

# Women Academics and Work–Life Balance: Gendered Discourses of Work and Care

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This article examines how discourses of work–life balance are appropriated and used by women academics. Using data collected from semi-structured, single person interviews with 31 scholars at an Australian university, it identifies and explores four ways in which participants construct their relationship to work–life balance as: (1) a personal management task; (2) an impossible ideal; (3) detrimental to their careers; and (4) unmentionable at work. Findings reveal that female academics' ways of speaking about work–life balance respond to gendered attitudes about paid work and unpaid care that predominate in Australian socio-cultural life. By taking a discursive approach to analysing work–life balance, our research makes a unique contribution to the literature by drawing attention to the power of work–life balance discourses in shaping how women configure their attempts to create a work–life balance, and how it functions to position academic women as failing to manage this balance.

*Keywords:* work–life balance, women, academia, work/care regimes, gender

## Introduction

Policies geared towards fostering work–life balance are well established in Australian universities, mirroring international trends in higher education institutions towards a managerial approach to gender equity initiatives (Bacchi, 2001; Blackmore, 1992; Morley, 2003, 2005). Despite the prevalence of family-friendly policies in the Australian university sector, surveys demonstrate that many academics feel compromised in their ability to successfully meet the expectations of work alongside commitments outside the academy (Langford, 2010; Strachan *et al.*, 2012). Factors contributing to the stress and anxiety experienced by academics include work overload and intensification, job insecurity, limited resources, poor leadership and lack of recognition (Langford, 2010, p. 42). Studies in Australia and elsewhere show that women academics are distinctly challenged in dealing with the demands of paid work alongside unpaid caring responsibilities (Doyle and Hind, 1998; Misra *et al.*, 2012).

Whereas scholarship exists concerning the design, implementation and use of university work–life policies (Helfat, 2002; McMahon and Pocock, 2011; Raabe, 1997; Waters and Bardoel, 2006) and there are a number of documented accounts of how male and female faculty experience work–life conflict (Forster, 2000; Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Woodward, 2007), there has been less emphasis placed upon the discursive practices that shape how academics speak about work–life balance (Gunter and Stambach, 2003; Nikunen, 2012; Santos, 2015). The aim of this article is to examine the ways in which discourses of work–life balance are appropriated and used by female scholars. We understand discourse in a dual sense — as the use of language (or other symbolic forms) to make meaning about the world, as well as a mechanism for actively constituting subjects, social entities

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and social relations in the world; what Alvesson and Karreman refer to as 'discourses with a capital D' — the stuff beyond the text functioning as a powerful ordering force' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, p. 1127; Fairclough, 1992, p. 3). Discourse analysis is used to assess women academics' interpretations and understandings of what it means to achieve work–life balance relative to their own workplace experiences, their day-to-day activities, and how they perceive their own attempts to achieve work–life balance. The value of this approach for our study lies in its ability to connect language to wider social relations of power and inequality, particularly in terms of gender (Sunderland, 2004). Analysing how women approach the concept of work–life balance can shed light on the social effects of discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4). That is, how a dominant discourse of work–life balance operates to position social subjects relative to gendered norms and expectations around work and care. In exploring how women in academia invoke a discourse of work–life balance, we do not wish to unproblematically ascribe agency to the subject in a way that assumes they are 'outside' of the discourses they invoke (Thomas, 1996, p. 144). Rather, we use discourse analysis to explore how the language, values, assumptions and ideas around work–life balance create and locate the female academic subject relative to an existing gender order of work and care. It is how academic women respond to the discursive power of the concept of work–life balance that we are interested in exploring for what it can tell us about the power of discourse to sustain gender inequalities in the spheres of paid work and the private domain.

Distinct from other studies, the insights offered here are not neatly categorizable into 'effective' or 'ineffective' work–life policies for the higher education sector. Nor are the barriers and drivers to the uptake of university work–life initiatives systematically documented or a set of strategies for managing academic work and personal life offered. While such outcome-directed research is undoubtedly valuable for fostering organizational change, it tells us relatively little about the ways in which work–life balance itself functions as a discourse that constructs understandings of 'work', 'life' and the relationship between them, as well as how it positions subjects in different ways relative to it.

Our findings identify a number of ways in which participants construct their relationship to work–life balance. They construct it as something they are expected to personally manage; an impossible task; detrimental to their careers; and as a topic that remains unmentionable at work. We observe that female academics' experiences of work–life balance do not accord with the dominant organizational framing of work–life balance as an initiative that encourages workplace flexibility, worker autonomy and personal wellbeing. Rather, their responses reveal how the normalization of highly gendered attitudes about paid work and unpaid care that predominate in Australian socio-cultural life, which also prevail in dominant discourses of work–life balance, create additional burdens for academic women to personally and successfully manage multiple work demands within and beyond the domestic sphere. We show how the concept of work–life balance rests on a highly problematic set of assumptions about work as a form of paid labour, as an activity that is flexible and autonomous, and a sphere that is distinct from life (Fleetwood, 2007). Such assumptions remain unproblematized (hence are naturalized) in our respondents' accounts, which we argue contributes to how women academics position themselves as failing to manage work–life balance.

Through a discursive analysis of academic women's discussions of work–life balance, this research contributes a deeper understanding of the power of work–life balance discourses to craft female academics as self-realizing agents who shoulder the responsibility for successfully managing the domains of work and life. It also exposes the discursive power of the concept to reinforce structurally embedded gender inequalities by masking the institutional forces (such as increased workplace demands and performance expectations; a gender order of work and care) that impact the seemingly free 'choices' work–life balance policies 'empower' women to make.

