

Academics' interpretations of working time, family time and leisure time

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Abstract

Time emerges as an important theme in the study of work-life balance. Working time, family time and leisure time are the focus of this research, which explored the work-life balance of 14 male academics in construction and related departments in Universities in Sweden and the UK. Narrative analysis revealed concerns with focus on work, work-to-work pressures and work/ family time vs personal leisure time. We argue that too much emphasis remains both conceptually and in practice on work-family (rather than work-life) balance to the detriment of employee health and well-being as keen workers' extend their efforts to achieve excellence in the face of demanding performance measures.

Keywords: men, academe, working time, family time, leisure.

1. Introduction

"It's just time these days ... something has to give."

'Time' or the absence thereof was a common leitmotif that ran through a set of interviews concerning work-life balance with Swedish and UK academic men within construction-related disciplines. The respondents' main preoccupation with time was related to the domain of work in that many respondents discussed work-work pressures and lack of time especially in relation to research, but yearning for alone time, time for hobbies and companionship time (rather than family time) was voiced more prominently than expected:

"... And there is very little room for personal development, personal reflection, there's very little room for time with friends – I never see friends."

Drawing on academic men's accounts of how they manage their work-life balance, our focus in this paper is on how perceptions may relate to feelings of satisfaction and emotional wellbeing. We contend that research on work-life balance tends to dichotomise the work-life construct into work on the one hand and life (or family) on the other, paying little attention to the overlaps, inter-relationships and ramifications of these two terms. What for example lies in-between them? It is this 'in-betweenness' that we are interested in.

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Our empirical data will show that the 'life' part of the dyad holds several in-between layers of relationships and activities that critically contribute to an individual's health, well-being and emotional satisfaction, but which often remain hidden from research results. In line with an 'emotional turn' in work-life studies (see Brandth 2012), we examine academic men's perceptions of their work-family-life situations.

Research on work-life balance has evolved over recent decades from solely focusing on how to enable women to balance their caring responsibilities with their work commitments to including both women's and men's desires to build successful and satisfying careers while also contributing to the care of family (Johansson and Klinth, 2008). This development has no doubt been largely influenced by the changing nature of work together with demographic and value-based changes in society more generally (Gerson, 2010). Knowledge-based work, for example, can be highly rewarding and self-fulfilling, being often perceived as embedded in life, rather than being experienced as a burdensome chore separated out of life, as the work-life dyad would intimate (Gallie et al, 2012; Ford and Collinson, 2011).

One sector in which intrinsic motivation to 'do well' drives commitment to work is academia, where self-management of 'protean careers' and academic freedom contribute to elevated levels of interest and attention to work (Enders and Kaulisch, 2006). Academia was one of the first sectors to allow staff to work outside the official boundaries of the university and traditional working hours (ibid: 88). It thus provided 'flexible employment' conducive to achieving work-life balance, at least in theory. However, research has found that masculine values prevail here despite the changes in society, gender roles and regulatory interventions (Allard et al, 2011; Berg et al, 2012; Hearn and Niemistö, 2012; Rice, 2012).

The European Commission is particularly supportive of men taking a more active role in family life (Bryson and Karsten, 2009: 40). This aligns with government campaigns and media attention afforded to the emerging notions of the 'new man' (Hearn, 1999; Watts, 2009: 42) and 'working father' (Ranson, 2011). These labels refer to men who do not conform to the traditional male work model, but value personal wellbeing and want to spend time with the family (Bevan and Jones, 2003; Family Friendly Working Hours Task Force, 2010; Linkow et al, 2011). In contrast, the traditional male role has been that of the breadwinner, toiling long hours in the workplace (Watts, 2009: 43; Ranson, 2011). Today, many men rate achieving balance between work and life/ family as one of their most important personal goals, regardless of whether or not they have children (Bevan and Jones, 2003). Across all sectors, a major obstacle in seeking satisfactory 'balance' is the inflexibility of workplaces. Even where part-time work and other forms of flexibility are available to employees, as in academia, research suggests that concerns over career progression and fear of others perceiving that one is working below potential remain very real (Family Friendly Working Hours Task Force, 2010: 20; Linkow et al, 2011).

