve the formalisation of flexible arrangements that already existed informally. Moreover many more requests are made by women than men and men are more likely to be turned down suggesting that gendered organisational assumptions persist. A major weakness however is that by limiting the right to request to parents of young children and more recently carers it continues to focus on individual needs rather than promoting innovative ways of working as potentially advantageous in themselves. The limitation of polices that remained based on a specific model of working time noted in the 2001 paper continue to relegate work-life or flexible working to the margins. In addition the government has resisted calls to remove an opt out of the European Working Time Directive so long working hours remain the ideal in many contexts. This reinforces the assumption that those who work in other ways are second class employees rather than, in many cases, the most efficient workers, as illustrated in the Council study.

In terms of addressing the third issue of gender inequities in caring and its impact on the take up of work-life policies it is clear that a national policy response enabling and encouraging fathers to take leave or work flexibly for childcare would have more potential impact than the approaches of individual employers, although both are important. The last decade there have been a number of policy developments in relation to family leaves but despite a discourse of supporting work life balance for

fathers as well as mothers developments in the UK on paternity and parental leave are very weak compared other European countries. From 2010 fathers will be able to take some of the mother's paid maternity leave if she returns to work. However the pay is lower than most men's earnings and take up is likely to be low. Morover, this is not an entitltment for fathers in their own right, unlike the use it or lose it provisisons in most of the Nordic countires and as such will provide a weak basis for fathers to negotiate with their employers. This reflects an ongoing assumption among policy makers that mothers are the main carers which reinforces rather than challenges gendered workplace assumptions about who should use flexible working arrangements. It is therefore likely to perpetuate the inequities between female and male dominated organisations noted on the 2001 paper.

In conclusion the Council case study in the 2001 paper marked an important milestone at a time when the UK government's work life balance campaign was at full swing, contributing to greater attention to work life issues and to the need for employers to look beyond policies to culture and practice. The case study illustrated that systemic changes are possible but also highlights the emergence of new problems stemming from persistent and deep seated gendered assumptions. Gendered experiences and gendered workplaces (and families) remain stubbornly difficult to change. Changes in organisational culture to meet the work-family challenge remains slow, uneven and highly sensitive to various layers of context. Moreover it is not just a matter of shifts in policy and practice that beget new problems. The decade since the Council case study was published has seen tumultuous shifts in wider contexts such as the global economy, developing and developed nations and national politics, all of which are reflected in new possibilities and problems in relation to gender equity and

the work-family challenge. An important challenge for the next decade will be to find ways of harnessing current and future contexts in support of gender equity at home and at work.

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