The article begins by situating the study relative to existing research conducted on the topic of work–life balance for academics. Next, we introduce Barbara Pocock's notion of 'work/care regimes' (2005) to provide the guiding theoretical research approach. By illuminating the relationship between the social ordering of gender and women's work experiences, the concept of work/care regimes offers a point of critical contemplation through which to render problematic the meanings inherent in the term work–life balance. In order to put the study into context, we include background

information about the university where the research was undertaken and describe our data collection and analysis procedures. Taken together, these theoretical and methodological components offer a framework through which to interpret how women academics constitute themselves and their capabilities in relation to work–life balance when articulating their feelings about and responses to this concept.

## Work–life in universities

Qualitative accounts of work–life balance in the higher education sector can be broadly divided into two approaches. The first is concerned with examining academic accounts of conflict and tension experienced between work and private life (see, e.g., Forster, 2000; Woodward, 2007), while the second strand focuses on evaluating the implementation and uptake of work–life policies and procedures in the university sector (Spalter-Roth and Erskine, 2005; Waters and Bardoel, 2006). Both lines of inquiry identify gender as a factor in how work–life issues are approached at the individual and institutional level, albeit with varying degrees of critical emphasis on how gender as a theoretical concept and social construct impacts on achieving work–life balance.

The first approach, which analyses the factors contributing to academic work–life conflict, can be viewed in the context of an established body of feminist literature identifying the structural and cultural conditions under which gender inequalities manifest in higher education (Acker, 1994; Bagilhole, 1993; Morley, 2003; Morley and Walsh, 1995). Forster's (2000) interviews with married academic women at a UK university investigated potential conflicts between work and family life and the impact of this on career advancement. He concluded that women's primary responsibility for domestic and childcare duties constituted a major barrier to women's career progression, despite the introduction of equal opportunity policies by the university in question. These sentiments are echoed in studies from European and North American higher education settings that identify culturally assigned gender roles in the family coupled with family-unfriendly work cultures as significant contributors to work–life tension for women (Nikunen, 2012; Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

There is also evidence suggesting that neoliberal attitudes impact on how both men and women academics perceive work–life balance (Nikunen, 2012; Rafnsdottir and Heijstra, 2013). Women view the negative career consequences of having children as a result of individual personal choices, with less consideration given to structural or cultural gender inequalities that contribute to halting the career progression of women with dependents. Nikunen (2012) attributes such attitudes to postfeminist tendencies, whereby women mobilize rhetoric of choice, risk, entrepreneurship and meritocracy in their interpretations of how work–life balance is achieved.

Several studies have investigated the coping strategies women academics deploy to achieve work–life balance. Woodward's 2007 UK study of 16 women managers of academic and non-academic university areas identified large workloads and long work hours as impediments to achieving work–life balance, which women sought to overcome by establishing a range of temporal, spatial and symbolic boundaries between work and personal life. However, women with caring responsibilities struggled to maintain this distinction owing to children's consistent and unpredictable needs clashing with work schedules — a finding supported elsewhere (Forster, 2000; Santos and Cabral Cardoso, 2008).

Studies directed more specifically towards the design, provision and use of work–life policies in higher education settings highlight the role of institutions in creating conditions for an achievable work–life balance. Literature from the US suggests that the uptake of work–life policy results in increased productivity in female faculty (Spalter-Roth and Erskine, 2005), although such initiatives have been shown to be undermined by unsupportive work cultures that act as a disincentive to accessing existing policies and programmes (Raabe, 1997; Thompson *et al.*, 1999). In the Australian context, Waters and Bardoel explored factors influencing university staff's decision to use work–life policies. Undertaking focus groups with male and female academic and general staff, they identified 'poor communication of policies, high workloads, career repercussions, management attitudes, influence of peers, and administrative processes' (Waters and Bardoel, 2006, p. 72) as the main disincentives to the uptake of work–life policies at a large Australian university. Doherty and Manfredi

(2006) extend the focus of the above-mentioned studies in their UK investigation of a university's role in improving work–life balance policies and practices for academic and general staff of both sexes by considering the policy planning, development and implementation cycle of work–life balance initiatives. Using an action-research model, they demonstrate that unless workload intensification in the university sector is resolved, it is unlikely that limitations associated with an academic's use of work–life policies will be overcome.

Our study advances understandings of work–life balance in universities by applying current feminist theory about the gender and work nexus to a discursive analysis of academic women's contemplations on work–life balance. Whereas the vast majority of the research cited explores sources of work–life conflict brought about by the pressure to create a balance between paid work and life beyond it (Ahmad and Masood, 2011, pp. 8–9), our emphasis is on the discursive techniques women academics use in their discussions about achieving work–life balance. By taking a discursive approach to questions of work–life balance, our research makes a unique contribution to the literature by drawing attention to the social effects of work–life balance discourse to maintain relations of power and constitute gendered subjectivities within academia.