1.1 Sweden and the UK

The above-mentioned changes have evolved in different ways in different social and cultural environments. Our interest is directed to two countries which the literature portrays as very different: Sweden and the UK.

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In Sweden we find a long history of a 'gender equality project', and it is generally understood that in Sweden (as elsewhere in Scandinavia) gender equality has progressed in terms of men's involvement with family. Certainly, parental leave campaigns since the early 70s have contributed to the image of a Swedish "new man" that is masculine *and* baby-oriented, and interestingly coined "soft man/soft daddy" in Swedish ("mjukisman/ mjukispappa"). However, uptake of parental leave remains at a moderate 20% (Johansson and Klinth, 2008: 43-44).

In the UK, an increase of men's input to the family sphere is a much more recent development. While the public (political, expert and media) discourses promote "involved fatherhood", in practice low up-take of parental leave and limited contribution to childcare generally seem to be related to a traditional male long-working-hours culture (Gregory and Milner, 2011). As a society, the UK has long operated within a more traditional view of gender roles. At the same time it has suffered from the culture of long working hours, which has strengthened and contributed towards maintaining men's position as the breadwinner and that of women as taking primary responsibility for caring duties.

However, 'new public management' and increasing managerialism of academia are common phenomena in both countries (Enders and Kaulisch, 2006: 85; van den Brink and Benschp, 2012: 510). As Berg et al (2012: 406) put it:

"In both countries surveillance, operationalized through performance management regimes, has led to a preoccupation with administrative procedures under the rubric 'effective leadership' (Ford, 2005: 236) that monitors behaviour and quality in bureaucratic ways..."

It is this commonality of increasing surveillance and managerialism on the one hand, and professional freedom and intrinsic motivation on the other, that interests us in seeking to better understand how academics manage their time: working time, family time and time with friends and hobbies, in these two contexts. We first review these three themes on time in order to develop an analytical framework for our enquiry. This is followed by an outline of the research methods used to conduct the empirical work before we discuss our findings. An outline of our key contribution and issues for future research bring this paper to conclusion.

2. Working time

Traditionally, working time has been understood and put into practice as a neatly definable construct, which has clear start and end times. Working hours are counted as discrete number of hours in a workday, work week, or sometimes a work year (annualised hours). During a workday, or a shift, work time is divided into reasonable periods of continuous work time, which is interrupted (only) by breaks, say 15 minutes coffee/ tea break or 30-60 minutes lunch break. The assumption is that work time is solely devoted to work, from which a worker has neither the need nor the interest to diverge.

This model applies satisfactorily to environments where, for example, a production facility must be organised and staffing arranged well in advance so that continuous cover is guaranteed. Operationally much of production and service-level work will always be

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conducted in the workplace and within specific work hours. Particularly where input is physical, requiring physical effort rather than emotional engagement with the work activity, an organisation can reasonably expect and monitor workers' productivity.

However, this model does not apply to more fluid, perhaps boundaryless, contemporary professional careers such as academic work which often requires thoughtful and creative input. In this environment formal contracts of employment hold looser definitions of work hours, which in practice allow employees' to focus on the units of output rather than to count hours of input when accounting for his/her contribution to a team and/ or organisation. Control and monitoring of input is difficult if not impossible; we cannot measure how much time we spend thinking and planning. Therefore, it is not surprising that the academic environment is often characterised by long working hours fuelled by high commitment to achieving personal and professional success. Both intrinsic motivation (employees) and organisational expectations and culture drive and help maintain the environment despite the potential (and the real) problems it creates with regard to life beyond work.

Curiously though, institutions both in the UK and Scandinavia have recently introduced mechanisms that seek to measure exactly that which is not easily measurable: academics' input. In the UK, for example, the transparency review seeks to quantify worker's input (e.g. teaching, preparation, publications, consultancy, administration) by quarter, in order to demonstrate the full costs of teaching, research and other activities in Higher Education and improve the accountability for the use of public funds (KPMG, 2012: 4). Output, and prestige in particular, is measured by way of Research Excellence Framework submission (see e.g. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>). Similar schemas are being put in practice in Sweden.

