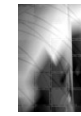

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Public sector austerity cuts in Britain and the changing discourse of work–life balance

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Abstract

The relative importance of economic and other motives for employers to provide support for work–life balance (WLB) is debated within different literatures. However, discourses of WLB can be sensitive to changing economic contexts. This article draws on in-depth interviews with senior human resources professionals in British public sector organizations to examine shifting discourses of WLB in an austerity context. Three main discourses were identified: WLB practices as organizationally embedded amid financial pressures; WLB practices as a strategy for managing financial pressures; and WLB as a personal responsibility. Despite a discourse of mutual benefits to employee and employer underpinning all three discourses, there is a distinct shift towards greater emphasis on economic rather than institutional interests of employers during austerity, accompanied by discursive processes of fixing, stretching, shrinking and bending understandings of WLB. The reconstructed meaning of WLB raises concerns about its continued relevance to its original espoused purpose.

Keywords

austerity, discourse, flexible working, human resource management, work–life balance (WLB)

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Introduction

Prior to the 2008 financial crisis, the availability of work–life balance (WLB) policies and practices was growing in Britain (Kersley et al., 2005), particularly in the public sector and large private sector firms (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). It is, however, unclear how the WLB agenda fared in the 2008 recession and subsequent period of austerity. This question is particularly pertinent in the British public sector which has a history of commitment to family friendliness (later termed WLB) (Yeandle et al., 2002) but is currently faced with severe austerity budget cuts (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). These cuts are likely to continue and even increase with the election of the Conservative government in 2015. This article explores discourses of WLB within British public sector organizations coping with the financial pressures of the austerity programme.

The meaning of WLB is often contested (e.g. Bloom, 2015; Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007; Özbilgin et al., 2011). An analytic distinction is made here between WLB practices and WLB as an organizational discourse (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). WLB practices, referred to in this article, are generally understood as a subset of flexible working arrangements, including flexitime, reduced hours, job sharing and home-based work, which may provide autonomy over where and when work takes place (Hill et al., 2008). These types of practices are distinguished from other flexible working arrangements such as zero hours contracts or shiftwork, which are explicitly designed around employers' needs (Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010). Nevertheless, the distinction is not always clear. Some non-standard working arrangements, such as part-time or reduced hours, may be employee or employer friendly, depending largely on whether they involve employee choice or are imposed by employers (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010).

This ambiguity raises the question of how the concept of WLB is understood, discussed and used by organizational actors who develop WLB policies, usually human resources (HR) professionals, a perspective that has been relatively neglected and under-theorized in the literature. This article addresses this gap by focusing on HR professionals' WLB discourses; that is, the concepts used to frame discussion of WLB in organizations, and the assumptions embedded therein, in the austerity context. This is important because discourses not only reflect but can also shape organizational practices by what they emphasize (explicit messages) and what they de-emphasize or obscure (implicit messages) (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). Discourses are dynamic and tend to change to reflect shifting contexts (Fleetwood, 2007; Tatli et al., 2012) so it is important to adopt a contextual approach to research on flexible working in general (Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010) and to WLB in particular (Fleetwood, 2007).

This article therefore considers how WLB is discussed at a particular time (post-financial crisis austerity) and place (the British public sector). This is addressed by first contextualizing organizational WLB discourses within historical and political discourses. Two areas of academic research and debate, based on (i) neo-institutional theory and (ii) critical WLB literature, are then discussed and the implications of both approaches for the present research are summarized.

Historical and political contexts

WLB emerged as a political discourse in Britain in the 1990s, following earlier debates on how to support family and employment and developments in what were initially termed family-friendly policies (Harker, 1996). During the Labour administrations of 1997–2010, a prominent WLB campaign and discourses surrounding the development of legislation to extend WLB policies were associated with social justice, and the compatibility of justice with economic prosperity (Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), 1998). It was maintained that WLB policies could benefit business through 'enhanced recruitment, retention, and service delivery' (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 2001: 2) while helping employees cope with their multiple roles. As such, they would be mutually beneficial to employers and employees (Gregory and Milner, 2009). This mutual benefit WLB discourse persists but may be challenged by economic crises. Institutional pressures placed on local government by central government and plans to reform the public sector were in place even before the full impact of the 2008 recession and associated budget cuts. For example, the 2006 Varney Report discusses how new ways of working can be implemented as part of a concerted cost-cutting exercise which focuses more on flexible working for employer benefit than WLB. More recently, the 2010–15 Conservative-led government's post-2008 financial crisis austerity programme was accompanied by a discourse that embraced a neo-liberal desire to reduce the state sector and further develop principles of public sector management. This included some concerns that WLB policies should not be treated by employees as entitlements (Beecroft, 2011), reflected, for example, in the Right to Request Flexible Working legislation (introduced in the UK in 2003 and updated in 2007, 2009 and 2014), which maintains management's rights to refuse such requests.

