

How do working mothers in Surrey Police Force experience work-life facilitation?

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Introduction

Organisational interest in promoting work-life balance is rapidly growing as is research in the area (Frone, 2003), showing that productivity, staff turnover and absenteeism can all be affected and improved by implementing work-life balance friendly policies. The UK government has also recognised the importance of investing more time and money into work-life balance research and policies (e.g. DTI, 2006a, 2006b), particularly in relation to women as increasing numbers are voicing a desire to take part in the formerly male-dominated professions (Turgoose, Hall, Carter and Stride, 2006). One example is the UK Police force which is under mandate to update its policies to facilitate a diverse workforce.

Actual work roles are extremely demanding, emotionally and physically, and finding ways to juggle work and non-work lives is especially difficult and important in a 24/7 profession. To address this the Police Force have begun to introduce work-life balance friendly policies and procedures such as part-time work and dependency leave, however as Hyman and Summers (2004) noted, it is important that these policies really do affect the employees positively and not only the organisation.

Whilst much work-life balance literature has focused on conflict, this study this study explored facilitation (Grzywacz and Butler, 2005; Frone, 2003); with specific focus on working mothers in a UK Police Force. As there is no extant research that would provide a framework for considering the concept of facilitation in the emergency services, and much research has focused on organisational rather than individual processes or outcomes, we adopted qualitative methodology to reflect the needs and interests of individuals who work for the organisation *within* this particular organisational context.

Our method for collecting data was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as this is “a specifically psychological research method” as opposed to one that taps into “social processes” like grounded theory does (Willig, 2001). IPA therefore is prominently positioned to help us understand individual psychological experience in rich depth, reflecting the needs and interests of individuals who work for the organisation *within* the organisational context.

Methodology

Through collaboration with the Police Federation purposive sampling was undertaken and six working mothers were contacted and agreed to take part in this study; who held a variety of job roles and ranks within this Force (see Table 1).

<u>Name</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Current work status</u>	<u>Children's ages (years)</u>	<u>Marital status</u>
Anne	Police Constable – Crime Management Unit	Part time – 20 hours/wk	11 10	Married
May	Detective Sergeant – Professional Standards	Full time – flexible hours	8 8	Married
Jo	Sergeant - Licensing	Part-time – 22 hours/wk	2	Married
Emma	Police Constable - Incident Handling Centre	Part-time – 20 hours/wk	13 10	Widowed
Jane	Sergeant – Community Safety Unit	Part-time – 36 hours/week	10 8 3	Married
Mandy	Detective Inspector – PIIT and Crime Management Unit	Full time	10 5	Married

Table 1 – Interviewee demographics

The interviews were semi-structured to allow a rich two-way conversation (Smith and Osborn, 2003), giving the interviewer space to probe into individual responses if something interesting arose, as opposed to sticking to a rigid, ordered set of questions. The interviews began with two very broad questions to establish rapport

with the participant before engaging the participant in conversation related to the interface of work and non-work, and facilitation; which we focused in line with Frone (2003) around the specific notion of transfer of skill from one domain to another.

The analysis was carried out according to the guidelines of Smith and Osborn (2003), where one transcript was analysed in detail first, noting any coding or notes about anything that seemed significant or interesting in the account. Then the researcher re-read the transcript, interacting with the texts to draw out the psychological experience of work-life facilitation, and making notes of emerging themes. These themes were then compiled into a long list and the researcher considered potential clusters amongst them. This process was carried out for each of the six transcripts in turn, respecting individualities throughout. Finally, the researcher considered all of the clusters and themes to distinguish superordinate themes that linked them, dropping any themes that were not supported by rich enough evidence in the interviews or that seemed not to fit with the emerging structure.

Findings and discussion

Three superordinate themes, identity, segmentation and support were identified. The theme of identity involved the discussion of prioritising the new identity as a mother, consciously re-evaluating life and making choices as a result. Segmentation is discussed in terms of a skill that working mothers employ to separate the work and non-work domains. Finally the theme of support pertains to the support working mothers receive from others and the self-support they draw from within themselves. We now discuss these themes in relation to existing literature and the implications for the individuals and the organisation are explored and explicated.

Identity:

Identity appeared as a major influence on how they experienced facilitation between their work and non-work lives. All women acknowledged a change in identity when children became a part of their lives, due not only to the new responsibilities involved in their new role as a mother, and how they consciously chose to handle the situation with regards to work, but also the reactions of others at work or in their lives outside work. The three subthemes detected that combined to highlight identity as an issue important to these women are: prioritising the new identity as a mother; choice and conscious life evaluations.

After having children the women obviously struggled to deal with the new identity as a mother which links to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The women in this study already had a work identity, however their newfound role as a mother lead them to seek a new identity. Four of the women stated that they identified themselves as a mother over a worker after having children and the other two women seemed to express more of a dual identity as a working mother.

Greenhaus and Powell (2006) included the moderator “salience of role” in their model of work-life facilitation which could be equated to salience of identity – i.e. if the woman gives more salience to her role as mother/worker, or identifies more with either role, this will moderate the facilitation experienced in the two domains. Implications for organisations could be that if they enhanced self-efficacy in the work role on return after maternity leave, this may have a positive effect on their identity as a working mother and enhance performance in both roles.

In talking about her dual identity as police officer and mother, one of the women stated “...I make no secret of the fact that my priorities are my children... I am a parent first and a police officer second.” This exemplifies the conscious decisions made by the women with regards to juggling their careers when they become mothers.

