

THE NEOLIBERAL PRIVATISATION OF RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY: THE CASE OF  
WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND FLEXIBLE WORKING PRACTICES

by

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## ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism is both a political ideology and set of practices which facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance. This study identifies *the privatisation of risk and responsibility* as one of its key elements. Taking as its case-study the field of *work-life balance* (WLB) and *flexible working practices* in the UK, it traces the manifestation of this imperative within and across the levels of the state, employer and employee. Part I begins by conceptually examining the response of the British state to the 'new social risk' of WLB, and the construction by employers of the typical 'flexible' worker in relation to traditional notions of 'work-life culture'. Part II provides an empirical examination of the theoretical framework. Extending the concept of work-life culture, findings are presented from a qualitative, critical case-study follow-up to the UK Government's *Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey* (2007). Contrary to official flexible working discourses, employee experience of the flexible working *process* at a 'best practice' Big Four accountancy firm is shown to not be 'win-win'. Rather, such experiences are complex and *double-edged* – that is, infused with neoliberal notions of privatised risk and responsibility. New opportunities need to be seen alongside negative consequences, particularly stalled career advancement.

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## GLOSSARY

BERR – Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform

CBI – Confederation of British Industry

CIPD – Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

DfEE – Department for Education and Employment

DTI – Department of Trade and Industry

DWP – Department of Work and Pensions

EOC – Equal Opportunities Commission

FWP – Flexible working practice

IB – Incapacity benefit

NSR – New social risk

OSR – Old social risk

RTR – The Right to Request Flexible Working legislation

TUC – Trade Union Congress

WLB – Work-life balance

WLB3 – The Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey (DTI, 2007)

## INTRODUCTION CHAPTER

This study identifies and critically examines the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, taking as its case-study the field of work-life balance (henceforth WLB) and flexible working practices (henceforth FWPs). In sum, it is argued that this represents one of the foremost arenas in which the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility is manifest, within and across each of the levels of the state, employer and employee. In doing so, the study presents a political sociological contribution to the field of the sociology of work and employment. It attempts to broaden existing discussion from its important but narrow focus upon workplace provisions for working mothers to enter/remain in the labour market, and to offer a more theoretically rounded and critical approach to the issues of WLB and flexible working.

Unquestionably, the issue of WLB has attracted considerable interest across media, public policy, human resource and academic discussions. The main message of the debate is always the same: the need for good WLB (Warhurst et al., 2008). Of course, the term 'WLB' has itself been questioned. It tends to imply that a person's life is neatly divided between the two distinct domains of 'work' and 'life', with the former seen as a negative restriction on the latter. 'Work' is projected as that which is paid or undertaken in relation to the market, whilst 'life' is generally taken to be everything that lies outside the realm of formal paid employment. 'Balance', on the other hand, appears as that which is simultaneously positive, achievable and synonymous with equity (Blundson et al., 2006; Fleetwood, 2007a; Gambles et al., 2006; MacInnes, 2006; Ransome, 2007).

However, notwithstanding these important qualifications, the *concept* of WLB retains its status as worthy of continued sociological consideration, particularly given its relevance to broad and important issues of

organisational, labour market and societal change (Blundson et al., 2006). The majority of existing sociological research has tended to focus mainly on the 'life' aspect of the WLB debate, analysing the challenges faced by working parents (particularly mothers) and dual-income households in attempting to better integrate the 'work' and 'life' domains. That is, it has been strongly characterised by feminist scholars centrally concerned with the category of *gender* to understand and explain the issues of WLB and/or FWPs. From the outset therefore, it is important to make clear the role I attach to the category of gender. In sum, whilst gendered accounts are highly important given the rising economic activity levels of women, ultimately, I would argue, they present only a *partial* understanding of the broader context which frames the WLB debate. Thus, this thesis recognises existing debates (see primarily Chapter Two), but attempts to build on these in order to progress the literature. I develop this point in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

The utilisation of a FWP is typically understood as the most practical means by which an employee can 'improve' their WLB. Flexible working therefore represents the more 'work' focused aspect of the WLB debate, and tends to be the domain of scholars working within HR and management studies. This study engages with both the 'work' and 'life' aspects of the WLB debate, but particularly that of the former where the emphasis is upon *flexible working*. Overall, it offers an original contribution to this field in a manner that contributes to existing accounts – regardless of whether the emphasis is on 'life' or 'work'.

The phrase 'flexible working practice' has itself been subject to some degree of variation, having also been referred to as, for example, flexible working arrangements (Cohen and Single, 2001; Lewis, 2003), alternative work arrangements (Johnson et al., 2008; MacDermid et al., 2001) and family-friendly programs (Arthur and Cook, 2003; Sutton and Noe, 2005). Indeed, up until approximately 2002, FWPs had been known as 'family friendly policies' (Dex and Schreibl, 2001; Grover and Crooker, 1995), although this was progressively altered in recognition that aspects of WLB are not simply issues for

women and those with childcare responsibilities (Smithson et al., 2004). All of these terms are analogous to one another, each corresponding to the definition offered by Lewis (2003: 1) which is adopted here: 'organizational policies and practices that enable employees to vary, at least to some extent, when and/or where they work or to otherwise diverge from traditional working hours'. To quote directly the British Government, there are seven main types of FWP:

- Part-time: working less than the normal hours, perhaps by working fewer days per week
- Flexi-time: choosing when to work (there's usually a core period during which you have to work)
- Annualised hours: your hours are worked out over a year (often set shifts with you deciding when to work the other hours)
- Compressed hours: working your agreed hours over fewer days
- Staggered hours: different starting, break and finishing times for employees in the same workplace
- Job sharing: sharing a job designed for one person with someone else
- Home working: working from home (Directgov, 2008)

It is worthwhile briefly accounting for the inclusion of part-time working in this list. A substantial literature exists debating the advantages and disadvantages of this work arrangement for employees (Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998; Kahne, 1992; McRae and Kohler 1995); the extent to which individuals (particularly women) 'choose' to work part-time or whether it is a choice structured by other factors (see for instance the exchanges between Hakim, 1998 and Crompton and Harris, 1998); and its relation to a 'successful' WLB (Higgins et al., 2000; Warren, 2004). Issues such as these are beyond the scope of this study. However, despite having existed long before the emergence of WLB discourse, in many ways part-time

should be considered the original form of attempting to balance/integrate the domains of work and family life (Bonney, 2005). In agreement with most other academic studies, therefore, I do view part-time working as a FWP (notably: Callan, 2007; McDonald et al., 2007; Smithson et al., 2004; Van Dyne et al., 2007).

To emphasise, this study considers FWPs collectively, rather than any one specifically: flexible working is conceptualised here as a complex social *process*. It is also important to acknowledge that, throughout, 'FWPs' refers to those flexible forms of working (listed above) which have been *formalised* i.e. contractually agreed between the employer and their employee, normally to occur over a minimum period of time. Of course, many workers engage in some degree of informal flexibility on a relatively frequent basis. A typical example in this sense would be the person who is able to work from home once every two weeks, and can arrive to work an hour later than usual on the understanding that this will be made up at some stage in the future. Increased spatial and temporal flexibility of this type is an important feature of contemporary working life, related to what Harvey has described as the demise of the 'standard working week' (1999), but, crucially, this is analytically separate to the formal uptake of FWPs which represents the focal point of this study.

A critical analysis of FWPs prompts brief consideration of other, broader debates regarding work *flexibility*. Unquestionably, 'flexibility' is a ubiquitous contemporary mantra (Bauman, 2001; Harvey, 2005), understood by many to represent a feature of the transition from Keynesian economic and labour market policies to that of neoliberalism, in which a laissez-faire approach to both economic management and labour market policies is adopted (Hutton, 1995). In this light, much has been written regarding the various strategies utilised by employers to maintain profitability within the context of an increasingly competitive and global economy. As I have already alluded to, these have included large-scale temporal and spatial alterations in the organisation of work and a greatly increased flexibility in how, when, where

and by whom work is conducted (see especially Benner, 2002; Benyon et al., 2002; Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Pollert, 1988). Most existing accounts have concentrated on the negative impacts this type of labour flexibilisation has had upon employees and their experience of work – an approach referred to as the ‘low road’ vision of flexibility (Bone, 2006; Michie and Sheehan, 2003).

However, flexible working time and place arrangements (FWPs) represent an interesting exception to this trend, given that they are widely understood to be employee, rather than employer, led. They conform to the version of positive, ‘high road’ flexibility, in which:

flexibility is presented as a desirable, progressive trend, increasing workers’ autonomy and providing more stimulating work, while injecting a pro-social dimension into employment practices, enhancing both employees’ lives and company performances through improved worker commitment and productivity. (Bone, 2006: 110)

Awareness of this debate and the recognition that FWPs are a form of ‘high road’ flexibility is important in two main respects. Firstly, it provides clarity regarding which types of worker the study is concerned with. Consistent with much of the existing WLB literature, I focus mainly on relatively affluent professional and white collar workers, referred to elsewhere as the ‘time poor, cash rich’ (Fleetwood, 2007a: 353). It is readily acknowledged that this approach largely omits consideration of those less economically privileged, for whom the pursuit of WLB is just as, if not more, acute. Secondly, the study serves as a partial critique of the crude assumption that FWPs, as a form of ‘high road’ flexibility, are unequivocally positive from the perspective of the employee. Empirically, I examine a single, self-proclaimed ‘best practice’ WLB employer. Interview data garnered at the Big Four accountancy firm ‘AccountCo’ confirmed that, whilst FWPs do *tend* to be employee led (cf. Fleetwood, 2007b) and largely successful

in creating new levels of agency and opportunities for the individual, this process is rarely wholly win-win, but complex and *double-edged*.

WLB and flexible working have generated a significant body of academic research. The following chapter critically discusses this in detail, although two main limitations of this literature have particularly influenced this thesis and need briefly stating. The first concerns the limited lens of analysis. The majority of contributions have utilised psychological or micro/meso sociological perspectives, in which the unit of analysis rarely extends beyond that of the organisation and/or the individual, mostly in relation to working mothers. Whilst a number of scholars have recently begun extending this discussion to consider the broader, more macro dimensions of the debate, these have tended to concentrate either on the causes underlying the emergence of WLB or the response of various welfare-states to it. Consequently, this study critically examines the role played by *neoliberalism* (defined more fully below) in this realm, drawing on a form of *multi-level analysis* (c.f. Hildebrandt and Littig, 2006) between the levels of the state, employer and employee. Both these forms of approach are currently rare. The second main limitation of the literature has been the almost total omission of the related concepts of risk and responsibility. Conceptually and empirically, both of these offer significant explanatory potential as well as being, I suggest, largely *implicit* across much of the WLB/FWP debate. As such, their exclusion represents a further gap in existing research which I aim to fill.

Given the pivotal place afforded it in this study, it is important to be clear what is meant by 'neoliberalism'. The concept has been subject to numerous interpretations, thereby allowing the potential for it, on the one hand, to be easily reified and treated 'as a phenomenon which manifests itself everywhere and in everything' (Gamble, 2001: 134) and, on the other, for its significance to be underestimated (Larner, 2000; Thompson, 2007). The beginning of Chapter Four offers a fuller

discussion of neoliberalism and the context surrounding it, such that a concise definition is all that is presently required.

To begin with, neoliberalism should be understood as:

a reassertion of the core beliefs of liberal economics, which evolved with capitalism as its apologia. It is a utopian vision of self-regulating markets transforming the inherent selfishness of individuals into general good. (Wilkinson, 2007: 817)

More specifically, and following Larner, I consider neoliberalism to be 'both a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance' (Larner, 2000: 6). This definition is largely consistent with that offered by Thompson (2007) who has argued that, analytically, there are two senses of neoliberalism – both of which are integral to this study. The first sees it as 'a regime of politico-economic organisation with attendant ideological and discursive justifications' (Thompson, 2007: 2). This understands neoliberalism as a phase of advanced capitalism, founded upon a number of core principals, particularly the primacy of the market; the liberalisation and deregulation of economic activities; and the privatisation of publicly-owned assets. Together, these transfer power away from governments (mandated to ensure universal service provision) and towards private capital (ultimately, concerned only with opportunities for further accumulation) (Larner, 2000). The second sense of neoliberalism originates from governmentality theorists, who consider it as 'a mode of governance with its own attendant justifications' (Thompson, 2007: 2). This perspective and its approach to risk is examined in detail in Chapter Three; it is sufficient to recognise at this point that the key aspect is the displacement of the mechanisms of government from the state to the individual, with power being exercised through the regulated choices of responsible individuals and the communities within which they are located (governance at a distance).

The research is limited in the main to examining the present day UK, specifically, the period since New Labour came to power in 1997. The cut off date for all forms of data which were included in the text was the beginning of May 2008. This focus necessitates locating the work-welfare regime around which the UK is clustered. Undoubtedly, the contemporary British model of capitalism has been subject to great discussion regarding the form it has taken. Repetition of these arguments is unnecessary here (see also the beginnings of chapters Three and Four). It is enough to note that, having emerged from post-World War Two Keynesian social democracy (premised upon the male breadwinner model), the UK welfare state continues to represent a *hybrid* model, one that has proved difficult to classify and neatly align with the traditional threefold classification of liberal, conservative and social democratic welfare regimes (Abrahamson, 1999; Esping-Anderson, 1990; 1999; Pierson, 2001; Taylor-Gooby, 2004a, 2008). The influential, yet contested, analysis of Esping-Anderson (1990; 1999) has identified Britain as belonging broadly to the US *liberal regime* type of welfare state, arguing that it moved closer towards it during Thatcherism. However, Esping-Anderson has also acknowledged that there remains a number of strong social democratic aspects to the British welfare state.

The point to emphasise is that the UK has now been almost entirely restored to a specifically (*neo*)liberal capitalist model (Gamble, 2001; 2003), in which the male breadwinner household model is being increasingly replaced with what Lewis (2000) has termed the 'adult worker model'. In sum, the argument developed throughout this study in relation to WLB and flexible working is that, although most particularly associated with the Conservative Government of 1979-1997, the UK continues to be strongly influenced by the neoliberal agenda, both in terms of its politico-economic organisation and mode of governance (Callinicos, 2001; Cammack, 2004; Fleetwood, 2007b; Gamble, 2001; Garrett, 2008; Hall, 2003; Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2001; Morrison, 2004).

A further feature of neoliberalism is its intricate connection to notions of *risk* and *responsibility*, principally in terms of their privatisation. Again, these are important concepts which need defining. Within sociological research and theory, the issue of risk has received a considerable upsurge of interest during the past fifteen years. Much of this has occurred as a result of the publication of Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992). First published in German in 1987, *Risk Society* has since been translated into over 20 languages and sold more than 80,000 copies globally. Writers have also drawn on the work of Michel Foucault and his concept of governmentality in order to analyse the role of risk in contemporary Western society.

Both of these perspectives are important and inform this study (discussed explicitly in Chapter Three). However, they raise the familiar sociological tension between objectivism and subjectivism. In short, the risk society perspective presents a more objectivist/realist approach to risk, whilst governmentality theorists offer a more subjectivist/social constructionist approach. As such, this study responds to the calls of Zinn (2006) and Mythen and Walklate (2006b) for research which attempts to transcend and/or integrate discussion between the two perspectives. Thus, I adopt a synthesis of these approaches.

Given its multidimensional nature and the various theoretical perspectives which have engaged with it, it is unsurprising that, from a sociological point of view at least, risk remains difficult to conceptually define (for detailed discussions of the meaning of risk, see Boyne, 2003: 1-14; Mythen, 2004: 12-15; and Lupton, 1999: 1-16). The common sense understanding of the word risk is that it is used to indicate danger or harm (Lupton, 1999). Theoretically, it has been argued that it is constituted by three major properties: probability, uncertainty and futurity (Mythen, 2004). As such, risk relates to forecasting and preparing for *possible outcomes/eventualities* (Ewald, 1991; Sparks, 2001). It would be a mistake to conceive of risk as a purely negative phenomenon (Hacker, 2006c). More accurately, it is *double-edged*, since, as Giddens has argued, 'opportunity and innovation are the positive side of risk' (1998: 63-64).

However, the precise manifestation of risk outcomes are subject to unpredictability and uncertainty: 'the essence of risk is not that it *is* happening, but that it *might* be happening' (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 2). At this stage, it is enough to settle on a conception of risk broadly consistent with the analysis of those scholars cited above. Thus, I understand risk to mean *the possibility of outcomes (positive and negative) to arise from progress*. 'Progress' here essentially refers to the context surrounding the risk, that is, the transition from one set of circumstances to another which has created it. This definition will be elaborated upon throughout.

A further facet to acknowledge is that risk necessitates a *response*; it needs to be managed or regulated (Rothstein et al., 2006). Appreciation of this fact forms the underlying premise of much of the welfare state literature, whereby the welfare policies implemented by governments are interpreted as, first and foremost, a public attempt to manage and minimise *social risks* (Esping-Anderson, 1999). In summary, social risks are those risks which have become collective and pose problems for the welfare of society; thereby representing the building blocks of welfare regimes. Drawing on this set of ideas presents a further means by which this study lays claims to originality. In sum, in agreement with a small group of welfare state researchers, the issue of WLB is acknowledged to be one of the foremost *new social risks* (henceforth NSRs) in postindustrial society (Bonoli, 2005, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004a, 2004b). Building upon this recognition, I argue that the manner in which the neoliberal influenced British state has responded to this is strongly consistent with its imperative to privatise risk and responsibility.

The notion of responsibility, in contrast to risk, is more self-explanatory. To be *responsible* suggests liability and moral accountability for actions, premised upon the assumption that one is capable of rational conduct. *Responsibility* meanwhile, extends this and refers to the person or thing for which one is responsible, incorporating ideas of duty and commitment. I understand responsibility to function as *both* a discourse and practice. For example, I demonstrate that flexible working is typically underpinned

by widely circulating managerial discourses that the FWP user must necessarily be responsible in their conduct and approach to working flexibly (see for instance CIPD, 2005: 21). Whilst in the realm of practice, one of the arguments presented is that the uptake of a FWP *necessarily* requires a range of new forms of responsibility which the FWP user must undertake in order to compensate for working in a non-standard manner (but which may or may not be made explicit). One of the central contentions throughout is that risk and responsibility are intimately connected, both conceptually and empirically. Whilst a number of scholars have also recognised this (Armstrong, 2005; Baker, 2002; Ericson et al., 2000; Giddens, 1999; O'Malley, 1996; Ring, 2002; Rose 1996a, 1996b, 1999b), it has had little impact upon the field of work and employment studies.

Traditionally, neoliberalism has been identified with a number of key elements, such as the primacy of the individual; freedom of choice; the market; laissez faire; and minimal government (Belsey, 1996). Together, these constitute the intellectual basis of neoliberalism and provide the theoretical impetus for its policies of deregulation and privatisation (Larner, 2000). In this light, the privatisation of risk and responsibility needs to be understood as a further aspect of the neoliberal agenda. It is a distinctive imperative which is analytically separate from, but complimentary to, neoliberalism's other discursive elements. Typical strategies of risk management include the avoidance of risk, the reduction of the negative aspects of risk, the acceptance of some or all of the consequences of the risk or, most significantly, *the transferral of risk to another party*. Clearly, it is the latter option which this study examines in terms of neoliberalism, with the basic argument being that neoliberalism is increasingly attempting to transfer the responsibility of risk management away from collective bodies such as the state and employers and towards *individuals*. Ideas pertaining to this perspective strongly resonate with a large number of existing and diverse social scientific accounts. However, this is the first occasion on which each of these components (neoliberalism, risk and responsibility) have been identified and brought together, not least in relation to the fields of WLB and flexible working.

At this point a further important recognition needs to be made: strategies to privatise risk are not, of course, particular to *neoliberal* capitalism. Late nineteenth century early liberalism saw the widespread development and commercialisation of private insurance and mortgages as practices of risk management (Defert, 1991; Ewald, 1991; O'Malley, 1996; Rose, 1996a). Insurance became *social* as European societies came 'to analyse themselves and their problems in terms of the generalised technology of risk' (Ewald, 1991: 210). In light of space considerations, however, this study considers explicitly the *neoliberal* privatisation of risk *and responsibility* – a variant which is more refined and widespread than its forerunner.

Unfortunately, the explicit focus on the UK restricts comparative analysis between and across other countries, welfare states and varieties of capitalism. This may well have proved a fruitful form of investigation, but, overall, it is beyond the scope of this study to adequately engage in this type of discussion.

As stated already, one of the proposed advantages to this research is its engagement in multi-level analysis. Added to this, attention is primarily fixed on the *work*-related aspects to the WLB debate i.e. FWP. As such, I am mainly interested in the state, employer and employee. It is acknowledged that this approach does, to an extent, obscure other relevant categories, particularly that of the *household* and the relationship of this to the labour market and caring commitments. For instance, an individual's satisfaction with their WLB is strongly related to the domestic division of labour in their household. Unquestionably, this is heavily gendered: men's contribution to housework remains small, with women continuing to retain the responsibility for organising, delegating and carrying out domestic tasks (Brannen et al. 1994; Crompton, 2006; Smith and Carroll, 2002). Recognition of these feminist led debates which place gender as the central category are important (both here and in Chapter One), but

the point to reinforce is that, having been extensively discussed elsewhere, these are not the main focus of the present study.

