

Discourses of Work–Life Balance: Negotiating ‘Genderblind’ Terms in Organizations

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This article examines current debates about gender equality, work-life balance and flexible working. We contrast policymakers’ and organizational discourses of flexible working and work–life balance with managers’ and employees’ talk about these issues within their organizations. We show how, despite the increasingly gender-neutral language of the official discourses, in the data studied participants consistently reformulate the debates around gendered explanations and assumptions. For example, a ‘generic female parent’ is constructed in relation to work–life balance and flexible working yet participants routinely maintain that gender makes no difference within their organization. We consider the effects of these accounts; specifically the effect on those who take up flexible working, and the perceived backlash against policies viewed as favouring women or parents. We argue that the location of work–life balance and flexibility debates within a gender-neutral context can in practice result in maintaining or encouraging gendered practices within organizations. Implications of this for organizations, for policymakers and for feminist researchers are discussed.

Keywords: work–life balance, diversity, gender, discourse

Introduction

Feminist theory has long been concerned with the importance of language as a promoter or challenger of sexist assumptions and practices. A particular issue for feminist politics has been the contrasting perspectives of ‘equality feminism’ and ‘difference feminism’ (Guerrina, 2001; Hughes,

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2002). The effects of recent feminist theorizing can be seen in the changes in terminology for legislation and workplace policies over the last few decades, which reflect important discursive and political changes (Sinclair, 2002). Contemporary organizational, government and academic discourses in Britain increasingly utilize the language of choice, of flexibility, and of work–life balance or work–life integration, in contrast to earlier discourses of equal opportunities, positive discrimination, and of family-friendly policies (DFEE, 2000a; DTI, 2002; Hogarth *et al.*, 2000).

Evans (1994) highlights as central to feminist theorizing the conceptualization of equality based on entry to paid labour, and equal pay. The language of equal opportunities typically reflects this ideal, and conveys as its main purpose the facilitation of a level playing field so that individual potentials can be realized within a system (Hughes, 2002). Equal opportunities discourses of women being the ‘same as men’ have, however, been criticized for silencing women: they cannot speak out about their difficulties, as this highlights their difference and their lack of suitability for the work, or need for special ‘help’ (Hughes, 2002; Liff and Ward, 2001). Liff and Cameron (1997) argue that equal opportunities initiatives fail to get to the root of gender inequality, focusing on allowing women to mould themselves to male working patterns rather than addressing the gendered nature of current organizational practices. Women feel compelled to work like ‘surrogate men’ to succeed (Cockburn, 1991; Maier, 2000). This theme of women succeeding when they act ‘like men’ is a recurrent one in feminist organizational analysis (Dryburgh, 1999; McIlwee and Robinson, 1992; Rutherford, 2001; Wacjman, 1998). Perhaps the apotheosis of this is women attempting to contain pregnancy and childbirth within a male model of work (Blair-Loy, 2001; Martin 1990). Equal opportunities conceptualizations thus may be viewed as upholding the hierarchical and competitive basis of the existing social order. There are also practical problems with this approach. Sinclair (2000) recounts the problems associated with affirmative action, while Lewis (2001) demonstrates that such policies become seen as favours rather than entitlements. There is evidence of a backlash against equal opportunities and positive discrimination policies, based on the view that this is ‘unfair’ (Faludi, 1992; Liff and Ward, 2001; Sinclair, 2000; Young, 1999).

The feminist argument for highlighting women’s different needs and experiences within the workplace through ‘difference’ policies and legislation rests partly on biological differences, in particular biological motherhood, and the corresponding importance of maternity rights (Bryson, 1992; Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1994). It also rests on the awareness that the majority of women still do take on primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work. Suggestions that these are not primarily a women’s issue may be a feminist ideal but are hardly a reality for many women. There is a concern that ‘when we used categories, we could see where women were. When we generalize, they disappear’ (Rollin and Burrell, 2000, p. 52).

However, 'difference' approaches have been criticized for assuming biological determinism, for equating the roles of caring and mothering (Evans, 1994; Guerrina, 2001), and for over-generalizing women's experiences (Butler, 1990).

The limitations with both these approaches have led to the currently predominating view within organizational and policymaking discourses that what is needed is more recognition of the diversity of flexible working styles and work-life balance needs, rather than policies which specifically enable working mothers to manage paid work and family needs. Kandola and Fullerton (1994, p. 7) suggest various definitions of diversity, including 'understanding there are differences between employees and that these differences, if properly managed, are an asset to work being done more efficiently and effectively'. The diversity approach aims to move on from the problem perceived with equal opportunities approaches as being just an issue for human resources, and just about women, to being concerned about all employees and an issue for all managers (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; Liff, 1996; Liff and Cameron, 1997; Sinclair, 2000). Diversity is often described as proactive and pluralistic, driven by business needs, in contrast to the legally-driven equal opportunities approach (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). As an example of the diversity approach, a recent publication by the DFEE states that work-life balance

isn't just about women juggling a home and family. . . . It's also about adjusting working patterns so that everyone, regardless of age, race or gender, can find a rhythm that enables them more easily to combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations. (DFEE, 2000b, p. 4).