Theoretical perspectives

Questions relating to the benefits to employees or employers, social justice and the possibility of mutual benefits, also permeate academic debates on the factors driving organizational WLB initiatives in diverse contexts. WLB practices and discourses tend to be examined within different theoretical approaches and empirical literatures. Özbilgin et al.'s (2011) critical review of WLB research distinguishes between mainstream work–life research in the positivist tradition, in which the meanings of WLB are taken for granted in order to explain and predict, and critical work–life research, which problematizes the term. As both approaches can contribute to knowledge by attending to different issues, we first discuss the relevance of neo-institutional theory in explaining organizational adoption of WLB practices and then consider critical literature on WLB discourses.

Neo-institutional theory

Most research examining why organizations adopt WLB practices is based on the neo-institutional theoretical approach which contrasts the economic rationality that underlies much of the behaviour of organizations with an institutional rationality (Den Dulk et al.,

2013). It is argued that organizations have to adapt to societal pressures, and more specifically coercive, normative and mimetic institutional pressures, to maintain their legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Although economic rationality is concerned primarily with the utilization of economic capital and normative rationality with the development of social capital (Oliver, 1991), these may co-exist and often overlap. Normative rationality has associated economic consequences, thus allowing for mutual benefit (Den Dulk et al., 2013). Institutional factors are important in the public sector. There has long been a discourse of the British public sector aspiring to be a model employer in terms of diversity and WLB provisions (Corby and Symon, 2011; Rubery and Rafferty, 2013), albeit with some recognition that maintaining good employer status can conflict with action taken in pursuit of efficiency (Bewley, 2006). The fact that women comprise more than half its workforce also influences the adoption of policies (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013) for both normative and economic reasons. Thus, discourses of mutual benefit in this sector may emphasize the economic advantages of meeting employee needs.

Nevertheless, the nature of the interface of economic and institutional rationales, and associated discourses, can change over time as normative and financial contexts shift and different priorities are foregrounded (Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007). A simple rational-economic argument is that WLB practices could be threatened by public sector austerity cuts. Alternatively, if underpinned by strong normative discourses, WLB supports may be sustainable and even form the basis for meeting financial challenges (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2012; Matos and Galinsky, 2012).

There is some, albeit limited, evidence that in previous recessions WLB provisions were reduced to some extent due to economic concerns (Dex and Smith, 2002). Following the 2008 recession, a CIPD survey also identified employer concerns about the state of the economy as a barrier to developing WLB supports (CIPD, 2012). There is also evidence, primarily from the private sector, that the provision of certain WLB practices, such as job sharing, has decreased recently in Britain, although others, particularly home-working, have increased (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). A recent US study (Sweet et al., 2014) reports a decline in availability of WLB practices from 2006 to 2009, which the authors attribute to adaptation to the uncertainties associated with economic recession. However, these studies focus mainly on availability of WLB practices, as reported in surveys. Nevertheless, in one British survey, more public and private sector managers report perceiving WLB as an individual responsibility than in previous surveys (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013), suggesting possible shifts in WLB discourses, as well as practices, when organizations are financially squeezed.

Critical approaches

Whatever public sector employers' responses to austerity and to institutional and economic pressures in the challenging financial context, a critical lens focuses on how the processes involved are discursively framed. The critical WLB literature (Özbilgin et al., 2011) extends the debate by explicitly distinguishing discourse from practice, asking what taken-for-granted version of reality is represented by the WLB discourse and whose

interests it serves (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007; Mescher et al., 2010). The WLB terminology has been critiqued for a number of reasons, not least on the grounds that it has connotations of individual imperatives to 'get the balance right' (Bloom, 2015) and implies an employee-led focus or 'favours', which can mask the employer benefits of some so-called WLB practices (Fleetwood, 2007; Özbilgin et al., 2011; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). For example, changes in working hours or place of work, deemed WLB practices, often occur alongside work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010) or high-commitment management programmes designed to blur boundaries between work and non-work (Fleming and Spicer, 2004; Özbilgin et al., 2011), which can constrain rather than support balance.