Having offered definitions of key concepts and indicated the substantive areas to be pursued, two main sets of research objectives now arise which structure and represent the core areas of contribution of the study:

- 1.a. To examine the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility
- 1.b. To examine this in relation to the field of work and employment
  
- 2.a. To apply this set of ideas to the field of WLB and FWPs. Firstly, at the socio/political (macro) level – to explore how and if this logic has affected the way the British neoliberal-influenced *state* has responded to the emergence of WLB
- 2.b. Secondly, at the *employer/employee* (meso/micro) levels – to explore how and if this logic has permeated to affect the way employers deploy FWPs, and how these are then utilised and experienced by employees.

Given the broad and multi-layered nature of the research, the thesis is approximately two-thirds conceptual and one-third empirical. Below I summarise the basic structure.

The thesis is comprised of two halves – Part I (largely conceptual) and Part II (largely empirical). Part I opens with Chapter One presenting a critical review of recent WLB and FWP literature. Chapter Two then focuses on work and employment literature, identifying the fields of unemployment, lifelong learning and the employability agenda, and retirement and the new pension environment as those which particularly manifest the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility. Chapter Three develops a

theoretical framework upon which to proceed. It considers the two foremost sociological perspectives on risk – the Risk Society and Governmentality approaches – alongside the contribution of Elliott (2002), to argue in favour of a synthesis between these which addresses the familiar dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism. From here, Chapter Four examines the transition to neoliberalism, the emergence of post-industrial ‘new social risks’ (henceforth NSRs) (the first explicit point at which WLB can be understood in terms of risk), and the dominant ways the privatisation of risk and responsibility has been translated into the British political context by New Labour and its Third Way politics. Chapter Five then draws together the key ideas thus presented, with a detailed consideration of the way neoliberalism has responded to the challenge of WLB in terms of what I refer to as its ‘work-focused response’. This is constituted by the ‘two-pronged’ approach of the *state* to WLB (Gambles et al., 2006), and the response of the typical *employer*.

Part II builds on the analysis of Part I to offer more explicit empirical consideration of *how* the neoliberal logic I have identified typically manifests itself across the level of the employer to that of the *employee*. It begins with Chapter Six, the methodology chapter. This opens by setting out the three research questions which underpin the remainder of the study. This is then followed by a justification and description of the choice of research instrument: a largely qualitative, critical case-study follow-up to the DTI’s *Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey* (DTI, 2007) (henceforth ‘WLB3’). Having first noted the importance of the concept of work-life organisational culture (McDonald et al., 2007) in Chapter One, Chapter Seven draws on and extends this via its presentation of the empirical *findings*, attempting, as much as possible, to let the data speak for itself. From here, Chapter Eight then *analyses* the findings in light of the conceptual framework developed previously. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main arguments presented and the areas where the study has added value to existing research.

# Part I – Conceptual Framework

# CHAPTER ONE: WLB AND FLEXIBLE WORKING LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

This chapter considers the recent body of research surrounding the fields of WLB and, more specifically, flexible working. It is structured around three main themes. The first examines the macro perspectives drawn on by scholars to make sense of the emergence of WLB and the ways various nation states have responded to it. The second reduces the unit of analysis to then look at WLB and flexible working research from meso and micro perspectives, drawing on the increasingly popular concept of 'work-life organisational culture' as the chosen method to achieve this. Finally, four broad deficiencies of the literature are highlighted which together suggest the need for a fresh and critical approach to research in this area.

### 1.1. Macro Perspectives

The vast majority of existing WLB and flexible working related studies have tended to examine their subject matter from the psychological or micro/meso sociological perspectives. As such, understanding these issues from a more macro and broad perspective has not, even within Sociology, proved particularly popular. Encouragingly however, in recent years this gap is being filled. Two distinct strands can be identified within this emerging field. The first covers accounts which have attempted to critically examine the *emergence* of the WLB/FWP debate against a broader backdrop than previously attempted. The second strand examines the various state responses to WLB. Both are relevant to the purposes of this thesis and will be considered below.

### 1.1.1 Studies Considering WLB Against a Wider Context

Amidst the vast swathe of WLB literature, a number of contributions have attempted to address the question of *why* the WLB debate has surfaced so prominently at this particular moment in history (Blyton et al., 2006; Crompton, 2006; Fleetwood, 2007b; Gambles et al., 2006, 2007; Maxwell and McDougal, 2004). The overall focus in each is WLB as opposed to FWPs. Authors such as Blyton et al. (2006); Crompton (2006); Gambles, et al. (2006, 2007) and Maxwell and McDougal (2004) all offer articulate and in-depth analyses which emphasise that the increased attention being given to the integration of work and life is a response to the contemporary social, economic and political context. However, as Gambles et al. are at pains to point out, whilst the WLB metaphor is a social construct located within a particular period of time and originating in a Western context, 'dilemmas relating to the management of paid work alongside other parts of life, especially family, have been the focus of research for several decades' (2007: 360).

Nonetheless, the arguments presented in these accounts are now widely reported and agreed upon. Typically, analysis centres upon developments such as changes in the profile of labour market participation (particularly the massive rise of women workers in the last half century); extensions in work hours (the contention that many employees are increasingly spending longer hours at work and taking additional work home with them); greater work pressure (this includes heightened sense of job insecurity); and the prospect of more demanding and substantially more diffuse and boundaryless work organisations in the future. In sum, these contributions are useful yet fail to offer much of a critical discussion regarding the primary concerns of this thesis, such as neoliberalism, risk and responsibility. MacInnes (2006) and Fleetwood (2007b) on the other hand, do offer more original and critical macro perspectives of WLB in this light and hence require further comment.

MacInnes (2006) argues that the existing academic analysis of WLB has too closely followed the public policy debate, to the extent that insufficient levels of attention have been given to its origins, the accuracy of the assumptions made, or the analytical adequacy of the concepts used. As I have shown, this perspective, in and of itself, is nothing particularly new – growing numbers of studies *are* examining the origins of the debate and problematizing the concepts and terminology typically used. However, where MacInnes breaks rank from much of the prevailing literature is in his central assertion that:

what are usually assumed to be the causes of the debate (longer hours and greater stress at work, along with the collapse of the male breadwinner division of parenting and employment responsibilities within couples) are nothing of the sort. Rather the debate's origins lie in states' concerns about demographic trends, especially low and falling fertility, which they fear threatens the future of the labour supply and viable dependency ratios between those in work and those dependent upon them. (p. 223)

Furthermore, the WLB debate is interpreted as 'part of a specifically liberal discourse about 'population ageing' that seeks to legitimate the rolling back of a welfare state by arguing that current levels of support cannot be sustained in a globalising world' (p. 223).

This allows MacInnes to make two fresh arguments. Firstly, most WLB policies are 'contradictory'. What makes them popular is also what makes them unlikely to achieve their particular intention of supporting parenting and avoiding a 'baby bust'. It is suggested that far more fundamental changes than most WLB policies currently envisage are required if they are ultimately to prove effective. Secondly, demographic changes across Europe have both increased the strength of the family and made the inter-generational transfer of wealth more important. It is argued that most workers actually enjoy substantial leisure and that they also accumulate substantial assets which, if they are parents, tend to be passed on to their

children. This transfer can only be undertaken by one of two institutions: the family and the state. The task of the state is therefore to secure a legitimate role in this process, if not it will become yet another social mechanism increasing inequality and social exclusion (p. 245).

MacInnes' contribution is useful, but only to a point. Whilst he successfully broadens the origins of the debate away from traditional explanations, it is insufficient to relegate WLB's emergence merely to states' concerns about demographic trends. Other commentators, such as Leitner and Wroblewski (2006) and Duncan (2002), have also noted the strong link between WLB and economic reasons to increase employment and population growth, but tie this explanation with the other more typical factors outlined by those scholars cited above. Moreover, MacInnes gives insufficient attention to the interests of the *employer*. Ultimately, employers are interested in the issue of WLB since it is understood positively to affect firm productivity, retention and the bottom line (Coyle, 2005). This is hardly a novel finding and will be elaborated upon further in terms of research findings relating to the 'business case' for WLB in section two of this chapter; it is also the line taken by Fleetwood (2007b).

The neo-Marxist contribution of Fleetwood (2007b) is equally, if not more, critical of the WLB debate and is more useful to our purposes here given his greater emphasis on flexible working. Fleetwood begins by usefully unpacking the term 'flexible working practice'. Whilst there is an 'inexorable link' between WLB and FWPs, a significant difference is highlighted as existing between those FWPs which are 'employee friendly' (sought by employees to enhance their WLB, e.g. flexitime, homeworking) and those which, conversely are 'employer friendly' (sought by employers, primarily in the pursuit of profit and only secondarily to enhance employee WLB, e.g. zero hours contracts and shift work) (Fleetwood, 2007b: 387-388). Drawing on *Labour Market Trends* (2004) and TUC data from 2005, Fleetwood argues that the current state of FWPs in the UK is characterised as much by employee unfriendly working practices that tend to *constrain* WLB, as they are by employee friendly practices that tend to enable it. The

emergence of discourses and practices of WLB and FWP are understood as part of the emergence of the discourse and practices of flexible working in general, with this then being understood as part of the emergence of neoliberalism. Following Harvey (2005), Fleetwood views neoliberalism as 'a new class strategy whereby the iron fist of a renewed ruling class offensive is wrapped in the velvet glove of freedom, individualism and, above all, flexibility' (2007b: 388).

Sometime in the late 1980's and 1990's, neoliberalism is held to have successfully 'discursively rehabilitated' the term 'flexibility', such that it no longer connotes any negativity:

the practices of employee unfriendly flexible working remained largely in place, while the discourses shifted from discourses that reflected these practices, to discourses of employee friendly working, thereby, ceasing to reflect the practices. (p. 388)

Thus, an answer is provided for the original question posed: why WLB now? Acting as a Trojan Horse, the discourses of WLB have increased markedly because they have been useful in legitimising the employee unfriendly working practices central to neoliberalism. That is:

the discourses of WLB conceal, while promoting, the now 'rehabilitated' discourses of flexibility. Employee-unfriendly flexible working practices remain, but are veiled by the mask of WLB discourses with their employee-friendly connotations. (p. 396)

Certainly, this is an interesting and useful perspective. Fleetwood's development of the link (and subsequent uncoupling) between WLB discourses and practices demonstrates the fact that this relationship is not stable and may be subject to distortion, typically from parties such as the Government and the employer. It also foregrounds the role of neoliberalism in initiating this process. Fleetwood's

contribution also reminds us again of the contested nature of the notion of 'flexibility', asking in whose interests it actually lies.

However, the distinction between employee friendly and employee unfriendly forms of flexibility which Fleetwood draws upon is overly crude, limiting its utility. As outlined in the Introductory Chapter, I am primarily interested in those FWPs which are 'employee friendly'/'high road' (cf. Bone, 2006). Indeed, one of the central contentions running throughout this study is that despite this status, FWPs do not unequivocally enable WLB. As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, given the inherent complexity involved in the flexible working process, the most useful notion as regards FWP usage is that of the 'double-edged sword'.

Thus, I have considered two recent contributions to the literature which move beyond the traditional units of analysis in an attempt to answer the question of 'why WLB now?'. Crucially, however, significantly less emphasis has been given to socio-political questions concerning *how* the issue of WLB has been responded to and managed by the (what I regard as neoliberal influenced) state. Typically, questions of this sort have been the domain of welfare state commentators and researchers, whose work is considered in the following section. Prior to that however, I examine the neo-Marxist perspective on this provided by Shorthouse (2004).

Shorthouse argues that capitalism has responded to the challenge of WLB in a manner that, as expected, favours the interests of capital and is therefore limited. It is held that that whilst the sentiment of WLB is itself worthwhile, the actual WLB campaign is 'one dimensional' and subject to a series of 'fundamental limitations', due to it being 'characterised by an inherent and limiting managerialism' (p. 2). The argument begins with the criticism that the WLB campaign is highly exclusive in its focus, being aimed mostly at managers and executive workers 'who work long hours through a combination of

interest in their job, career aspirations and general commitment to a profession' (p. 3). In contrast, many other types of worker work long and unsociable hours 'due to a much more formal and overt economic compulsion' (p. 3). Drawing on the familiar Marxist idea of alienation, Shorthouse points out that this is an issue which the WLB campaign does not deal with adequately. For most workers under capitalism, the capacity to interact creatively with the world through his/her labour has been all but eliminated. Despite this, managerial discourse continues to advocate work as the route to creative self-expression.

A second and more refined critique is then levelled at WLB. This concerns the managerialist implication that the organisation (that which causes workers to experience 'imbalance'), is *itself* the solution. What is needed instead is a work-time *reduction* rather than a re-balance within the organisational setting. Shorthouse maintains that WLB rhetoric, propelled by employer interests, suggests that job redesign programmes such as FWPs represent 'a 'win-win' solution' to the ills of modern work life' (p. 3). It is precisely this underlying rationale which makes WLB 'self limiting', i.e. it only goes so far as to redesign work practices *within* the existing structures of the workplace. Thus, Shorthouse argues: 'The implication is clear; the WLB campaign starts and finishes, logically and here even linguistically, with the needs of employers and organisational objectives' (p. 4).

The contribution of Shorthouse is useful because to some extent it elucidates the managerial and 'business case' philosophy underlying much of the WLB campaign. It also succeeds in foregrounding the role and responsibility organisations should hold in helping their employees better integrate their work and life domains. Again however, like Fleetwood, Shorthouse's account does seem overly pessimistic at times. He neglects to mention the fact that FWPs can and often do hold extremely positive consequences for flexible workers; with no attempt made to tally the experiences of individuals with what he terms the WLB campaign. Nor is much discussion given to the state's legislative intervention, such as the RTR.

### 1.1.2 Studies Examining State Responses to WLB

Examining and contrasting the various policy frameworks employed by governments to promote WLB is proving an increasingly popular field of study amongst sociologists and social policy and welfare state researchers (Bittman, 1999; Blundsen and McNeil, 2006; Brandth and Kvande, 2001; Cousins and Tang, 2004; Crompton, 2006; Den Dulk et al., 2005; Duncan, 2002; Ellingsaeter, 2003; Gambles et al., 2006; Hegeswich et al., 2005; James, 2006; Kilkey, 2006; Leitner and Wroblewski, 2006; Leon, 2005; Lewis, 1992; Roper et al., 2003). A full and thorough examination of this field in relation to the UK is unnecessary here, since these arguments will principally be drawn upon in Chapter Four where I discuss the ways the neoliberal influenced British state has responded to the challenge of WLB. All that is required at this stage is a brief overview of the general patterns this research has taken and the implications of this for the present study.

The overall picture from the existing literature would seem clear: the social-democratic Scandinavian countries are routinely held up as representing the archetypal 'best practice' nation states which support employees in their quest to successfully integrate the domains of 'work' and 'life'. Numerous studies have sought to examine the main policies to promote WLB in these countries, and to then ask how, in what ways, and under which conditions, might such policies be transferred to other countries which are less successful at promoting WLB (see especially Leitner and Wroblewski, 2006).

In such analyses, two perspectives are typically examined. The first focuses upon individual and household characteristics. Here, attention is given to the various factors which affect the decision making process of working parents as they consider the ways in which they might combine work and family life. Den Dulk et al. (2005: 20), for instance, have argued that there are four possible reasons

underpinning this: human capital; the economic necessity of two incomes; the availability of work-family provisions and norms and values concerning work and family. The second and more popular approach in this form of research has been to examine the institutional contexts of the countries in question. Typically, this involves reference to welfare state regimes, with this then acting as a framework for subsequent discussion. The overwhelming tendency amongst researchers here is to draw on the influential (yet contested) welfare state typology offered by Esping-Anderson (1999), with the recognition that work-family policies, the prevalence of part-time work and gender ideologies closely correspond to these.

Whilst a large number of studies and commentaries have examined these issues with reference to the predominant liberal welfare state regimes of the UK, the US and Australia, far fewer accounts have critically considered these in relation specifically to ideas surrounding neoliberalism. Moreover, despite the increase of macro level accounts, few have actually critically challenged the importance and role of the state in facilitating WLB (Blundsen and McNeil, 2006). However, a recent and useful exception to this trend has been provided by Tomlinson (2007), who examined the markedly different ways flexibility and working-time patterns (solely in relation to part-time work) are carried out by women in the US and UK. A much larger proportion of women work part-time in the UK than in the US, with this at surface level appearing to reflect women's preferences and personal choices. In investigating these divergent patterns, Tomlinson develops an integrated theoretical framework that emphasises three systems of socio-economic relations with regard to women's experiences of WLB: welfare state regimes, varieties of capitalism and gender regimes.

Overall, the argument is made that the UK's neoliberal agenda has resulted in only a 'partial commitment' to achieving a gender equitable form of WLB, due mainly to the continued poor quality of part-time jobs and also an overall lack of affordable childcare resources. Meanwhile, the more

archetypal and 'pure' example of neoliberalism, the US, presents fewer inconsistencies. Here, women are constructed as workers 'regardless of their caring responsibilities and this often leads to very long working hours coupled with low incomes and insecure forms of work' (p. 412). Far less 'choice' is available for employed mothers here, particularly those who are head of the household – a trend reinforced by the emphasis towards occupational welfare provision. In sum, it is suggested that in neither country is there evidence of a wholly gender equitable form of WLB or an approach that could be understood as 'win-win' for those negotiating WLB, rather: 'WLB often becomes more like a work-life trade-off' (p. 412).

Tomlinson's contribution usefully highlights that neoliberalism's response to WLB has not been uniform across countries, nor has it occurred in a way that could be said to be truly gender equitable. It also concurs with much of the flexible working literature (considered below) which points to the fact that, from the perspective of the employee, flexible working cannot in reality be understood as win-win, with Tomlinson's notion of the 'work-life trade-off' particularly significant. Further, it represents a valuable addition to the literature which critiques the foregrounding of the notion of choice in explaining why women work part-time. However, it is limiting to restrict analysis to only one particular expression of flexible working. Overall, Tomlinson's approach only goes so far in exploring *how* neoliberal forms of governance have sought to respond to the emergence of the WLB/FWP debate. Further examination is required regarding its constitutive elements (such as freedom, individualism, the primacy of the market, and of course the privatisation of risk and responsibility), and how these have been utilised in relation to WLB and, more specifically, FWPs.

Interestingly, in recent years one other (smaller) body of the welfare state and social policy literature has begun to *partially* engage with the issue of WLB. 'New social risk' (NSR) scholars take as their starting point the fact that most existing social welfare state research has focused on the issue of retrenchment.

Whilst this is seen as important, it tends to neglect a consideration of how the socio-economic movement from industrial to post-industrial society has led to the emergence of new risk groups who are experiencing major welfare losses, yet which cannot be neatly aligned with the traditional post-war welfare state (Bonoli, 2006). In sum, risk structures are seen to have dramatically altered in the last fifty years, with this leading to the creation of a fleet of NSRs which 'are typical of the post-industrial labour market and family structures in which we live today' (Bonoli, 2006: 3). Cited examples of NSRs include single parenthood, having a frail relative, possessing low or obsolete skills, insufficient social security coverage and, most crucially for our purposes, the work-life role conflict experienced by individuals as they seek to 'balance' their 'work' and 'life' responsibilities.

This set of ideas and its impact upon the current study will be elaborated upon in much greater depth in later chapters. For now it is important simply to understand that only a small set of welfare state scholars have articulated WLB in this light (Bonoli, 2005, 2006; Hildebrandt and Littig, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004a; 2004b), with this recognition being almost totally absent from the existing WLB work-based literature (with the brief exception of Blundson and McNeil (2006)). Moreover, there exist no accounts (sociologically based or otherwise) which have extended this preliminary recognition into a longer length discussion of WLB as a NSR. Clearly, this is a definite gap in the literature.

## **1.2 Work-Life Organisational Culture: Meso And Micro Perspectives**

Two broad fields of literature focus on WLB/flexible working from the perspectives of the employer to the employee; what I am terming the meso and micro perspectives. The first of these considers the factors associated with the implementation of FWPs by organisations and is mainly located within the sizeable body of HRM literature. This is not directly relevant to our present purposes and is beyond the scope of this thesis. However the second field, that which examines the increasingly utilised concept of 'work-life

organisational culture', is the focus of this strand of the chapter. Moreover, it figures as a key empirical and theoretical construct for the remainder of the study.