The gender-neutral terms of diversity management have gained popularity, partly as an attempt to put work-life issues into the 'mainstream' of organizational policy (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994). Recently, the term 'flexible working' has been used to describe aspects of work-life balance, in an attempt to move further away from viewing 'family' and working flexibility as issues for women (Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Napoli, 1994; Sheridan and Conway, 2001). It is assumed that men, and organizations, will respond better to 'flexible working' and 'work-life' initiatives than to gender equality issues. While the diversity approach is increasingly widespread in UK organizations, there has been a recent interest in and criticism of the meaning and underlying assumptions of diversity management (Sinclair, 2000). Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) use critical discourse analysis to argue that diversity management can perpetuate rather than combat inequalities in the workplace, as well as typically prescribing essentialist categories of difference. By focusing on individual differences and choices, there is little emphasis on power differentials or structural inequalities (Liff, 1996; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). Sinclair notes that 'the argument that "all people are different" renders equivalent systematic sources of inequality and sources of minor discomfort'

(Sinclair, 2000). It dilutes societal and organizational responsibilities for providing equal treatment and equal opportunity (Liff and Cameron, 1997; Linnehan and Konrad, 1999).

Fears of a backlash against gender equity issues have been one of the primary motivators for using a gender-neutral, or 'diversity' approach, and one of the main feminist arguments for using gender-neutral terms. It is argued that the language of diversity can reduce backlash propensities (Cox, 1994; Sinclair, 2000). Moreover, using gender-neutral terms can be an effective strategy for gaining funding, or an entry to organizations which may be more open to research on 'flexible working' than on gender equity. However, diversity approaches are limited in effectiveness. As new terms come into use in an attempt to 'mainstream' gender-equality issues, they become associated with women's and family issues and thereby become limited in effectiveness (Lewis, 2001).

One assumption behind the shift in emphasis from women-centred policies and terms to gender-neutral terms is that workplaces are no longer gendered in themselves, and that both women and men have equal choices and opportunities about participation in paid work, non-work commitments and preferences. Feminist theory has examined the concept of the 'gendered organization' since the 1970s (e.g. Acker, 1990, 1992; Kanter, 1977). Most feminist writers therefore share an assumption that gender inequality is the central issue and that organizations are structured hierarchically in favour of men, although there is much debate about the exact nature of the gendered organization (Britton, 2000; Martin and Collinson, 2002; Mills, 2002; Rutherford, 2001). If the workplace is no longer a sexist environment, there is no need for positive discrimination, nor for special policies to enable women to achieve in the workplace. Particularly among younger employees, enforced equality legislation and especially positive discrimination are seen as unfair and unnecessary and as lessening individual choice (Benschop and Brannen *et al.*, 2002; Doorewaard, 1998; Smithson, 1999). The lack of take up of flexible working or work-life balance policies by men has been explained in terms of organizational cultural barriers and gender expectations, including perceptions of these arrangements as favours or entitlements, and as fair or unfair (Haas and Hwang, 1995; Lewis, 1997).

As summarized above, the three approaches described here — equal opportunities, difference and diversity approaches, have all been criticized by feminists on both theoretical and practical grounds. Poststructuralist feminist theory provides possible ways of addressing the inherent problems with these approaches. Phillips (1987) outlines the problem of the equality/difference debate for feminists — namely that, set in opposition, both approaches (minimizing gender differences, or emphasizing them) fail to acknowledge that concepts of equality and difference have been developed within specific, gendered, structures. Butler (1990, 1997) demonstrates how the use of binary terms set in opposition, even those of 'man' and 'woman', are both the

product of discursive norms and limit the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life to certain habitual presumptions. Scott (1988) argues that feminists should not be forced into these pre-existing dichotomies, but need to find a way that, for example, we can retain difference and also argue for equality. Equality, for example, need not be understood as the opposite of difference: some understandings of equal treatment rely on the acceptance that to achieve equality, people need different treatment. Guerrina (2001) similarly advocates redefining these concepts so they are not in opposition.

Attempts to reclaim terms for feminist use can often fail as the dominant meanings of hierarchical pairings are so strongly in place (Butler, 1990; Hughes, 2002). The development of gender-neutral language can also fail as this reinforces the 'masculine humanist rational subject' as normative (Hughes, 2002). For example, Crompton and Birkelund (2000) reformulate the men-women dichotomy into a new division between 'encumbered' and 'unencumbered' workers, but it is clear which gender will slot into this new category division. One poststructuralist feminist approach is to aim to displace common hierarchized binary meanings by the invention of new language, for example by creating a third term, or 'hinge word' (Grosz, 1990; Hughes, 2002). These function as undecidable, occupying the ground of their 'excluded middle'. Grosz (1990) asserts that this is both impossible and necessary. Impossible, because we have to use the terms of dominant discourses to challenge that discourse. Necessary, because the process illustrates how what is said is bound up with what cannot be and is not said.