3. Family time

Similarly to work time, family time is traditionally understood as a specific period of time when one engages with family, say at the weekend or during maternity/ paternity or parental leave. From a working parent's point of view, this functioned well when women stayed at home to look after the children and the main concern in negotiating work time versus family time was that of the father's involvement. Traditional gender roles advocated that men (the breadwinners) were to commit most of their time to work and women focused their time on family. Hence within such a family ideal work-family-time conflict was often a non-issue.

As alluded to in the introduction, at present this is not considered a satisfactory *modus operandi*. Many men are keen to spend time with family, and the number of women who work has rapidly increased. Also, blurring of the boundaries between work time and family time is explicitly recognised. Therefore, one may argue that we have entered an era where an on-going negotiation of flexible constructs is emerging as an alternative to the traditional compartmentalised and linear view of time.

4. Time for friends and hobbies

An important aspect of time, with regards to 'life' in work-life balance, relates to time with friends, time for hobbies and general leisure time. Recent research (e.g. Brown and Perkins,

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2012) highlights this as an area neglected by much of work-life balance research, and also an area rarely discussed politically or drafted into organisational policy. However, it is an aspect of time with significant potential to positively influence workers' well-being and satisfaction, both at work and in life (Beatty and Torbert, 2003). Health research shows that leisure activities (such as exercise) improve mental health and reduce the risk of depression (Penedo and Jason, 2005).

What seems to prevent workers from engaging in leisure activities is the shift from male-breadwinner model to dual-career households (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001) as well as a resulting 'combination pressure' (van der Lipper et al, 2006), which is a problem particularly for knowledge workers (Nätti et al, 2012). The above-mentioned self-driven intrinsic motivation to do well at work allows work time to expand to such an extent that it fills time available for 'life'.

5. Research method

In order to investigate academics' interpretations and use of time with regards to work-life balance, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 academics (seven from Sweden and seven from the UK) from construction-related departments at universities in the two countries. Assistant Professors (1), Lecturers (4), Senior Lecturers (4) and Professors (5), aged from mid 30s to early 60s, were represented in the sample. Most of the respondents had full-time posts at their respective universities; four had part-time posts. All the respondents were married or were living in a long-term relationship, and all but one had children in 18 months to 32 years age-range. Our sampling strategy was based on a purposive key informant approach. The interviews, lasting around one hour each, were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were open-ended since the aim was to gain insight into the lived day-to-day work-life realities of the respondents, and took the form of informal conversations between interviewer and interviewee. Drawing on Polkinghorne (1995) and Lindebaum and Cassell (2012) narrative analysis was applied on the data in order to identify the various storylines that united fragments of talk and built thematic narratives in the interviews. Our joint and reflexive reading, and re-reading, of the transcripts lead to identification of key issues first, and thereafter storylines, allowing us to piece together the narrative streams that collectively rendered a coherent story of the men's experiences regarding work-family-life balance. Our reading and re-reading of the data was iterative, informed by critical discussion of our respective interpretations, complemented by our understanding of the conceptual field. We used NVivo 9 to facilitate our organisation and scrutiny of the data.

6. Research findings and discussion

The narrative analysis revealed several important themes: focus on work, work-work pressure, family time and desire to find 'me time'. We will explore these under the relevant sub-headings below.

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6.1 Focus on work

One of the key pressures in work-life balance stem from the increasing flexibility of working hours, which is related to both, intrinsic motivation of the workers and proliferation of communications technologies that allow work to be performed 'anytime, anywhere' (Glavin and Schieman, 2012: 73). Beyond the opportunities to fulfil work duties outside of the usual spatial and temporal parameters of work, many professional occupations, like those in academia, also engage workers psychologically in work roles while physically located in another, for example with family (ibid: 74). Thus the boundaries between working time and time dedicated to family/friends/leisure become blurred.

Indeed, many of our respondents (two from Sweden and three from the UK) reported taking work home after the normal office hours and many more (three from Sweden and four from the UK) said they worked very long hours. One Professor estimated that on average his working week came to 65-70 hours, and one Senior Lecturer mentioned working 12-hour days frequently; they both work in the UK. In Sweden, our respondents estimated working on average around 50 hours a week. One Swedish Associate Professor reflected on the disruption this caused:

"...every evening, or most evenings, I spend an hour or two working, and even if I only work for one hour in the evenings, between eight and nine say, that interferes with everyday life around me. Which means that I can't sit and work for three days at home for one hour, even if that's not much at home, and then the fourth day go away to play music; I have to be free at home."

