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NEGOTIATING DOMESTIC AND PAID LABOUR ARRANGEMENTS: SOME EMERGENT THEMES

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Abstract

Whilst recent years has seen a plethora of work-life and work-family balance researched performed in Australia and internationally, there is still much to understand about the intersection between people's work and non-work life. This paper contributes to this research and develops a research agenda couched in negotiation theory. Couples are continually required to address the changing nature of their work and family commitments throughout the life course. We begin to examine the manner in which couples negotiate the changes to domestic and paid labour arrangements at crucial junctures in their lives – specifically, the period when young children require significant parental support.

Introduction

For couples, pregnancy and childbirth mark the beginning of significant and ongoing changes in domestic and employment arrangements. Such changes include shifts in power relations as a result of discrepant earning ability and increased quantity of and greater divisions in domestic responsibilities. In the employment context, men's participation remains virtually unchanged following family formation (ABS 2006) while for women, the advent of pregnancy and subsequent caring responsibilities means a period of absence from the workplace and a series of changes to working hours and conditions as infants' age. In addition, women face concomitant career and pay penalties. Whilst a number of broader policy and legislative provisions have been implemented to assist families to balance the demands of work and care (flexible work arrangements, anti-discrimination legislation, social welfare policies) and offset the disadvantage of being an 'encumbered employee' (Charlesworth & Baird, 2007), these problems and inequities persist. This paper will begin to explore an area of the work and family nexus that is currently under-researched. That is, the manner in which couples engage in the process of negotiation when significant changes to domestic and employment arrangements occur.

The remainder of this paper will examine negotiation theory before providing a brief review of the work-life balance literature. This paper will explain the data collection method before providing data around three emergent themes in couple negotiations. These themes are 'assumptions', 'discussions' and 'work expectations'. It will be argued that these themes provide some direction for future research that will

assist in understanding the experiences of couple negotiations over the split between paid work and unpaid domestic labour.

Negotiation Theory's Relevance to Work and Family

The purpose of negotiation is to agree on how to share or divide a limited resource, to create something new or to resolve a dispute (Lewicki et al 2006). Fundamental shifts in work and family arrangements demand interactions and negotiations within partnerships in the context of the home, and with supervisors in organisations. Thus, effective negotiation strategies are critical to achieving goals and managing problems during the tumultuous changes in roles, caring responsibilities and working hours associated with family formation. To date however, the negotiation literature has largely neglected theoretical explanations within ongoing parenting relationships (Sheppard & Tuchinsky 1996) and knowledge of individual-level negotiation in employment contexts is limited.

As Lewicki et al (2006: 2) explain, "negotiation is not a process reserved only for the skilled diplomat, top salesperson or ardent advocate for an organised lobby; it is something that everyone does, almost daily". Negotiation as an area of academic enquiry is located across a number of subject area literatures (e.g., management, industrial relations, economics) which in turn, can be traced through a number of 'purer' disciplinary pathways including philosophy, sociology and psychology. Common to all negotiation situations are a number of principal characteristics, including an interaction by choice rather than simply accepting what the other side will voluntarily give or allow; conflict over issues of common interest; an expectation of a give and take process; a preference for agreement rather than domination; techniques of influence and persuasion; and a management of tangibles (e.g., the terms of agreement) and intangibles (e.g., psychological motivations) (Lewicki et al 2006; Putnam & Jones 1982). Interactions involving unilateral decisions or domination are distinct from 'true' negotiations, such as when a pregnant employee is sacked or when fear of conflict or reprisal from a partner prevents negotiated outcomes. We would propose that many work and family arrangements evolve as unilaterally-decided events, compared to genuinely negotiated outcomes.

The literature on work and parenting suggests a number of junctures where effective negotiation between employees and supervisors may be critical and where the negotiation process can be examined. These issues have been identified from empirical studies published largely in the feminist sociology, management and industrial relations literature and as such, are not unified by a consistent theoretical thread. However, they provide a starting point from which to develop appropriate methods and instruments to extend the literature on workplace negotiation which, to date, has largely focused on collective bargaining. Significant events and problems identified include requests for part-time work; employer-initiated changes to duties during or after parental leave; employee requests for changes to rostered work hours; taking leave to care for sick children; denials of training opportunities or promotion; accommodations for pregnancy or breastfeeding; and receiving less favourable work performance evaluations (ABS 2005; Charlesworth & Macdonald 2007).