Guerrina (2001) argues that postmodernist feminist analyses provide two helpful approaches to feminists involved in legislation and policymaking. Firstly they question the underlying assumptions on which the policies were developed, and secondly, they challenge the construction of woman and mother. A problem for poststructural feminism is that it is easier to question or deconstruct underlying assumptions than it is to achieve changes in people's assumptions. An important aspect to achieving this change is not just using new terms, or using terms in a new way, but creating new stories and metaphors. This challenge has been taken up by feminists working in organizations (Liff and Cameron, 1997; Rapoport *et al.*, 2002). At its best, the diversity approach could be argued to be attempting to achieve gender (and other) equalities in the workplace by emphasizing a cultural change in organizational discourse.

While there are both pragmatic and ideological reasons for the changes in equality and diversity discourses, and we have highlighted a variety of criticisms of recent changes, it is important to understand how organizational members experience and practise these discourses, and what their effects are in terms of achieving gender equality. In this article we consider the effects of a 'genderblind' approach by looking at how participants in two organizational studies talk about such issues. In these research projects the terms 'flexibility', 'flexible working' and 'work-life balance' were used in the

official research literature and by the interviewers to participants, so in this analysis we will focus on the meanings of these three terms to the participants. We examine workplace members' talk about their organization, gender, work and flexible working practices.

Data and methodology

Two sets of data were drawn upon to explore the issues set out above. The first came from focus groups and individual interviews with employees in a large banking organization (Study A). Forty participants aged 25–55 took part in focus groups and individual interviews, conducted by the first author and colleagues. The second set of data came from 50 individual interviews with chartered accountants in a number of accountancy organizations (Study B). The participants in this study were aged 25–55, and were interviewed by the first author and a colleague. Both sets of data were recorded and the talk was transcribed verbatim. Company and participant names were changed in order to retain anonymity. The transcripts were read in conjunction with the recorded data.

Any analysis of language should focus on the ordinary, everyday use of terms, taking account of the local context within which the language term is placed (Moi, 1999). The everyday, or mundane, is thus viewed as a place of political struggle over meaning. Our analytic approach draws on these ideas as well as ethnomethodological methods that promote the importance of studying 'members' practices'. We take the view that if organizations are discursively gendered, that gendering will be displayed in the way people talk about their working lives. We therefore wanted to investigate if and when gendered categories and descriptions became relevant in the interviewees' accounts and descriptions of their organizational practices. Although the issue of gender was sometimes made relevant by the interviewer in her questions, we trawled the data particularly for responses and descriptions in which gender was a crucial organizing feature and basis, explicitly or implicitly. Our focus is therefore on 'the situated flow of discourse . . . members' methods and the logic of accountability while describing also the collective and social patterning of background normative assumptions' (Wetherell, 1998, p. 405). We examined the sequential organization of gendered argumentation, descriptions and evaluations of 'flexible working' and work-life issues and the dilemmatic quality of talk about these topics.

One particularly useful way into gendered accounting practices was to explore the local management of speakers' categorizations of themselves and others, focusing particularly on gender categorizations. According to membership categorization analysis (MCA), a branch of ethnomethodological inquiry (Sacks, 1992), it is in the ongoing construction of social categories (such as 'professional worker', 'breadwinner', 'woman') and the activities

and characteristics people link to them (like 'working all hours', 'caring', 'looking after children') that is central to the perpetuation of gendered assumptions and practices. Additionally, 'the more natural, taken-for-granted and therefore invisible the categorization work, the more powerful it is' (Baker, 2000, p. 111). Participants' categorization work is central to the organization of commonsense knowledge because categories and their associated predicates are 'quiet centres of power and persuasion' (Baker, 2000, pp. 99–106). MCA, therefore, is a useful method for feminist researchers because it allows analysts to see how participants both construct and manage their conduct in relation to conventional expectations for women and men's activities and characters (Stokoe, 2004).

One way in which the categorization process occurs is via the inferential resources, carried in categories, that are available to members of a culture, and that allow them to imply and infer things in their descriptions. This is because categories are 'inference rich': 'a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories' (Sacks, 1992, pp. 40–1). The practical reasoning by which categories and their inferences 'go together' is not, however, a strictly linguistic or logical kind of entailment. Rather, it is a commonsense, normative practice in which inferences and implications are generated and managed in actual stretches of talk, with regard to particular states of affairs or narrative accounts. Inferences may be picked up, developed or countered in subsequent turns.

Thus, the category of 'wife' can, within a conversational context, entail 'being heterosexual' and 'running a household' (Tainio, 2002), even though those features may not be required on strictly logical-semantic grounds. So a woman may be correctly categorized as a 'mother', 'worker', or 'wife', with each category carrying a different set of 'category-bound activities', predicates, or 'rights and obligations' that an incumbent of that category can be expected to perform or possess (Watson and Weinberg, 1982). Members' practical categorizations form part of what ethnomethodologists refer to when they describe the ongoing construction and maintenance of 'facts' about social life, including our knowledge about gender. This approach to analysis allows us to examine, at the micro level, how the building blocks of fundamental cultural divisions are formulated and exploited as part of the local construction of social meanings.

