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Organisation Carescapes: Policies, Practices and Equality in Business

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Abstract

In this paper I introduce the concept of *organisation carescapes* and subsequently consider data from an on-going project on the interlinked domains of work and family for women working in unskilled and semi skilled jobs in food retail companies.

Organisation carescapes offers a framework for research and policy work. It adopts the metaphor of a map to posit that people and companies plot routes through a changing, multidimensional terrain that comprises their experience and anticipation of care and relevant legislation and policies. The concept offers potential to theorise and empirically examine the manner in which people and organisations try to realise particular aims and goals by actively selecting their paths through carescapes (McKie et al., 2002). That may include legislation, socio-economic context, company finances and goals, and the changing needs of employers and employees over the lifecycle.

From the study *Work-Life Balance in the Scottish Food Retail Sector*¹ I report on findings from twenty-one semi-structured interviews conducted with women aged 21 to 64. Here I identify and reflect upon the experiences of women employees. The day-to-day management of care, and disruptions in arrangements, takes place among all workers, supervisors, relatives and friends, with limited knowledge of, and no recourse to, company policies and relevant legislation. A notional form of reciprocity underpins all these processes as care work is bartered across a range of relationships (Rankine et al., 2005). Supervisors have a pivotal role maintaining staffing levels, often incurring personal and financial costs as a consequence. Thus the hierarchical nature of organisational structures places particular tensions upon supervisors in particular, with regards to balancing work and care.

Drawing upon the concept of organisation carescapes, and empirical data, I offer the possibility of a *care-employment* ceiling. By that I posit that women will not actively seek promotion, training or education for fear of further responsibilities that could inhibit their potential to remain as flexible as possible in seeking to combine caring and working. It would seem that public policies have limited relevance to the lives of women in low paid jobs and, as a consequence, mainstreaming equality remains illusive.

¹ Data are drawn from the study entitled *Work-life Balance in the Scottish Food Retail Sector*. Funded by the European Social Fund the project team comprises: Laura Airey, Linda McKie and Laura Rankine, all Glasgow Caledonian University, Kathryn Milburn, University of Edinburgh and Gill Hogg, University of Strathclyde. Correspondence to Linda McKie; l.mckie@cal.ac.uk

Organisation Carescapes: Policies, Practices and Equality in Business

Introduction

One of the aims of this final seminar in the series *Public policy, equality and diversity in the context of devolution* is to explore how policies of mainstreaming equality work in practice, and what the trade-offs are for different groups. In this contribution I offer some conceptual ideas and empirical data on combining caring and working. The focus is upon women working as shop assistants or supervisors in the food retail sector, in Scotland. This is a growth sector for employment, especially for women. Opportunities for flexible working are high. However, although pay is above minimum wage levels it remains low. It is a sector of employment in which large, well-known, companies dominate the image, and yet in sheer numbers it is the small to medium size shops that are highly relevant to both urban and rural communities. With many social and public policies premised upon notions of the citizen active in employment, training or education, often regardless of parenting or carer status, combining paid work alongside care responsibilities is an everyday reality for most.

There exists, at local, national and supra national levels, a plethora of work-life balance and equality related policies. Most post-industrial societies have implemented policies directed towards facilitating participation into the labour market for individuals with caring responsibilities (Rubery et al., 1999). A range of European Union (EU), UK and Scottish Executive directives and initiatives are in place to achieve this aim, including: Employment Act 2002 (part-time working, parental, paternity and maternity leave, the right to request flexible working); the UK's Working Time (Amendment) Regulations, 2003, in response to the EU's Working Time Directive, 1999; New Deal Programme for Lone Parents; National Childcare Strategy; and Child Tax Credit. In various ways, these local, national and supra national initiatives are aimed at enabling women's labour market participation (McKay 1998; Land, 1999; Dex and Smith, 2002; Leira, 2002). At previous seminars colleagues considered the origins, development and implementation of a range of these policies.

Despite the continual development of these 'new' policies, the 'old' issues in relation to gender inequality still persist within workplaces, specifically for those employed in low paid jobs. Women continue to take responsibility for scripting care, even if others undertake actual care work, and often forego their wages to pay for care services and aids. And the Cabinet Office Report, *The Female Forfeit*, identifies how women loose out in terms of pay and pensions across the lifecourse with an increasing number living in poverty (Cabinet Office, 2000). However, there have been relatively few empirically based studies of how women employed in the food retail sector attempt to reconcile their work and caring demands, and the implications of this for immediate and longer term dimensions of equality.