The vulnerabilities associated with these transitions and identified problems give rise to inequalities or constrained opportunities in careers, financial outcomes or participation in family life. For example, research demonstrates that part-time workers (men and women) are worse off in terms of promotion prospects, access to higher status male-dominated occupations, salary increases, training and entitlement to fringe benefits, than those who work full-time (Ginn et al. 2001; Kirby & Krone 2002;

Schwartz 1989). This is thought to be because employers attach a higher risk to investing in part-time employees and perceive decreased organisational commitment (Allen & Russell 1999; Schwartz 1989). There is also evidence that negotiated flexibility is a top priority for women and that many are choosing it over careers (Pocock, 2000). These mutually exclusive positions (flexibility vs career) may be related to 'quid pro quo' expectations that promotion or development prospects should be gratefully traded off for the privilege of employer-sponsored flexibility (McDonald, Pini & Bradley, 2007). In employment negotiations, this may limit the claims to resources that could potentially be made (Thompson 2005). Indeed, in a largely male-defined work culture, women's negotiating strategies could leave them operating from a position of significant weakness (Babcock & Laschever 2003).

Previous research has also established income penalties associated with career interruptions for women compared to those who work continuously (Arun, Arun and Borooh, 2004; Rimmer and Rimmer, 1997). Factors influencing these penalties have been identified as loss of human capital (Arun et al 2004; Becker 1991) and discrimination by employers (Arun et al 2004) which are often underpinned by assumptions about the incongruence of being an effective mother as well as a committed worker (Hays 1996; McDonald et al 2006; Walzer 1997). However, it is also possible that less-than-optimal negotiation styles play a role in income penalties. For example, there is conjecture that women judge their worth as determined by what their employer will pay, expect to earn less than men and are less comfortable operating in the social context of negotiation in general (Barron 2003; Major & Konar 1984; Small et al 2004). Thus, we begin to explore the extent to which negotiations between couples represent 'true' conciliations compared to decisions based on assumptions and expectations commonly based deeply in gender roles.

The examination of work and family decision-making cannot be adequately made without considering how the construction of gender influences these interactions (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiede & Hall 1996). Two competing explanations for disproportionate household loads suggest that women engage in maternal gate keeping which allows them to exert control within the home or alternatively, that they encounter resistance when they ask men to engage in more housework and caring (Game & Pringle 1983; Pease 2002; Williams 1998). Consistent with the latter explanation, it has been noted that men derive material benefits or as Connel notes, a "patriarchal dividend", of avoiding caring and housework (Connel 2002: 142; McMahan 1999). However, Bittman et al (2003) demonstrated that while power flows from bringing resources to a relationship and that a spouse can use economically based bargaining power to get the other partner to do housework, internalised gender norms affect the allocation of housework even in the absence of unequal earnings. Thus, both earning power and gender factor into negotiations about unpaid work.

Despite a raft of recent theoretical and empirical work on gendered family roles and the division of household labour, only a handful of studies have specifically addressed the work and family decision-making interactions between partners with dependent children. Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiede & Hall (1996) found that the majority of couples failed to acknowledge and even resisted alternatives to the male-as-provider pattern, even when confronted with the male partner's job loss and economic adversity. Couples used a process identified by Kompter (1989) as 'apparent consensus' whereby they believed they were in agreement about an issue which reflected mere commonsense, reinforcing the status quo in marriages and making such arrangements seem inevitable, natural and immutable (Zvonkovic et al

1996). Such unquestioned gender roles in traditional families illustrate the importance of complex social processes which shape the context around negotiations (Lewicki et al 2006) and collectively negotiated views about what behaviour is right and proper (Barlow et al 2002).