Critical approaches also attend to the ways in which discourses can evolve over time and place, in terms of what is emphasized or de-emphasized, or how discourses are used. Fleetwood (2007) situates a growing focus on WLB within the wider context of neoliberal market thinking, which largely considers WLB support in terms of rights or opportunities for employees with negative economic consequences for employers. Although discourses and practices usually overlap, Fleetwood argues that in some contexts they evolve unevenly and discourses cease to reflect practices. For example, flexible working, once regarded as primarily employer-led and family unfriendly, became discursively rehabilitated in the 1980s and 1990s through the application of the WLB discourse. Research in this tradition focusing on other constructs, such as diversity, further illuminates the processes of shifting discourses (Tatli et al., 2012). For example, Lombardo et al. (2009, 2010) analyse shifting political discourses across contexts and describe four processes through which a concept is discursively constructed: fixing, shrinking, stretching and bending. First, a particular meaning is fixed and embedded rather than contested when it has an established meaning, often through becoming enshrined in legislation. The UK Right to Request Flexible Working legislation has helped to fix the concept of WLB through a repeated affirmation of such practices leading to better WLB for employees (as well as benefiting employers; CIPD, 2010). However, fixing a meaning can also provide a starting point for further debate and interpretation, which may result in stretching that meaning, reaching a wider and perhaps more inclusive understanding of a concept, with a broader range of initiatives and actions. Conversely, it may lead to a concept being shrunk by limiting its meanings, leaving out possible interpretations. For instance, Smithson and Stokoe (2005) show that discourses of WLB, though not 'genderblind', have been shrunk to refer only to women. Finally, the process of bending refers to the adjustment of the meaning so that the focus shifts to something other than the original goal, risking silences around taboo areas. The shrunken, stretched or bent concepts can subsequently become fixed, accepted and embedded with a limited or shifted meaning. This article analyses WLB discourses, drawing upon this framework.

Despite their different perspectives, both neo-institutional theory and critical approaches suggest that changing economic contexts may alter the focus on economic benefits of WLB practices for employers, although critical approaches also attend to shifts in WLB discourses and meanings. This article addresses the question of how WLB discourses develop within the specific economic challenges of austerity cuts in a sector

aiming to be a good employer in response to institutional pressures. It does so by examining the ways in which HR professionals in British public sector organizations talk about WLB in this context. The analysis explores the relative emphasis on economic and non-economic drivers or mutual flexibility in participants' accounts, and the processes whereby WLB discourses shift, evolve and are used in this context.

Methods

Participants

As HR professionals play a key role in espousing and developing WLB supports, 26 interviews were conducted with HR directors and managers in public sector organizations across Scotland and the north, the Midlands and south of England to generate portrayals of WLB within their organizations in the austerity context. A purposive sampling technique was used (Bryman and Bell, 2011). This sample includes: 12 local councils, with statutory responsibilities for governing local services, including planning, housing, social services, education, environmental health and transport; five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); three National Health Service (NHS) trusts; four emergency services; one regional government office; and one research council. The inclusion of a higher proportion of local councils partly reflects greater ease of access, but also a concern to ensure that they were well-represented due to their particularly strong economic and institutional pressures. Local councils are the most deeply affected by austerity cuts but are also among the most visible and publicly accountable public services (Den Dulk and Groeneveld, 2012). Although the aim of qualitative research is in-depth understandings and not representativeness and generalizability (Bryman and Bell, 2011), the wider sample illustrates WLB discourses in a broader range of British public sector organizations. All the organizations are large, visible, and, with the exception of the emergency services, have a high proportion of women employees.

The interviews

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' accounts of WLB in their organizations. The questions were designed to encourage rich, detailed answers on topics of particular salience to the participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). A temporal perspective was taken, inviting participants to look back at the initial discussions and developments of organizational work–family policies over time. In most cases, the policies pre-dated the participants' employment in the organization and therefore accounts reflected interpretations embedded in organizational history and culture. Given the study's emphasis on discourse, it was important to understand how participants framed their responses and to probe taken-for-granted knowledge and assumptions. A descriptive overview was obtained as a starting point to understand what WLB policies were available, how they were used, how WLB was portrayed in the organizations and how this may be changing (the term WLB was used in policy documents in all organizations). Specifically, the interview schedule covered: how WLB or similar issues were discussed in the organization in the past and present, and at what level; formal WLB policies; why policies were adopted; how they were implemented in practice and any perceived implementation

constraints; recent changes in policies and associated practices and their perceived future; and whether WLB considerations had any influence on the way the cuts were handled. The interview schedule allowed the researchers to remain open to what the participant gauged as relevant (Rapley, 2004), while maintaining consistency between interviews. It was piloted with four participants and minor adjustments were subsequently made. Interviews were carried out by the authors in 2011–12 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed.