## Theoretical approach

In seeking to make sense of how female academics construct meaning about work–life balance, it is necessary to take into account the gendered organization of the paid workforce and domestic realm that informs women's social realities and their discursive accounts of them. Barbara Pocock's model of work/care regimes (2005) lends itself to a critical consideration of how gender as an organizing principle frames the ways academic women perceive work–life balance. Pocock developed her model of work/care regimes to allow for an inclusive analysis of work and care that takes into account all forms of labour — paid, unpaid and voluntary — in public and domestic spheres (2005, p. 33). Fundamental to Pocock's argument is a recognition that work/care regimes are shaped by a variety of forces — economic, social, historical, political — hence the gendering of work needs to be understood as situational and dynamic. In the Australian context, women's increased participation in the labour market coupled with work intensification and longer working hours has significant impacts on personal life, including work and leisure in the domestic sphere (Pocock, 2005, p. 35). These changes are particularly profound for women who continue to shoulder the burden of unpaid household labour, despite dual earner families overtaking the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker family model (Pocock, 2005, p. 36). Pocock attributes Australia's current work/care regime as contingent on a gender order that, while mutable, is strongly influenced by historical and social power relations in which women are expected to be primarily responsible for unpaid labour in the form of childcare and management of the domestic domain. This manifests, Pocock argues, not only at the level of the cultural expression of dominant values and norms but institutionally in terms of individual actions, behaviours and preferences (2005, p. 39).

Pocock argues that gender orders are central to the construction of work/care regimes. Drawing on the sociological work of Connell, she describes gender orders as

historically constructed patterns of power relations that are 'always imperfect and under construction' but that 'an orderliness' of gender relations exists at any point in time. Constructed by the division of labour and gendered social and power relations, the gender order both shapes behaviour and is shaped by changes in behaviour over time (Pocock, 2005, p. 38).

This order takes on a regulatory function when institutionalized in a gender regime that constructs unequal gender relations as normative. The ways in which gender regimes operate to maintain a social order based on unequal relations of power between men and women has particular salience in light of our discursive approach. While Pocock argues that the gender order is embodied in

work/care regimes, she also notes that it is constructed by historical and social relations of power (Pocock, 2005, p. 38). As noted by Sunderland (2004), discourse is central to the formulation of social relations of power because it legitimates, through language, certain expressions of gender as normative and desirable.

Pocock's approach to theorizing labour according to work/care regimes allows for a consideration of work–life balance that takes into account the sphere of unpaid work, which for the majority of women occupies the 'life' dimension of the work–life equation. Feminist analysts of labour have long recognized the home as a site of work for women (Hochschild, 1990; Pocock, 2005; Pringle, 1989). Women's 'double shift' — the combination of a paid job and unpaid domestic work — complicates an understanding of work–life balance where the 'life' side of the equation means respite from work (Hochschild, 1990; Pocock, 2005, p. 36). Feminist analysis thus draws attention to a set of underlying assumptions regarding the relationship between these spheres that constructs work as existing outside of the private realm of family and personal life. In formulating a model of work/care that accounts for all forms of labour undertaken across public and private domains, Pocock also problematizes the construction of work to mean paid work — a point that is taken up in critiques of work–life balance.

Fleetwood (2007) observes that the concept of work–life balance has been widely contested within the literature for a number of reasons. These include the assumption that the two spheres are, or should be, treated as distinct, rather than seeing work as a dimension of life. Amongst other things, he questions whether there is a common unit from which work and life can be feasibly compared and deemed to be in balance or out of balance, and whether achieving balance is akin to achieving equity in these spheres by simply trading off time in one for time in the other (Fleetwood, 2007, p. 353). A number of scholars have responded to the division of work and life by offering alternative conceptualizations that seek to overcome this conceptual problem. Using the language of work–life integration, combination and harmonization (Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Lewis *et al.*, 2007) suggests another way of approaching questions of work–life balance that attempt to resolve some of the dilemmas the nomenclature creates — namely, assumptions of mutual exclusivity are replaced with a view that the domains of work and life can be mutually reinforcing. Although such conceptualizations frame work and life as integrated rather than separate domains, they nonetheless maintain a binary view of work–life. Moreover, viewing work–life as constitutive of each other can be seen to consolidate feminist critiques of how work is defined by acknowledging that these spheres are not distinct but overlap, raising new questions for how paid and unpaid labour is negotiated according to gender as the temporal and spatial parameters that once divided work and home become increasingly blurred in a globalized 24/7 economy.

Noting the various limitations to how work–life balance is understood and conceptualized serves to highlight that the term itself is discursively constructed in ways that rest upon gendered assumptions underpinning what constitutes work and in what contexts. In offering the semblance of being gender-neutral, work–life balance discourse sustains gender inequity by 'obscuring wider ongoing gendered discourses and practices' (Lewis *et al.*, 2007, p. 365). Relatedly, discourses of work–life balance assume that balancing work and life is desirable and possible without taking into consideration who is responsible for achieving this balance (Fleetwood, 2007, p. 353). As noted in the preceding section, recent explorations have sought to engage with this issue through the lens of neoliberal discourses, which place the responsibility for achieving a balance between the sphere of work and life with the individual, rather than at the level of organizations. The language of personal preference, flexibility and autonomy is mobilized in work–life balance discourse to put the onus on the individual for managing work–life balance, thus drawing attention away from the role of social institutions in creating conditions that differently impact men and women's experiences of work and family and the choices they make in attempting to balance these domains (Lewis *et al.*, 2007, p. 362).

Adopting the notion of work/care regimes enables an exploration of the extent to which a gender order that naturalizes caring work as normative and expected for women is reinforced in women's discussions of work–life balance.