Certain work-life provisions have been targeted specifically at men, such as paternity leave, which aims to foster a greater sharing of occupational and social responsibilities between men and women (Bercusson and Dickens, 1996). However, European evidence suggests that despite offering longer periods of parental leave, the use of this leave by male employees remains low (Schaefer et al, 2007). This lack of response to targeted policies that provide the opportunity for men to become more involved in child-rearing reflects the firmly entrenched gendered domestic division of labour. A review of men's use of family-friendly employment provisions (Bittman et al., 2004) argues that barriers to men's use arise from three major sources: the organization of the workplace, including doubts about the legitimacy of men's claims to family responsibilities (also known as a 'flexible care deficit', Pocock 2005); the business environment, including competitive pressures to maintain market share and increase earnings; and the domestic organization in employees' own homes, including the centrality of the father's. It is likely however, that as organisations increasingly favour the provision and support of work-life policies as a means of attracting and retaining workers, men's ability and willingness to utilise these policies will slowly increase. For example, in 2002, 30% of fathers used some form of flexible working arrangements to care for their children under 12, up from 24% in 1993 (ABS 2006). This is likely to increase more as women play an increasing role in the labour market.

Methods

Sample

Data were derived from a larger data set involving 40 interviews with employees from a large, Australian Government agency responsible for the policies and programs related to capital works. Close to 80% of the workforce are men. Twenty-four interview transcripts from employees who were co-habiting parents of dependent children were utilized for the current study. A wide range of occupations and organizational levels of seniority were represented, from entry-level administrative positions to the directors of three business units. Consistent with the statistical profile of the Department (<5% were employed part-time), most interviewees were currently working in full-time positions, although 2 women had had recent experience of part-time work. Respondents were engaged in a range of non-work activities and responsibilities including care of dependent children, elder care, study, second jobs and work with community and sporting organizations.

Procedure

An initial list of potential interviewees was generated from a sample of questionnaire respondents in a previous stage of the research which explored work-life balance. The questionnaire asked respondents who were willing to discuss issues about the utilisation of flexible work arrangements to return their contact details in a separate reply-paid envelope. This process generated a list of 82 employees, all of whom were contacted and asked for further demographic information in order to be able to purposefully sample a range of employees who were likely to provide a wide range of views. The final sample was chosen not to be strictly representative of all employees in the organisation, but to maximise the range of characteristics thought theoretically important to the research questions, that is, gender, age, business unit, seniority, job characteristics and types of non-work responsibilities. The research team travelled to conduct face-to-face interviews where it was feasible to do so, although three interviews were conducted by phone due to long distances. The interviews were transcribed prior to analysis.

Instruments

The full interview schedule was developed to elicit information about work-life balance in the agency. In this paper, only responses pertaining to questions about negotiated outcomes of work and family arrangements are reported. Respondents were asked questions including: “Can you tell me about how you and your partner decide on your employment arrangements to accommodate your children’s care needs?”; “How have these arrangements changed over time, for example as your children have grown?”; “How do you and your partner deal with school holidays and/or when regular care arrangements fall through?”; “How do you decide who takes time off in emergencies or when one of your children is sick?”; and “What are yours and your partner’s future plans in balancing employment and family obligations?” A semi-structured interview was utilised to balance the requirements of consistency across interviews with flexibility of responses (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

Analysis

The data were analysed by exploring themes which represented how employees conceptualised and discussed negotiated outcomes in their work and family arrangements, and how the nature of the workplace interacted with discussions in their domestic spheres. We were also interested in the extent to which our questioning techniques adequately accessed relevant information about negotiation specifically. Consistent with guidelines outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), frequencies, or ‘counts’ of occurrences of a particular theme were reported where it was important to verify the consistency of a reported phenomenon.

Assumptions, Discussions and Workplace Expectations

From the data we can see three clear themes emerging around the level of negotiations occurring with couples and the role the workplace plays within these discussions. The first theme we will discuss is the notion that many people do hold deep rooted assumptions and underlying expectations around the gendered nature of childcare responsibilities. Some of our respondents go so far as acknowledging that these assumptions are the result of their upbringing with the traditional male breadwinner model of family structure. For example:

It was just an understanding we had because of our traditional upbringings and backgrounds ... she looked after the house ... she cleaned ... and took them to pre-school. (Interview 21)

After we became parents (wife) sort of stayed home and I don’t think there was any intention for her to return (to work). (Interview 29).