Analysis

A discursive approach was taken to the analysis (Oswick, 2012), examining how language is used to construct descriptions and portrayals of the HR professionals' understanding of WLB within their organizations. This approach examines the intersections of varying discourses as they overlap and contrast (Tietze et al., 2003), considering aspects of the wider context of austerity. Analysis focused on ways in which participants discuss WLB and what is foregrounded and emphasized, or de-emphasized in this context (Fleetwood, 2007), in relation to social/institutional and economic drivers or mutual benefit. The analysis drew on Lombardo et al.'s (2010) approach to discursive construction in examining the conceptual portrayal of WLB by the participants.

A synopsis of each interview transcript was prepared, read and discussed by the authors to identify preliminary codes. The full transcripts were then reviewed within NVivo 10, with detailed coding taking place through the examination of themes and discursive patterns. Nodes were created and refined through several iterations and accompanied by ongoing comparison and discussion among the authors. The analysis therefore evolved from categorizing data to interpretation, and the varying constructions of a particular discourse, and the use of language to stretch, shrink or bend portrayals of WLB were identified. For instance, when describing how WLB policies were used, HR managers referred to the workforce being well informed about the policies, and about uptake among employees. Quotes were therefore categorized in nodes of 'awareness of policy' and 'uptake of practice', which were considered to be aspects of the discourse of WLB practices as organizationally embedded. Similarly, initial themes of 'promoting WLB practices', 'provision of IT support' and 'examples of cost cutting' led to the overarching theme of 'efficiency focus', which was a key part of the second discourse about the strategic use of WLB practices to manage financial pressures. The third discourse emerged from data coded as 'personal morale', 'well-being' and 'the impact of working practices on individuals and families', which were clustered under the theme of 'people strategy'. All of these data were framed within an emphasis on personal responsibility for WLB, which was extrapolated as the third discourse.

Findings

Context: WLB policies and practices

All participants reported a wide range of WLB policies, including flexitime, job sharing, reduced hours, compressed hours, term-time only working, extended maternity leave and

remote working, with some variation across organizations. These were introduced initially in response to institutional factors, particularly to comply with, and often extend beyond, legislative requirements. There was no evidence that formal policies were being cut, but no new policies with cost implications were being introduced. Nevertheless, all organizations were struggling to deliver services with less money and were therefore reducing staff numbers or seeking other ways to make savings.

Within this context, the analysis identified three dominant discourses: WLB practices as organizationally embedded amid financial pressures; WLB practices as a strategy for managing financial pressures; and WLB as a personal responsibility. Underlying these was a prevailing discourse of mutual benefits, suggesting both social/institutional and economic rationales for WLB practices. Nevertheless, the discourse of enhancing individual choice, typical in relation to family-friendly policies of the past, was largely absent in discussions of the present situation. Within each of the dominant discourses, there was also a minority dissenting voice (and, in some cases, conflicting perspectives from the same participant).

Discourse 1: WLB practices as organizationally embedded amid financial pressures

When discussing developments over time, a dominant theme was that WLB practices had now reached a stage where they were sufficiently embedded in organizations to withstand economic pressures. This implied that the notion of WLB was no longer contentious. The terminology of flexible working tended to be used interchangeably with WLB in this context:

> I wouldn't say that there's any current dialogue going on about work–life balance because I think flexible working and work–life balance is very much embedded in our culture here so we have all the policies to support it. … It's just an ongoing part of our culture. (HEI 4)

This cultural embeddedness was discussed with reference to the strong staff awareness of policies and the range of work–life practices available. This was framed within the prevailing discourse of mutual benefits, rooted in both institutional (particularly normative) and economic rationales. For example, WLB practices were discussed as being among the few provisions currently available to existing staff during austerity:

> If you're going to ask more of people then you need to give them a bit more and show them that you're trying to make the environment palatable, really, and make it as easy for them as possible. (HEI 3)

The mutual benefit argument often involved weaving between normative and economic rationales:

> … we very much saw [flexible working] as a whole approach to improving and delivering a model working environment for our staff, because there were huge potential efficiency gains as a result of that. It was also about wanting to be a model employer and wanting people to want to work for us. (Council 11)

The positioning of WLB practices as organizationally embedded and uncontested implies that the meanings of WLB have become taken-for-granted and discursively fixed (Lombardo et al., 2009). However, a small minority of respondents questioned whether this was the case, describing WLB practices as vulnerable if financial pressures persist. They emphasized risk, which is de-emphasized in the dominant discourse:

> [As] the council's financial position becomes increasingly tight, I would say that the level of risk to the work–life balance practices will increase … I think they'll be fine because they're entrenched and embedded, certainly for this year. Thereafter I think questions might start to be asked about whether [the Council] can continue to sustain that type of flexibility. (Council 1)

Nevertheless, the dominant fixed discourse of WLB as organizationally embedded despite financial pressures highlights a widespread acceptance of WLB within organizational cultures and its original institutional focus, reinforced by a mutual benefit discourse. It can, however, also be viewed as one stage within the process of shifting discourses of WLB in the austerity context. The following section demonstrates how the meaning of WLB and the mutual benefit discourse itself have been bent, stretched and shrunk by a more explicit focus on employer-led flexibility and its associated financial benefits.

Discourse 2: WLB practices as a strategy for managing financial pressures

The most widely used discourse constructs WLB practices as a strategic tool for managing financial pressures and maintaining service delivery. For example, take-up of WLB policies, such as career breaks, was actively promoted and encouraged to cut costs as part of wider organizational restructuring:

> … while people are not here we're not paying them a salary, so it works in terms of making some small contributions to savings. (Emergency Services 2)

In practice, however, the main emphasis was on extending understandings of embedded WLB supports by incorporating flexibility within wider organizational transformation, on the organization's terms, through what were variously labelled 'lean', 'agile' or 'smart' working programmes. The relatively fixed meaning and acceptance of support for WLB was stretched to incorporate new practices and bent to incorporate the additional goal of explicit cost-savings. Participants discussed how prior IT investments and experiences of implementing WLB practices, particularly home-working, had provided the basis for new cost-effective practices. There were many accounts of economic benefits of remote working, such as selling off office space or reducing utilities costs with fewer employees on site. This was framed within a mutual benefit discourse of maintaining advantages to the organization and supporting employees' WLB, citing institutional as well as financial motives. However, increasing efficiency and strategically maximizing benefits to the organization were foregrounded in this bending discourse:

> … [remote working] benefitted us in two ways because it's allowed us to reduce the size of our footprint in the building and as a consequence we've been able to lease or sublease some of the space that we no longer need. Also it reduces a whole range of utility costs … and at the same time enhances staff's appreciation of their employer who allows them to operate in this way. (Council 6)

There was a surprising lack of any different patterns in the data across the different types of public sector organizations, but one exception was the evolution of remote working among the councils, which was more limited in the NHS and emergency services due to a larger proportion of front-line workers. The greater use of remote working in the councils was increasingly enforced for business and efficiency reasons (part of the bending of the WLB discourse to achieve cost-savings), yet this resulted in a simultaneous shrinking of the discourse through removing the element of individual choice which had previously been a key factor:

> … it's not that they can if they want to, they have to … if they are so designated as a mobile worker we take away their desk. (Council 3)

Changes were constructed as necessary adjustments to meet current challenges or improved services and increased efficiency. Some participants justified changes by referring to an earlier over-emphasis on individual rights, rather than service delivery needs, reflecting a public sector reform agenda and discourse of the economic costs of supporting WLB (Beecroft, 2011):

> We've had to tighten things up because we discovered that managers were allowing staff to do things that actually meant that they couldn't run their wards effectively … we just introduced the electronic staff roster on our wards to a third of our staff … and we found that about 30% of staff on wards were actually working exactly what they wanted to, to the detriment of the patient. (NHS 2)

These strategic developments were described as having evolved over time, prior to the current austerity context, and reflecting economic considerations for reform in the public sector. However, some took the view that the budget cuts had provided an impetus for the acceleration of much-needed change in ways of working, challenging traditional managerial views of presenteeism:

> I think that what the recession gave us … is a burning platform that compelled some of our managers to realize that the world had moved on. So would we have changed? Possibly. At this pace and speed? Absolutely not. (Council 6)