## Background

This article is derived from a larger research project commissioned by an Australian university to investigate how its policies, practices and work cultures enable or limit women's equitable participation, representation and experiences as academics. Participant responses formed the basis of a report and set of recommendations to inform access and equity initiatives for university staff. The university in question is a large public institution with metropolitan and regional campuses and teaches upwards of 50,000 students across a wide range of disciplines in the fields of Arts, Business, Education, Health, Science and Technology (S&T). Academic staff number approximately 1500 (full-time and fractional appointments). Although just over half of the organization's academic staff are women, a higher percentage of women occupy casual or contract positions, with fewer women in the ranks of senior academic managers or the professoriate — a pattern that is consistent with the Australian university sector in general (Probert, 2005).

While there has been some disagreement in the literature regarding the extent to which discriminatory practices on the basis of gender impede women's advancement (Probert, 2005), there is consensus that women academics are unequally represented at senior level within Australian universities and that there remain a number of barriers to women's career progression, such as gender bias in promotion and the incompatibility of academic and caregiver responsibilities (North-Samardzic and Gregson, 2011, p. 281). In terms of the sector's obligations to address gender inequality, under the current regulatory framework universities are required to comply with the Workplace Gender Equality Act (2012), which involves meeting a minimum standard of 'having a policy or strategy in place that specifically supports gender equality' (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, n.d.). As the composition of this strategy is left to the organization, there are no specific compulsory measures that workplaces are required to take to support gender equality (such as pay equity or policies to support families with caring responsibilities). However, the majority of Australian universities go beyond minimum compliance and reporting standards to demonstrate an organizational commitment to matters of gender equality. For this reason, the sector (which is publically funded) has been recognized as an industry leader in the provision of policies that seek to redress gender inequalities in the workplace (McMahon and Pocock, 2011, p. 15). In line with other Australian universities (Probert, 2005, p. 61), the university in question offers paid and unpaid parental leave, family-friendly leave options, flexible work arrangements and on-site childcare facilities — voluntary measures that go beyond minimal legislative compliance. Moreover, the university in question has been recognized over consecutive years as an 'employer of choice for women' — a 'prestigious acknowledgement' awarded by the government to organizations that demonstrate the advancement of women in the workplace (EOWA, n.d.). This citation, along with the legislation, guidelines and policies, all form part of official discourses of work-life balance; constructing a message about universities as empowering, enabling and supportive of employees with caregiver responsibilities, as well as more broadly promoting a work culture that is responsive to changes in working life and the competing demands this creates for employees beyond the workplace.

## Method

This study used purposive sampling techniques to select participants and invite them by e-mail to voluntarily participate. Criteria for participant selection included women academics ranging from all employment levels (Level A: assistant lecturer; Level B: lecturer; Level C: senior lecturer; Level D: associate professor; Level E: professor), representatives from all the broad-based disciplinary areas identified above, and from all campuses across the university. Unless otherwise stated, the majority of interviewees held ongoing, full-time appointments. Given the parameters of the study, men's perceptions on work-life balance were not sought. A total of 31 female academic staff agreed to participate in face-to-face or telephone interviews. The single person interview format was chosen to provide respondents with anonymity and confidentially to candidly discuss positive and negative aspects

of their workplace without fear of experiencing institutional repercussions for speaking out. To further ensure anonymity, participants were ascribed pseudonyms. The interviews were semi-structured and between 45 and 60 minutes in length. Broadly, respondents were asked to describe and reflect on enablers and constraints to career progression, aspects of work they enjoyed and difficulties they faced. They were also asked their thoughts on management processes and their awareness of policies, procedures and facilities to support work–life balance. Because participants were not selected on the basis of marital status or number of dependents, we did not ask them specifically about work–family issues, preferring to use the term ‘work–life balance’ to encompass non-work activities involving family, friends and community (Skinner and Pocock, 2008, p. 304). In light of our acknowledgment of the conceptual limitations of the term, we did not offer a definition of work–life balance to respondents. We did, however, ask them about the issue, which they discussed in terms of their own understanding and experiences. Methodologically, this approach proved valuable in that it allowed us to focus on how academics interpreted the concept and the extent to which their understandings intersected with dominant discourses that assume work–life balance to be desirable, achievable and enabling for women.

All interviews were digitally recorded and the process of data coding and analysis was undertaken jointly by the authors. The topics covered in the interview questions (detailed above) formed the main thematic categories for analysis, with work–life balance emerging as a consideration for all interviewees. Within the theme of ‘work–life balance’, we identified sub-themes using the principles of grounded theory — an approach that does not apply preconceived codes to the data but rather data is used to establish recurring themes via which women discursively construct work–life balance (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As per grounded theory principles, data was considered to be validated when common themes recurred throughout the data such that no new insights emerged. At the stage where no new themes were present, the data was deemed ‘saturated’, with subsequent interviews validating information from previous respondents. In light of our aim to examine the ways in which discourses of work–life balance are appropriated and used by female scholars, we organized the data according to the kind of language women used when discussing work–life balance. Rather than formulating thematic categories based on topics discussed such as ‘childcare’ or ‘increased workplace demands’, we looked for patterns in their modes of talking about work–life balance. From this, we identified four main ways that women academics spoke about work–life balance: first, as a personal management task; second, as an impossible ideal; third, as having negative career consequences; and finally work–life balance was considered unmentionable in the university context. Extracts for analysis were first compiled under the four discursive themes, then selected for this study on the basis that they were representative or typical of participants’ accounts. Another factor influencing our selection of extracts was the desire to sample the voices of a variety of academic women from different disciplines, levels and periods of the life cycle. This allowed us to illustrate similarities in the discourses of work–life balance from women in different contexts.