Analysis

Across the data sets, we found that talk about flexible working and work-life balance was overwhelmingly gendered in relation to women. We report on four related themes in this gendering process. First, we consider the way participants talk about flexible working in general, before considering how

speakers make gender relevant to their accounts of workplace practices. Then we consider the consequences and upshot of participants' gendered accounting, first in terms of the possibility of doing flexible working in a non-gendered way and, finally, in terms of 'backlash' issues. Through the analysis, we explore the ways participants construct their occupational contexts as gendered and how gender 'creeps into' talk about organizations in complex and subtle ways (Hopper and LeBaron, 1998). By investigating the ways that participants construct and negotiate ideas about the role of gender in the workplace, we can begin to understand how organizations become gendered and are maintained as gendered.

1. Talking about flexible working and work–life balance

In this section, we examine participants' talk about work–life balance and flexible working. We focus on the way talk about flexible working becomes talk about female workers. The attribution of flexible working as an issue, especially for women, and primarily younger women with children, occurred repeatedly in both studies, by women and men, young and old, at all levels of the organizations.

Extract 1: Man, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 I Okay, now there's a few questions about the business case for
 2 flexible working. The Institute of Chartered Accountants funded
 3 our study and they are very interested in whether it makes financial
 4 sense for people to work flexible working or part time work. I
 5 think they are particularly interested in retention of skilled staff.
 6 Do you see any advantages from a business point of view,
 7 giving people flexible working schedules, giving people management
 8 of their own timetables, letting them working from home?
 9 D Yes. The main advantage is the retention and attraction of,
 10 sort of like, particularly female, female members of staff who
 11 tend to be more the ones who'll be thinking of having kids,
 12 things like that.

Although the interviewer's question about implementing flexible working policies is gender-neutral, D's response constructs such policies as being relevant for women because it is they who have children. In lines 1–8, the interviewer uses the category 'people' to construct her question about the efficacy of flexible working policies. However, in D's response, the category 'people' is taken up and gendered: it is 'female' members of staff for whom such policies and practices are relevant. Additionally, D links the category 'female' with the activities of 'having kids' and 'things like that' (lines 11–12). By mentioning the activity of 'having kids', D makes relevant the category 'mother'. Thus we can track D's sense-making orientations as he categorizes

flexible workers as female staff and, moreover, as 'mothers', hence reproducing and maintaining the gendered order of workplace and related practices. We can also note that D's account is punctuated with pauses, hedges ('sort of like') and repetition ('female, female'), suggesting an orientation to some trouble in talking about gender issues.

The next extract in this section is unusual in that P, another man partner in an accountancy firm, does not automatically assign gender to work-life balance talk.

Extract 2: Man, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 P I think you need to have regard for the different mixes and
- 2 characters of people you've got . . .
- 3 I Yeah?
- 4 P And maybe you're looking at the work life balance for the chunk in
- 5 the middle, because the chunk at the top will be the sorts of people
- 6 who work out what's right for them . . .
- 7 I Yeah
- 8 P And who're prepared to put in the extra mile.

P first talks about valuing different people within an organization, which has strong links with diversity management approaches. He then makes a distinction between the moderate achievers, who may have some sort of work-life balance, and the high fliers 'who work out what's right for them'. The notion of 'putting in the extra mile' was very salient in the accountancy participants' talk, it was widely seen as the way a professional works, and the way to get promoted. The predicates of the category 'professional' therefore include not having a work-life balance, and putting in 'the extra mile'. This extract was remarkable in these data sets in not becoming explicitly talk about women. Instead, work-life balance is viewed as a freely made choice, but not the sort of choice made by high fliers. This 'diversity approach' positions 'difference' as a matter of individual differences in ability or choice, rather than power differentials (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Sinclair, 2000) and ignores the gendered reality of who is free to put in the extra mile (Rutherford, 2001).

In the third extract we consider another example of the way talk about flexible working becomes gendered:

Extract 3: Man, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 I Well, just the final question then. Do you think ways of work are
- 2 changing in accountancy firms in general? Not just [firm P]
- 3 A I think because of the flexibility that technology gives, clearly
- 4 as an employer we need to be able to recruit and take the best staff,
- 5 and it requires us to also, obviously to, it's part of being a
- 6 caring employer, you've got to develop and provide more
- 7 flexibility to our staff. So yes, things are

8 changing, umm, you know I don't rule out any possibility in
9 terms of flexible working as a tool, you know, if it can make
10 us a better firm. For instance I suspect there's a lot of
11 young lady accountants, particularly, maybe have had a young
12 child or whatever, and who want to retain the link with the
13 profession, but who've temporarily given up work for having a
14 child or just wanting to provide the childcare. So they've got
15 a slot say from 9.30 to 2.30 if you like, a few days
16 a week, you often think, or I often think, that people in
17 that situation are probably very good talented people with a lot of
18 good accountancy skills who want to keep their hand in.

In this fragment, A initially links the practices of 'flexibility' to the gender-neutral categories 'staff' (line 7), 'us' and 'firm' (line 10). However, as his account moves from the general to the particular, his example of the way the policy might get translated practically makes gender relevant in a similar way to Extract 1. He links the category 'young lady' to having 'a young child or whatever' and 'provide the childcare' (lines 11–12, 14). This is similar to D's description, in Extract 1, of 'female members of staff' who have 'kids (. . .) things like that'. The phrases 'or whatever' (in A's account) and 'things like that' (in Extract 1) seem to function in two ways: as 'generalised list completers' (Jefferson, 1990) that orient to the shared cultural knowledge of the 'things' that are related to having children, but also as neutralizing or distancing devices that objectify the description as one that is based in fact rather than biased description. As in D's account in Extract 1, this indicates a possible orientation to interactional trouble in talking about gender matters.