The dominant finding across the (particularly sociological) work-life literature would seem to be that an organisation's 'culture' (also referred to in the literature as 'context' or 'climate') is *the* most significant variable contributing to the outcomes, successfully or otherwise, of FWP's. Whilst formal FWP's intended to enable employees to better integrate their work and life domains may be important indications of an organisation's intent, they do not necessarily coalesce with the informal culture. This is a fact attested to both in the more policy oriented studies and reports (EOC, 2007; HREOC, 2007; TUC, 2006; Unison, 2006) as well as those arising from more explicitly academic perspectives (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002; Bond, 2004; Callan, 2007; Gambles et al., 2006; Hochschild, 1997; Johnson et al., 2008; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Lewis, 1997, 2001, 2003; McDonald et al., 2007; Rapoport et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 1999; van Doorne-Huiskes et al., 2005). For instance, the following comment in a paper by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (roughly equivalent to the British EOC) summarises well the popular consensus:

Recommendations for legal reform in the areas identified above are important base line responses to the problems that workers experience in combining paid work with their family/carer responsibilities. However, in order for these changes to be implemented in a way that is productive for both employees and employers, they need to be incorporated with other structural and cultural changes within the workplace. In particular, barriers to uptake of family-friendly policies need to be addressed and measures introduced that will improve understanding and use of family-friendly policies. (HREOC, 2007: 86)

As discussed by van Doorne-Huiskes et al. (2005: 56), 'organisational culture' is a rather vague concept and one which is difficult to measure empirically, yet which is crucial when considering 'what goes on in organisations, how people behave, how committed they are, and how satisfied they are with their work situation'. Schein (1985) has referred to the key elements of organisational culture as being 'taken-for-granted assumptions', the implicit ideas that are not discussed unless fundamental processes of change occur. Building on this, Thompson et al. (1999: 394) draw on theories of organisational and social support to create a definition of work-life culture which remains the most utilised in the literature: 'the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organisation supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives'. Whilst Thompson et al's focus was more in relation to the older notion of 'family friendliness', their development of the measure of 'perceived organisational family support' through the assessment of perceived instrumental, informational and emotional support for work-family needs, remains highly creditable.

A particularly important addition to this field, both empirically and conceptually, has been provided by McDonald et al. (2007) in their exploration of work-life policy provision and its (relative lack of) utilisation in local government organisations in Australia. Drawing on the existing literature – with particular attention paid to Thompson et al. (1999) and McDonald et al. (2005) – they are the first to systematically identify five 'conceptually distinct dimensions' to an organisation's work-life culture and then simultaneously *empirically* explore these from the perspective of the *employee*. These dimensions are: manager support, career consequences, gendered perceptions of policy use, organisational time expectations and co-worker support.

This framework is extremely useful for the purposes of this thesis. It will presently be drawn upon as the basis for an *amended* and more comprehensive, British oriented review of the growing field of (largely empirical) literature which has sought to identify and explore the nature of organisational environments

that support flexible workers and/or reflects the gap between policy provision and its utilisation. It will also later provide the primary means by which data from the empirical study will be reported and analysed. In short, it provides the most suitable empirical framework from which I can engage with the broad research themes and objectives with which I am concerned, as well as the more specific research questions outlined at the beginning of the methodology chapter (Chapter Five).

An in-depth review of McDonald et al's empirical findings meanwhile, is unnecessary. In summary, their interview data strongly corroborated the utility of the proposed framework, although they concede that: 'more work is needed to develop and refine aspects of work-life culture that are relevant to contemporary work environments' (2007: 618). Beyond this, their findings agree with most of the existing body of research. It should also be made clear that the extent to which the five dimensions are 'conceptually distinct' is highly problematic. In practice, it is likely that a combination of each contributes to outcomes. Indeed, having analysed their data, this proved to be one of McDonald et al's findings: 'each proposed dimension was not mutually exclusive' (2007: 617). I would suggest that the task of the researcher should be to firstly identify the respective dimensions and to then examine the nature of the relationship and overlap between them.

Before continuing to this five-fold analysis however, the recent contribution of Callan (2007) needs briefly highlighting. This study is original in that it examined the existing root cultural facets in place within two organisations and then sought to analyse the extent to which *changes* in these cultures over an eighteen month period were attributable to the implementation of FWPs. That is, it did not appeal directly to those dimensions laid out by McDonald et al (2007) and Thompson et al. (1999). Overall, a 'straightforward 'before and after' study of the effect of policies on culture was not intended, rather a search for trends, the direction of movement in the culture and employees' perceptions of these shifts' (Callan, 2007: 678). Both organisations were seen as being underpinned by five main root cultural

facets. For example, two of these for EngCorp were its 'gradualism with respect to change' (a profound conservatism associated with images of reliability and predictability) and 'emphasis on equality' (a culture of consistency and fairness with managerial discretion highly influential). By contrast, PharMerger was seen in terms of its 'imperative for change' (internalised by individuals despite the difficulties it often meant at a personal level) and culture of 'individuation' (the assumption that employees should be treated as discrete individuals).

Three of Callan's main findings are particularly relevant. Firstly, an organisation's cultural facets will strongly influence the way a flexible working agenda is implemented and propagated. For instance, a working culture characterised by a constant imperative to change may require the challenge of an explicit and high-profile campaign. Whereas a more conservative setting is likely to prefer change to be 'evolutionary rather than revolutionary', with the most useful mechanism of change being successful flexible workers themselves (p. 687). Secondly, firm generosity of FWPs does not guarantee workplace transformation, despite the fact that both firms were viewed as caring for their employees and exceeded the legislative requirements for flexible working. Thirdly, cultural change is not straightforward: 'Small, incremental changes may be all that can be hoped for, strategic nudges in the right direction over a long period of time' (p. 689).

In summary therefore, Callan's contribution is highly original and useful, focusing as it does on the existing culture of the organisation and how this then relates to the introduction of FWPs. However, the perspective this present study adopts is more in keeping with that drawn on by most other scholars and that explicitly offered by McDonald et al (2007). This approach identifies the five more traditional aspects constitutive of work-life organisational culture (as seen across much of the recent literature and research) and then seeks to build on both the empirical and conceptual utility of these.

### 1.2.1 Manager Support

One of the most consistent findings from both qualitative and quantitative research is the recognition that through their role as gatekeepers, management, and particularly supervisors, play a vital role in both the successful and unsuccessful implementation and take up of FWP. This is due to the fact that, more often than not, FWPs are subject to managerial discretion over who can work flexibly and the precise form this takes. Much of the literature has therefore attempted to identify and cultivate best management practice in this area. Undoubtedly, this has been useful in aiding our understanding of the different aspects of the manager-worker relationship and the many WLB outcomes.

It has been shown that the immediate supervisor's response to work and family concerns is more critical than that of the top management in setting the tone for a supportive environment (Bernas and Major, 2000; Maxwell, 2005; Ray and Miller, 1994). For instance, for a firm to offer FWPs does not in and of itself mean that every manager and supervisor will know about them, support them or encourage their use. Indeed, in their study of an organisation without a set of formal FWPs in place, Friedman et al. (1999) found that it was the supportive attitudes and management behaviours which employees considered the most significant factor in balancing their work-life responsibilities. The enthusiastic support of managers in this process means that employees will be more likely to take up FWPs (Bardoel, 2003) and experience an overall lower level of work-life conflict (Allen, 2001; Carlson and Perrewe, 1999). Research by Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) found that employee take up of FWPs is likely to be greater if they work with powerful supervisors (and colleagues) who could buffer them from perceived negative effects on their careers.

In this light, a flexibly working manager is seen by many as acting as a powerful role model to their subordinates, contributing significantly to cultural change within the organisation (Bond et al., 2002;

Hopkins, 2005; Kossek, et al., 1994; Smithson et al., 2004). Corwin et al. (2001: 122) meanwhile have drawn attention to the importance of 'champions' in senior management who: 'not only protect ... [FWP users] ... from sceptics but actively advocate for their arrangements up and down the ranks'. Thirty part-time professionals, alongside twenty-seven of their colleagues and managers, were studied in eight mixed-size organisations. It was found that all the successful part-timers studied had champions in senior management positions in their respective firms who helped them overcome obstacles such as: the management of work-load; career progression; the need to remain visible; interference from other managers, colleagues and clients; etc. On the other hand, in their study of 'family friendly' policies and practices in seventeen Scottish companies, Bond et al. (2002) demonstrated that whilst many managers recognised the importance of FWPs, they themselves tended to eschew flexibility and work long hours.

Decisions to grant requests, be they formal or informal, may be based on beliefs about potential disruption, notions of fairness and respect (often termed 'organisational justice', e.g. Hegtvedt et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2008), perceptions of the quality of previous work and commitment, perceived long term impact, the substitutability of employees (Bond et al., 2002), perceived gender appropriateness of the FWP, the extent to which it will increase supervisor workload (Lee et al., 2002; Powell and Maniero, 1999) and other factors (Barham et al., 1998; Bond et al., 2002; Klein et al., 2000). This was the central focus of Powell and Maniero's study (1999), in which 53 managers were each presented with 50 examples of hypothetical subordinates requesting various AWAs (alternative work arrangements, that is, FWPs). Particular attention was given to the type of FWP requested, the characteristics and job role of the subordinate, and reasons for the request. In line with previous theoretical explanations, it was found that more disruptive arrangements would receive less favourable decisions; for instance, working from home was regarded more unfavourably than unpaid leave. Overall, the most significant factors to influence a managerial decision were the type of arrangement requested, the criticality to the business of the subordinate's tasks and skills, the supervisory status of the subordinate and the reason offered by

the subordinate for the request in making decisions (Powell and Maniero, 1999: 52). An additional finding of note was the tendency for decisions by lower level managers to be made on the basis of judgments of short term disruption, rather than long-term considerations of the potential costs of losing and replacing critical employees from the organisation. For Powell and Maniero, the practical implications are therefore clear:

Organizations will not reap the benefits of alternative work arrangements unless they take action to encourage their first-line managers to go along with company-sponsored AWA programmes. Organizations need to do more than simply announce to employees that such arrangements are available and then expect lower level managers to fall into line. They also need to make lower level managers aware of the corporate benefits and provide them incentives to implement AWAs. (1999: 53)

However, a certain amount of diversity in decision making was also found. This was apparent particularly in relation to the extent to which managers focused on the person making the request, the nature of the specific FWP and the reason given for making the request.

Klein et al.'s (2000) later contribution is similarly interesting and provides a useful comparison to that offered by Powell and Maniero. A sample of 200 lawyers (including both partners *and* associates) were asked how likely it was that their firms would accept different hypothetical employees' requests for part-time work; with the overall finding being that managers are more likely to grant requests for FWPs to those on whom they rely most. Thus, the most significant difference between the two studies is the distinction between manager supportiveness and perceived organisational supportiveness. As others have found elsewhere, managers tend to present more favourable accounts of flexible working within organisations than do their subordinates (Cooper et al., 2001; Klein et al., 2000). Consequently, the

findings perhaps suggest something of a contradiction regarding what managers say they would do and more general perceptions of organisational responsiveness.

Managers can also influence the success or otherwise of FWP through their daily management and the expectations they place on flexible workers. Interestingly, a relatively small number of both qualitative and quantitative studies suggest that FWP users working shorter hours may be as, or perhaps even more, efficient or productive than their full-time counterparts (Lewis, 1997; 2001, Stanworth, 1999). A more dominant finding across the literature is the managerial perspective that part-time and reduced hours workers pose particular problems, particularly in contexts where such 'non-standard' working is in the minority and where long working hours are typical. This may be due to the fact that managers fail to adjust their expectations when their subordinates move from full-time to part-time (Edwards and Robinson, 2000) or, perhaps more seriously, that they view part-time workers as less committed to the organisation and therefore underuse them (Cooper et al., 2001; Edwards and Robinson, 2000; Lewis, 2001).

Managerial regulation at work has traditionally rested on allocating employees to specific workstations within specialised workplaces, restricting their movements and observing their behaviour at appointed physical sites (Felstead et al., 2005). Importantly, therefore, notions of presence and visibility have been at the centre of managerial strategies of control. As Felstead et al. (2005: 120) have pointed out in relation to one of the main forms of flexible working, 'working at home problematizes these approaches because workers are no longer present in fixed sites and can no longer be subject to panoptical surveillance'. In this light, the literature suggests that managers can undermine FWPs through the encouragement, implicitly and explicitly, of long hours and face time (the issue of face time will be covered in more depth in relation to the fifth aspect of work-life culture – organisational time expectations). This was the main finding of Perlow (1998), who demonstrates that this can be achieved

by a variety of tactics, including the overt valuing and rewarding of long hours in the workplace, the penalising of non-conformers, the setting of unnecessary deadlines and the constant monitoring of employees. Moreover, Felstead et al. (2005: 120) concluded that many of the managerial respondents in their study found it disconcerting to supervise staff who worked at home for prolonged periods of time: 'They feared that lack of visibility would result in a decline in the quality and regularity of interaction with their subordinates'.

A recent and important study by Johnson et al. (2008) of managers and supervisors from two of the US 'Big Four' international accounting firms supports most of these findings. These firms devote significant resources to AWA's (alternative work arrangements), 'touting their widespread availability and the absence of negative workplace or career consequences associated with participating in these programs' (p. 48). However, it is emphasised that survey results point to the fact that, actually, employee perceptions of the consequences of AWA use 'stand in marked contrast to public claims that these programs do not adversely affect career success' (p. 49). Thus, they examined whether participation in the flexible working process and gender influenced supervisors' evaluations of a subordinate's job performance and likely career success. The methods employed were largely quantitative, with 400 case questionnaires containing a hypothetical case study of a 'sub-standard' subordinate posted to practice office managers. After reading the questionnaire, respondents were directed to make three judgments on the subordinate's performance (essentially a performance appraisal), and to then complete an AWA attitude and beliefs scale. Consistent with other research, AWA use was generally viewed as inconsistent with the traditional full-time workplace culture and, consequently, as detrimental to career success. Gender bias remained strongly evident: men were significantly more likely than women to suffer adverse career consequences. Additionally, an FWP which involved a reduction in working hours was viewed more negatively than those which do not.

Whilst much of the existing research has focused on examining the personal characteristics that affect managers' behaviours, there has been little focus with regard to the influence that managers' own work-life experiences, problems or management strategies may have on their response to workers' difficulties. Furthermore, as has been pointed out by Hopkins (2005: 451), many studies of this type 'have not sufficiently examined the real-life actions by supervisors in actual work settings', but instead have focused on what workers perceive or say supervisors do, and what supervisors themselves report they would do in hypothetical situations. Finally, research tends to conceive of 'management' in an overly homogenous and undifferentiated manner. Whilst a number of studies have focused solely on managers, relatively few have examined these matters in relation to the particular independent variables of FWP usage and levels of seniority.

### 1.2.2 Career Consequences

The second dimension of work-life culture concerns employee perceptions of negative career consequences. This is particularly interesting given that one of the underlying arguments in favour of the uptake of FWPs is that they are supposed to enable employees to reduce their work-life role conflict by allowing for heightened levels of autonomy and time/spatial sovereignty and thus, in turn, to enable progression into upper management positions (Rogier and Padgett, 2004). Undoubtedly, this is particularly the case for working women, as Rogier and Padgett (2004: 93) have pointed out:

If given the opportunity to have a flexible work schedule, the greater ability to balance work and family that results may make it more likely that career-oriented women will remain in their jobs, even when these jobs are demanding. This should lead to greater numbers of women advancing into upper management.

However, the literature suggests that, for all employees, taking advantage of FWP may actually have the *opposite* effect, since the pursuit of WLB conflicts with the traditional culture of the organisation. The general consensus seems to be that employees fear they will be viewed as less committed to their career aspirations if they take up a FWP, or that if they do so, they will be less visible to management due to their self-enforced removal from standard conceptions of working time and/or space. Certainly, this agrees with the findings of McDonald et al (2007), particularly with regard to more senior employees. The culture of the local government organisation meant that seniority necessitated a continuous and full-time presence in the workplace, with virtually no resistance to this perception found amongst respondents.

The association between negative career consequences and flexible working has been demonstrated most clearly in terms of part-time work. One of the first to highlight this issue was Schwartz (1989), who referred to women who returned to their jobs part-time following a birth as 'mommy track' workers. Part-time women were found to receive less training, be paid less and advance slower because employers attached a higher risk to investing in them (Schwartz, 1989). The dominant research finding from across various industries and sectors is that part-time work (for both men and women), to lesser and greater degrees it must be said, consistently tends to be viewed as opposed to the 'ideal worker model'. Not only is it seen as at odds with promotion, but also in terms of entitlement to other fringe benefits (Cooper et al., 2001; Ginn and Sandall., 2001; Kirby and Krone, 2002; Lewis et al., 2002; Tam, 1997).

To return to the first aspect of work-life culture, it is clear that managerial attitudes and behaviours play an integral part in this process. For instance, Allen and Russell (1999) found that the allocation of fewer organisational rewards, including advancement opportunities and wage increases, resulted from perceptions of decreased organisational commitment by employees who took up family-friendly policies (such as FWPs). MacDermid et al. (2001) meanwhile, conducted semi-structured interviews with

seventy-eight women managers and professionals who utilised a reduced workload schedule. Respondents were assessed with regard to their own perceptions of various aspects of their career development and success. Most felt that they had sacrificed some upward mobility in their careers, particularly in the short run.

The presentation of hypothetical scenarios to managers in this field has proved a popular means by which to assess the impact of FWP usage on potential career consequences (most notably, Cohen and Single, 2001 and Johnson et al., 2008). Specifically examining reduced-workload schedules, participants in Cohen and Single's study evaluated desirability for a business project, perceived likelihood of advancement, and perceived likelihood of turnover. It was found that the hypothetical manager was perceived more negatively on all three dependent variables when s/he was described as being on a flexible, rather than a regular, work schedule (regardless of gender).

These results were largely echoed in the later and more rigorous study by Johnson et al. (2008). On the one hand, the *formal* measures designed to test supervisor's performance judgments 'showed that they were sensitive to the public expectation that AWAs should not influence engagement performance judgments' (p. 65). However, as predicted, supervisor's *informal* beliefs regarding the subordinate's future value to the firm and their long term career success were found to 'suggest a substantial discontinuity between the public (stated) and private (actual) workplace cultures within the Big Four' accounting firms (pp. 18-19). As such, supervisors were found to be largely unwilling to pursue the subordinate for future working assignments when they were engaged in a (part-time) FWP.

Similarly, in their study into the career progression of flexibly working female employees, Rogier and Padgett (2004) made use of the hypothetical scenario method, though the sample this time was 111 MBA students. Most of these were either currently employed full-time or had prior experience of full-time

work. Many, but not all, had supervisory experience of some type. Again, similar conclusions were reached regarding negative career advancement potential. On the one hand, it was found that that perceptions of employee capability were unaffected by the use of a flexible work schedule. However, this showed that when women work flexibly in this form, the subsequent negative perceptions regarding their career advancement potential were due to the fact that they were considered as 'having less job and career dedication and less desire to advance, and not as lacking in ability' (p. 100). Whilst this may be positive in the sense that it suggests that female employees are likely to be perceived as having the ability to succeed in higher-level jobs, it also demonstrates that perceptions regarding employee motivation and career dedication are both gendered and far more subjective in comparison to perceptions of performance, 'and thus are probably more subject to error as well as more difficult to change' (p. 101).

On the whole, this field has focused too heavily on part-time working and reduced hours schedules. More studies are needed, such as that provided by Johnson et al. (2008), which examine how flexible working more generally affects perceived and actual career opportunities. Furthermore, the stress has tended to be on managerial perceptions of (generally hypothetical) flexible workers regarding their career potential, rather than actual outcomes. Finally, within the academic literature at least, there has been little recognition of firms which *have* rewarded flexible workers in terms of promotion and, subsequently, little emphasis on the organisational cultures which have *supported* career advancement.

### 1.2.3 Gendered Perceptions of Policy Use<sup>1</sup>

One of the main conclusions within the existing literature is that whilst organisational work-life policy discourse is usually gender neutral and non-discriminatory, in practice it tends to revolve around the

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<sup>1</sup> I have opted to narrow this dimension henceforth to 'gendered perceptions of *FWP* use', as opposed to the original 'policy use'. This allows the focus to be more specific, omitting other, more general policies such as maternity and compassionate leave which are beyond the scope of this thesis to deal with adequately.

working conditions of women, with men's uptake remaining low. According to McDonald et al. (2007) therefore, wide-reaching perceptions about FWP as being developed for, and aimed at, working women (or, to be more precise, working *mothers*) constitute the third aspect of work-life culture.

Like most other work-life scholars, Smithson et al. (2004), examining the accountancy profession, found that whilst organisational discourses surrounding flexible working are increasingly gender neutral, in practice it tends to be women who take them up. They argued that the gender neutral language may encourage more men but it also contributes to masking the highly gendered patterns of living and working which continue to predominate. Women who worked flexibly tended to do so to combine caring commitments with work, typically in ways which were detrimental to their career prospects. Men meanwhile tended only to work flexibly at later stages of their career, once they had already reached senior levels. Indeed, in accountancy, no evidence was found to suggest that masculine identities associated with the breadwinner role are changing. Consistent with this, the category of 'flexible working' was found to be 'heavily linked' to those of 'women' and 'mothers'. By this, Smithson et al mean that despite the fact that flexible working was deliberately presented by interviewers as a 'gender neutral' topic, women and men in this study routinely responded as though questions about flexible working were questions specifically about women with children (Smithson et al., 2004: 121).

Most of the work-life literature has tended to understand the 'life' aspect of WLB in terms of childcare responsibilities. This is reflective of the fact that the vast majority of FWP usage is taken up by working mothers. Harr (2007) recently studied the perceived benefits and use of one particular FWP, flexitime, amongst users and non-users. Again, his finding is indicative of much of the other research in this field: 'the utilisation of flexitime by female respondents was significantly different than that of male users when parental status was considered' (p. 76). In short, mothers exclusively used their flexitime to carry out childcare responsibilities, whilst fathers used it for personal activities such as exercise.