Discourse analysis was used as the guiding analytical method to investigate the expression of gender norms as constitutive of female scholars’ discussions of work–life balance. As a mode of social analysis that critically interprets how language is used in light of the social context in which it is embedded, discourse analysis lends itself to a consideration of the relationship between language and the social order (Fairclough, 1992, p. 231). Following Sunderland, we understand discourse both in an interpretive sense as ‘*ways of seeing the world*, often with reference to relations of power and domination’, as well as an active process where language is drawn upon, invoked, produced and reproduced as a means of constituting subjects (the self and others) in the world (2004, p. 6). Viewing discourse from both these aspects enables a consideration of how gender expectations frame the ways women make meaning about work–life balance in tandem with critical reflections on how women construct themselves relative to work–life balance discourses. For the researcher, discourse analysis offers a means through which to problematize, rather than take as given particular concepts or actions that are configured as normal and desirable within wider society (Fairclough, 1992). Our analysis was thus guided by a desire to explore the power of wider gender discourses that normalize

assumptions around women's unpaid care work, hence influence how women academics speak about work–life balance. In this tradition, we mobilize the model of work/care regimes to draw attention to the underlying assumptions and ideologies regarding gender and work that inform how women respond to the concept of work–life balance.

## Findings

### *Work–life balance as a personal management task*

Many of the women interviewed understood work–life balance to be a personal management task. Nikunen has observed the increased emphasis on individual choice and freedom within the neoliberal university (Nikunen, 2012). As an official discourse, work–life balance plays an important function in promoting the neoliberal agenda of universities as workplaces of flexibility, adaptability and autonomy — features that are implicit to enabling employees to achieve a work–life balance (Fleetwood, 2007, p. 354). The expectation inherent in official discourses of work–life balance promoted by universities is that employees are responsible for managing work–life balance, in that its function is to support individuals to meet the demands of work and life on their own terms. These shifts towards individual responsibility and flexibility are prevalent in the way respondents position themselves within discourses of work–life balance, as well as how they understand the effects of individualization:

As an academic, you're flexible with time, they are giving you flexible time you can do whatever you like but in that time you have you still have to do this, this and that. You still have to do publications, you have to do research, you have to do consultation, you have to do marking and preparation for teaching. Yep. Which means you work 24/7 (Sasha, Level A, Business, dependent children).

By 'giving you flexible time' the university is understood as having fulfilled its duties to supporting work–life balance by providing flexible work arrangements. Accordingly, it is the academic's responsibility to use these privileges wisely. Under neoliberal logic, if women find themselves working '24/7', it is not because of unreasonable work demands, but because they have failed to properly manage their time.

As identified in studies by Currie and Eveline (2011) and Nikunen (2012), flexible work hours (working on weekends, before and after hours) and locations (home, on holiday), are crucial for women attempting to meet commitments to workplace and family. While flexible workplace arrangements are viewed by participants as important for juggling work and family responsibilities, their accounts reveal that they are expected to personally manage a workload that is boundless. In no way is flexibility associated with working less. Rather, academics feel unable to prevent the increasing demands of 'work' from encroaching on 'life', despite the benefits of workplace flexibility:

Having flexibility is one of the most important things to me at [the university]. I mean it's been one of the reasons I've been able to continue here because I feel that I can do my work from home. But where do you draw the boundaries? For example, yesterday was a public holiday, now I worked about 6 hours because I just simply have to do that (Marta, Level C, Arts, dependent children).

By configuring the consequences of flexibility (such as working longer hours, work impinging on personal life) as an individual problem, women academics' construction of work–life balance in neoliberal terms points to the discursive power of the concept to seemingly address issues of gender inequality in universities whilst structural and cultural impediments remain not only intact, but obscured by the language of individual responsibility. The effects of failing to manage their workload, despite 'having flexibility' is keenly felt by participants, both in the paid and unpaid work spheres.



This language of individual failure is also witnessed in women's accounts of the impacts of work on family life. When discussing bringing university work home, female academics identify its impact on the quality of family life and interpersonal relations:

All of that work that goes home at night undermines family interactions because it's got to be done. It's a kind of solitary locking away in one part of the house to catch up with work while the rest of the family goes on living. It's that sort of alienation (Lara, Level B, Education, dependent child).

By highlighting the negative implications of paid work on personal relationships, such comments allude to discourses surrounding women's responsibilities to nurture familial bonds. As Pringle notes, the private domains of home and the family are 'generally held to represent the "feminine" world of the personal and the emotional, the concrete and the particular, of the domestic and the sexual' (Pringle, 1989, p. 214). Compromising family life in order to meet the university's expectations is something female academics are highly aware of and wear the burden of guilt for. Women's accounts position the failure to manage the demands of work and life as a failure of the individual, rather than a systemic failure to take into account the gendered expectations about the ideal worker as always available and disengaged from family duties. Relative to the work/care regimes that shape cultural expectations that women are responsible for maintaining family life, respondents position themselves as personally responsible for undermining family interactions. The ensuing feelings of guilt that are evoked by women academics function to secure both the distinctions between the domains of work and life in dominant discourse of work–life balance, as well as a gender order whereby the burden of guilt is borne by women who do not fulfil the responsibilities that are expected of them in the private sphere.