In the study I draw upon here, entitled *Work-life balance in the Scottish food retail sector*, a mixed methods approach was undertaken, with data collected from women working in 7 small to medium enterprises (1 to 249 employees) and 2 large companies. While the project is on-going an analysis of 21 interviews and 246 questionnaires with women workers is offered. Future work will include interviews with employers and human resource managers. Data considered today highlight

dynamic and complex intersections between women's employment experiences and their care commitments. Women adopted private solutions to reconciling caring and working with little, or no, recourse to policy level initiatives. It would seem that the array of legislation, policies and guidelines on aspects of work-life balance have limited impact upon working lives of the women in this study. Employee choice and informal flexibility proved helpful for women working in this sector most of whom bartered and managed work time to accommodate the sometimes competing demands of caring and working.

At this point I would like to offer a conceptual framework – organisation carescapes - that has potential to aid the analysis caring and working across the lifecourse.

Organisation Carescapes

Organisation carescapes allows for the critical examination of: formal 'care policies'; implementation of policies and practices of care; experiences of care within companies and outside companies; and organisational cultures and cultures of care more generally.

Let me 'unpack' the components of the concept:

- Care is a multi-faceted term that can combine feelings of concern and anxiety for others alongside the provision of practical labour and tasks that attend to a person's needs (Cancian and Oliker 2000: 2). Most discussions on care emphasise either the social policy and welfare context; work-life balance, or organisational well-being and occupational health (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).
- Culture refers to the beliefs of the organisations and their symbolic and practical representation through a range of activities. In researching cultures of care we might identify values (how organisations specify what people ought to do through policies and practices) and norms (the rules of behaviour that create parameters for behaviour) through a multi-method research design (Brown, 1995; Wilson, 2001).

The relevance and potential for organisational cultures to endorse the concept of care across a range of employment policies, is critical to working relations and thus, productivity. While it is difficult to specify the complex emotional and material concerns that caring entails, there are a variety of caring processes that are crucial to the organisation of everyday life, thoughts and plans for the future: for employers, workers, family, friends (Bowden 1997: 184). Caring, as a combination of feelings with tasks, has been conceptualised by researchers in two ways, as 'caring about': the feeling part of caring, and 'caring for': the practical work of tending for others (Parker 1981; Ungerson 1983; Bowden, 1997; Sevenhuijsen 1998, Williams, 2001). Caring itself is an activity in which both subtle and not so subtle relations of power can be expressed, often in a gendered fashion (Tronto 1993). If power is gendered, as are many aspects of caring, then the inter-weaving and workings of these concepts has implications for the development and operation of organisational cultures and policies.

In earlier work the notion of caringscapes was offered as a means by which the multi-layered aspects of care (McKie et al. 2002; McKie et al., 2004). The theoretical basis of caringscapes posits that people plot routes through a changing, multi-dimensional terrain that comprises their experience and anticipation of care and that these projects of care are gendered in content and experience (Hagerstand, 1978; Giddens, 1984; Adam, 2000). The concept of organisational carescapes, incorporates research on formal 'care policies'; implementation of policies and practices of care; experiences of care within companies and outside companies; organisational cultures and cultures of care more generally. Organisational carescapes are not static: thus planned 'routes' (policies and practices) must sometimes be changed or amended in response to shifts in public policies (e.g. the introduction of disability rights legislation, and flexible working guidelines), the actions of employers or, in the case of family life, personal events such as the arrival of a first or subsequent child. These issues also change in response to the influences of others and changes in mobility, communication, and the institutional organisations that confront individuals and companies.

Work-life Balance in the Scottish Food Retail Sector

There is not time today to go into detail on the study suffice to say it is that data were drawn from stage one of an ongoing three-year European Social Fund (ESF) project. Firstly, exploratory qualitative interviews enabled in-depth discussions of the complex and often nuanced day-to-day and longer-term issues for women who are employed and have caring commitments (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001). Subsequently, we developed a quantitative research component to gain a breadth of women's views on a range of issues (Sarantakos, 1998). The findings considered below are based on 21 qualitative interviews and 246 self-administered questionnaires carried out with female employees in the Scottish food retail sector².