We can see how flexible working practices are constructed again as an issue for women with childcare responsibilities. Moreover, we can see how A can imply that 'young lady accountants' are not seriously committed core employees via descriptions of practices such as 'retain(ing) the link with their profession' and 'keep(ing) their hand in'. Exploring the data in this way allows us to see what is 'unsaid' and 'inferred' as the participants build categorizations. By excluding talk about men or fathers in their accounts, the participants construct what we have termed the 'generic she' or 'generic female parent' in which talk about parenting and childcare implicitly assumes that the mother, and not the father, is responsible for childcare (Stokoe and Smithson, 2001). This is in contrast to the well-documented 'generic he' of the traditional worker (Stringer and Hopper, 1998). As Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) found from interviews with banking sector employees, a gendered subtext operated within the accounts, which provided the basis from which both perceptions of equality and inequalities emerge. These include the 'mommy track', down which employees who are also mothers often find their careers progressing. While the language of the policies has changed, the participants

are still operating within a highly gendered context; so it appears that language change without corresponding culture change is bound to fail (Butler, 1990; Hughes, 2002).

Towards the end of his account, A switches back to a gender-neutral category, replacing 'lady' with 'people' (lines 11–12). Although it is clear from the context of the talk that 'people' is a same-turn replacement category for 'lady', and that he is still referring to women when he says 'people in that situation . . . probably very good talented people . . . who want to keep their hand in', we can see an interesting structure emerging in the way speakers talk about gender and flexible working patterns. A's account moves between the deployment of neutral, gendered and back to neutral categorizations of workers. We explore this structure of turn organization in more detail in the next section. However, we can see that using 'gender-blind' terms such as flexibility and work-life balance does not in fact obscure or affect the 'commonsense' knowledge that it is working women, usually mothers of young children, who are the main users of work-life policies. The category of 'flexible worker' is routinely linked to being a woman, and to having a young child. In this respect, the political goal of 'mainstreaming' equal opportunities policies is not being achieved by the use of more inclusive language.

2. Talking about gender in organizations

In this section, we explore participants' tacit reasoning about gender within their organizations in response to direct questions about gender-related matters. Do people view their organizations as gendered? In Study B, interviewees were asked whether they thought it made a difference being a man or a woman in their organization. We return to the interview with D, who appeared in Extract 1:

Extract 4: Man, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 I In terms of promotion, do you think it's easier for a man to get
2 promoted than a woman, or doesn't it make a difference?
3 D I don't think it makes a difference what sex you are, but I think
4 it does make a difference going back what we were saying earlier,
5 to part timers and commitment, I think that if a woman has a
6 house husband, as it were, but if somebody is looking to take a
7 career break of two to three years, I can't see her presence being
8 required. But that could be a woman or a man, and I don't see
9 the difference

The upshot of D's account is that gender makes no difference in terms of promotion within his accountancy firm (lines 3, 8–9). However, a more careful

analysis of this extract reveals a particular structure to his account and, within this sequential order, the maintenance of particular ideas about gender. As we noted earlier, participants often displayed some difficulty in talking about gender (in)equality (see also Smithson, 1999; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001). We found that, in an interview situation, participants' accounts routinely followed a 'gender-neutral' trajectory, in that initial responses to such questions were usually that no, gender does not make a difference. Talking about gender problems emerged as an interactional problem, needing careful management. One way in which talk about gender problems was achieved was by framing such descriptions in an overall gender-neutral account. Throughout our data, the following three-part sequence could be found in response to questions about gender:

- A: Suggest gender is not an issue
- B: Describe a gender problem or inequality
- C: Conclude that gender is not an issue

By framing talk about problems in this way, participants can maintain an overall gender-neutral account. However, such accounts are problematic because they are often embedded in implicitly gendered repertoires of sense-making. Looking at extract 4 above, the three-part sequence can be seen as follows:

- A: I don't think it makes a difference what sex you are
- B: it does make a difference . . . to part timers and commitment
- C: woman or a man . . . I don't see the difference

The overall message here is that it is situation, not gender that makes a difference. However, if we track D's categorizations across this account, a gendered explanation is implied. First, D juxtaposes the category 'part-timer' with the category predicate 'commitment', although it is clear that D is troubling, rather than consolidating, this juxtaposition. For a woman to be fully committed, she must have a 'house husband (. . .) as it were' (line 6). Given that D has already described flexible working policies as applying to women who want children (Extract 1), and thus it is women who are likely to be part-timers, the middle part of this account suggests that there is a problem with part-time women and commitment. In other words, D firstly reproduces the normative order of heterosexual partnerships and families in which one person looks after the house. Although he disrupts the conventional man-as-breadwinner category-activity pair, the 'as it were' tag marks this as unusual in some way. Further, D's use of the gender-neutral 'somebody' (line 6) who might engage in a 'career break' is transformed into a female category in the subsequent part of his turn: 'I can't see *her* presence being required'. A similar tension between gender and promotion is found in the following extract from another interview:

Extract 5: Man, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 I Do you think it makes much difference being a man or a woman in
 2 accountancy firms at the moment?
 3 B Er, it certainly doesn't in this practice, um, and it never
 4 has done. You might argue with that because at the moment we only
 5 have one female partner, shortly to become two, um, I don't
 6 really understand why that is. I actually, when I look round
 7 actually in our firm I think that the women are better organized than
 8 the men. I think they generally are, in the practice as a whole.
 9 I think in the accountancy profession as a whole, I see a lot
 10 Of. I see a lot of successful women. [Woman P] had to fight to
 11 get to be president of the institution, she made it in the end,
 12 but she is, I think she is a tough cookie. So I would say that
 13 there probably are some barriers but, not here I don't think.

The same three-part pattern can be identified in this account:

- B: we only have one female partner
- A: it (being a man or woman) certainly doesn't in this practice
- C: not here I don't think

B's description of his firm, in which there is only one woman partner, is framed within an overall gender-neutral account. He positions himself as naïve and distanced from this state of affairs, by stating 'I don't really understand why that is' as well as by constructing a counter-intuitive case that 'actually' 'women are better organized than men' (lines 6–8). However, the activities he links to the category of 'successful women' include 'fight', making it 'in the end', and being a 'tough cookie'. He therefore reproduces the commonsense notion that women who are successful need to be 'extra' in some way, or are 'tough'.

Overall, when asked about whether it made a difference being a man or a woman in their organization, participants simultaneously argued that gender was not an issue in the company but also that there were no women 'at the top' of the organization. Participants made the link between flexible working and women, and between flexible working and promotion prospects, but typically did not make a corresponding link between gender and promotion. This three-part sequence occurred regularly in our data. The pauses, repetitions and contradictions evident in these extracts again demonstrate the participants' trouble with the idea of gender being an explicit issue. In organizational members' accounts, therefore, despite reproducing gender differences at one level, the rhetoric of working in a non-gendered organization is maintained.

3. Consequences: doing flexible working in a non-gendered way

We have seen that flexible working and managing a work–life balance are issues that are routinely linked to women, especially women with young children. Meanwhile, the myth of a gender-neutral organization is perpetuated in official discourse and that of everyday members. In this section, we consider some of the practical consequences of this discrepancy. We investigate how participants negotiate flexible working issues. Here we focus particularly on how women negotiate maternity leave with colleagues and managers, and how other organization members react to this. Maternity leave provides particularly striking examples of women attempting to do even this activity in a way that minimizes gender differences in the workplace.

The first extract comes from a focus group interview with women bank managers, who are discussing maternity leave and coming back to work. N and J are both participants.

Extract 6: Women bank managers, in focus group

- 1 N It's amazing actually, nobody's supposed to come back till the
 2 baby's two weeks old, but I've seen correspondence when they've
 3 asked, you know, can they come back sooner, purely for
 4 financial reasons. Really it does happen! [lines omitted]
 5 J But if you're working right up to having the baby, and you have
 6 off all, over and above the medical side of ante-natal et cetera,
 7 it does add up to quite a bit, I think it's whether you can —
 8 I'm making sure I don't take off any more than I absolutely have to.

The participants build an account of baby-related absence as something that is restricted, but their two perspectives are constructed in sharp contrast. Whilst N's description of the employer's perspective as a manager is prefaced and suffixed with a display of resistance to the limited period of leave ('it's amazing' and 'really it does happen!'), J's description, as a pregnant employee (as well as a manager) demonstrates her commitment to restricting leave time ('I'm making sure I don't take off any more time than I absolutely have to'). J's use of the extreme case 'absolutely' functions to strengthen this commitment (Pomerantz, 1986). Both N and J construct maternity leave in terms of abbreviated or minimal time periods: 'sooner' (line 3) and 'right up to' (line 5) and, interestingly, 'two weeks' (line 2), something 'men' were entitled to at the time of the study (1998) by government legislation. As noted earlier, women in traditional organizations are accepted at a managerial level if they hide their differences and work 'like men'. Taking maternity leave 'like a man' — doing 'macho maternity' — is an extreme but common example of this (Blair-Loy, 2001; Martin, 1990), although taking less than two weeks is rare in the UK, even among women bank managers, noted by other

researchers for their adherence to 'male' styles of working (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998).