A minority critical voice was again evident, suggesting that the WLB discourse was still in place and being used as a lever for change, but with the new focus on 'justifying' ways of making cuts through encouraging or enforcing greater flexibility, appropriating the language of support for WLB and mutual benefits to obscure more instrumental decision-making:

> It's been discussed recently in relation to the cuts because people on the boards have been encouraging council employees to reduce their working hours to save the council money … So work–life balance has been used as a lever to do that. (Council 10)

Similarly, the dropping of the WLB terminology in favour of flexibility in these discussions is significant. Some participants openly acknowledged that there had been a bending of the discourse to reflect a different meaning of flexibility with no reference to WLB:

> Our strategy talks about the flexible employee in a different way to how it was meant previously. We're now meaning an employee who is able to move across the organization, who isn't stuck rigidly to their job description, but is able to be deployed to wherever they're required. And also to work those hours that are required of the business. So we're using these flexible working policies to support the needs of the business now, more than the needs of the employee. (Council 5)

Thus, the second and most dominant discourse demonstrates how the fixed WLB discourse, with a mutual benefit focus, has been stretched to include often involuntary remote work, shrunk to de-emphasize employee choice and original goals, and bent to incorporate a greater focus on organizational needs, especially financial savings.

Discourse 3: WLB as a personal responsibility

A third discourse developed the cultural embeddedness theme, subsuming WLB within a broader theme of 'well-being' or an overall 'people strategy':

> … we … have plans which reflect the need for our employees to have pay, and work for a work–life balance that reflects their needs as people and our understanding of the importance of a good work–life balance as part of the well-being agenda. … We don't have a work–life balance strategy or … policy, but it's referred to in our overall people strategy and within the approach that we take to well-being. That sense of recognizing [the] importance of work–life balance in terms of the well-being of our staff. (Council 3)

Shrinking of the meaning of WLB by de-emphasizing organizational supports in the form of flexibility and autonomy and focusing on individual well-being outcomes, makes it possible to reinterpret WLB as a personal responsibility. The organization's role is then reconstructed as encouraging and offering support for employees to take greater responsibility for their own work and health:

> We have our own internal health and welfare teams, and they have done a lot of work around work–life balance, encouraging people to consider the hours that they are working, the impact on homes and families, and on their own well-being, both emotionally and physically. (Emergency Services 1)

> We promote well-being but equally making it clear that it is the employee's responsibility to look after their own health and well-being. … you know, you take care of yourself, look after yourself, you do the exercise. (Council 11)

Although a minority of participants reflected on the potential threats of this changing discourse to employee well-being, quality of work and service delivery, most interpreted this shift in emphasis positively, within a mutual benefit framework, for managing austerity. While acknowledging the pressures faced by employees, they talked about encouraging personal resilience and healthy lifestyles as key to maintaining WLB and service provision, again emphasizing personal responsibility and de-emphasizing working conditions and structural constraints underlying these pressures:

> The only thing we're doing now is having discussions about the impact of some of the changes on people's lives. … But through not necessarily using the term work–life balance but looking at things like resilience, personal resilience, and also looking at stress and the impact of stress on the organization. (Council 1)

Thus, the third dominant discourse focused upon individualized responsibilities, in terms of maintaining a level of personal well-being and also service delivery. Shrinking the meaning of WLB and mutual benefit in this way acknowledges the contextual pressure and the need to protect workers. However, it also obscures other possible interpretations of the situation. It represents a bending of the meaning of WLB and mutual benefit from the original goal of reducing pressures between work and non-work by providing terms and conditions of employment which recognize employee demands outside the workplace, to a reconstructed goal of encouraging personal resilience to working conditions that threaten WLB and well-being. This more explicit individualized discourse conceals power issues and neglects constraints on individual agency.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates a minority voice of concern among the three dominant discourses. However, the dominant discourses represent a distinct shift towards greater emphasis on the economic rather than the social or institutional interests of employers during austerity by the discursive processes of fixing, stretching, shrinking and bending.

Discussion

The findings reveal how HR professionals' WLB discourses are being adapted and reconstructed in these British public sector organizations. The dominant narrative is that WLB practices, embedded over time, can be developed strategically to manage austerity while simultaneously addressing employees' WLB needs, albeit with a growing emphasis on personal responsibility for well-being. Discourses are important because they shape and are shaped by workplace practice. In these contexts the WLB discourse is being appropriated to position increasingly employer-led practices as mutually beneficial.