### *Work–life balance as an impossibility*

When asked whether they felt pressure to balance work and family life, 65 per cent of respondents answered in the affirmative. For these interviewees, achieving work–life balance is viewed as an impossible task. Particularly for academic women with children, the dynamic nature of gendered work/care regimes — where women commonly move between states of paid, unpaid and care work over the life cycle (Pocock, 2005, p. 37) — is incompatible with a notion of balance and its implied state of stability and equal distribution:

I'm working 150 per cent and I just can't, I've got my kids to think about too. I probably find that I don't have a good work–life balance at this point of time (Jane, Level C, Health, dependent children).

This lack of fit between the language of work–life balance as a state of equilibrium and the fluid and unstable connection women have to the labour market manifests within women's accounts via a language of work–life balance as 'impossible', rather than via discourses of gender inequality or sexism. In the context of a gendered work/care regime, our respondents' construction of work–life balance as impossible to achieve stems from larger structural conditions that preclude them from mobilizing a language of work–life balance as enabling, as proffered by official discourse.

For both scholars with and without dependent children, work–life balance is potentially achievable but only when constructed in terms that appear counter to the very philosophy of a work–life balance. Maggie details a work schedule that is typical of respondents with adult or no children: 'I come in at eight o'clock in the morning, sometimes earlier. I leave at about seven or eight o'clock at night and I work every Sunday. I try to have Saturdays off, that's my family life'. By making balance out to be a matter of working longer hours, both during the week and on weekends, respondents' accounts expose the conceptual limits of speaking about work–life balance as though these domains can be separated, contained, and the time spent in each can be equally distributed (Fleetwood, 2007).

The impossibility of achieving work–life balance is commonly expressed by echoing a gender order where the unpaid labour of domestic work and childcare remains culturally associated with women, regardless of the amount of time spent in paid employment (Pocock, 2005, p. 43):

How I'm working is not sustainable, like I couldn't keep this up and manage my family (Nancy, Level B, S&T, dependent children, part-time academic).

This response is indicative of what respondents believe work–life balance should look like (meeting commitments to work and life beyond paid employment), which shapes how they conceptualize and speak about it as something that is impossible to achieve. Put another way, what women take work–life balance to mean (working longer hours, working to fulfil expectations at home and work) is informed by an unequal gender division of unpaid labour (domestic, emotional, familial) that cannot be accounted for when work and life are configured in binary terms. And although work–life issues may affect both male and female academics (Santos, 2015), the ways that women articulate the challenge to balance work and life as an impossibility is shaped by and responds to a structural organization of labour that disproportionately places the responsibility of unpaid work onto women (regardless of hours in paid work) in tandem with a university sector where work hours and workload have intensified (Acker, 1994; Currie *et al.*, 2002).

It is through these reflections that we identify another site of work for women in addition to paid work and unpaid labour that constitute the work–life model — the work of being good at sustaining a balance between these two spheres. For the women interviewed, performing the role of the successful female scholar involves being seen as getting the work–life balance right, yet their attempts, which they readily acknowledge, are impossible to achieve in a work context that Pocock and others have identified as simultaneously unstable and intensified (2005, p. 42). When interviewees judge themselves against an idealized notion of the female academic who manages the 'right' balance between work and life, structural inequalities are recast as the personal failings of individuals who are unable to 'get the balance right'. Work–life balance discourse thus operates to mask workplace structures that fail to account for the dual commitments to paid and unpaid work that women are largely expected to shoulder.

### *Work–life balance as having a negative impact on career*

While university policies around workplace flexibility contribute to an official discourse of work–life balance as supporting women's career advancement, our interviewees tell a different story. Instead of viewing work–life balance as a positive measure allowing them to sustain their careers while attending to responsibilities in the private sphere, for our respondents a sustainable work–life balance comes at a professional cost:

the expectation is that if you want to be a serious academic then you are supposed to be working seven days a week and taking work home every night and on weekends. I've kind of got to a stage where I'm not prepared to do that ... there are times when I do take stuff home but I have a life beyond [the university] ... my research falls behind because I choose to have a life and not to work seven days a week (Ora, Level C, Education, no children).

In 'choosing' to 'have a life' over a research profile and career advancement, the negative implications that ensure (not being a 'serious academic') are cast as a consequence of the individual making the wrong choice, instead of being viewed as a consequence of unrealistic workplace demands intersecting with gendered expectations and structures that shape women's relationship to paid work and the private domain. As weekdays are taken up with commitments to teaching and service work, it is common for research to be undertaken during personal time, such as weekends. Yet for a number

of the female scholars we interviewed, working weekends is not an option as it competes with family commitments, with consequences for their research agendas and career trajectories.

Research conducted by Misra *et al.* (2012) at a large North American university shows that mothers with caring duties sacrifice research time in order to meet the teaching demands of students, service expectations to the university and family duties. For a number of our respondents, work–life balance was configured as a matter of compromising the research element of their working lives to meet family obligations and reclaim time for personal lives. Says one interviewee about the women she works with:

if they have families with young kids and they have the responsibility of childcare, dropping them off, picking them up or if the kids are ill then they're the ones who take care of it, so once again it's eating away at the time that they have available for doing those things like the research that's going to get you the promotion (Zelda, Level C, S&T, dependent children).