This illustrates a combination pressure more Swedish than British respondents experienced, as also identified by van der Lippe et al (2006), because of parallel careers in the family. When both parents pursue careers, finding time to spend together can become problematic.

However, the Swedish respondents also very explicitly reflected on flexibility as a positive construct in terms their ability to maintain continued and active engagement with work, while primarily on 'family-time', namely extended parental leave. One respondent said to have kept working one day a week while on parental leave for five months so that he could be available for a doctoral student even while on leave. The following excerpt from an interview with another Swedish respondent illuminates commitment to work:

"The interviewer: Were you on full leave?"

Respondent: Yes. I worked, checking e-mails and so on, doing some work, doing some writing on papers."

Although the respondent says "yes" he was on full leave, he clearly maintained an active working role but almost dismisses this. This is common in professional occupations (Glavin and Schieman, 2012: 92) and indicative of affective commitment, an emotional bond that individuals develop towards their organisation or profession/ job (Buonocore and Russo, 2012: 4, 13).

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Two British respondents spoke about flexibility in positive terms, both referring to how it allows them to participate in the school run. While many men use their flexible circumstances at work to help with the school run and occasional events like appointments at the dentist, overall their involvement with the family is mostly about being [physically] present and much less about emotional engagement. In line with Glavin and Schieman (2012: 91, 92) we find that “*jobs that offer freedom and control tend to come with the price tag of loftier work demands and responsibilities*” and hence support the greedy-role perspective. While flexible and permeable boundaries between work and family roles clearly allow the respondents to participate in some specific family engagements (such as the school run), their affective commitment and engagement with the work role seem to demand disproportionate amounts of time. The following scenario described by one Swedish respondent was relatively representative of the sample:

“I’m not a very good companion. I’m physically there... she thinks I’m boring because she needs to talk to me – practical issues, or if we should visit some of my family, or hers, whatever... and maybe I reply, or give her an answer to half of her questions, and it’s not a very good reply because I just, ‘Mm, mm. Ah, ah. You decide. Whatever you think. Let me know so I can put it into my outlook calendar’... Yes, she is running everything at home, almost everything... I know she’s not very happy with it. She wants me to be more involved, maybe, not necessarily involved in practical issues, she can do that, but more involved in us...”

6.2 Work-work pressure

The respondents did not feel only a one-way pressure in the direction work-to-family. Many also referred to work-work pressures to do with increasing teaching loads and requirements to source research funding simultaneously. Such role conflict, i.e. work-work conflict, was found very stressful in light of the performance measures that combine teaching, research and administration, and respondents highlighted concerns about how this affected their performance both in Sweden and the UK. One Swedish respondent noted:

“I have talked to my boss about this and said that I’m afraid that I am actually not delivering properly. I’m failing students by actually not having time, and that, of course, pushes my evening e-mailing...”

Many British respondents discussed personal and professional development, which they considered important for maintaining satisfactory performance and more so for achieving the excellence their institutions expected of them. Therefore, lack of time to engage in and reflect on such activities was understandably a critical issue for many interviewees both in Sweden and the UK. As noted earlier, the new research-excellence frameworks require institutions to submit individuals with high quality publications for assessment, and successful submissions benefit from additional resources to fund further research.

Arguably, work-work conflict is amplified in academia due to the varied nature of activities an academic role contains. There is a requirement to continually excel in ‘ideas-based work’ (such as initiating new areas of research) and creative writing as well as in administrative

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and time-bound tasks, like marking within 21-days to increase student satisfaction (a rule in Sweden and in the UK a recent initiative introduced by many Universities). The latter is an example of one managerialist performance-management metric, many of which van den Brink (2012) suggests as being possible ideals impossible to achieve.

6.3 Family time

Although it was clear that work was commonly a priority, and also consumed much time, the majority of the respondents in the UK (and two in Sweden) made efforts to manage the boundaries between work and family time by designating specific periods of time as 'work free', mainly during weekends and holidays. One respondent commented:

"The one thing I do, and I've always done, is I do take long holidays... the time the kids have off, I try and match it. So that's genuine, sort of, down time, quality time."