This passage is interesting because the women do not explicitly gender their discussion of 'having the baby', an activity normatively linked to the categories 'mother' and 'woman'. They do not even mention the word 'maternity', a term that further inscribes gender into childcare practices. Their account contains categories and activities such as 'having the baby', 'ante-natal' and 'baby' which, in MCA terms, imply such categories as 'woman'. But the fact that they do not explicitly index gender, leaving its relevance implicit, is central to the way categorization works: inferences and upshots can be denied, allowing speakers to do subtle things with their descriptions. We explore further accounts of maternity leave in the following two extracts from individual interviews in a small accountancy firm, in which two male accountants are discussing the same absent woman, who is in a management position:

Extract 7: Man, employee from accountancy firm

- 1 P We have a partner at the moment who's a woman
 2 and she's just had a baby and she's having four months
 3 off, but she's still, I mean she's, I keep thinking she's
 4 in the office because you know, I'm getting contact from people
 5 over in (town Y) office. 'Oh (woman X) said this', you know.
 6 So she must obviously be in contact, but she's just not in work.
 7 I mean at the end of the day, you can lose, and not to, to
 8 demean anybody's position, but you can lose somebody near the
 9 bottom for 12 weeks can't you, but you can't at the top,
 10 you can't, how would you replace somebody?

There is a contradiction in this account. In the first half, P describes his colleague as having four months' maternity leave yet he keeps 'thinking she's in the office' because 'she must obviously be in contact' (lines 3–6). The absent woman, then, is maintaining her work responsibilities whilst being on four months' leave and is doing 'macho maternity'. However, in the second part of the account, P constructs an argument implicitly against this scenario. He suggests that it is easy to lose 'somebody near the bottom' of a company due to maternity leave but not somebody 'at the top'. So despite describing the woman's activities as continuing to work and maintain contact during her official absence, P still adopts a position that it is problematic for (female) workers at the top of organizations to go on leave. In other words, it is acceptable for female workers at the bottom of the company to take maternity leave, but not senior workers. The same situation is being discussed in Extract 8:

Extract 8: Man, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 H recruited (woman X) and agreed a maternity policy with her. So I
 2 have absolutely no problem with that at all, er, we had a long

- 3 discussion about how she would manage her part of the practice which
4 is the (Town U) office, um, while she was on maternity leave.
5 I was quite satisfied with what she had to say at the time.
6 She has been very good because she has arranged her confinement at a
7 period when the practice is less busy (laughs) and it has worked
8 out pretty much as we predicted that it would.

The notion of 'macho maternity' is reinforced even more strongly in H's account. His positive evaluation of the absent woman's approach to maternity leave is predicated on arranging her 'confinement at a period when the practice is less busy (laughs) and it has worked out pretty much as we predicted that it would'. The laughter functions here to mitigate the use of 'confinement', an old-fashioned category for pregnancy and childbirth, as ironic and not to be taken seriously. However, for a woman to arrange her pregnancy and childbirth for a quiet period at work indicates that these situations must cause minimum disruption to the company for the woman not to be criticized.

Despite the fact that the participants are themselves managers, what emerges from these extracts is that the roles of 'manager' or 'professional' and 'mother' do not sit easily together. This supports other research findings from interviews with banking sector workers, in which tensions emerged between 'active parenting' and senior roles (Liff and Ward, 2001). 'Diversity' approaches fail to deal adequately with this tension. There is still an uneasy distinction between the 'good' male-style worker and the 'bad' female-style worker, even when men and women can ostensibly work in either way. We can see that many women in these organizations feel compelled to work 'like men' to succeed, and that even women who have already achieved senior positions work hard to maintain the notion of being equal players with their male colleagues in a non-gendered organization. Speakers make use of gender-neutral terms to minimize the perceptions of gendered behaviour and entitlements, to the extent of making maternity leave arrangements in a 'fair' or non-gendered way. This leads into a related consequence of viewing organizations as gender-neutral spaces: a backlash.

Consequences: a backlash

In the final section of analysis, we consider the way that discourses of equality for women have been replaced with notions of fairness and choice. One of the reasons for using genderblind languages is to move away from the perception of policies as unfairly favouring women. The woman in the following two extracts is in her thirties, with a young child. She is discussing whether

parental leave would work in her organization, a topic that is introduced by the interviewer:

Extract 9: Woman, partner in accountancy firm

- 1 I The extended leave of up a month a year of which either parent can
 2 take generally in Britain it's unpaid at the moment, this is
 3 since you had your son, most people can take parental leave now of
 4 up to a month a year but it is unpaid and some companies are
 5 considering paid parental leave which either parent, for up to
 6 three months at a time,
 7 K I think to offer people full pay would be quite divisive actually
 8 (laughs). First of all it's going to cost a lot. I mean an
 9 organization like ours would find it quite difficult to be paying
 10 people for lots of parental leave, um, but equally what about
 11 the, um, for the people who don't have children it's quite
 12 unfair. You are actually giving people time off and paying them
 13 for it. Um so I see that it could be quite divisive so I don't
 14 think I would be in favour of that really. I certainly don't mind
 15 if people want to take time off then, I have no problem with that,
 16 but as to whether it should be paid, I don't think it should
 17 particularly.

Extract 10: Same woman accountancy partner

- 1 K I think we've talked about term time working and I do think there
 2 could be more mileage in that. I think perhaps my fear from this
 3 work-balance issue is the backlash from the people who don't have
 4 children,
 5 I Yeah
 6 K Because they perceive it as being a benefit completely for people with
 7 children, and I think we could almost do to promote the fact there
 8 is a balance to be had for people who don't have children.