The majority of our respondents in both sample groups worked part time (i.e. less than 37 hours per week). 78% of the questionnaire respondents worked on average between 18 and 30 hours per week. In common with other research (Gregory, 1995), we found that non-standard working hours were prevalent. Working patterns were diverse and varied, for example, an individual's working hours might be: Monday to Friday 8:30am to 2pm; or Monday to Wednesday 12pm to 5pm, and then Thursday 9am to 12pm; or Monday 10am to 2pm, Tuesday 9am to 1pm, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday 12pm to 4pm.

The women who participated in the study ranged in age from 16-60+ and they reported a range of differing caring responsibilities. A large proportion of the women in both sample groups had children (21 interview participants; 122 questionnaire respondents). Six of the 21 interviewees also reported additional caring responsibilities, such as caring for an elderly/disabled relative. 24% of survey respondents indicated that they looked after someone, with examples of caring for a sick parent and caring for an elderly relative given, sometimes in addition to caring

² Further information on methodology and the current progress of the project can be obtained by emailing either Laura Airey, laura.airey@ed.ac.uk or myself, l.mckie@gcal.ac.uk. An information sheet in the appendix of this paper provides an overview of the project.

for their own child/children. We found that although there was considerable diversity within and between the sample groups, in terms of both lifecourse stage and the nature and extent of caring responsibilities, women generally faced similar challenges and issues in relation to combining work and care.

A key theme that emerged very strongly from both datasets, regarding employment choice, was the high importance that women placed upon being able to work in a location that was close to their homes. Almost all of the women in the interview sample reported that the shop they worked in was located in the same neighbourhood in which they lived, and almost ½ (46%) of the survey respondents reported that they lived 'less than 1 mile' from work. Further, it was important to women that their workplaces were in close proximity to their homes in case they were unexpectedly and urgently required to provide or arrange care for dependents during working hours. By actively choosing to work close to home, women's employment opportunities were restricted to those jobs that were available in their local neighbourhoods; frequently, women in the interview sample reported that food retail stores were the *only* employers of women within their local area.

Women reported that their caring commitments influenced their availability for work in many different ways, for example: which days they were able to work; how many hours a day they could work; and whether they could work in the morning, afternoon or evening. The majority of respondents expressed the view that food retail companies were, in general, 'good' places for people with caring responsibilities to work, because of the variety of shift patterns and working arrangements on offer. Women's ability to express some autonomy and a degree of choice over their working hours is well illustrated by the following comments offered by one mother:

'Well, I said 16 hours would be enough for me and they were quite happy about that and I said getting somebody to watch the baby's easier at night and then one day during the week cos my mother- in- law's off, so she could have him on a Thursday. So I just explained that and they were fine. That's what they gave me.'

(Large 1 [1], semi rural, aged 21, one child)

The care needs of children, elderly people, and other recipients of care, were dynamic and appeared to shift over time. Women seeking to reconcile paid work and caring, therefore, may need to alter their working arrangements in order to accommodate changes in caring commitments. Respondents described being able to increase or decrease their working hours and alter the distribution of their working hours, in order to reconcile their work and their care-giving commitments.

The data drawn from the interviews indicate that when women required time off work in order to fulfil sudden or unexpected caring demands, this tended to be arranged with supervisors on an ad-hoc, one-to-one basis. In the interviews, women emphasised the relational nature of arrangements at work. Most of the interviewees said that their supervisors were very understanding when time off for caring was required. They also stressed that they did not want to 'take advantage' of the goodwill of supervisors, and so requested time off only when it was absolutely necessary.

Over 3/5 (76%) of the survey respondents also noted that they felt comfortable about asking for changes to their working patterns to help them reconcile work and both emergency and day to day caring demands. Individuals reported organising this flexibility with managers and other colleagues on a one to one basis with very little or no recourse to formal policies and practices. In the interviews, this informal flexibility was described in clear and self-explanatory terms such as ‘give and take’, ‘doing favours for each other’, and ‘everyone’s in the same boat’.

The picture differs for those working in supervisory grades. These women reported that it was much more difficult to say no to working or covering extra hours and shifts. All of the supervisors confirmed that there was a general expectation for them to work flexibly to suit the needs of the business, simply because of their designation:

(Researcher)

‘... it sounds like you’re quite often standing in for other people.’

(Supervisor)

‘Yeah. Uh huh. Well, there on ...what day was it? Wednesday? I was in at quarter to 8 but I didn’t get home till ... I didn’t finish till half 6 because I had things I wanted to finish cos I was off on the Thursday and I wanted to finish it before I went home.’