I can’t say I was happy with the arrangement (staying home with the children) but I just accepted it, that was how I was brought up, that’s what the women do ... (Interview 14).

In addition, some couples lack of negotiation and discussions due to the expectations or assumptions focussed on the male’s role in the household. Sometimes there appears to be cursory conversations which are deeply embedded in the assumption that the male simply has lesser responsibility for the domestic division of labour. In many cases, this process of limited negotiation fits what Kompter (1989) referred to as ‘apparent consensus’. For example:

(he) always did the bottles ... that was his job. He always chooses his own jobs. They say, I'll have that job, I'm not doing that (job). (Interview 23).

I think the assumption was that I would still be the primary caregiver, and I would ... work full-time, but I would still be the primary caregiver, because I would still get up at night. (Interview 22).

(after explaining a small disagreement that morning) ... I said something like 'you just keep on doing everything for yourself' and you know, he said 'I've been up since six o'clock, I've done heaps of things'. That means he'd hung out a basket of washing. I'm not saying that wasn't helpful, but there's a totally different perception. (Interview 22).

The quotes from these participants provide a stark contrast against those couples who have a more integrative form of negotiating over the role of paid work and domestic responsibilities in their residence. There appears to be a distinct cohort of couples who aim to have an equitable share of domestic responsibilities and shared 'sacrifice' of working time when childcare responsibilities dictate such a requirement. The following quotes are examples where people detail the negotiations or discussions held within their family unit:

My husband ... has a supportive employer and like me, we do the childcare role if one is sick, who is going to stay home and work from home? ...so I just think it is the way of the future... (Interview 40)

I'm very lucky in that we see the pool of stuff to be done and there is two adults in the family to do it. So we sort of go, well, who's taking the kids to childcare and it's not necessarily me, we have to work it out, are you busy in the morning? The way we work it out is that I usually do drop offs in the morning, he usually does pick ups in the evening. (Interview 37).

We pretty much share it. Work out priorities, meetings, who's got more on, what needs to be cancelled. (Interview 10)

Further research is required as many of these quotes do not give us an indication of whether the 'share' is a balanced 50-50 split based on gender or if one party's greater control over workload or more flexible working arrangements gives them greater leverage in interactions on work and family matters. Finally, it is obvious that even when a couple aim to engage in equitable divisions in the domestic labour responsibilities, workplace pressures play a significant role in their decision-making. That is, while there may be adequate support in any particular workplace, the employees often want to remain committed to the organisation or workplace. Hence, it is not simply a case of the workplace always comes first or the family always comes first. For example:

My accumulated leave was up quite high ... so I was able to take two months off and so I was able to fill the gap (in childcare). I made a point of always coming in to work one day a week to keep my nose in, so they wouldn't forget about me. (Interview 3).

I guess when I'm discussing it with my wife, I think about okay – how have I been performing at work, have I been there a lot or have I had a lot of time off because of (family) things and sometimes that influences me when we're making a decision because it's 'oh, more time off, I can't do it again'. (Interview 16).

He did save leave and at the end of my maternity leave when I went back to work he stayed home for a little while, about six weeks with the first child and I think a month with the second child ... (Interview 40).

Conclusion

This research has begun to delve into an area of negotiation over gendered divisions of labour that has previously been neglected. Whilst we know much about the gendered nature of roles at home and in the workplace, we know very little about the manner in which couples negotiate significant changes in their domestic sphere and the impact that has on the work sphere of life. For couples, pregnancy and childbirth mark the beginning of significant and ongoing changes in these domestic and employment arrangements. Whilst some policy and legislative provisions have been implemented to help families to balance the demands of work and care problems, the inequities persist.

Following a series of interviews, this research has identified three emergent themes of particular import: 'assumptions', 'discussions' and 'work expectations'. These themes provide some direction for future research that will assist in understanding the experiences of couple negotiations over the split between paid work and unpaid domestic labour.

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