Following this pattern, it is unsurprising that the focus of research regarding males has been working fathers. During the 1990's the literature was dominated by the argument that British fathers worked the longest hours in Europe (Deven et al., 1998). For instance, it has been shown that from the end of the 1990's: the overall economic activity rates of fathers has continued to increase (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003); the working week of fathers remains longer than that of men in general with two-fifths usually working 48 hours or more per week; and fathers continue to be much more likely to work during 'atypical' times than mothers (La Valle et al., 2002). However, in practice, there remains a reluctance by working men generally to engage in the flexible working process.

In their review of men's use of family-friendly employment provisions in Australia, Bittman et al. (2004) identified three major cultural barriers. Firstly, the organisation of the workplace; in which doubts about the legitimacy of men's claims to family responsibilities and the sheer novelty of men's utilisation are widespread. Secondly, the business environment, which emphasises the competitive pressures to maintain market share and increase earnings. Lastly, the domestic organisation in employees' own homes, where in most cases the female's career is seen as secondary to that of the male.

Brandth and Kvande's (2001) paper on both the gendered patterns of FWP uptake and the related state provisions for WLB is particularly important to consider. This contribution is useful not simply from a work-life organisational culture point of view, but also in relation to (what I would suggest are neoliberal-related) ideas about the individualisation of risk. Whilst their research was on Norway, a number of their conclusions are applicable to other countries such as the UK. The findings from three different research projects, each carried out separately between 1987 and 1997 and utilising a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques, were brought together in order to draw comparisons between two different forms of WLB policies and to 'ask which is the most successful considering central characteristics of

late-modern working life such as individualism and choice, flexible working hours and boundless jobs' (p. 251). The paternity quota was the first form of leave to be examined, considered a typical modern programme 'where the state intervenes and regulates the behaviour of people through standardisation' (p. 252). For Norwegian fathers, this form of leave (four weeks in total) is compulsory, producing strong normative guidelines for behaviour, to the extent that if the leave is not taken up, parents (and the child) would be 'punished' by losing four weeks of paid leave, since these weeks generally cannot be transferred to the mother.

On the other hand, the second form of leave examined was the 'time account'. According to Brandth and Kvande, this was characterised by 'late-modern' notions of flexibility, individual choice and reflexivity. In brief, they found that time accounts contain several options regarding how many hours of the working week to work, and how much to stay at home on leave. In addition, they also contained options on how to undertake the working hours during the week: as shorter working days, or fewer days during the week (p. 256). Essentially then, this was a version of flexibility which allowed for various adaptations and negotiations between the mother, the father, the company and the welfare state. As Brandth and Kvande are keen to point out, this was expected to be particularly attractive to fathers, since it would not require them to stay away from work on a full-time basis.

Findings showed that the majority of fathers utilised the compulsory leave, while the uptake of the time account flexible leave option was greatly inhibited by considerations of its impact on men's employment. The authors cite various reasons as to why this amount remained so low, for instance: substantial employee difficulties in obtaining sufficient information; demanding work loads; bureaucratic problems in handling individual pay accounts and difficulty in finding quality and non-expensive part-time day care. However, in line with much of the other literature, the largest hindrance was attitudinal, revolving around notions of the 'ideal worker' (this concept is considered in the following section). This result held for both

men and women: mothers returning to work before the maximum leave time was over were often met with suspicion, whilst fathers were seen to 'risk' being defined as part-time workers, a form of flexible working arrangement which is widely conceived of as female only.

What is so interesting is that it is only really in the two concluding paragraphs of the paper that Brandth and Kvande begin to draw on the concept of risk. Whilst this rather sudden inclusion is welcome given its explanatory potential, it is frustrating that it appears right at the end, with no further elaboration or discussion. In summary, the authors suggest state intervention in the form of the paternity quota 'provides the necessary legitimacy for taking leave from work', and further, 'that if leave is collectively granted and collectively taken, the risks associated with taking it, are perceived to disappear and fathers are able to act on their wish to be more involved with their children' (p. 265). Further, they also contend that 'As long as taking up family friendly policies is an individual option, the employee risks becoming a 'time-deviant' ... and thus marginalised' (p. 265). This recognition is something that will be returned to subsequently. For now, however, it is important to recognise Brandth and Kvande's argument that state interventions of this type have a more positive effect not only upon strengthening the father-child relationship, but also in promoting gender equality.

Returning once again to Johnson et al's (2008) study which examined the influences of AWAs upon managerial performance evaluation judgments, further evidence is provided of gender-related perceptions helping determine the nature of organisational work-life culture. According to respondents, participation in a full-time AWA was found to harm a male's long-term career prospects. Supervisors tended to evaluate the male subordinate in the context of a more traditional organisational role and judged that a reduced work-load was less justifiable for male subordinates than for their female counterparts under the same circumstances. Thus, across all AWA conditions where gender was significant, the male received lower evaluations than the female.

#### 1.2.4 Organisational Time Expectations

Organisational time expectations are widely held to negatively influence the uptake and overall supportiveness of FWP. Bailyn (1997) has defined time expectations as the number of hours employees are expected to work, how they use their time (for instance, whether or not employees are expected to take work home) and the level of discretion in one's work schedule. Much has been written and researched regarding the issue of the UK's 'long hours culture'; suffice to say that, within the UK at least, the dominant finding is that many employees are spending longer hours at work and also taking additional work home (Beynon et al., 2002; Green, 2001; Fagan, 2003; TUC, 2006), although the generalisability of this has been challenged (Bonney, 2005). Whatever else, in traditional work-life organisational cultures, working long hours tends to serve as an important indicator of commitment and productivity, yet at the same time representing a stumbling block towards meeting non-work responsibilities.

This dimension has been closely associated with the related concepts of 'face time' and the 'ideal worker'. Both of these are highly pertinent to this study, although McDonald et al's five-fold framework omits specific consideration of the latter of these (to the detriment of their analysis). Face time is widely understood to refer to employee physical time at the workplace that is observed by co-workers, supervisors, and customers (Brubaker et al., 1999), incorporating both face to face interaction and working in the presence of others. Research has shown that for many organisations, time *seen* at work is typically understood in terms of productivity levels, with many professionals reporting a sense of pressure with regard to managing their face time and being present when and where their supervisors work (Van Dyne et al., 2007). Further, face time is seen as indicating motivation for advancement, based of course on normative perceptions of the nature of work itself and career routes (Clarkberg and

Moen, 2001). The overall consensus is that decreasing face time is a function of three inter-related forces: technological advances that assist non-standard working arrangements; competitive pressures that necessitate employees to work at times outside the 'traditional' and 'standard' working times; and professionals who opt for greater job flexibility (Bailyn, 2006; Gambles et al., 2006; Gottlieb et al., 1998; Kossek and Ozeki, 1999).

The broader notion of the 'ideal worker type' (Bailyn, 1993, 2003; Lewis, 1997; Rapoport et al., 2002) meanwhile, incorporates aspects of both gendered perceptions of FWP use and organisational time expectations. Seen to embody 'assumptions about competence that value stereotypically masculine ways of working' (Rapoport et al., 2002: 170), the ideal worker is fully cognisant with organisational expectations of 'face-time', and possesses no other areas of life which might impinge on their ability to work. Conceptually therefore, it is argued that this ideal type is underpinned by a separation between the spheres of work and life. Large scale social, cultural and political developments of the types already briefly considered in the Macro Perspectives section of this chapter, are seen to have rendered the reality of this construct outdated; although crucially, the implicit norm/discourse is widely seen to remain (most notably: Callan, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008).

In short, FWP usage is perceived by scholars as being *contrary* to an organisation's time expectations. Research by Epstein et al. (1999) has proved particularly forceful in this light; relevant to each of the five dimensions but most applicable here. Drawing on a qualitative study of part-time lawyers in large corporate law firms, working flexibly was found to negatively affect virtually every workplace interaction. It was argued that in 'greedy' occupations such as law, employees who work part-time are stigmatised as 'time-deviants', that is, they violate norms that proscribe near-constant devotion to occupation, organisation, and client. Consequently, flexible workers were marginalised within their firms, their contributions devalued, opportunities for promotion stalled and their pay attenuated.

### 1.2.5 Co-Worker Support

As demonstrated above, to date, most FWP research has focused on individual users. However, an individuals' FWP usage inevitably affects colleagues and members of the wider work group. I would suggest that of the five dimensions of work-life organisational culture put forward by McDonald et al. (2007), their conception of co-worker support is the weakest. Focus is limited to a generalised discussion of the extent to which colleagues of FWP users are either overtly supportive or subtly resentful of the benefits they enjoy; both of which are understood in terms of 'backlash'. This is useful but neglects to give due attention to the coordination challenges which tend to arise as a result of individual FWP usage and which greatly determine levels of co-workers support.

Beginning with the issue of backlash, existing studies have produced somewhat mixed findings. On the one hand there is a large body of evidence which points to a (perhaps increasing) backlash against those utilising FWPs by those who do not, while, on the other hand, a smaller body of research suggests that this evidence has been exaggerated. In this light, a number of scholars have examined the extent to which the availability and uptake of FWPs can be seen as responsible for creating inequities in the workplace by providing particular employees with extra benefits.

Certainly, the oft-cited early research of Grover (1991) – which examined the perceived fairness of a proposed mixed-sex parental leave policy at a large university – agrees with this latter proposition. It was found that individuals' positions *are* clearly significant; females, those of childbearing age, and parents were more likely to perceive the policy as fair, along with those individuals who held non-traditional attitudes towards women. Furthermore, either membership in, or identification with, the potentially benefiting group influenced perceptions of policy fairness, and these in turn influenced

attitudes toward parental leave takers. In sum, positive or negative perceptions clearly related to whether the individual employee was likely to gain personally. However, Grover's research has been criticised by Hegtvedt et al. (2002: 388) who have argued that it neglects contextual factors such as workplace support or procedural justice, to the extent that it is 'impossible to assess how these ... temper the egoistic patterns revealed'.

Similar findings are provided by Galinsky et al. (1997) in their analysis of the US's *1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce*. Here, more evidence is offered regarding the effects of contextual and procedural justice factors, but these are examined independently of the effects of self-interest. Overall, support was again found linking certain demographic factors – less highly educated respondents, those in non-managerial or non-professional jobs and non-whites – to a greater propensity to express resentment regarding work-family policies from which they may not personally benefit. This also proved to be the case regarding those in what were considered less supportive workplaces. Research by Parker and Allen (2001) revealed comparable findings: younger workers and those who had themselves utilised FWP had the most favourable perceptions regarding work-life benefits.

Kirby and Krone (2002) meanwhile, examined the impact of communication on WLB benefit (i.e. FWP) utilisation, since 'the perceived appropriateness of work-family benefits emerges through interaction' (Kirby and Krone, 2002: 50). Responses of employees in a finance organisation were examined in relation to the implementation and utilization of FWPs. FWP users reported feelings of resentment from colleagues and, interestingly, were *formally* made aware of the need to carefully manage 'use' versus 'abuse' in order not to be seen, and treated, as a less committed worker.

The salient work of Felstead et al. (2005) should also be briefly examined, particularly given its emphasis on one particular FWP: homeworking. The majority of studies from this field utilise large scale

quantitative survey data. However, Felstead et al. drew upon two large, mixed-method quantitative and qualitative studies of professional and managerial workers who regularly worked at home and/or away from traditional workplaces and workspaces. The large amount of transcript excerpts reveals feelings of ambiguity, distrust, suspicion, unease and resentment. Crucially, these feelings resulted from the decrease in face time that homeworking necessitates. Indeed, home-located workers *themselves*:

found their relative invisibility to be disturbing, making it difficult for them to demonstrate their honesty, reliability and productivity. Virtually all were subject to banter and joking relationships with in-house co-workers, who portrayed working at home as an opportunity to watch television, sunbathe, paint the house or 'skive' in other ways. Although much of this was said to be 'good natured', it also constituted a source of unease for many respondents. (p. 121)

Interestingly, Felstead et al. go on to comment that since most of the home-located workers they spoke to had been selected to work in that manner 'precisely because they had a reputation for trustworthiness' (p. 121), few had ever experienced non-committed depictions of themselves.

By contrast, other studies have argued that the idea of flexible working 'backlash' has been overstated. Grover and Cooker (1995) for instance, compared employees working in family responsive organisations with those in family non-responsive organisations. The chief finding of the study was clear: 'people are more attached to organisations that offer family-friendly policies, regardless of the extent to which the people might personally benefit from the policies' (p. 283). Importantly, this was the case regardless of the employee's parental status.

Hegtvedt et al. (2002) reached comparable conclusions, but with two additionally important findings. Drawing on the same sample frame as Galinsky et al. (1997), their results overall *disagreed* with their original hypothesis that 'Parents and women are less likely to express anticipated resentment about work-family policies than are non-parents and men' (Hegtvedt et al., 2002: 389). That is, childless workers did *not* resent more strongly than others the implications of work-family policies. Equally, gender did not affect levels of resentment about extra levels of family benefits. Although men were far more likely to resent being burdened with extra work to cover/help out a colleague who had opted to work flexibly.

Similarly, Haar and Spell (2003) found that those who do not utilise FWP considered the advantages granted by these to be over-rated, because 'they consider their organisation is attempting to provide a societal good through work-family practices, and this may in turn reduce their negative attitudes' (p. 70). Moreover, Lee et al (2002) found high levels of consensus amongst a wide range of workers (users and non-users) that FWPs can be and are successful. It is significant that eight of the main facilitating factors seen as underpinning success were the individual characteristics and behaviours of FWP users, the top five of which were termed: 'strong performance record'; 'flexibility in responding to work demands'; 'high level of hard work and commitment'; 'organized, highly concentrated work style' and 'unique skill set in high demand' (Lee et al., 2002: 216). Other facilitating factors were contextual, such as the characteristics of the job and the supportiveness of managers.

As already mentioned, McDonald et al's over-emphasis on backlash neglects the coordination challenges which tend to arise as a result of an individual's FWP usage and which, in turn, greatly determine levels of co-workers support. Significantly few studies have empirically explored the ways in which reduced face time influences group processes. Van Dyne et al. (2007) have usefully provided the clearest theoretical recognition of this issue, suggesting that others empirically extend their analysis.

They argue that the reduction in face time brought about by FWP holds strong potential for 'coordination problems ... when team members have different work schedules, times, and places and accordingly are less aware of others' needs' (p. 1128) and which, in turn, renders it more difficult for work to be coordinated amongst employees. This is due to two factors. Firstly, the loss of face-to-face interaction results in a general loss of awareness amongst the work group and that this reduces both the quantity and quality of communication (Felstead et al., 2005; Graetz et al., 2002). Secondly, indirect communication amongst colleagues can diminish levels of clarity and increase levels of misunderstanding (Daft and Lengel, 1984), often considered in terms of the loss of non-verbal cues such as tone, gesture, and facial expression (Ekman and Oster, 1979).

Overall analyses of 'co-worker support' suggest that when FWPs have been added into traditional management systems, without also adding in new coordination mechanisms, the reduction in face time brought about by an individual's uptake of a FWP holds the definite *potential* for both backlash and coordination problems. In addition, since FWPs are (formally at least) generally made available only to a select group of employees (i.e. typically parents and those with caring responsibilities), perceived inequity amongst those not eligible can reduce the sense of entitlement to take up FWPs amongst those who are eligible. This thereby reduces the take-up and, ultimately, the desired outcomes of flexible working. Given this recognition, Lewis (2003: 14) for instance has argued that there is a case for making FWPs: 'normative and available to all rather than subject to management discretion', and that doing this may 'contribute more than targeted policies to a family supportive culture'.

### **1.3 Four Main Deficiencies of The Literature**

Having surveyed in detail the two most relevant research themes in the extant work-life literature (macro and work-life organisational culture perspectives), in the final section of this chapter I am now able to

highlight four particular aspects which point to the requirement for a fresh approach to the study of WLB and FWPs. Elements of each of these have appeared already in the chapter, and are reinforced and developed below.

### 1.3.1 Methodology

Overall, the existing field of work-life/flexible working empirical research has not been dominated by any particular form of research methodology. Notwithstanding this, a small number of trends are apparent. First, typical methods involve the use of telephone interviews (Hegtvedt et al., 2002); postal questionnaires (Grover, 1991; Johnson et al., 2008; Parker and Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999); email (Haar and Spell, 2003); or very occasionally, face-to-face interviews with close-ended questions (Gronlund, 2007). As such, respondents' answers are limited to a fixed set of responses, but the sample sizes have been large, often drawn from geographically diverse locations and, most importantly, have tended to be representative. Few studies since 2000 have either exclusively utilised semi-structured interviews (Callan, 2007; McDonald et al., 2007; Tomlinson, 2004; Yeandle et al., 2003) or used them alongside other methods (Gambles et al., 2006; Smithson et al., 2004). This general rule holds true for both academic and non-academic research, both from within and outside the UK. All things considered, there has tended to be an over-reliance on quantitative and survey data to inform analysis. These approaches have a valuable role to play, yet their utility is ultimately limited. More qualitatively focused approaches which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context are needed in order to supplement current social research.

No obvious bias exists in terms of the type of sector studied. However, larger organisations are typically the most popular, mainly because they tend to offer the greatest number of policies. Case-studies are increasingly being drawn upon to highlight examples of good practice, particularly from the more

HRM/managerial initiated literature (Bevan et al., 1999; Maxwell and McDougal, 2004; TUC, 2005a). These have proved useful additions to the field, yet have tended to overly focus on outcomes at the expense of *process*. That is, they have provided only limited attention regarding the extent to which FWPs are implemented in practice and the affects of this upon the wider organisation. As I have shown however, the mere availability of formal FWPs 'is not necessarily indicative of their use in practice' (Lewis, 2003: 4). The contribution of Lewis and Cooper (2005) to this field is, on the other hand, an important exception. Their case-study analysis focuses on generic *principles* for change and recognises that an understanding of the right processes will result in longer term benefits. Further, they examine success stories alongside failures experienced and barriers overcome.

Conversely, there is a clear gap within the more sociologically oriented literature (which has tended to place greater emphasis on issues relating to 'life' and 'non-work') regarding best practice case-studies. Whilst the recent Australian contribution of McDonald et al. (2007) is clearly sociologically driven given its emphasis on 'work-life organisational culture', it should be highlighted that it is located in the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Also, typical case-studies of best practice firms tend to conceive of the chosen organisation somewhat homogeneously, rather than a multi-faceted workplace often containing different sectors, departments, managerial styles and even work-life organisational cultures. Inadequate attention has therefore been paid to examining intra-firm differences in relation to the many issues surrounding WLB and FWPs. At the least, little if any research has qualitatively examined a specific *department* or sector of a particular large-sized firm. Such an analysis would allow for an in-depth examination of issues which might otherwise be diluted in a firm-wide study.

### 1.3.2 Limited Lens of Analysis

At a number of levels, existing literature is restricted by its limited lens of analysis. As has been demonstrated, the study of WLB/FWPs is overly characterised by meso and micro level research which has extended little beyond the remit of the collective organisation and/or the individual employee (and occasionally their household), mostly in relation to working mothers. Within this, few scholars either argue in favour of (Sutton and Noe, 2005; Van Dyne et al., 2007), or achieve (Callan, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2002; McDonald et al., 2007), due attention being given to the wider members of the organisation (i.e. individual colleagues, work team and managers) who are impacted when an individual utilises a FWP. Linking with the above section regarding methods, this has been reflected in the fact that few studies have attempted to directly compare flexible with non-flexible workers. Further research is needed which generates multiple perspectives, 'in order to provide a more holistic picture of the processes and barriers impacting the effectiveness of FWAs in a range of workplace contexts' (Lewis, 2003: 16).

There ought also to be more of a stress on flexible working as a *social process*. At one level this would erase some of the confusion surrounding precisely which practices one is referring to when the term 'FWP' is used, as well as broadening the debate out from the predominant focus upon part-time work. At another level, existing (particularly HRM/managerial) research has tended to examine FWPs in terms of singular outcomes and effects e.g. the issues of take-up and overall job satisfaction. Again, more of an holistic framework is needed which can attempt to capture – from multiple perspectives – the overall process of initially considering, requesting, taking-up and then suspending a formalized FWP.

The recent limited trend to examine these issues from more macro perspectives is to be welcomed. Although, as has been argued, these accounts almost without exception deal with the more general

category of WLB, with few drawing explicitly on ideas surrounding neoliberalism. Overall, there exist extremely few (sociological or otherwise) accounts which attempt to simultaneously examine and draw together the three analytic levels of the state, employer and the flexibly working employee (*limited* exceptions to this rule include: Maxwell and McDougal, 2004; Gambles et al. 2006). Moreover, this has certainly not been achieved in terms of an examination of how neoliberal discourses and practices have sought to manage the relatively recent challenge of WLB.