Research within both the neo-institutional tradition and critical WLB perspectives considers reasons for adopting and sustaining WLB practices. Yet little is known about the impact of severe economic pressures or the perspectives of HR professionals in this context. This article makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, it demonstrates the value of complementing the wider research focus on availability of WLB

practices by drawing attention to WLB discourses. Previous research suggests a decline in reported availability of WLB provisions in financially challenging times across sectors (Dex and Smith, 2002; Sweet et al., 2014), although one study found that homeworking increased post-recession (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). The three dominant WLB discourses identified in this article suggest a more nuanced story. Whether the number of reported practices changes or not, what has shifted in this context is the way in which those flexible working arrangements, designated as WLB supports, are discursively positioned and used. While the embeddedness discourse espouses a clear commitment to supporting employee needs, albeit with benefits to employers, the strategic and personal responsibility discourses develop the notion of mutual benefits, but with less of an emphasis on employee benefits than on organizational economic needs. In particular, the personal responsibility discourse draws on the well-being agenda, apparently in a paternalistic way, but with an implicit focus on the onus on employees to 'look after' themselves so that they can manage stress and be effective workers. This suggests an increasing acceptance of relationships between lifestyle choices and work and the idea that such choices may aid or hinder recovery from work (Payne et al., 2013). These discursive shifts, together with refocused flexibility practices and cuts in public service jobs, mark a progression away from the political discourse of WLB, launched in 2000, in which 'social justice' was emphasized and positioned as compatible with economic efficiency.

Second, the research identifies ambivalence about the shifting discourses among some HR professionals. Social actors are not passive recipients of organizational discourses. They engage with, interpret and use discourses in different ways (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Whittle, 2008). Although concern about practices prioritizing employer needs was expressed by a minority in this sample, this nevertheless hints at less enthusiastic adoption of the shifting discourses in some cases. HR professionals are at the centre of the ambiguity between implementation of austerity and commitment to the ideal of WLB as mutually beneficial. Reconstituting WLB discourses to justify new approaches as mutually beneficial can be a way of resolving conflicting institutional pressures to be a 'good' employer and economic reality. More needs to be known about the dilemmas of HR professionals reconciling ideals with economic and political realities in changing contexts.

Third, the research enhances understandings of how and why shifts in workplace WLB discourses occur. The findings confirm the usefulness of Lombardo et al.'s (2009, 2010) framework for understanding the complexity of the shifting WLB discourse, which is shaped by the contextual factor of austerity, as well as by interpretations of governmental and organizational actors. The hegemonic discourse of mutual benefits underpins the three emergent discourses found here. Within this framework, the meanings have been fixed, stretched, shrunk and bent beyond espousing improved retention, recruitment and service delivery for employers and improved personal life for employees. The primary goals of WLB have been bent to develop resilient employees and support cash-strapped organizations. Notions of enhancing employee choice, once constructed as central to WLB policies (Eikhof et al., 2007; Gregory and Milner, 2009; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005), have faded. Discursively framing strategies to manage austerity as WLB practices rather than, for example, crisis management strategies, constructs them as

being employee-led or mutually beneficial, concealing asymmetrical power relations (Fleetwood, 2007) and potential detriments for employees. The inherent individualism in the WLB discourses and pressures to 'get the balance right' have long been noted (Lewis et al., 2007) but are increasingly implicit in the personal responsibility discourse.

These linguistic processes echo shifts in other management discourses, such as diversity, which are sometimes labelled fads (Collins, 2001; Whittle, 2008), attesting to their transitory nature. The findings thus reinforce wider understandings of why HR and management discourses often fail to encourage practices that meet their original purpose.

The findings contribute to critical debates on the conceptualizations of WLB, whose interests are served by the WLB discourse and whether the term is useful or misleading (e.g. Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007; MacInnes, 2008; Özbilgin et al., 2011). Even before the 2008 recession, Fleetwood (2007) argued that WLB discourses were popular because they helped to legitimize employee-unfriendly working practices central to neoliberalism, concealing, while simultaneously promoting, the 'rehabilitated' discourses of flexibility (2007: 396). Although Fleetwood's argument is not based on empirical research, the current findings support his analysis in the public sector austerity context. Specific flexible working arrangements can be employee- or employer-friendly, or mutually beneficial, depending on how they are implemented (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010). While WLB advocates may have capacity to adapt such arrangements to take more account of employee needs in some circumstances, this becomes less feasible under the constraints of austerity. Encouraging people to work (and earn) less by using the language of WLB, or implying WLB benefits when making cuts through enforced remote working, then obscures more instrumental economic decision-making. This raises questions about if and at what point practices designed to address austerity cease to be about WLB, and how the WLB discourse might evolve next.