For our respondents, work–life balance is couched in terms of first meeting commitments to others (children, students), which are required and inflexible, and necessitates individuals compromise on the discretionary element of their working life — the research activities that would advance their careers (writing papers, presenting at conferences, grant writing). When work–life balance is discursively constructed as a matter of compromise between discretionary work and family commitments, it is individual women who accommodate the cost of caring by accepting that their 'choice' to balance work and life will be detrimental to their career.

### *Work–life balance as unmentionable*

Our findings reveal that women's family responsibilities remain unmentionable in the university context, despite the open discussion of such issues being necessary for the success of work–life policies such as family leave and flexible work options (Doherty and Manfredi, 2006). And while respondents recount situations where individual managers supported women in exceptional circumstances (such as seriously ill children), there remains a residual perception that day-to-day family arrangements are a potential impediment to the workings of the university and that women needed to 'fit in' to the status quo. Women are reluctant to request work provisions in order to accommodate family duties, having experienced criticism from colleagues on these grounds. As one respondent explains:

I just heard funny comments from people thinking it wasn't fair [that they benefitted from work–life policies] 'just because they decide to have children, that's their decision, they shouldn't get any special treatment' and that was a bit hurtful (Nancy, Level B, S&T, dependent children, part-time).

Even for women without children, particularly those of child-reading age, there is an awareness of being seen as a potential liability by peers. Despite the university's maternity leave and work–life balance policies, Daphne recounts her apprehension at telling a male staff member about her pregnancy 'because he was directly involved in my appointment and he might be upset to the point where he would like to see a different person in my job'. She informs us of a similar situation experienced by a colleague in another department:

When she joined the department a male academic said to her 'I hope you are not going to go and get pregnant on us' and she has just actually become pregnant so she is really worried about it as well (Daphne, Level B, Arts, pregnant with first child, on probation).

The participants' responses highlight the power of discourse as a form of policing whereby women who seek to take up work–life policies such as flexible work schedules or maternity leave face censure from their peers. In receiving the message that work and home are incompatible, women who seek to

occupy these domains simultaneously are effectively silenced, limiting their ability to generate alternative discourses that acknowledge and accept the double burden many academic women face in undertaking paid work and unpaid responsibilities. What is revealed in these accounts is the operations of gendered discourses to uphold gender regimes that separate 'work' and 'care', or 'work' and 'life' in the work-life balance equation. Not only do discourses of work-life balance function to govern the limits of women's capacity to seamlessly occupy the status of worker and caregiver, but the division of 'work' and 'life' appears as natural, with women academics being required to manage these two domains instead of challenging them.

While on the surface work-life policies are geared towards enabling women to manage the highly gendered work/care regimes that structurally position them across the domains of unpaid and paid work, interviewees' discussions reveal the way traditional gender expectations of the 'proper' worker as 'male, full-time and care-free' (Pocock, 2005, p. 43) still influence the extent to which unpaid caring work can be openly acknowledged, accepted and accommodated in academic workplaces. Some interviewees made reference to an ideal type of academic worker who is unencumbered by family responsibilities (Kelly *et al.*, 2010). This ideal worker is viewed as incompatible with the realities experienced by many women who shoulder responsibilities outside of paid labour:

I was at a conference a couple of years ago and they discussed what makes a good professor and the answer was [having] someone at home, you know, a wife and someone who can do the life part of your work. I think that's a primary issue and if you've got a husband who's working as well it becomes incredibly hard for some women, especially when the children are young, to be productive and to be eligible and appropriate for a promotion (Claudia, Level D, Health, adult children).

While the academics quoted above contemplate the limitations of speaking about unpaid family responsibilities, should women be viewed as not up to the requirements of the job, other scholars respond to the discourse of managing work-life balance in a different way.

Ten of our respondents indicate that they do not feel pressure to balance work and family life. While three academics attribute this lack of pressure to the fact that they do not have children or have adult children, most women in this group speak about achieving work-life balance in ways that echo certain attributes of the ideal worker model. As one participant explains:

I have a family. I have always worked. When my children were born they were in day care, at university ... the first one from two months old and the second one from three weeks old and I've always been able to maintain a work-life balance ... I'm at my desk during all working hours ... I also take my work home and I work at home after hours and I think that any business person who has succeeded has probably adopted the same *modus operandi* (Tracey, Level D, Business, adult children).

While this respondent's working life is characteristic of the ideal worker who works long hours and prioritizes work over other activities (Kelly *et al.*, 2010, p. 283), others largely subscribe to what we term the 'modified ideal worker'. Echoing Pocock's notion of the 'modified breadwinner', a model which 'sees women adding a part-time or full-time job to their existing privatized care responsibilities' (2005, p. 43), these academics utilized flexible workplace arrangements to enable them to fit family responsibilities, like picking up children from school, around paid work. Yet this results in them working constantly to meet the dual demands of paid and unpaid duties. While the concept of the modified breadwinner configures work as secondary to caregiver responsibilities through its framing of paid employment as in addition to unpaid labour, the idea of the modified ideal worker sees work prioritized over family, yet it is assumed that family duties will be attended to in addition to work (unlike the ideal worker who is assumed to be absolved of such responsibilities). In their discussions, respondents position themselves in terms of the gender organization of both domestic

work and university work. They construct themselves as successful academics in the ideal ‘masculine’ worker model by meeting the expectations of the job via long work hours, whilst also undertaking the role of invisible support by managing the domestic domain. There is little contestation within these accounts of gendered discourses that attribute the management of family life to women. Rather, these employees negotiate dual roles of paid and unpaid worker by extending their overall work hours, rather than challenging the feasibility of an academic workload that requires more time working to meet the minimum teaching, research and service requirements of the job.