### 1.3.3 The Flexible Working Process as Double-Edged

If the totality of motivations, experiences, procedures and outcomes of flexible working are interpreted in terms of a process, then, having surveyed much of the body of existing work-life research and literature it is clear that the flexible working process is not 'win-win' – a fact explicitly articulated by commentators such as Shorthouse (2004) and Tomlinson (2007). Seeking to find an appropriate metaphor for the flexible working process, I am drawn to that of the double-edged sword. The usefulness of this analogy will be considered in full in Chapter Five. Here it is enough to recognise that, from the employee's perspective at least, existing research clearly demonstrates that granting individual employees greater control over the integration of their work and 'life' has the potential for both losses and gains, given that this occurs within a typical organisational culture which is premised upon notions of the ideal worker (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2007). However, the potential for losses and gains is far from being an 'either/or', but more like a 'both/and' – hence the reference to the double-edged sword. In line with many of the observations made in this chapter, an individual's usage of a FWP therefore necessitates an increase in *complexity* for both the individual and the wider work group.

This interpretation of the research is at odds with much of the 'official' discourse surrounding FWPs, where the dominant message continues to be one of unequivocal 'win-win' for *all* parties. For instance,

the opening sentence of the Government's official guide to the RTR leaves little room for doubt: 'Flexible working opportunities benefit everyone: employers, employees and their families' (DTI, 2006: 2). A similar sentiment was expressed by the then Employment Minister Gerry Sutcliffe in July 2005:

*We have long argued that flexible working opportunities benefit everyone: employers, employees and their families, and today's findings show that these arguments have been embraced in the modern workplace. (Cited in Amble, 2005)*

On the positive side, a sizeable body of HRM and managerial studies have demonstrated that flexible working can prove beneficial for the business needs of the firm, particularly in terms of matters such as retention, recruitment and other work-related variables (Arthur and Cook, 2003; Bevan et al., 1999; Comfort et al., 2003; Glynn et al., 2002; Gottlieb et al., 1998; Lee et al., 2002; Maybery, 2006). Self-evidently, for the employee, the uptake of a FWP can of course lead to a wealth of new opportunities to better integrate the often competing demands of work and life, by means which are almost impossible under standard working arrangements. From the more negative perspective, as I have shown, research suggests that engagement with the flexible working process represents a break with the dominant 'ideal worker' model, manifesting itself in various ways such as stalled career progression and backlash from colleagues. However, it is also vitally important to recognise that not all flexible workers experience these disadvantages as necessarily negative. Rather, they see them as part of the inevitable trade-off that they have to make in deciding to work flexibly (Corwin et al., 2001; MacDermid et al., 2001; Tomlinson, 2007). In summary, the increase in complexity brought about by an individual's FWP usage holds the potential for both losses and gains for all parties – a process I am opting to refer to as *double-edged*.

### 1.3.4 Neglect of Risk And Responsibility

The final critical point to make is that the influence of theories of risk, responsibility and their privatisation are, on the whole, conspicuously absent from the mass of existing work-life literature. Simply put, beyond the limited recognition from a small group of welfare state scholars that WLB represents a NSR, no research exists on the relationship between sociological concepts of risk and the issues of WLB and flexible working. However, 'risk' as an atheoretical explanatory term has occasionally been specifically drawn on to describe the various possible reasons why FWP are *not* being successfully implemented and used within organisations. Typically, this has been in relation to the compromised relationship between employer and employee which FWP usage is seen to bring about. For instance: the risk of a lack of lack of managerial support (Gottlieb et al., 1998); the risk of speaking up to the manager and requesting a FWP given its association with a lack of organisational commitment (Edmondson and Detert, 2005); and the risk that part-time workers will be stigmatised as a 'time-deviant' (Epstein et al., 1999). It has also been used to describe how, from the perspective of the firm, the costs of offering FWPs risk outweighing the subsequent benefits (usually in terms of the bottom line) (Gottlieb et al., 1998). These remain useful (in a narrow way) in further highlighting the non win-win nature of FWPs but offer no account of wider social, cultural and political processes which, as I go on to argue, are constitutive of the flexible working process.

Ideas of responsibility represented in the literature are more problematic. On the one hand, the notion of responsibility *is* often referred to and discussed, though crucially, most of this tends to occur in terms of the 'life' aspect of WLB. For instance, given that the majority of the work-life research is working-mother centric, a common starting point is the justification of this gender bias, 'since in reality it is still women who retain the major responsibilities for care ... and are much more likely to work part-time' (Tomlinson, 2007: 401). Indeed, 'part-time' here may be read as 'work flexibly'. Thus, 'responsibility' has traditionally

been understood in relation to the continuing dominance of women in carrying out activities which are performed to meet responsibilities arising directly from the needs of the household and its members (Ransome, 2007), with typical examples being 'household management', 'direct' and 'indirect' care, emotional work (Glover, 2002: 255) and the 'labour of emotional maintenance' (Hochschild, 1989).

On the other hand, there has been some, but much less, use of this concept in relation to the 'work' aspect of WLB and flexible working. From this perspective, the most relevant allusion to 'responsibility' is located in small sections of the HRM literature which have sought to identify and promote models of best practice amongst organisations offering FWPs (considered above in point one of this section). *Implicit* amongst much of this research is the idea of openly communicated and shared responsibility between employer and the flexibly working employee. Crucially, only *one explicit* example of this recognition has been found, and this within the forward to a (non-academic) report on FWPs in the accountancy profession:

In essence, where flexible working is achieving the desired objective, it is because it has been approached with a 'dual agenda'. In other words, the responsibility for making it work has been shared by the individual and the organisation, thereby ensuring that the needs of both are being met. (Britten, 2002)

The principle of mutual responsibility here is therefore seen in terms of the 'dual agenda'. Unfortunately, this theme is not developed in any further detail in the report.

Lewis and Cooper (2005), meanwhile, have written at length about the specific work environments which they see as facilitating a 'dual agenda'; conceiving it as a mutual focus on both the business and the personal outcomes which arise from successful flexible working (p. 4). An approach of this sort,

which focuses on both workplace effectiveness and employee WLB, is considered truly 'win-win'. Again however, no discussion is given in relation to the specific theme of responsibility. Overall, I would suggest that these types of contribution are useful, yet at a deeper and more sociological level, they are limited in two main respects. Firstly, they imply that FWP usage can involve equal power relations between the employer and employee. Secondly, and as will be elaborated upon throughout the remainder of this study, they give no recognition to the fact that, ultimately, new and more complex forms of risk and responsibility are shifted onto the employee when they engage in the flexible working process.

### Summary

This chapter has covered a large amount of ground, with the three main analytical levels of the macro (state), meso (employer) and micro (employee) having been addressed in light of existing WLB and flexible working literature. However, the thesis' other main research theme, the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, has thus far only been touched upon. Prior to this being considered in terms of WLB and flexible working (Chapter Four onwards), the next chapter first examines the typical ways in which, I would argue, neoliberal logic can be seen to influence other areas of work and employment.

## CHAPTER TWO: WORK, EMPLOYMENT AND THE PRIVATISATION OF RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY

### Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis I made clear my starting assumption that the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility represents a highly valid and salient area of study for social scientists. Before examining and making sense of this in detail (Chapter Three) and applying it to the field of WLB and flexible working (Chapter Four), here I briefly highlight the typical ways in which existing work and employment research can be seen to have (largely unconsciously) engaged with this research theme (that is, research objective 1.b). It should be made clear from the outset that the aim here is *not* to offer a systematic review of work in relation to the concepts of risk and responsibility *per se*, but rather to demonstrate that, despite not being articulated as such by scholars, the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility is a useful concept for sociologists to draw on in order to make sense of contemporary developments across the realm of work and employment.

Ideas strongly consistent with the concept of the privatisation of risk and responsibility are proving increasingly popular for commentators to allude and make reference to across a great deal of extant sociological work-related literature (Beck, 2000; Brandth and Kvande, 2001; Butz and Leslie, 2001; Ferguson, 2007; Fleetwood, 2007b; Ford, 2000; Hancock, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Heery, 2000; Hildebrandt and Littig, 2006; Mythen, 2005, O'Rand and Shuey, 2007; Orton, 2004; Wilkinson and Lapido, 2002); as well as being a trend which has received critical coverage in the media (Gittins, 2007). It is significant to note that academic accounts tend to restrict this idea to merely an *a priori* assumption which figures either as the initial building block on which a broader argument is then developed, or as a

concept that is briefly alluded to. In both cases, it is highly likely that little, if any critical discussion is provided regarding notions of either risk, responsibility or the nature of neoliberalism. Thus, crucially, one cannot say that there is a readily identifiable literature on the privatisation of risk and responsibility within the field of sociologically influenced work and employment research. Instead, there are a growing number of studies and commentaries which draw on this idea/framework, rather than explicitly making reference to it and/or locating themselves within this area of thought. Therefore, this review is attempting something which has not been systematically undertaken before.

The final important point to make here is that this broad body of literature makes little or no reference to any sections of the WLB/flexible working debate which we considered previously. Indeed, acknowledgment of this omission represents the foundation of both this chapter and the thesis as a whole. Consequently, there is definite potential in scholars beginning to examine the issues of WLB and flexible working in light of the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility.

Three thematic fields of recent work-related research particularly manifest this strand of neoliberalism:

1. Unemployment
2. Lifelong learning and the employability agenda
3. Retirement and the new pension environment

Of course, these issues represent substantial bodies of research in and of themselves. To repeat, it is not my intention here to simply offer another review of these. Rather, what will be considered are those scholars who have examined these themes in a manner which strongly resonates with the ideas surrounding the notion of the privatisation of risk and responsibility.

## 2.1 Unemployment

Perhaps the first and most typical issue in this regard is that of unemployment, with the risk of unemployment often being understood as 'insecurity'. The contention made by many is that in contemporary society, traditional forms of state welfare provision which guarded against unemployment have been increasingly transferred to the individual.

Ford (2000) has examined these matters in relation to the extent to which mortgagors are 'at risk' in the labour market and to what extent these risks are perceived by individuals and households. Essentially, she argues that the state's reduction in safety net provision for unemployed mortgagors and its subsequent encouragement of market based insurance cover, requires individuals to take greater personal responsibility for the management of risk. It is significant that Ford deliberately does not consider the literature and debates surrounding the notion of the individualisation and transfer of responsibilities to individuals. Instead, her analysis 'starts from the recognition that labour market risks have increased alongside developments that have resulted in the individualisation of the responsibility of risk' (p. 93). As regards the risks themselves, one of Ford's most useful and original contributions is her distinction between 'direct' and 'consequential' risks. Typical examples of 'direct' risks are unemployment, failed self-employment, temporary working, poorer terms and conditions of employment, income volatility and variable working hours; whilst 'consequential' risks include reduced standards of living, prolonged ill health and an inability to pay housing costs (pp. 96-97).

Data is presented from two separate empirical studies. The first examined the responses of households with mortgages to risk and the nature of their risk management, whilst the second considered families' responses to unemployment in what is termed the flexible labour market (for Ford this refers to particular outcomes of structural change in the labour market, typically manifested in, for example, part-

time work, self-employment, temporary work and annualised hours). Taken together, these are seen to 'make useful complements' in that the first looks primarily at the private insurance safety-net, whilst the second focuses 'on the widest range of ways in which households may manage labour market risk' (p. 96). Given the aims of this chapter, it is unnecessary to describe at length the findings from these studies, however, three of Ford's overall conclusions are pertinent.

Firstly, Ford found that people's attitudinal responses tended not to correspond with the directions of welfare policy in place at the time of the research. Most respondents were reluctant to take out private insurance cover due to factors such as cost, perceived effectiveness, the extent to which people saw themselves as 'at risk' and general attitudes to insurance and the private market. Secondly, she concludes that 'the individualisation of risk responsibility is not necessarily well aligned with the capacity of individuals to accept this responsibility' (p. 112). At one level this is due to the financial implications which, regardless of whether the market works well, are easier for some to bear than others. At another level, given the welfare restrictions already in place, individuals are assumed to manage their own risk either through employment in poor or poorer jobs, or through relying on networks of family and friends. For Ford, those who are unable to achieve either of these 'face severe poverty' (p. 112). Thirdly, whilst the responsibility for managing risk has shifted to households, this has not been matched by any form of concern or support in terms of 'financial socialisation'. Levels of financial literacy are extremely poor, with little adequate skills or safeguards in place.

Building upon the work of Ford, Abbott and Quilgars (2001) have offered a more detailed discussion of whether welfare restructuring may be seen to be undermining support for social security. The argument is made that the gradual erosion of state safety nets is premised upon two assumptions. Firstly, on the one hand, private insurance based schemes may succeed in offering a limited form of protection against certain risks such as redundancy. However, on the other, it is more difficult to provide cover against

more complex situations, such as temporary mental illness, divorce or caring responsibilities. The second assumption is that individuals will make rational decisions regarding the self management of the risk of unemployment, personally organising private insurance. However, whilst employees are 'acutely aware of the general trend towards greater job insecurity', perceptions of their own market position are much more complex and frequently inaccurate; employees often fail to see redundancy before it arrives (p. 113).

Abbott and Quilgars draw on data from the second study that Ford considered above, in which respondents living in relatively high degrees of job insecurity and benefit dependency were questioned in relation to issues of risk management. Unsurprisingly, their findings and discussion do not depart significantly from that offered by Ford. However, their repeated insistence that unemployment related risks and responsibilities have shifted away from the state and towards the individual is certainly noteworthy. Their argument, having reviewed the empirical evidence, that people generally are less willing to engage with individualised solutions to manage their risk 'as the Government and many other commentators might suppose' (p. 123), is also important. Further, they suggest that policy measures favouring private market based provision seem to be *increasing* the disparity between those individuals and households who are most at risk from the impacts of flexible labour markets, and those who are more able to purchase their safety and freedom from risk.

Rutherford's recent (2007a) and ongoing study of New Labour's welfare reform describes in some detail neoliberalism's latest attempts at welfare withdrawal in the UK. This can also be seen as an elaboration of Rose's (1999a: 488-489) earlier reading of New Labour's ideological shift in the form of the Third Way from 'welfare' to 'workfare'. Rutherford discusses both the intellectual and institutional links between leading insurance companies, the academy and new government policies on welfare reform, chiefly in terms of the 'welfare to work' programme and, specifically, the sickness benefit policy, Incapacity Benefit

(henceforth 'IB'). The UK currently has rising numbers of IB claimants, the majority of whom have mental health problems. This trend is considered as unsustainable and in need of reversal by Government, particularly so given increased global competitiveness. Thus, a series of policy developments are in the process of being set in place, with one of the primary outcomes being the redefinition of the cultural meaning of illness such that growing numbers of individuals will be declared capable of work and 'motivated' into new jobs (Rutherford, 2007a).

Examining this situation, Rutherford points out that the UK actually has one of the highest work participation rates of all OECD countries, with benefit levels amongst the lowest in Western Europe. The system is therefore not in crisis, rather, these new policies involve a logical progression towards the neoliberal marketization of the state. This type of welfare reform therefore 'offers 'opportunities' and 'choice' to 'customers', who, in return, must shoulder a greater degree of responsibility for their individual predicament (p. 53). Whilst Rutherford, surprisingly, does not point to the individualisation of risk, it is clear that this understanding is implicit throughout<sup>2</sup>. For instance, those IB claimants who fail to participate in work-focused interviews, or to engage in work related activity, will be financially hit by losses of up to £10.93 a week, rising to £21.80 for a second refusal to work (p. 51). This risk would appear greatest for those suffering from mental health conditions who cannot demonstrate the objective nature of their illness (p. 52). To Rutherford, the policy is driven by cost reduction considerations, a task in this instance achieved by keeping claims to a minimum. This process, which I would term responsabilization (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2001; O'Malley, 1996; Rose, 1996b; Shamir, 2008), reflects a welfare system in which performativity is demanded of individuals in return for 'a meagre subsistence' and a loss of autonomy. Whilst New Labour may have termed it 'mutual responsibility' and 'no rights

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, elsewhere Rutherford (2007b: 2) has made plain his thoughts regarding the development of neoliberalism and what I understand to be the privatisation of risk (and responsibility):

The global rise of liberal market capitalism and its ideology of neo-liberalism was a response to the crisis of profitability in the 1970s. The aim of this new hegemonic project was to restructure national economies and societies in order to reduce the influence of labour and optimise capital accumulation ... Risk has been transferred from business and the state onto individuals.

without responsibility' (Giddens, 1998), I agree with Rutherford that this new compact between state and the individual is fundamentally uneven. This is a particularly important point and one which will be considered in greater depth in later sections.

## 2.2 Lifelong Learning And The Employability Agenda

Given the transformations in the conditions of the market and the economy which we will consider in the following chapter, the widespread assumption amongst politicians and business leaders would appear to be that in order for the UK to respond successfully and not lag behind its competitors, the constant updating and reforming of the skill base of workers is urgently required. Consequently, as Greenwood and Stuart have argued: 'This places investment in training and development in a central political position' (2006: 104). Thus, the recent developments in training and learning can be seen to be manifesting the wider, neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility. Here I focus upon the specific contributions of three groups of scholars to this discussion, although others too have briefly mentioned sentiments highly consistent with the arguments presented here. See, for example: Kemshall (2002: 31); Giddens (1998: 135) (cf. Cammack, 2004: 162); and Rose (1999a: 487).

I begin with the influential commentary on this subject provided by Coffield (1999). The consensus, it is argued, is 'that lifelong learning is a wonder drug or magic bullet which, on its own, will solve a wide range of educational, social and political ills', yet this is considered nothing less than 'naive, limited and apparent as well as being deficient, dangerous and diversionary' (p. 479). To elaborate on this, Coffield utilises the theory of 'human capital', by which is meant the totality of productive skills and technical knowledge embodied in labour. This theoretical perspective, it is argued, has found its way into government and policy strategies for lifelong learning and, whilst this to an extent is 'welcome', it succeeds in transferring 'responsibility for remaining 'employable' onto *individuals*, who do not have the

power to remove the structural barriers which prevent them learning' (p. 482; original emphasis). In this light, he cites research by Hewison et al. (1998) in which the implications of this ideology for NHS workers with young children was found to be serious, since not taking the opportunities to train further was considered as evidence of a lack of commitment to the organisation. In this context, policy makers increasingly understand lifelong learning as essential in tackling wider economic uncertainty.

Like Greenwood and Stuart (2006) after him (considered below), Coffield highlights the significance of notions of *flexibility* in relation to the idea that lifelong learning has become both: 'a moral obligation and a social constraint' (Coffield, 1999: 488). As such, the rhetoric of lifelong learning is understood primarily as that which will make workers more flexible and employable – nothing less than 'a self-evident good' (p. 488). Darmon et al. are cited and, given the relevancy of their research to the present discussion, it is worth quoting them here:

This new discourse on flexibility and employability legitimates the already well-advanced shift of the burden of responsibility for education, training and employment on to the *individual*, and implicitly denies any notion of objective structural problems such as lack of jobs, and the increasing proportion of poorly paid, untrained, routine and insecure jobs. (Darmon et al., 1999: 38; original emphasis)

Overall, the logic of shifting risk and responsibility inherent in the lifelong learning campaign is seen to represent a form of 'contested terrain' between employers, unions and the state. Various discursive tactics are utilised by employers to help legitimate the baton of learning being passed to individuals, who are then exhorted to update their skills regularly in order to preserve their 'employability'. Moreover, these processes are understood by Coffield as nothing less than polemics reflecting mechanisms of social control. Two examples cited include 'empowerment', which is used to disguise an intensification

of workloads via increased delegation, and the familiar notion of 'flexibility', used to gloss over a variety of strategies to reduce costs which increase job insecurity (p. 488). Indeed, Coffield is at pains to point out the centrality of flexibility to this discussion, primarily in terms of its relation to the requirements of the global market. Thus, from his perspective, the most appropriate slogan for the National Campaign for Learning is: 'Lifelong learning: your flexible friend for your flexible future' (p. 491).

Writing seven years after the contribution of Coffield, Greenwood and Stuart (2006) build on this analysis, though their focus is more explicitly on the rapidly emerging theme of 'employability' in the EU and its relation to the flexible economy and broader conceptions of neoliberalism. The official policy language and various texts of the EU are examined, in an attempt to highlight how 'political understandings of learning have emerged that are closer to a neoliberal agenda than a social one' (p. 105).

The economic and political context is considered first with the importance of globalisation being stressed, despite the recognition that the concept is somewhat problematic. The political ideology of neoliberalism is assumed to be highly significant for employment, with one prime consequence being that flexibility has been prioritised at the expense of employment security and welfare. Translated to the EU, these developments (and others) are understood to contribute towards a future economic space in which economic growth is likely to be slow and unemployment to rise. According to Greenwood and Stuart, for the EU, the driving force for economic change and the organisation of work is quite simply the competitive position of the EU in the global economy in which 'Political, business and trade union leaders alike are promulgating the same message: increased competitiveness is the key to generating sustainable economic growth and jobs' (p. 106). It is in this rapidly changing context that the ability of workers to create knowledge depends on the extent to which they are able to acquire a wider range of

competences and higher and broader skills – hence, the shift to the lifelong learning and employability agenda.