This suggests a rather instrumental view of being part of a family, and as an approach to managing work-life balance indicates 'segmentation' where work and non-work are seen as two distinct, separate domains of life with little influence on each other (after Guest, 2002). Such segmentation, together with reliance on partners and wives in family matters, lends evidence to a continued 'male breadwinner' model and traditional gender roles which support of Rice (2012) and Berg et al (2012) who noted that masculine values prevail in academia. However, research beyond academia supports this view as well; for example, Aarseth (2009: 425) states that despite recent cultural transformation (such as the emergence of the new man) *"men only appear to be more sensitive and care oriented but in fact do not meet the demand for emotional and practical participation in the domestic sphere."* And further, where families fail to realize the equality project (i.e. to share care and housework equally within the couple as in the case example in Aarseth, 2012: 429) *"she became the administrative and emotional centre of the family and he was increasingly involved in his work"*.

However, due to the work-work pressures many respondents experienced 'creep' and found that even segmentation as an approach to managing work-life balance proved challenging to maintain. One British academic explained:

"There are times of the year when it [work] goes home and it gets done in the evenings or, more particularly, at a weekend, which I hate doing... weekends are too important to you. But that doesn't work here."

Interestingly, three respondents (one Swedish and two British) noted that having to pick up children from school and day-care helped manage the 'creep'. Indeed, starting a family had been a turning point in their careers and lives, which had triggered a change they had been unable or unwilling to make earlier:

"I suppose having Max (name changed for anonymity) put things into a different perspective..."

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“Having Sarah (name changed for anonymity) obviously influenced how we organised our lives, the day-to-day life. I started to leave work on time so I could come home... I wanted to come home... obviously because I wanted to see them, but also because I needed to support my wife.”

6.4 ‘Me time’: time for friends and hobbies

An important segment of life that most of our respondents mentioned they were missing out on was time with friends and hobbies. This was because work took over much of their family time and hence there was no time left over ‘to steal away’, as reflected in the opening quote of this paper. What has to give is time with friends and time that prior to the forming of a family had been allocated to hobbies and/or sports or music, for example. As alluded to earlier, this has potentially severe negative consequences on the overall wellbeing of the workers, not only in terms of their work-life balance and satisfaction with such arrangements, but with regards to their health. Alarming, many respondents had had to give up regular exercise (such as cycling, running or hill walking – all known to have positive effects on health and well-being) and all expressed dissatisfaction in having to make this kind of sacrifices. Therefore, in the absence of important time to recharge, it is no surprise that many were left feeling that they had no time to do a good job in any sphere of their lives (work, family and personal life). For some respondents this introduced family-personal time conflict, which generated additional stressors to managing work-life balance. Managing work-life balance then becomes a much more complex negotiation of work-work pressures, work-family balance, work-personal time balance and family-personal time balance.

7. Conclusion

Given the flexibility and freedom in academic jobs, it is curious to find such a strong trend towards compartmentalising different spheres of life – work, family, friends, hobbies – in our study. As work tends to take priority and much time is committed to work roles, as explained by intrinsic work motivation, finding specific ‘work free’ time is the primary mechanism for managing work-life balance. This is in an attempt to contain ‘greedy roles’ and limit the workers’ own interest and commitment to perform work roles over family roles. Those few men who made use of the flexibility of place and time of work tended to respond to family-unit related pressures rather than to satisfy personal desires to spend quality time with family.

Our research supports the concern that much work-life balance research and most of the organisational initiatives still focus on work-family balance, neglecting the importance of personal time spent with friends and on hobbies. Considering the potential for serious adverse implications for employee health this is an area of study in need of attention. We also suggest that this pilot study should be developed into a more extensive study to explore the themes emerging from our research covering a larger and more varied population (e.g. single men and women, with and without children), possibly utilising techniques from psychology to establish the connect between the individual’s focus on work and leisure time and secondary attention on family versus gender roles in the new managerialist academia.

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For now, this study has opened up a rich vein of analysis in developing our understanding of time as a multivariate construct with regards to work-life balance negotiations.

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