It could be argued that this flexibility is in fact detrimental to the work life balance of those with the responsibility of organising others. Colleagues might ring in sick, having encountered problems in organising care or support for family members. Regardless of the reasons, the supervisors considered themselves responsible for staffing shops and ensuring opening hours were met. Thus they might attempt to barter time among other employees, or cover shifts themselves.

Overall, our sample reported minimal knowledge of general employment rights, legislation, and company policies, especially with regard to adoption leave, the right to request flexible working and paternity and parental leave. This finding is somewhat concerning, given the on-going promotion of directives and strategies from EU, governments, and campaigns by non-governmental organisations.

Conclusions

To conclude:

- Firstly: data presented this morning are drawn from women workers. This provides useful insights to the everyday situation for women. Data support previous findings that women will leave employment and be attracted to jobs dependent upon the location and the potential flexibility on offer (Land, 1999; Rubery et al, 1999; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Women draw upon past experiences, social and economic contexts and changes in families and relationships. They have limited knowledge of, and recourse to, company policies or legislation. Women seemed to be making a trade-off; they were prepared to undertake poorly paid, low-skilled employment because the

flexibility of their jobs enabled them effectively to reconcile paid work and caring. The research have coined the term 'care–employment ceiling' (McKie et al, 2005). However, we have yet to interview HR people in companies and key informants in national business organisations to gain their perspectives.

- Secondly, a reprise of the conceptual framework: organisational carescapes adopts the metaphor of a map to posit that people and companies plot routes through a changing, multidimensional terrain that comprises their experiences and anticipation of care and relevant legislation and policies. Drawing across the conceptual framework and data it would seem that the continual development and promotion of new and innovative policies, has limited relevance to the women in this study, namely, women working in low paid, part-time work. The 'map' of these women is one in which the immediate and short-term challenges to combine caring and working take precedence. The longer-term implications seem opaque. Existing legislation, policies and guidance, with the exception of maternity leave, seem largely irrelevant.

It would seem that the direct and indirect discrimination women in work experience, potentially more pronounced when they have caring commitments, is proving difficult to tackle. Women mould their working lives to caring responsibilities, and while men do more domestic and care work, they remain players in a production scripted and directed by women.

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Appendix

Work-Life Balance in the Scottish Food Retail Sector 'newsletter'

First stage (July 2004 to December 2005)

Aim: To *identify* how women, employed in the Scottish food retail sector, *experience family-work balance*.

Methods: Data will be collected from two phases: (1) *interviews* with 68 female staff members; (2) *questionnaires* distributed to 891 female staff members.

Interviews

The first round of interviews (21) were conducted and analysed in the summer of 2004. The analysis assisted with the development of the questionnaire tool and the production of a conference paper and proposed journal article. In light of the subsequent questionnaire results from phase two, the interview script was revisited and revised. A theoretical sampling framework has been adopted (the number of women interviewed at each of the stores is a proportion of the total number of staff employed at each business) and a further 47 women will be interviewed. Data collection has commenced with full analysis to follow. Thereafter a document and executive summary will be produced.

Questionnaire

Utilising themes from the first round of interviews, a questionnaire was developed to gain breadth of issues. A comprehensive sampling approach was adopted and questionnaires were distributed by the nine owner managers to their female staff members. From a total active sample of 891, a response rate of 27% has been obtained. Both descriptive and inferential statistics have been calculated and full analyses will follow. A document and executive summary will be produced along with comparative quantitative and qualitative reports.

An individual summary of each partner businesses' staff responses will be offered to owner managers. For women who completed the questionnaire, four prize draws have taken place: two £100 cash prizes donated by Division of Social Sciences, Sociology subject group, Glasgow Caledonian University; and two £100 gift voucher prizes donated by the Scottish Co-op.

Final stage (January 2006 to December 2006)

Aim: To investigate *employers' views* of the *links* between *work-life policies* and *economic competitiveness*.

Objective: To *develop and assess guidelines on best practice* to be disseminated to a range of other sectors and businesses.
(To achieve this aim, collaborative working will take place with five of the nine partner companies).

Method: *Interviews* will be conducted with *management staff* across the nine companies. *Interviews* will also be conducted with representatives from relevant *national organisations*.

For further information about the research please contact:

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