Various documents, papers and treaties are then considered which together may be seen to represent the EU policy agenda and the requirements of business. These illuminate 'the concepts of lifelong learning and the employability agenda in a precise way', with both being 'embedded in the necessity for flexibility, both outside work through the workings of the labour market, and inside work through functional flexibility and the polyvalent worker' (p. 110). What is increasingly noticeable in this strategy is the assumption that voluntary arrangements – known as partnership – between employers and employees are the preferred vehicle for workplace developments. Consequently, the arguments of Coffield are drawn upon, and what I understand as the privatisation of risk logic at the heart of lifelong learning is clearly elucidated, being later adapted to the broader notion of employability (pp. 112-113). Amongst a number of other policy texts and documents which are then drawn upon to highlight this contention, perhaps the most powerful is that produced by the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT, 2001). The belief here is that the attitude of workers must change in order to improve competitiveness. Workers must not only develop new attitudes of entrepreneurship but also accept that they themselves are 'responsible for their own employment destiny ... and ... training requirements' (ERT, 2001: 4). I would therefore strongly agree with Greenwood and Stuart that the implications of their research are clear: 'The themes of individual responsibility, flexibility and adaptability seemingly everywhere frame the notions of employability and lifelong learning' (2006: 112).

Coming from a less sociological and more explicitly human resource management based perspective, the work of Rainbird (most notably: 2002, 2004, 2008) has been at the forefront of recent debates on training and workplace learning. Again, whilst the privatisation of risk logic is not formally articulated in her research, it is implicit in her discussion of developments in this field and, thus, shares a great deal

with the work of both Coffield and Greenwood and Stuart. For instance, she argues that the considerable growth in policy debate surrounding lifelong learning in recent years has 'occurred in a context of concern about economic competitiveness and skills development and the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own 'employability'' (Rainbird, 2002: 214).

A consideration of the national policy context of training and learning is one of the main focal points of Rainbird's continued research in this area. According to Rainbird, Conservative and Labour Governments broadly agreed that continued training is the responsibility of both the employer and the individual employee. However, as might be expected, there are a number of significant differences. Under the Conservative Governments of 1979-1997, the tripartite training system, which had been in place since the 1960's, was progressively dismantled. One of the primary effects of this was the total cessation of financial mechanisms which encouraged employers to train (Rainbird, 2008). Concomitantly, a number of measures to encourage individuals themselves to engage in various forms of training and development were deployed throughout this period. However, little was done to entrench rights to training and to training leave, because these were seen as involving unnecessary costs to employers.

Rainbird argues that the incumbent Labour Government has, to an extent, recognised its greater responsibility in this area, seen for instance in its appointment of a Minister for Lifelong Learning. Beyond this though, there are significant continuities between the two forms of Government. For example, there is still no entitlement to paid educational leave, and an overall lack of formal representation of employees' interests (Rainbird, 2002: 217). This is reflected in New Labour's discursive replacement of 'training' with 'lifelong learning' – perceived by Rainbird as a challenge to established providers of education and training and as marking a shift from institutional to *individual* notions of education and training. Overall, New Labour's approach has therefore been facilitative, rather

than legislative, with encouragement given 'through a number of financial and delivery mechanisms to lifelong learning rather than through statutory entitlements and formal institutional structures' (p. 219). Thus, there are virtually no statutory requirements upon employers to train beyond the areas of health and safety:

Despite the government's rhetorical commitment to employee learning and approaches based on social partnership, legal entitlements in this arena are extraordinarily weak and employer prerogative remains the norm. (Rainbird, 2008: 20)

Interestingly, Rainbird closes her most recent contribution to this debate by posing the question of to what extent can developments under New Labour be interpreted 'in terms of continuities with the neo-liberal policies pursued by the Conservative government?' (Rainbird, 2008: 20). On the one hand, she argues that a significant break with regard to decentralisation *has* occurred – the state has assumed once again centralised control of education and training. On the other hand however, there are still few attempts to intervene directly with employers, to the extent that there remains a continuing failure by the state to 'create institutions capable of nurturing cooperation, coordination and social partnership on training' (p. 20). Consistent with the argument throughout this chapter, this recognition is useful, but remains extremely limited. Neoliberal ideology should be understood here not merely in terms of welfare withdrawal but, crucially, also in terms of the logic which has sought to shift the burden of training and continuing learning – and the associated risks and responsibilities– away from institutional sources to the individual. Understood thus, the true neoliberal intention behind lifelong learning is rendered clear.

This final point highlights the decidedly restricted status given to notions of risk by Rainbird. For instance, in her discussion pertaining to individual demand for continuing training (2002), new training discourses and policies are understood to continue to present difficulties at the structural level.

Unsurprisingly, these are felt most strongly by those at the lower ends of the labour market, with institutional/structural responses required if these are to be overcome. It is only at this point that the issue of risk is raised explicitly. This is done briefly, and in terms of existing research which has shown that, whilst there is evidence of workers taking the initiative in pursuing learning opportunities at work, the possibilities of financing it and 'taking the risk of leaving full-time work are restricted to younger workers who are already self-confident about their learning skills' (Rainbird, 2002: 228). Notions of risk privatisation are therefore significant omissions to this discussion, particularly when considered in the context of, firstly, the frequent references to the idea of responsabilization (although not articulated as such) and, secondly, the ongoing structural problems which reside in the current workplace training and learning environment.

### **2.3 Retirement And The New Pension Environment**

The area of retirement and the new pension environment represents a rapidly expanding field of both academic comment and empirical investigation. Whilst the language of risk and responsibility has always been used in this field, there appears to be widespread consensus that developments in this area point to qualitatively new approaches to pension provision which, in turn, involve risk and responsibility increasingly being shifted to the shoulders of individual savers and pensioners. Indeed, of the three specific fields discussed in this chapter, studies examining what is widely referred to as 'the new pension environment' make the most explicit reference to ideas of the privatisation of risk and responsibility.

Surveying the literature, it is clear that the privatisation of risk and responsibility logic within this field is most clearly discernable in relation to the most archetypal or 'pure' liberal welfare-state regime – the US (Esping-Anderson, 1990). The dramatic shift in the US over the past 25 years towards individualised

and marketised pension savings accounts, known as defined contribution (DC) plans, and away from traditional pensions with defined benefit (DB), has been widely interpreted by many American commentators from across the fields of sociology and political science as representing a privatisation and devolution of risk (Baker and Simon, 2002; Calhoun, 2006; Hacker, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; O’Rand and Shuey, 2007; Shuey and O’Rand, 2004). This trend is also emerging in the UK (Minns, 2003; Ring, 2002; Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005); a development I consider shortly.

Put simply, the consensus amongst many American social scientists is that the massive upsurge in DC plans has served to ‘shift all of the responsibility for pension investment in the market away from employers to individual workers’ (O’Rand and Shuey, 2007: 288). While most have only briefly commented on this trend (Baker and Simon, 2002; Calhoun, 2006), Hacker (2006a, 2006b, 2006c) has been the most vociferous in his sustained attack on what he considers a serious and worrying development. Writing in 2006 (2006c), he highlights how twenty years ago, nearly half of all American workers were covered by a DB plan which promised a fixed payment in retirement. These are generally mandatory and financed by employers and so represent a particular form of forced savings. As well as being insured by the Federal Government, they are also heavily regulated in order to protect participants against mismanagement. Furthermore, and according to Hacker at least, most significantly, DB plans ‘protect workers against the risk of stock market downturns and the possibility of living longer than expected’ (Hacker, 2006c: 21). Today only 20 percent of workers are currently covered by this form of provision; DC plans have now become the stuff of ‘national obsession’, with nearly 60 percent of families nearing retirement engaging with this form of provision. Participation is wholly voluntary, with many workers choosing either not to participate or contributing inadequate sums due to a lack of generous employer contributions. Regulation is also far lower, with no government insurance in place, meaning there is no protection against asset or longevity risks.

Reading Hacker also serves to confirm one of the central tenets to this thesis – that risk privatisation typically reinforces existing lines of stratification and disadvantage:

Indeed, some features of defined-contribution plans – namely, the ability to borrow against their assets, and the distribution of their accumulated savings as lump-sum payments that must be rolled over into new accounts when workers change jobs – exacerbate the risk that workers will prematurely use retirement savings, leaving inadequate income upon retirement. And, perversely, this risk falls most heavily on younger and less highly paid workers, the very workers most in need of secure retirement protection. (Hacker, 2006c: 21)

O’Rand and Shuey have both broadly discussed (2004) and empirically extended (2007) this line of argument, specifically in relation to gender. Here, it is recognised that pension risks are intertwined with other life course risks (such as illness and marital dissolution) which all workers face, yet women are more vulnerable than men given their market positions and preponderance for childcare responsibilities. In their later study, data was drawn from the ongoing, and representative, US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). They conclude:

Trends towards individualisation and the devolution of risk are introducing new responsibilities regarding retirement planning earlier in the lifecourse. They are interacting with the marital and employment biographies to produce inequality in retirement saving. (O’Rand and Shuey, 2007: 301)

While both men and women in single-headed households experienced disadvantages in the new environment, unmarried women remained those most at risk. As such, although recent changes can be

seen to have increased women's access to occupational pensions, O'Rand and Shuey argue that these changes have preserved, and perhaps increased, traditional disadvantages associated with gender, marital status and labour market position. Again therefore, this body of the literature would appear to agree with arguments proposed by authors such as Mythen (2004; 2005; 2007) that risk *has* been redistributed, but in ways that tend to follow the grooves etched by traditional forms of stratification.

From the British perspective, the contribution of Ring (2002) to this debate has been particularly noteworthy. In summary, the implications of the British Government's policy shifts in the area of pensions are examined (what may be understood as a progressive movement towards an environment echoing that seen in the US), whereby provisions are made on the one hand for those who cannot afford to save and, on the other, for those who can. It is the second of these developments which is most relevant here.

Ring interprets New Labour's movement towards a system increasingly based upon individualised money purchase pension provision (simply another term for DC) as involving a radical transfer of risk to the employee:

There are no guarantees of benefit and the evidence is that the amount employers contribute to these arrangements is usually less than what would have been contributed to a final salary arrangement ... The risk as to what the final pension will be lies solely with the employee. (p. 559)

The numerous repercussions of this shift are discussed at the level of the employer and employee. For instance, it is shown that some opportunistic employers are taking advantage of this new context by making smaller contributions to money purchase pension schemes than to the final salary schemes

they replace, thereby reducing their own costs. More fundamentally however, this process accelerates the movement away from shared risk (between employers, and between employees and employer) to a situation in which risk is 'transferred to the shoulders of individual savers and pensioners' (p. 559). Ring provides a useful addition to the contributions considered previously by developing a typology of three risks and the approaches that the Government uses to manage these risks: contribution risk, fund risk, and annuity risk. In summary, Government responses range from the now familiar encouragement of individual money purchase pension schemes, to raising levels of financial education amongst consumers – each of which Ring shows to be, to some extent, problematic.

Ring's argument also appears to conform to the notion of the double-edged sword proposed in the previous chapter. It is made abundantly clear in the conclusion to the paper that:

All of this is not an argument against private pension provision, nor against some measure of money purchase provision, nor even against individuals being exposed to market risks. Rather, it is an attempt to question the limits of a public policy seeking to pursue these aims through individual private pension provision while maintaining that this provides affordable and secure pensions for all. (p. 568)

Again, this public policy drive is seen to succeed in providing the conditions necessary for redistributing the balance of risk, firstly, from the state to individual citizens and, secondly, from employers to employees. Since these risks are inherent in the market, government policy cannot seek to reduce them, instead: 'What it appears to be doing, however, is privatising and individualising them' (p. 568). Whilst this may provide opportunities for some, the now familiar argument is made that the imperative to reconfigure risk in this way holds the most potentially negative consequences for low to medium

earners – those who are least able to understand and manage financial risks and for whom market fluctuations can have a disproportionate effect.

The second significant contribution to this field from a British perspective is provided by Vickerstaff and Cox (2005). This is notable given that it not only directly engages with the notion of individualisation and seeks to examine the extent to which this, along with risk, is useful in explaining current patterns and experiences of transitions into retirement; but also that it is empirically based, drawing on qualitative case-studies of two organisations. The large majority of the existing research in this field has, if empirical, used large-scale quantitative data sets.

Again, the focal point of the study is the changing pension and retirement environment, which is understood as currently surrounded by 'A climate of risk and uncertainty' (p. 77). A number of factors are considered to be contributing to this trend, particularly the decreasing value of many private pensions and the growing movement towards early retirement before state pension age. The latter of these is seen as destabilising the traditional life course notion of a fixed retirement age, particularly for men. Overall, the growth in money purchase pension schemes is argued to unequivocally 'shift the burden of financial risk from the employer to employee and mirror the government's recent efforts to encourage individuals to take out private or stakeholder pensions' (p. 77). While the focus of Vickerstaff and Cox's study departs somewhat from others in its explicit conceptualisation of risk in terms of its *individualisation*, their use of this concept remains somewhat limited. Whatever else, they present a somewhat simplistic version of the concept, drawing extremely little on those theorists most associated with it, such as Beck and Giddens. For instance, as the paper progresses, 'individualisation' tends to be replaced with increasing regularity by the term 'fragmentation of experience'.

Despite a lack of conceptual clarity and no discussion of ideas surrounding responsibility, the study found evidence to strongly support the idea that there is a 'fragmentation of experience' in the planning for, and the experience of, retirement. Interestingly, whilst this demonstrates heightened levels of agency, crucially, it remains infused with definite structural patterns. This found clearest expression among women and those on lower incomes. Further, employers were found to still hold greatest sway regarding when an individual could retire. The overall issue to recognise in this contribution is that, again, evidence is presented to backup the claims made earlier regarding the privatisation of risk and responsibility and its double-edged nature:

The form that structured individualisation took here, was less to increase the majority of people's range of alternatives and choices over when and how to retire and more to enlarge the range of risks they had to cope with. (Vickerstaff and Cox, 2005: 92)

In summary, the movement towards a neoliberal logic of the privatisation of risk and responsibility within the realm of pensions and retirement results in an increase in the amount and complexity of risks to be confronted and negotiated by individuals.

## **2.4 Overview of The Literature**

A number of key points can be deduced from the above analysis of the literature. The first is to emphasise that, whilst there is no existing and readily discernable field of social scientific enquiry neatly arranged under the banner of 'the privatisation of risk and responsibility in employment research', it is an appropriate and fruitful area for continued study. Moreover, it would appear that there has been an increase in work-related research and commentaries that in broad terms, explicitly, or (largely) implicitly, identify and engage with what I understand to be the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and

responsibility. The three categories of unemployment; lifelong learning and the employability agenda; and retirement and the new pension environment, represent simply the three clearest areas where this logic is currently manifest.

The encouragement of the individual uptake of *private market based solutions* has been one of the foremost ways in which this logic has been translated into practice. This is perhaps most apparent in terms of the new pension environment and its progressive shift towards individualised and marketised savings accounts. It is also manifest particularly strongly in recent government attempts to reduce safety-net provision for unemployed mortgagors and the subsequent presumed take up of market provided insurance cover, as discussed by Ford (2000) and Abbot and Quilgars (2001). However, the scope of this logic would appear to be wider than simply individualised marketisation. Coffield's (relatively under-developed) assertion that lifelong learning has become 'a moral obligation' (1999: 488), is particularly relevant. As will be elaborated upon in later stages, I would suggest that the neoliberal privatisation of responsibility also carries with it a privatisation of *moral obligation* and/or *moral responsibility*.

Whilst the scope of this chapter has been broad, evidence from each of the three fields strongly points to risk and responsibility privatisation as being largely etched along traditional lines of stratification. In short, the more positive outcomes of the logic are associated with those individuals in more advantageous positions, those 'able to deploy a series of resources, goods, capabilities and aptitudes' (Elliott, 2002: 305). Again, this is a highly significant point which will continue to be developed.

This chapter has also begun to elucidate the relationship between this logic and neoliberalism. Significantly, the majority of the sources considered above are American. Given that, as mentioned previously, it is usually argued that the US represents the purest neoliberal regime (Esping-Anderson,

1990), this trend is unsurprising. Crucially however, there is clear evidence that this development is also gaining in prominence within the UK. This also is unsurprising, since the UK has itself been increasingly influenced by neoliberalism in terms both of its politico-economic organisation and its mode of governance (Cammack, 2004; Fleetwood, 2007b; Gamble, 2001; Garrett, 2008; Hall, 2003; Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2001; Morrison, 2004).

With regard to methodology, few qualitative empirical studies have examined 'lived experience' within what I consider the existing privatisation of risk employment field. This is perhaps to be expected, given that this literature tends to deal with macro level theories which engage directly with hugely broad categories such as 'post-Fordism', the 'new economy', economic restructuring, flexibility, neoliberalism, etc. The most notable exception to this trend is provided by Vickerstaff and Cox's (2005) research into the individualisation of retirement experiences. Given the lack of good qualitative studies, there is a clear need for an empirical study which seeks to connect these macro level theories with the micro-level, lived-experiences of the individual employee.

### Summary

This chapter has engaged with three fields of current sociologically informed work-related research, in an attempt to demonstrate the conceptual and empirical salience of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility to this broad field. It is worth repeating that existing WLB/flexible working research has not in any significant way engaged with these types of ideas. Whatever else, there exists definite merit in beginning to think and critically examine these issues through this lens.

## **CHAPTER THREE: SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RISK**

### **Introduction**

This chapter considers the two foremost sociological approaches to risk. It concludes by arguing that an examination of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility requires a synthesis between these. As such, it is divided into four strands. The first presents a brief overview of the period known as Keynesianism/Industrial Society and its relationship with risk. The second and third strands build on this to critically examine the risk society and governmentality approaches to the theorising of risk in contemporary late modernity. While both perspectives agree that risk is a particular outcome of the changes induced by modernisation, the precise effects and outcomes of this are disputed. Moreover, discussion of the two raises the familiar sociological dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism. Finally, the analysis of Elliott (2002) is drawn upon, given its utility for the present study. Throughout the discussion, the focus is more explicitly on risk as opposed to responsibility. However, this is unproblematic given the close relationship I am positing between the two; such that the notion of responsibility is largely implicit within and across discussions of risk.

### **3.1 Keynesianism/Industrial Society and its Relationship to Risk**

It is necessary at the outset to provide a broad overview of the period referred to as 'Keynesianism' and/or Industrial Society and its relationship to risk. Only out of this recognition can subsequent arguments be fully appreciated. Closely associated with the so-called 'Golden-Age' of long post-war economic expansion, Keynesianism was built upon a regulatory structure which was widely seen as progressive and egalitarian. Principally, it was characterised by the expansion of the welfare state, the

growth of unions and collective bargaining and the availability of well paid public-sector employment (Stanford, 2004). Each of these contributed to higher incomes and economic security for a large proportion of workers. However, this 'Golden-Age' should not be understood as unequivocally progressive for all. The assumption underpinning the British labour market at this time was that the 'standard' employment relationship was characterised by full-time hours, a long-term/stable tenure, a male 'breadwinner' and extensive non-wage benefits. Those workers who fell outside of this norm did not have similar levels of material and social gains e.g. women, immigrants and certain ethnic minority groups (Vosko, 2000).

Keynesianism was dependent upon a particular set of economic and political circumstances. In this light, Stanford (2004: 6-7) considers three main conditions as vital. The first of these was the massive increase in investment by private firms, which, in turn, created millions of new jobs. Secondly, wide-scale technological and structural change, facilitated by rapid investment, in turn generated rising productivity. Finally, this underlying dynamism of private accumulation was reinforced by expansionary government policy, a trend incorporating macroeconomic, labour market and social policy measures which amplified and supplemented the growth in employment and earnings. The role of the active state was therefore fully legitimated in order to stabilise demand and maintain the economy close to the ideal of full employment, through the use of automatic stabilisers and high levels of public spending on welfare and defence programmes (Gamble, 2001).

This post-war period has been referred to as one of 'risk spreading' (Baker and Simon, 2002; Jacoby, 2001; O'Rand and Shuey, 2007), in which risk was understood in a relatively straightforward manner. This is discernable in two senses. First, risk was considered a purely *negative* phenomenon, something to be avoided or minimised (Giddens, 1998). Secondly, it was *calculable*, as distinct from uncertainties which could not be anticipated or measured (Reiner, 1998). The primary objective of the welfare state at

this time was to therefore provide for needs which were not adequately met through the market. The promise was not only a social policy to alleviate social ills and redistribute basic risks, 'but an effort to rewrite the social contract between government and the citizenry' (Esping-Anderson, 1999: 33).