Although the discourses discussed in this article are contextually specific, there is some indication in the wider British context that the trend for WLB to be subsumed within employer-led flexibility discourses is accelerating. A current popular management discourse, which could complete the evolution of WLB as a management tool, is 'agile' working. This is not a new concept and was often mentioned, along with smart working and lean working, by participants in this study. However, the CIPD is now recommending agile working (CIPD, 2014), based on the definition adopted by the business-led Agile Future Forum (AFF, 2014). This explicitly advocates strategic use of various forms of flexible working, including not only those labelled WLB practices but also more traditional contractual flexibility, to enhance business performance and spur economic growth. WLB is mentioned briefly as one of the outcomes of agile working, and also in some of the AFF case studies, but the focus is on agility as a key business tool for meeting changing economic, demographic and technological challenges (AFF, 2014).

This study is based on a small sample of HR professionals, a disproportionate number of whom were employed in councils, although they may, of necessity, be in the vanguard of change, having faced the largest proportion of budgetary cuts. Public sector organizations vary in the nature of the services they provide and their experiences of the recession. It was, however, beyond the scope of this study to examine such differences, which could be the focus of future research. However, the object of this qualitative research is not to generalize across all organizations. Rather, it contributes to theory by elucidating

and analysing shifting WLB discourses and related practices and processes in an explicit time and place (Bryman and Bell, 2011), within specific organizations that are experiencing institutional and especially economic pressures. It is, however, important to note that HR professionals are responsible for developing, although not the day-to-day enacting of, WLB initiatives, and thus their discourses illuminate espoused values and practices, which are not necessarily uniformly enacted (Kirby and Krone, 2002). Future research focusing on other organizational actors, especially line managers, could complement this research by further illuminating enacted as well as espoused practices in specific contexts.

There are a number of potential implications for practice. WLB discourses are evolving and supporting these public sector organizations to build on well-established WLB practices to ride out austerity. This raises questions about whether it matters if the concept of WLB is reconstructed or even subsumed. One argument is that if it saves some jobs and continues to provide services, however compromised, this is an important strategy. It is even possible that enforced flexibility, such as non-voluntary remote work, could have inadvertent positive outcomes. Voluntary take-up of WLB practices by men remains limited and stigmatized (Leslie et al., 2012; Vandello et al., 2013). Non-voluntary remote work could conceivably challenge gendered assumptions about ideal, constantly visible workers (Herman and Lewis, 2012), increase provision of quality flexible jobs (Lyonette et al., 2010) and counteract the stigma often associated with flexible working (Prowse and Prowse, 2015).

However, there is strong evidence that WLB and quality of working life more generally are heavily dependent on autonomy, control and predictability of employment, which in turn are associated with positive organizational outcomes such as lower turnover and higher organizational commitment (Fagan et al., 2012). Some forms of flexible working arrangements may produce such outcomes but this depends on their origins within specific contexts. For example, Stavrou and Kilaniotis (2010) found that schedule flexibility is related to lower turnover in collaborative cultures such as Norway, but is associated with higher turnover in countries such as Britain, where management has the greatest freedom to apply practices for its own purposes. Thus, employer-imposed flexibility, even cloaked within WLB discourses, may ultimately be counterproductive. Reservations expressed by some participants about neglect of not only employee needs and working conditions but also service delivery highlights the need for a greater understanding of the social and economic impacts of the reconstructed discourses of WLB and associated practices.

Finally, reconstructing or even dismissing WLB as a fad neglects the fact that issues inherent in the original family-friendly and later WLB discourses have not been resolved and the business case for attending to these remains. US action researchers propose a dual agenda of meeting employees' personal and family needs and enhancing workplace effectiveness (Rapoport et al., 2002). Crucially, they found that workplace interventions that included collaborative problem-solving by managers and employees improved productivity and economic outcomes, but only when both sides of the dual agenda equation were attended to. When either employee or employer needs were neglected, the interventions were ineffective. Herein lies another danger of increasingly employer-focused WLB discourses. A key question is how organizations can sustain attention to normative, institutional and economic drivers in challenging economic times.

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