These extracts are interesting in that it is parents, rather than women or mothers, who are viewed as potentially causing a backlash. This is consistent with findings that if fathers make use of flexible working policies, charges of unfairness and worries of a backlash become transferred from women to parents (Haas and Hwang, 1995; Lewis, 1991). Perceptions of unfairness in work-life balance policies lead to, or are feared to lead to, a backlash against workers with family responsibilities, and when men are included more in these policies, it appears from this data that the backlash does not disappear, it is merely shifted onto parents. This may be construed as a rather perverse step forward in gender equity, but is likely to be a deterrent to both men and women from taking up flexible working policies. These extracts demonstrate the problematic results of reformulating binaries in less obviously gendered ways, for example using parent/non-parent rather than woman/man.

In Extracts 9 and 10, the woman promotes fairness between parents and non-parents over policies that aim to make life easier for new working parents. Issues of whether the highly gendered division of childcare and domestic labour underlying these 'choices' is fair (Dally, 1996) are not apparent in these discourses.

Discussion

In this article, we have explored current discourses utilized by managers and by employees, about gender, flexible working patterns, gender equality, and work–life. We investigated the extent and consequences of the use of 'genderblind' terms for equality, specifically in these studies, the terms 'flexible working', 'flexibility' and 'work–life balance'. We aimed to discover whether, in these organizations, the genderblind terms were an aid or a hindrance to feminist goals of advancing gender equality. While we came to the data with feminist notions of gender and careers, the participants in these studies predominantly framed their responses within a gender-neutral account of organizations. Our analysis suggests that masking or minimizing gender differences within gender-neutral language does not, as a strategy, appear to be working as a means for advancing gender equality. In other words, men do not normally 'do' flexible working and work–life balance, any more than they did family-friendly working.

We found that the de-gendered terms do not in practice change the widespread assumption within organizations by managers and employees, both women and men, that these issues are strongly linked to women. Both terms are overwhelmingly used in connection to working women with families. Some evidence of 'diversity' discourses can be seen in the data. Viewing decisions about working hours, parenting and childcare as individual freely-made choices, is acceptable given a gender-neutral society, a 'level playing field'. However, while both women and men participants regularly construct these 'choices' as primarily choices for women, our analysis suggests that the gender-neutral language of diversity and choice is not adequately addressing highly gendered patterns of living and working. Of particular note is the way women feel compelled to work like men to succeed, to the extent of doing 'macho maternity'. These practices are seen by many women as essential both to be accepted as a core member of the organization (rather than being relegated to the 'mommy track'), and to minimize charges of a backlash.

We are not advocating a return to 'woman-friendly' or 'family-friendly' terms. Poststructuralist feminist approaches of challenging the underlying assumptions and binaries on which workplace culture and policies are based offer potential alternatives. Some recent attempts to change language and discourses around work–family issues have been aiming to move on from gendered binaries towards a lasting cultural shift (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002)

though our analysis demonstrates how hard this is to do in practice. As noted in the introduction (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1990) attempts to change or reclaim language are often likely to fail as we attempt this from within a dominant, gendered discourse.

Liff and Cameron (1997) argue for a change of emphasis to viewing 'organizations not women who have the problems' (1997, p. 39). They suggest that overall attitudes will only get changed if men respond to the new opportunities offered to them. It appears to be vital to aim for a redefinition of central assumptions. For example, in the UK motherhood and maternity are viewed as a highly personal issue. Other countries have more successfully managed to begin to redefine of public and private spheres (Nyberg, 2003) with parenting and childhood viewed as a social issue rather than an individual choice. Guerrina (2001) suggests we find ways of allowing gender differences, for example maternity leave, as part of equal treatment. The Swedish approach of a long period of paid parental leave, of which two months has to be taken by each parent, or be lost, demonstrates an attempt to de-gender parenthood and caring responsibilities, in contrast to the UK system of six months' paid maternity leave but a minimal (two weeks) paid leave available to fathers (Nyberg, 2003). Some UK organizations have implemented unpaid leave and flexible working opportunities policies available for all employees, although in practice patterns of leave-taking remain highly gendered (Smithson *et al.*, 2004). It is likely that in a context where many more men do take part in flexible working schemes such as parental leave agreements, a backlash becomes less of a deterrent as flexible working is normalized (Brandth and Kvande, 2002). These practical approaches to policy and organizational change reflect poststructuralist notions of providing new stories and metaphors (Hughes, 2002; Moi, 1999).

It is also important to acknowledge the existence of multiple identities, or subjectivities (Butler, 1990). A mother is not 'just' a mother: she will have other identities not shared with all other mothers in the workplace, while non-mothers may have significant caring responsibilities too. Similarly, debates about, say, 'macho maternity', need to consider not just the length of the mother's maternity leave but who else is caring for the child, and particularly the father's time and caring involvement. Butler emphasizes how the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions. This is the case not just for organizational members but also for us as researchers.

There are limitations on what can be concluded from a small-scale study. However, from this analysis, we can conclude that changing the terminology of equality does not in itself contribute significantly to advancing gender equality within this type of organization. Using gender-neutral terms may be an essential step towards changing organizational culture (Liff and Ward, 2001) but the effects of these changes is negligible without far wider cultural changes within organizations and in wider society.

Notes

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