Collectively, what these responses reveal is female academics’ limited capacity to contest the ideal worker model, despite the presence of work–life policies. Mention of unpaid care obligations are either met with criticism from peers, hence silencing women’s attempts to frame their work duties within a work–life balance model, or result in women responding to the concept of work–life balance in liberal terms by meeting the expectations of the ideal worker type. Their accounts suggest that in order to demonstrate their commitment to being ‘serious’ academics, their obligation to family should not be mentioned, or if it is discussed, should not impact on their availability to the university and their ability to produce research outcomes.

## Conclusion

By examining the ways in which discourses of work–life balance are appropriated and used by female scholars, this article contributes to understanding the operations and effects of discourse in naturalizing assumptions regarding work–life balance as enabling, desirable and achievable for women. Accordingly, work–life balance discourses create subjects as individual agents responsible for managing a successful work–life balance. For women academics, notions of work/care regimes, which are themselves products of gendered discourses, frame the way they speak about achieving work–life balance. While most of our respondents find work–life balance to be impossible to achieve, noting its negative impacts on their career and that it cannot be mentioned at work, they do not speak about the concept of work–life balance as the problem, or the reason for their failure to achieve it. Rather, they construct their inability to successfully manage work–life balance as a personal issue, not a consequence of the socio-cultural ordering of work and home as distinct and distinctly gendered spheres that shape the reality of how women experience work–life balance.

Consistent with previous studies, our data shows large workloads (Woodward, 2007), longer work hours (Doherty and Manfredi, 2006; Kinman and Jones, 2008), the attitudes of managers and peers (Thompson *et al.*, 1999), career repercussions and administrative processes (Waters and Bardoel, 2006) as significant institutional barriers to fostering work–life balance. In accord with Currie and Eveline’s 2011 study, flexibility in work hours and technology featured as facilitators of work–life balance, although it proved a double-edged sword for many who felt that the expectations and demands of paid work extended into all other spheres of life. Our research also supports the existing literature demonstrating that family and domestic responsibilities featured prominently as sources of work–life conflict for female scholars (Forster, 2000; Probert, 2005; Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008).

It is through our discursive analysis, however, that we re-orient how women academics’ discussions of work–life balance can be understood. In considerations of how university policies and procedures might facilitate a better work–life balance for women academics, it is insufficient to focus only on drivers and barriers to the uptake of policy-led measures. Through a discursive analysis of the ways women speak about work–life balance, our research draws attention to the social effects of discourse to construct subjects and reinscribe relations of power. The discursive tensions between institutional policies that configure flexible work arrangements as empowering and enabling and the way participants construct work–life balance as impossible to achieve, reveal the discursive power of work–life balance discourse to pathologize individuals who fail to live up to this ideal. In doing so, the gendered expectations and structural relations of work and care that inform women’s ability to balance work and life remain unquestioned. So, too, does the concept of work–life balance itself remain unproblematised, hence naturalized as something which individuals should strive to meet.



Within our data, there appears to be very little differentiation between staff working in different disciplinary fields, yet employment level emerges as a factor informing women's perceptions of work–life balance. Women at junior and mid-career levels (B and C) are most likely to conceptualize work–life balance as a struggle between commitment to family and paid work. In this regard, our findings support the observations of Probert (2005) and Santos (2015) about the significance of life cycle on how women experience work–life balance, as this stage of their academic career often coincides with caring for children and/or ageing parents. Our findings, however, also reveal new insights. Academics with adult children or no children also deploy gendered discourses that emphasize women's family commitments when discussing their experiences of work–life balance. These academics speak in terms of *not* having responsibilities for children. This is in contrast to male academics who, regardless of their parenting commitments, rarely frame experiences of work in terms of meeting family responsibilities (Gunter and Stambach, 2003; Rafnsdottir and Heijstra, 2013; Santos, 2015).

Our findings further suggest that in attempting to create a university environment where the issue of work–life balance is rendered visible and important via policy schemes, paradoxically, women academics respond to such schemes by evoking a language of pressure, failure and opting-out, hence diminishing the efficacy of family-friendly workplace policies to alleviate the stresses of working life whilst allowing for a meaningful engagement with the private sphere. In a related manoeuvre, women discursively construct such issues as unmentionable in their daily interactions with managers, peers and other members of the university community. We postulate that such paradoxes arise in the context of what Barbara Pocock has termed work/care regimes, in that the discourses women draw upon and insert themselves into are underpinned by socio-cultural expectations and gender norms about academic work and unpaid work, regardless of whether the women themselves actively choose to co-opt, or resist, such discourses. Even though work–life policies constitute an attempt to accommodate the multiple roles and the blurring of boundaries between work and home experienced by both women and men in paid occupations, we contend that the genesis of such policies in the context of late-modern shifts in higher education towards managerial models generates unanticipated effects that counter the purported aims and rationale for business models of the university, particularly in the case of work–life policy concerned with transparency and cultural change.

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