Segmentation:

Throughout the interviews, all but one of the women emphasized the way they segregate their lives into work and non-work. They were adamant that this was the only way and it was very important for them to do this segmenting in order to juggle the different domains of their lives. Most of the women saw this divide as an emotional and social divide that they created, although one woman used physical division to segregate the two. It was interesting that the process of separating the work life from non-work was viewed by half of the women as a skill that could be worked on and developed. The two subthemes that were identified to form this superordinate theme were segmentation as a skill and switching personas.

In accordance with the literature on WLB, the results of this IPA study support the more contemporary view of segmentation as a process employed by people as a coping mechanism (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000). At this point it is important to remember the definition of work-life facilitation: when engagement in one domain enhances performance in the other. Segmentation of the two domains does not fulfil this criterion; it is not something that happens in one domain that specifically enhances performance in the other domain, but something that occurs *between* the two domains. For this reason, although the analysis identified segmentation as a major theme, it should not necessarily be viewed as a facilitator (as it does not meet the definition) but perhaps should be considered as a moderating variable of work-life facilitation. Neither in the model of work-life facilitation suggested by Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson and Kacmar (2007), nor in that of Greenhaus and Powell (2006) is segmentation referred to, suggesting either the models may not be complete, or perhaps are not applicable to all contexts and professions.

Possible organisational implications include introducing more segmenting policies such as flexitime to facilitate their employees to strike the desired level of segmentation to then juggle their work and non-work lives appropriately. However, the onus to improve segmentation does not only rest with the organisation – the

women in this study identified separating their work and non-work domains as something *they* actively carried out and therefore took partial responsibility for. For example, one of the women said “I don’t socialise within the police environment, I have everything outside, so I like to keep that separate. That is very precious to me, that’s what helps, I think keeping it separate is very precious”. This could have implications for training for the organisation – perhaps they need to teach their employees about how to go about segmenting their lives, or perhaps just increase their employees’ awareness of the benefits of segmentation.

Support:

The two-way process of facilitation really becomes apparent in this final theme of support. In the interviews, the women identified that both domains did provide support for each other and facilitate the juggling process between the two, whilst also discussing the compromise and need for flexibility between the two. They also named specific facets of each domain (work/family), that they found particularly helpful to them in the other domain of their life (family/work). The two subthemes identified during the analysis were external support and self-support.

The theme of support backs up the findings of past research claiming that increased support in either the work or family domain enhances performance in the other domain (Voydanoff, 2004; Wayne et al, 2006). For both work-to-life facilitation and life-to-work facilitation, the women identified both self-support and external support as necessary. There was a strong emphasis in the interviews that organisation and planning on the part of the women is paramount, but for this to work they needed the external support too. They talked about support as a facilitative process but compromise was needed between support from the non-work domain and support from the work domain, irrespective of whether this is external support or self-support. When the women discussed the facilitation they experienced as a result of support, one type of support seemed to occur relatively subconsciously – they seemed

unaware of the transfer of skills and knowledge gained in their work lives that they then used in their non-work lives – when they discussed it, it was as if they were realising it for the first time. This may have training implications for organisations – they may find that their employees could benefit from training in terms of making these subconscious skills explicit to them, and increasing awareness of particular skills they that work well in each domain that could be transferred (e.g. leadership skills learned at work can be used in family life with children). When ask about transferable skills during the interview, one of the women realised, “the skills that I’ve learned [at work] help me outside of work...like, being able to talk to groups of people, because when we go into a school outside with the pregnancy crisis, you’ve got a class of like 20 teenagers, sometimes 30, well I can stand up in front of them and talk, and that’s through the skills that I’ve learned at work”, however this had not been obvious to her prior to the interview discussion.

With reference to support, a possibility for the organisational intervention is to ensure the organisation as a whole is supportive of working mothers, and that line managers are trained sufficiently in supporting their employees. In addition the derogatory attitude towards part time workers and working mothers should be actively discouraged to allow such employees to take advantage of facilitating policies without inducing feelings of guilt or lowering self-efficacy.

Conclusion

When reading the transcripts, the theme of segmentation seems the most obvious and prominent, however this does not make it the most important. The analysis drew out three major themes, each of which provides unique insight into how working mothers experience facilitation, and these themes cannot be narrowed any further without losing the essence of the interviews.

IPA studies are of a very specific and personal nature, and therefore the generalisability of their findings is ambiguous, however Smith and Osborn (2003) argue that if there is sufficient theoretical grounding, then generalisations may begin to be formed from specific cases. Since there is theoretical grounding and support for each of the superordinate themes discussed in this paper, it is probable that generalisations can be made from the findings and therefore implications for the organisation are real and worthy of consideration.

In summary, as the Police Force and other organisations introduce more policies to attend to the issue of work-life balance, the findings of this research paper suggest they should concentrate not only on reducing conflict but on ways to increase work-life facilitation. In this paper the six working mothers interviewed highlighted the need to address identity, segmentation and support when considering possible interventions. The findings pointed not only towards a need for support from the organisation to maintain women's work identity after having children, but also a need for women to take responsibility themselves, through planning and organisation, segmentation, and drawing on certain transferable skills they already possess. This could be aided by the organisation through training to heighten awareness of such transferable and segmenting skills, and/or the implementation of policies such as flexitime.

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