A small group of welfare state scholars, most notably Bonoli (2005, 2006) and Taylor-Gooby (2004a, 2004b) have referred to these types of risk as 'old social risks' (henceforth OSRs). The distinction between OSRs and 'new social risks' is an important one, given the recognition that one of the foremost NSRs is WLB. However, this will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter. For now it is sufficient to recognise that, according to Taylor-Gooby, typical examples of OSRs included:

the interruption of income (such as retirement, unemployment, sickness, or disability) and the mismatch between income and need during the life cycle (e.g. child endowment) – or for needs where state provision was widely recognised as desirable (e.g. highly-valued services in areas where the costs of privately checking professional expertise are high, such as health care or education). (Taylor-Gooby, 2004a: 2)

Given the important recognition in the Introduction Chapter that the social policies of all welfare states are attempts to manage and minimise social risk (Esping-Anderson, 1999), the state at this time sought to manage OSRs through *pooling* them. That is, in the attempt to protect all citizens from shared vulnerabilities, OSRs were pooled in order to establish common standards in the provision of universal needs (Jordon, 1998). The pooling of risks and their redistribution or 'spreading' (Baker and Simon, 2002), via systems such as universal health care, state pensions and unemployment, came together to form the underlying principle of the social insurance approach to social policy and welfare (Kemshall, 2006). This era also witnessed the dramatic growth in insurance as the paradigmatic form of risk

management (Armstrong, 2005; Baker and Simon, 2002), by which risks came to be spread across populations. With regard to the workplace, human resource departments and labour management accords developed during this time, as forms of risk spreading between employers and employees. Employers achieved greater control over their workers, whilst employees achieved greater job security and insurance against life course risks such as illness, death and income loss (Jacoby, 2001).

Aharoni (1981) has described this period as nothing less than a 'no risk' society, in which security from a range of external risks was promised to the citizen who, according to Kemshall (2006), was viewed as the 'no fault' victim. However, social care largely remained within the domain of the family. Overall then, the outcome of this period was the Keynes–Beveridge or Keynes–Bismarck welfare state, whereby governments managed economies to promote full employment and organised social provision for needs which the market and family did not meet.

Of course, labour market regulation was not wholly liberated. The entire regulatory regime continued to fully rely on the household as the primary site of social reproduction and, thus, the unpaid work of household members i.e. women (Bonoli, 2005; Stanford, 2004; Taylor-Goody, 2004a). Additionally, it has been argued that this period was, to an extent, witness to a rise in precarious employment. Given that postwar labour law was premised upon the male-breadwinner-female-caretaker household, few benefits and protections against risk were extended to 'secondary breadwinners', particularly those in non-standard forms of employment and working arrangements. This was a strategy utilised by employers to erode workers' collective powers and, typically along lines of gender and ethnicity, to construct a supply of more vulnerable workers (Stanford, 2004).

Having surveyed the post-war period known as Keynesianism/Industrial Society and its relationship to risk, a foundation has been laid upon which to examine what is more relevant – traditional sociological

approaches to this theme. What is of crucial importance here is the recognition that both of those upon which I focus broadly agree upon the context that has just been outlined. The point of departure is the onset of modernity and the transformations this has brought in its wake.

Overall, social scientific research on risk has been influenced by a broad range of theoretical perspectives and methodological forms. Within this, there are three major sociological approaches to the theorising and study of risk: 'risk society'; 'governmentality;' and a 'sociocultural' approach. This thesis concentrates on the first two of these. In doing so, it omits discussion of the latter cultural studies informed 'socio-cultural' perspective. Essentially, this understands risk to be a contemporary strategy utilised by those in the West to deal with danger and Otherness, but has by some distance proved the least influential both in terms of academic engagement and political outworking (Denney, 2005).

### **3.2 Risk Society Approach**

#### **3.2.1 Beck**

The most prominent sociological analysis concerning risk remains that provided by Ulrich Beck (1992, 1995, 1996, 1999 and 2000) and, to a lesser extent, Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994a). To begin with I focus on Beck, whose risk thesis has proved nothing if not provocative, engendering a wealth of academic, environmentalist and political debate on the issue of risk and ensuring a sizeable body of both sympathetic followers (Abbott and Kelly, 2005; Butz and Leslie, 2001; McGuigan, 1999; Mythen, 2007; Strydom, 2002) and ardent critics (Dingwall, 2000; Elliott, 2002; McMylor, 1996; Scott, 2000). As Mythen (2007: 795) has observed, 'what is notable about responses to the risk society thesis is that they have clustered around the polarities'.

In essence, Beck's argument is that contemporary advanced capitalist Western societies are undergoing a dramatic transformation from an economy and way of life shaped by industrial processes (what is referred to as 'early' or 'first' modernity), to a late modern 'risk' society in which dangers and hazards have proliferated as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation. During this period, the production of wealth is simultaneously accompanied by risks, which have grown as a result of what is termed 'reflexive modernization' (the disembedding of industrial social forms, and the re-embedding of another modernity). Put another way, in the earlier stages of modernity (which I have just considered in the form of the Keynesian welfare state), society was concerned with the production and distribution of 'social goods', such as increased wealth, healthcare and levels of employment. The distribution of these was contested by a range of organisations, such as political parties, trade unions and protest groups. However, the very act of creating these goods has, Beck argues, led to an unintended situation in which a range of unmanageable 'side-effects' have been created which begin to impact upon everyday life around the globe (Beck, 1992: 42). Society now has increasingly to concern itself with the logic of the prevention or minimisation of 'social bads' (risks), with typical examples ranging from pollution, radiation and climate change to lack of care in old age, unemployment and vaccine-resistant disease. In the words of Beck:

The place of the value system of the 'unequal' society is taken by the value system of the 'unsafe' society. Whereas the utopia of equality contains a wealth of substantial and positive goals of social change, the utopia of the risk society remains peculiarly negative and defensive. Basically one is no longer concerned with attaining something 'good' but rather preventing the worst. (p. 49)

For Beck, therefore, risk is defined as 'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (p. 21). It is readily acknowledged that all societies

throughout history have been faced with threats and dangers. Yet these have been 'natural hazards', such as drought, famine and plague and tended to be attributed to *external* forces such as gods, demons or nature (Beck, 1992: 98; 1995: 78). However, in contemporary risk society, 'manufactured risks' are not limitable in time or space and succeed in evading established systems of security and welfare. Their sheer magnitude and global nature makes contemporary risks hugely difficult to identify, quantify, prevent and avoid. Most significantly, they are understood as being invisible to our senses.

Despite the intended utility of the notion, for Beck the paradigmatic case of risk is that of nuclear radiation; a risk which cannot be directly seen, touched, tasted, heard or smelt and which is potentially catastrophic in its consequences for all with whom it comes into contact. In his typically colourful way, Beck summarises the situation following Chernobyl:

We look, we listen further, but the normality of our sensual perception deceives. In the face of this danger, our senses fail us. All of us ... were blinded when we saw. We experienced a world, unchanged for our senses, behind which a hidden contamination and danger occurred that was closed to our view. (cited in Adam, 1995: 11)

Therefore, as Lupton (2006: 12) points out, both Beck (and Giddens) understand that *human responsibility* is now intricately attached to risk. People, rather than nature are the cause of risks, and it is they who are responsible for their minimisation. For Beck, two processes are widely considered as driving risk: individualisation and risk distribution (Goldblatt, 1995; Mythen, 2004, 2005). Whilst these are seen as occurring in a symbiotic relationship, it is important to consider each independently.

For Beck, 'individualization' refers to the negotiation of personalised life-paths which are increasingly reliant on individual decision-making and self-reflexivity (Beck, 2000: 53). To summarise, macro-societal

changes, particularly those driven by and related to globalisation such as the flexibilisation of the labour market, deindustrialisation, changing patterns of consumption and educational differentiation, come together to dissolve the bonds of collective experience, generating new forms of atomised and risk-laden existence. 'Given' and traditional forms of collective identity (such as those revolving around the family, factory, trade union and permanent employment) are therefore steadily eroded and replaced by more 'open' practices of personal choice and reflexivity. Thus, 'do-it-yourself' biographies become the prevalent form of cultural determination (Beck, 1994: 15). On the one hand, individualisation promises greater scope for creativity and choice, whilst, on the other, it presents tangible dilemmas. With regard to employment, although the risk regime creates a surfeit of work related choices, these remain fixed within a wider context of insecurity and uncertainty (Beck, 2000: 72). For example, Beck notes that, under the risk regime, job evaluation, re-training and career changes become less like options and more like necessities (Mythen, 2005: 133).

The idea of risk distribution closely relates to this, involving a gradual transformation occurring in the logic of social allocation (Beck, 1992: 87). It is argued that risk is being progressively relocated away from its traditional sources. As I have shown, the 'first modernity' is seen to represent an era of wealth distribution, in which the distribution of 'social goods' was the principle aim of economic and political interests. Hence, the central logic of the Fordist regime was based on social class, whereby the overarching purpose was the removal of scarcity through the production of sufficient goods to meet the collective needs of society. However, it is argued that the distributional patterns rooted in class society were fractured in the 1970s, when the distribution of 'social goods' became augmented by 'social bads'. For Beck therefore, class societies are bound up with issues of scarcity, whilst risk societies are preoccupied with the problem of insecurity (Beck, 1992: 49). Returning again to the field of work, this logic is most clearly expressed in terms of Beck's assertion that, in times of economic uncertainty, labour market fluctuations universalise the threat of redundancy, such that today, 'you can run into

anyone down at the unemployment office' (Beck, 1998: 55). In sum, for Beck, new inequalities and new groupings of 'risk positions' emerge in the risk society in place of existing 'class positions'.

### 3.2.2 Giddens

Giddens has also written at length on risk and the uncertainty faced by individuals in contemporary Western society, though he puts greater emphasis upon the impact of cultural changes at the level of the individual. His thoughts build on the assumption, shared with Beck, that widescale uncertainty has arisen from the realisation that the claims of modernity upon which human progress has been founded have come under challenge. In his work, Giddens attempts to identify and analyse what he considers one of the most distinctive features of modernity: the interconnections between 'the two "extremes" of extensionality and intentionality, that is globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other' (1991: 1); and the need to understand the implications of these in terms of social responses to risk.

Giddens articulates the central shift among citizens of the risk society in terms of their 'reflexivity'. This is the idea that individuals are conscious of their social context and their own role as actors within it. Linked to this, society has seen a decrease in levels of confidence and trust in experts and other accredited 'authorities', as people become more aware of their shortcomings and of the range of alternative and non-traditional approaches to problems. As the traditional and established lifecourse, which involves work, marriage, family and community, becomes progressively weakened, so levels of individualisation, uncertainty and anxiety increase. Again, the links with Beck here are strong. The self is understood as a 'reflexive project', as a problematic, rather than a given: 'The self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (Giddens, 1991: 3).

Interestingly, however, Giddens places a greater emphasis than Beck on the idea that individual citizens are increasingly conscious of the *responsibility* to manage one's own life trajectory and associated risks. Crucially, this imposes responsibility whilst being empowering, leading to a shift towards a citizenship of 'active trust', rather than the traditional deference which is granted to experts. To be sure, the notion of responsibility is important for Beck, but it assumes greater attention throughout Giddens' work. It is clearest in a contribution made to the journal *The Modern Law Review* in 1999, entitled simply 'Risk and Responsibility'. Given the readership of the journal, it is unsurprising that it has received virtually no recognition or citation from Sociologists concerned with risk. However, what is noteworthy is Giddens' relatively brief argument that responsibility, in contrast to risk, is best understood in terms of ideas of obligation or liability. More specifically:

The relation between risk and responsibility can be easily stated, at least on an abstract level. Risks only exist when there are decisions to be taken ... The idea of responsibility also presumes decisions. What brings into play the notion of responsibility is that someone takes a decision having discernable consequences.  
(1999: 8)

Like Beck, Giddens develops this idea in the context of the transition from external to manufactured risk. It is this development which is seen as bringing about a crisis of responsibility, since the connections between risk, responsibility and decisions have dramatically altered. Taken as a whole, Giddens' approach to risk lays the foundations for his later work in which he elaborates upon these ideas in terms of the Third Way politics that became associated with New Labour and other centre-left parties (Giddens, 1994b; 1998; 2000; 2007). Principally, this is understood as a response to a new, more critical citizenry in the context of the declining ability of national governments to control key features of

their own economies (thereby incorporating the transition from external to manufactured risk). For this reason I return to a discussion of the Third Way and risk within the context of New Labour's employment policies in the following chapter.

### 3.2.3 Discussion – Risk Society Approach

Unquestionably, the risk society approach as put forward by Beck and Giddens has been hugely influential, with a number of major convergences occurring across the two thinkers' work. Both see risk as a pivotal concern in the contemporary era, largely unavoidable today as we navigate through what Giddens terms 'the life course'. Both also understand the drive towards *progress* as having led to an increase in *complexity*, which in turn has created risk. Their key move is to essentially de-couple 'capitalism' from 'modernity', the latter of which is seen to have its own developmental logic (from 'simple', to 'late', to 'reflexive'). Thus, whilst the category of capitalism *is* viewed as important, it is the broader notion of 'global risk society' which is seen as most significant. Indeed, this is described by Beck as where the 'historic alliance between capitalism, the welfare state and democracy shatters' (1998: 11). Together, Beck and Giddens are also interested in the political aspects of risk, identifying reflexivity as the primary response to uncertainty and insecurity in the risk society. As such, the citizen is re-characterised as an active risk manager, responsible for the identification and management of risks, constantly negotiating risk opportunities and threats.

Following the excellent work of Lupton (1999, 2006), I would agree that Beck and Giddens utilise a 'weak social constructionist' approach to risk 'which is founded in critical structuralism' (1999: 81), a position she later refers to as 'fairly realist' (2006: 14). Throughout, their attention is focused on how risk proliferates and is responded to at the macro-structural level, and this is considered in terms of its political implications and the social conflicts which subsequently arise. Risks are conceived of as

objective and real, although responses to these are always mediated through social and cultural processes. Beck himself has termed this 'a sociological perspective' (1995: 76), since it maintains a 'natural-scientific objectivist' approach, whilst drawing on 'cultural relativism'.

To repeat, the risk society perspective has been subject to sustained theoretical and empirical criticism.

In broad terms, the approach is seen by many critics as:

too speculative, making broad and loose speculations about structural and organizational processes, without grounding these specifically enough in the actual processes and experiences of institutional and everyday life. (Lupton, 1999: 82)

Three other common objections may be briefly stated. Firstly, claims about a 'global risk society' are criticised for their overly Western focus (mainly in terms of Germany and the UK) (Nugent, 2000). Secondly, it is argued that risk has figured as a social category and matter of concern for government since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, as such, is not specific to the contemporary condition (Dingwall, 2000; Ewald, 1986, 1991; Rose, 1996a). Thirdly, the approach is considered unduly pessimistic because of its over emphasis upon risk as a negative and harmful phenomenon (Denney, 2005): risk taking across many domains (e.g. medicine, finance, leisure) can prove a positive and rewarding process (Giddens, 2002; Simon, 2002). Indeed, this is another of the main areas in which the work of Giddens departs from Beck and is reflected in the former's greater influence upon politicians (particularly in the UK). As Giddens argues, risk in late modernity is not simply 'something to be avoided or minimized. It is at the same time the energizing principle of a society that has broken away from tradition and nature' (Giddens, 1998: 62-63).

Two other more significant critiques may be levelled at the risk thesis which have a particular bearing upon my concerns. Firstly, despite Beck's claim to a 'sociological perspective', confusion remains over the precise status of risks (Alexander, 1996; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006a: 404). Mythen and Walklate argue that one of the intrinsic problems for the risk society approach is:

how to reconcile the individual process of risk decision-making with that of understanding societal processes, whether these are institutionalized in political, policy or cultural processes, or less visible to the individual and embedded in the structure of society itself. (Mythen and Walklate, 2006b: 232)

Put another way, to what extent are risks to be seen as real and external, or as social constructions? If it is the former of these options, then risk acts as a principal driver of social change, which in turn shapes social experience and consciousness. Typical examples here are those of the new risks associated with technological advances, such as environmental pollution or nuclear power generation. However, if the latter is emphasised, then risks are generated by people's understandings of the contexts in which they find themselves. Understood thus, risk and its correlates (individualisation, etc) contribute to radical alterations in people's assumptions, behaviour and experience. Certainly, tensions and ambiguities remain between locating risk in terms of, on the one hand, human agency and, on the other, a socio-cultural, political process. Whilst Beck's recognition of the need to overcome the divide between realist and social constructionist accounts of risk is to be welcomed, his 'sociological approach' remains problematic. Indeed, Lupton argues that the risk society thesis 'tends to waver uncertainly between a realist and weak constructionist approach' (1999: 28, see also: Elliott, 2002; Houston, 2001; Mythen, 2004; Mythen and Walklate, 2006).

This is bound up with the second major criticism: the universalising tendency present within the risk society thesis. The insistence that society has undergone a radical rupture in terms of the logic of social distribution is one that has, unsurprisingly, been particularly hotly contested (see for instance: Atkinson, 2007; Elliott, 2002; McMylor, 1996; Mythen, 2005; Scott, 2000; Tombs and Whyte, 2006). Whilst Beck felt able to declare that in the risk society, 'poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic' (Beck, 1992: 36), the reality is, unquestionably, quite different given the continued existence of social divisions based on ethnicity, class, age, gender, sex, etc. The distribution of risk is both uneven and unequal, more likely to reinforce, rather than alter, existing distributions of inequality. Inverting the words of Beck, Scott argues that:

The wealthy were protected from scarcity and remain protected from risk; 'protection' here being understood as 'relative protection'. Smog is just as hierarchical as poverty so long as some places are less smoggy than others. (Scott, 2000: 36)

It is an important point that Beck succeeds in conflating risk as perception with risk as material force. For instance, there can be little coincidence behind the fact that it is the most economically poor countries which are most susceptible to, and affected by, risks such as environmental pollution, AIDS, and political violence (Calhoun, 2006). Moreover, the inclination towards generalised processes and their outcomes neglects an awareness that different groups may respond in multifaceted ways to late modernity. With particular reference to Giddens, it is likely that the responsible, confident, self-creating individual will epitomise a particular social stratum, rather than society as a whole (Atkinson, 2007; Mythen, 2005; Rose, 1999b; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003).

Nonetheless, a series of analytical benefits follow from the risk society approach. Foremost amongst these is its awareness that, as we have seen, there is an objective basis to risk which exists

independently of our knowledge of it. However, there is also a recognition that risks are inevitably mediated through social and cultural processes and can never be known in isolation from them. The types of broad, macro-level questions this approach poses also remain pertinent, particularly: 'what is the relationship of risk to the structures and processes of late modernity?' (Lupton, 1999: 35). The association between risk and responsibility is also important; essentially the assertion is that, in contemporary society unlike previously, human responsibility is now firmly attached to risk. A particularly useful insight is provided by Giddens (1999) who argues that, in the context of risk, the notion of responsibility refers to a situation in which a person takes a decision with discernable consequences.

One of the most enduring ideas from Beck's original *Risk Society* is his general argument that in the risk society, 'How one lives becomes a biographical solution to systemic contradictions' (1992: 137). This is undeniably a powerful statement and one which other social theorists, most notably Bauman (2001, 2003), have explicitly drawn upon. Bunting meanwhile, in her popular treatise on today's overwork culture, has declared that this ideology is now so pervasive that it is crippling us as 'one of the strongest illusions of our age' (Bunting, 2004: xxv). Certainly, the assumption that, in contemporary society, we are compelled to embrace individualised solutions to what are essentially structural problems has broad resonance given this study's focus upon neoliberalism. Indeed, this latter observation is integral to the other main approach to which I now turn; the governmentality perspective.

### **3.3 Governmentality Approach**

Governmentality approaches to risk begin with, and are founded upon, the seminal work of the French social theorist Michel Foucault, whose lecture 'Governmentality' in 1978 remains perhaps the most

notable work on this topic<sup>3</sup>. For Foucault, governmentality is defined broadly as the 'art of government' (1991). In short, this perspective conceives of risk as 'a governmental strategy of regulatory power by which populations and individuals are monitored and managed through the goals of neo-liberalism' (Lupton, 1999: 87). Neoliberalism (understood as both a set of practices and a mentality of government) is seen as signalling a reconfiguration in the way that government – involving the state, civil society, the economy and the self – is conceived. One of the main utilities of this approach has been the attempt to explore these ideas across various analytical levels. Consequently, it has been understood as a strategy of *individual* self-government (Simon, 2002); a strategy of government by, or through, the *state* (O'Malley, 2002; McClusky, 2002) and a strategy of government by *intermediate institutions*, such as employers, insurance companies, banks and health care professionals (Baker, 2002; Heimer, 2002).

In his work, Foucault traces the historical development of this across a variety of periods and specific power regimes, from the mercantilist nation states of the seventeenth century, to the present day capitalist state. Attention is given to the processes by which these states have continuously sought to develop and implement new techniques for managing their populations and achieving the national goals of, for example, the population's health, welfare, prosperity and happiness (Foucault, 1977; see Dean, 1999: 18-20). Rather than punishment and overt coercive control, Foucault argues that these strategies increasingly came to refer to populations and abstract categorisation, in order to assess national resources and assist planning. Individuals were no longer seen as the object of disciplinary power: 'but as resources to be fostered, to be used and to be optimized' (Dean, 1999: 20). Perhaps surprisingly, Foucault himself did not deal specifically with the concept of risk in his writings at any great length. However, many of his arguments regarding governmentality and modernity have since been drawn upon and extended by scholars (particularly in the UK and Australia) who have sought to heed his call that there is a gap between studies of power at the levels of the individual and the state. They build on

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of governmentality gained attention in the English-speaking academic world mainly through Burchell et al's edited book *The Foucault Effect* (1991), which contained a series of essays on the notion of governmentality, alongside a translation of Foucault's 1978 lecture on "*gouvernementalité*".

this, asking how, and in what ways, neoliberal states discipline and govern through risk, with Rose's contributions being most influential (1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1999b, 2000).

