Discourse Practice Gaps in Work Life Balance: Comparative Case Studies in the Australian Construction Industry.

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Introduction
Perspectives on work-life balance (WLB) reflected in political, media and organisational discourse, would maintain that WLB is on the agenda because of broad social, economic and political factors (Fleetwood 2007). In contrast, critical scholarship which examines work-life balance (WLB) and its associated practices maintains that workplace flexibility is more than a quasi-functionalist response to contemporary problems faced by individuals, families or organisations. For example, the literature identifies where flexible work arrangements have not lived up to expectations of a panacea for work-home conflicts, being characterised as much by employer-driven working conditions that disadvantage workers and constrain balance, as they are by employee friendly practices that enable it (Charlesworth 1997). Further, even where generous organisational work-life balance policies exist, under-utilisation is an issue (Schaefer et al, 2007). Compounding these issues is that many employees perceive their paid work as becoming more intense, pressured and demanding (Townsend et al 2003).

Fleetwood (2007: 388) addresses these competing paradigms, arguing that work-life balance discourse, defined herein as a 'main-line story' that conveys common values (Weingarten 1991), has become 'detached' from its associated practices. This paper takes up this contention via an exploration of the phenomenon in two construction industry companies (one public, one private) in Australia. Critiques of such discourse are important because they constrain questions asked and solutions sought (Lewis, Gambles & Rapoport 2007).

Methods
Data from ConstructPrivate were gathered from two worksites over an 18 month period. At Site 1, nine baseline, face-to-face interviews were conducted. The workplace then shifted to a compressed working week. Subsequent to this change, 14 employees were interviewed once per month for five months (total, 70 interviews). At Site 2, four baseline focus groups (20 participants, 8 women, 12 men) were convened. Data from ConstructPublic were gathered in two distinct phases over an 18 month period; via 40 interviews (12 women, 28 men) with employees and six focus groups (44 participants, 14 women, 30 men) of managers who attended a leadership development program.

Following Lewis et al (2007), we employed a social constructionist approach to the analysis, examining taken for granted assumptions that underpin discussions of WLB. We identify four dominant discourses evident in the data and the associated practice gaps. Distinctions between private-public sectors were specifically sought.

Results

Participants' expressed a high level of awareness of a disjuncture between espoused organizational goals and workplace flexibility policies on the one hand, and the reality of everyday working practices on the other. These policy-practice gaps are supported and promulgated by four discourses (see Table 1). First, productivity in the workplace dominates all other concerns, including family responsibilities and other competing demands or interests outside the workplace such as illness, the need or preference for rest/recreation, or preferences to reduce commute times or hours worked. Second, caring responsibilities is a personal and individual choice. Third, commitment to real work equals 'presenteeism' or the necessity of constant visibility and availability in order to be judged as an efficient and productive employee. Fourth, the demands facing this particular industry or sector are unique, including short project time-frames, unrealistic workloads, political/ministerial expectations, skill shortages and retention issues.

Discourse	Illustration
Organisational needs should be prioritised over those of individual employees	*"When you turn up the next day and are asked 'is this done'? You say 'no', I went home at 5 o'clock because of work-life balance. That excuse just doesn't cover"*
Caring responsibilities are an individual choice	*"Almost every female that goes off and comes back in six or 12 months says I would like to arrange for a three or four day working week. Now I am sorry, I support it, but what it does tend to do is actually put even more work-life balance problems onto everybody else who is in the workforce".*
Commitment to 'real' work equals presenteeism	*"I think the nature of project work is the availability of people for attendance at meetings and availability to communicate with… In project work too much flexibility would probably not be helpful to the overall achievement of those outcomes".*
The construction context/environment is unique/different	*We have got to be honest about what sort of job they are coming into, and saying we have got this work-life balance, when really we haven't, then they are just going to walk out the door".*

Table 1: Discourses supporting WLB policy-practice gaps

Discussion

The positioning of organizational productivity as a superordinate goal was a key theme in the data. In the face of global competition and heightened expectations of the ideal worker (Lewis et al 2007), achieving maximum productivity is also directly linked with notions of work intensification discussed at length in recent literature. The study also illustrates that working patterns in both construction sectors are traditionally organised around a male breadwinner model and that absences associated with part-time employment (predominantly undertaken by women) are

considered problematic for business. Thus, by obscuring wider gendered discourses and practices, gender inequities are reinforced and reproduced (Lewis et al 2007).

Importantly, these discourses are not mutually exclusive. Achieving productivity at all costs in an environment where various labour market factors are working against this goal (skill shortages, high turnover) compounds individual workloads, increases work stress and ultimately, makes attaining 'balance', however it is defined, elusive.

The discourses evident in the data were at the heart of a deep-seated ambivalence. That is, respondents expressed support for achieving 'work-life integration' (Kossek & Lambert 2006) but few challenged the privileged status of organisational productivity over the needs of individuals and families. Such unquestioned discourses legitimised practices which effectively curtailed WLB, such as blocking requests for flexible work arrangements, thwarting career opportunities of employees engaged in workplace flexibility, and encouraging long work hours. The findings provide a critical analysis of existing organisational rhetoric and an empirical platform from which legislative and institutional change can be implemented to close the discourse-practice gap.

References

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