One of the main ways in which this form of governance is achieved is through the role of expert knowledges. Again, in a sense, this is similar to the risk society thesis. Here, however, experts are considered in terms of their role in the formation of particular types of subject. Experts provide the guidelines and advice against which populations are analysed, compared against norms, trained to conform with these and then rendered productive – a form of disciplinary logic referred to as the 'science of the state' (Foucault, 1991: 96). This form of management of populations, through statistical forms of categorisation, succeeds in providing a fundamental form of power and regulation 'beyond the state'. Applied to the fields of economics, science, psychology, medicine, etc, it marks out the boundaries of risk for the late modern individual, all of which is in line with the goals of neoliberalism. Thus, risk becomes transformed from a de-subjectivised notion of threat into an objective, actuarial concept by which individuals are regarded as affiliated to groups which are 'at risk' or 'risky' (Dean, 1999).

To repeat, crucial to the governmentality approach is the argument that risk functions as a major apparatus through which individuals are encouraged to engage in self-regulation. If, as I have shown, the previous era was considered one of 'risk spreading', then the contemporary rationale is instead one of 'risk embracing' which privileges 'disaggregating risk pools and placing more responsibility on individuals for bearing the risks of their life' (Simon, 2002: 178). Commentators from all disciplines and theoretical positions agree on the fact that one of the most characteristic features of the period following the late-1970's has been the progressive withdrawal of the 'active' state from welfare intervention (Harvey, 2005; Kemshall, 2002; Pierson, 1998; Taylor-Gooby, 2008). The governmentality approach however builds upon this recognition, forcefully arguing that 'Above all, it is a mistake to see neo-

liberalism as simply a negative political response to the welfarism or corporatism of previous decades' (Barry et al., 1996: 11). Rather, the state has attempted to subtly *extend* and *advance* its influence via:

a positive technique of government ... the fabrication of techniques that can produce a degree of "autonomization" of entities of government from the State: here the State, allying itself with a range of other groups and forces, has sought to set up ... "responsibilization" and "empowerment" to sectors and agencies distant from the centre, yet tied to it through a complex of alignments and translations. (Barry et al., 1996: 11-12)

'Autonomization' refers to the 'the unmediated government *of* individuals *by* individuals' (Armstrong, 2005: 453; original emphasis), the central premise of which is the contention that the neoliberal state has increasingly devolved responsibility for the management of risks onto the shoulders of the individual and that social responsibility has therefore been eroded (Rose, 1996a). As such, the state now exercises only a limited overt power of its own, 'steering and regulating rather than rowing and providing' (Rose, 2000: 323-324). Crucially, this logic succeeds not only in reducing the costs to the state, but also in reducing dependency and moral hazard (Parker, 1982). In this light, Rose was able, somewhat provocatively, to pose the question: 'Are we witnessing not just a temporary shift in political and theoretical fashions but an event: 'the death of the social?' ' (1996a: 328). In his words:

Although strategies of welfare sought to govern through society, 'advanced' liberal strategies of rule ask whether it is possible to govern without governing society, that is to say, to govern through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents – citizens, consumers, parents, employees, managers, investors – and to

govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to particular 'communities'. (Rose, 1996b: 61).

An important point to briefly highlight here is Rose's use of the broader term 'advanced liberalism' in place of 'neoliberalism' – a tendency echoed by a small number of his followers from this perspective. However, I would agree with Thompson (2007) that this distinction is unproblematic. The two reflect more or less the same reality, although 'neoliberalism' remains 'the most forceful expression of the present condition' (Thompson, 2007: 3). Whatever else, this form of government is understood as rule at the 'molecular level'. The 'active', rather than the 'passive', citizen is seen as both morally and economically desirable, particularly so in an era of rapid social and economic change. This technique of 'responsibilization' (Rose, 1996b) thus governs behaviour less by overt state power and more by *moral* expectation; individuals are made responsible for their own actions, including their own risks and their own effective self management (Dean, 1999; Shamir, 2008). At its heart, the responsibilized individual is seen as assuming a moral agency which incorporates a subject that is autonomous, self-determined and self-sustaining, one:

whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts. As the choice of options for action is, or so the neo-liberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, *the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them.* (Lemke, 2001: 201; emphasis added)

Given that risk has been desocialised, privatised and individualised, it follows that the locale of risk management has, concomitantly, also shifted in this direction. As such, going hand in hand with the notion of 'responsibilization' is that of 'prudentialism'. Under neoliberal governance, prudentialism – a

form more refined than its nineteenth-century forerunner – becomes the order of the day. Through its removal of the core idea that individuals can best be regulated through collectivist risk management, it ‘throws back upon the individual the responsibility for managing risk’ (O’Malley, 1996: 197). Thus, prudentialism requires the responsible citizen to adopt a calculating attitude to all of his or her decisions. According to Rose (1996b: 60), therefore, this contemporary form is new in that it represents ‘the ethical *a priori* of the active citizenship in an active society’, simultaneously underpinning contemporary governmental forms regardless of political spectrum or political ideology.

Many risks, of course, are simply too large for individuals themselves to ‘embrace’ and self-insure, meaning that insurance represents the paradigmatic form of risk management (Armstrong, 2005; Baker and Simon, 2002; Ericson et al., 2000). Strongly consistent with much of the research identified in the previous chapter, the governmentality perspective holds that the neoliberal state typically privileges private insurance as *the* responsible market-based alternative, as opposed to depending on the state for managing risk. Seeking to optimise their independence from others and the state, the responsible subject may, for instance, employ epidemiological data of health risks, and undertake diet and other lifestyle recommendations offered by private health and fitness professionals or publicly funded health promotions (O’Malley, 1996). ‘Risky’ forms of behaviour such as smoking or lack of exercise consequently come to be understood not only as unhealthy, but also immoral. Taken together these forms of attitudes and behaviours, urged upon individuals by authorities, become akin to what Foucault termed ‘practices of the self’ (Dean, 1999: 191).

### 3.3.1 Discussion - Governmentality Approach

In sharp contrast to the risk society perspective, the governmentality literature is characterised by a strong social constructivist oriented and poststructuralist approach to power relations (Lupton, 1999). As

in all Foucauldian thought, the notion of discourse is fundamental; 'risk' can only be examined through an analysis of the discourses, strategies, practices and institutions which surround it. It is these which produce 'truths' on risk which then function as the basis for action (Lupton, 1999). Whilst there are a whole host of potential dangers and hazards, only a small number of these come to be constituted as 'risks'. In short, risk is a wholly social construction, 'There is no outer world, which forces society to respond to risk. Instead risk is understood as a specific way to shape and control populations and govern societies' (Zinn, 2006: 14). Power is therefore seen to operate or flow through discursive strategies and techniques, not hierarchically. Moreover, power relations and ideological and political bias are constantly at work in the categorising of risk. The notion of capitalism is largely redundant, since neoliberalism is understood not as a distinct historical phase, but rather as a particular mode of governing associated with the emergence of postmodern societies. From the governmentality perspective therefore, research and debate on risk can never stand outside of an exercise in power and politics.

The governmentality approach has been criticised on a number of grounds, although only the main two will be considered here. To begin with, despite the belief amongst governmentality theorists that their approach *does* open up sites of resistance, the perspective remains curiously 'top-down' in seeking to explain social developments in terms of the exigencies of government and other power-holding institutions. This, in turn, offers a restricted account of agency 'from below' which provides little opportunity for non-compliance with the totalising force of discourses (Shilling, 1997; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006a). This potentially passive account of the agent is compounded by the universal conception of the self offered by Foucauldians. This pays insufficient attention to the multiplicity of ways in which discourses of risk are responded to and managed by individuals, and the effect of standard divisions (e.g. gender, ethnicity, class) upon this (Lupton, 1999, 2006).

This line of critique has been extended by a number of commentators, who have argued that there is a distinct lack of empirical studies examining the day-to-day negotiations through which people make sense of risk responses (see for instance: Lupton, 1999, 2006; Mythen and Walklate, 2006a; Zinn, 2006). However, whilst this may be accurate to an extent in terms of responses to risk, there is a sizeable body of literature which has dealt with aspects of responsabilization. Prominent examples include: self-care and self-regulation (e.g. healthy eating) (Peterson, 1996); criminal justice policy (Kemshall, 2002a; Rose, 2000); drug policy and the individualisation of responses (O'Malley, 2004); and new work ethics and workplace health and fitness (Kelly et al., 2007).

Secondly, although this perspective succeeds in elucidating new forms of governance beyond the state, it can be argued that, in doing this, it neglects any recognition of the central *source* of risk (Denney, 2005). For the Marxist, for instance, this is straightforward. Given that neoliberalism is identified primarily as a phase of capitalism (as opposed to simply a mode of governance), risk originates within the capitalist mode of production and is utilised by the social class in control of the means of production and their political allies.

However, I consider there to be a number of definite advantages inherent in the governmentality approach relevant to our interests, and which I will seek to develop in the remainder of this thesis in relation to WLB and flexible working. Firstly, the explicit stress on responsibility as a significant category is to be welcomed, particularly given its intimate connection with risk. Whilst this is also the case in the risk society literature, it is more rigorously developed here. For instance, Baker (2002) has argued this point well using the example of insurance, showing that it not only involves the transfer of risk, but also the transfer of responsibility: 'In an important sense, the proliferation of risks produces a proliferation of responsibilities. Put perhaps more controversially, risk creates responsibility' (Baker, 2002: 33). I would also argue that, given the relationship between the two, this principle also holds true when inverted (a

point surprisingly not mentioned by Baker); the proliferation of responsibilities also creates a proliferation of risks.

At a general level, Foucauldians correctly recognise that risk and responsibility are utilised by the neoliberal state as mechanisms of social control. Although, of course, it is responsabilizing practices themselves which are seen to constitute power: these are not presented as being state-led, 'top-down' and 'one-way'. Also, the perspective is useful given its broad analytic focus across the differential levels of society (individual, intermediate institutions and state). Related to this, the perspective refutes the suggestion that there has been a radical rupture in modernity (e.g. from 'industrial society' to 'risk society'), but instead sees a continuity with the past regarding the way discourses, knowledges, strategies, practices and institutions have developed around risk (Barry et al., 1996; Lupton, 1999). As explained, however, central to the governmentality account are the ways in which rationalities of risk increasingly operate as a result of the political ethos of *neoliberalism*. Moreover, the approach provides the most explicit recognition that neoliberal modes of governmentality necessarily involve a privatisation of *moral* responsibility. The final and most significant benefit concerns the role of discourse. While the notion that the only properties risk has are those articulated in discourse can be readily objected to, it can be agreed that the discursive realm is important, that it *does* effect outcomes and that to discard this would be to ignore the fact that 'discourse and ideas are fundamentally important aspects of the social and political world' (McAnulla, 2002: 283). Undoubtedly, people's actions are shaped by the meanings they attribute to events (Blumer, 1986).

### 3.4 The Contribution of Elliott

Amidst the sizeable body of sociological literature which has critically engaged with the work of Beck, the contribution of Elliott (2002) has proved not only one of the most cited, but also a significant spring

board from which I can continue to investigate neoliberalism's imperative to privatise both risk and responsibility. Elliott's critique of the risk society thesis is built upon three strands: risk, reflexivity and reflection; power and domination; and tradition, modernity and postmodernization. In the second of these, 'power and domination', the now familiar argument is made that, whilst there is definite currency in the suggestion that class patterns and divisions have altered in recent years, it is highly implausible to maintain that there has been a transfiguration of class itself into a new logic of risk (pp. 303-304). Where the work of Elliott most conspicuously breaks rank with previous commentators is in his suggestion that the most urgent theoretical task is not to try and demonstrate the continuing salience of social class (since this already has, and continues to be, well-founded) but rather:

to develop methods of analysis for explicating how patterns of power and domination feed into, and are reconstituted by, the socio-symbolic structuring of risk. Here I shall restrict myself to noting three interrelated forces, which indicate, in a general way, the contours of how a politics of risk is undergoing transformation. (p. 304)

The three developments (each understood as channels of contemporary *risk management*) are: firstly, the privatisation of risk; secondly, the commodification of risk; and, thirdly, the instrumentalisation of identities in terms of lifestyle, consumption and choice. Unsurprisingly, it is Elliott's conception of the first of these which I seek to utilise *and extend*. Given my analysis outlined thus far, this is most discernable in terms of my coupling of the notion of risk with that of *responsibility*. For instance, whilst Elliott's discussion on this matter only fleetingly mentions responsibility, the notion of risk management essentially refers to the process by which parties are made *responsible* for the management of risk (Denney, 2005; Rose, 2000). Moreover, Elliott goes on to argue that the sociologist should examine each of these three developments in order to 'develop a more nuanced interpretative and critical approach' (Elliott, 2002: 306). In part, this study represents a response to this call.

According to Elliott, the privatisation of risk sees the movement of society towards one in which:

the individual is increasingly viewed today as an active agent in the risk-monitoring of collectively produced dangers; risk-information, risk-detection and risk-management is more and more constructed and designed as a matter of *private responsibility* and *personal* security. By and large, human agents confront socially produced risks individually. Risk is desocialized; risk-exposure and risk-avoidance is a matter of individual responsibility and navigation. (p. 305; added emphasis)

Two other main issues are raised. Firstly, it is acknowledged that the privatisation of risk is, in part, what Beck meant by the individualisation of risk (p. 305). However, what distinguishes Elliott's approach is his insistence that material inequalities (seen for instance in the development of global poverty) are more systematic and complex than Beck recognises and that these continue to hold significant and often polarizing consequences for the privatisation (or individualisation) of risk. I would also add that the notion of the privatisation of risk encapsulates, to a large extent, the concepts of autonomization and responsabilization as put forward by Rose and colleagues from the governmentality approach; in that it incorporates the basic assumption that neoliberalism is increasingly attempting to govern individuals at a distance, by predisposing social actors to assume responsibility for the management of their own actions and risks.

Elliott goes on to note that, under these societal conditions, it is increasingly vital that 'in order to count as a 'player' in the privatisation of risk-detection and risk-management', individuals must be able to deploy a series of resources, goods, capabilities and aptitudes' (p. 305). Naturally, this is a structured and uneven process, in which class and material inequalities are likely to determine access to the

management of privatised risk. Unquestionably, this is a significant point and one which I am in agreement with, yet which this study can unfortunately only touch upon. Certainly, recognition that risk is structured corroborates with the overall findings of Chapter Two (see especially Abbott and Quilgars, 2001; Calhoun, 2006; Ring, 2002; Rutherford, 2007a). Whilst the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility is a macro social, cultural and political development, it is a process involving more 'win' than 'lose' for those already in advantageous positions.

The second issue concerns what Elliott considers 'a key factor in the erosion of the management of risk through welfare security': the transition from Keynesian to monetarist economic policies (Elliott, 2002: 35). He sees this as crucial, yet, unfortunately, the point remains undeveloped apart from the subsequent statement that: 'The impact of globalization, transnational corporations and governmental deregulation is vital to the social production of the privatisation of risk' (p. 35). This is a hugely significant point and is also where we broaden our discussion out and reconnect it with the risk society and governmentality approaches. An in-depth consideration of the impact of the forces of globalisation, transnational corporations and governmental deregulation is beyond the scope of this chapter, yet what I understand and take from Elliott's discussion here is essentially that the increasingly hegemonic shift to *neoliberalism* (i.e. capitalism's most recent form), as both a set of discourses and practices of political-economic government, has been the central driver behind the movement to redistribute risk away from collective bodies, such as the state and employers, and towards individuals. Put another way, the privatisation of risk (and responsibility) is inherently a core strand of the state-led neoliberal project.

## Summary

This chapter began with an examination of the period known as Keynesianism/Industrial Society and its relationship with risk. Subsequently, it then considered the Risk Society and Governmentality perspectives. Taken as a whole, there are elements from both of these which hold promise for an examination of WLB and flexible working. Of course, both are contested, but neither should be rejected outright given the valuable insights they offer regarding the relationships between risk, responsibility, the neoliberal-influenced state and individuals. It should also be remembered that there are two areas of broad consensus. Firstly, that the intensification of discussions of risk and risk practices result from changes associated with the progression to late-modernity (a feature which resonates particularly strongly with the definition of risk offered in the Introduction Chapter: 'the possibility of outcomes (positive and negative) to arise from progress'). Secondly, that risk today has become a central cultural and political concept through which individuals, social groups and institutions are organised, monitored and regulated, as well as the fact that risk is associated with notions of choice, blame and *responsibility* (Lupton, 1999).

This now leads to the overall conclusion: that a *synthesis* of both these approaches is required in order to begin to attend to the structure-agency conundrum which lies at the heart of sociological discussions about risk (Flynn, 2006; Mythen and Walklate, 2006b), so that the issue of the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility might then be adequately addressed. Furthermore, such a synthesis must take into account the important analysis of Elliott (2002). Elliott's contribution highlights once again the weaknesses of Beck's Risk Society approach, particularly in terms of issues relating to power and domination. It foregrounds (albeit briefly) the privatisation of risk, arguing that it represents one of the primary vehicles through which discussions of risk can be fruitfully advanced. Additionally, it recognises

both the power of discourses (which emphasise the stress on individual responsibility as the most desired means of contemporary risk management) and structures (broadly, neoliberalism).

My contribution is to recognise the explicitly *neoliberal* privatisation of, not simply risk, but also responsibility - because I see the two concepts as intricately connected (Giddens, 1999; O'Malley, 1996). In this sense then, this thesis represents a response to the call by Elliott for sociologists to build upon the work of Beck by better analysing power and domination, specifically in terms of the privatisation of risk. The following chapter begins to discuss in detail the case-study for this approach: WLB and flexible working.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE EMERGENCE OF 'NEW SOCIAL RISKS' AND THE UK'S NEOLIBERAL POLITICAL CONTEXT

### Introduction

This chapter represents the point of the thesis where I draw upon many of those ideas already considered and begin to apply them specifically to the field of WLB within the UK today. It is divided into three main strands. The first summarises the UK's transition to neoliberalism and the relationship of this to risk and responsibility. The second then considers post-industrial 'new social risks' (NSRs) – their emergence and the contention, of principal interest to this study, that the reconciliation of work and life has itself become one of the foremost NSRs. Given my contention that risk is being privatised, this is significant. The third strand then examines the political context of New Labour and the Third Way in relation to these ideas. Overall, the chapter is primarily theoretical and engages with the levels of policy formation and discourse.

### 4.1 Transition to Neoliberalism

To repeat the definition offered in the Introduction Chapter, neoliberalism is a complex, yet distinct phase of capitalism, involving both a set of political discourses and practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance. Returning to the nature of Keynesianism/Industrial Society and its relationship to risk considered at the beginning of Chapter Three, it may be seen that, during the 1970's, capitalism faced a series of crises. Mainly, these took the form of accelerating inflation which exacerbated the fiscal crisis of the state and then led onto both a recession and a rapid rise in unemployment. Keynesianism's responses appeared nothing less than irrational (Gamble, 2001). It was

into this context that *neoliberalism* emerged as a new form of political-economic governance, primarily as a critique of the system it sought to replace.

Founded upon the extension of markets, its general aim has been to restructure national economies and societies in order to reduce the influence of organised labour and optimise capital accumulation (Rutherford, 2007b). Harvey (2005: 2) argues that at the heart of neoliberalism lies the theoretical proposition that it is the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, within an institutional framework containing strong private property rights, free markets and free trade, which most advances human well-being. The role of the state is therefore to create and preserve an institutional framework in line with this vision. Consequently, the state has to guarantee the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up structures and functions (legal, military, defence, etc) which are required to secure private property rights and, by force if necessary, the proper functioning of markets. If a market does not exist, such as in the areas of social support for the care of children (den Dulk et al., 2005) or the new occupational pension environment (O’Rand and Shuey, 2007), then it must be created, by state action if required. Beyond these remits, the state should not intervene (Harvey, 2005: 2).

Neoliberalism has increasingly pursued the privatisation of risk and responsibility as one of its central strategies in creating the widest possible conditions in which markets can flourish and the state remain minimal. Since its inception, it has always sought to facilitate new forms of capital accumulation. This has been achieved, for instance, through eliminating as many restrictions on competition as possible, as well as empowering market agents through reductions in taxation (Gamble, 2001). Rutherford (2007a; 2007b), amongst others, has argued that one of the more recent developments in this vein has been the extension of markets and corporate profit making into the public sector and other traditionally non-market social spheres of life. Closely tied with the notion of responsabilization, in this sense, capitalism is expanding ‘inwardly’ into the psyche and emotional and *moral* life of the individual in order to utilise

human potential. While neoliberalism may mean less government, it does not follow that there is less *governance*. Of course, much could be written on this theme, and indeed already has (see especially Dean, 1995; Shamir, 2008). The key point is that the imperative to shift both risk and responsibility away from the state and onto the shoulders of individuals, is one of a number of strategies employed by neoliberalism in order to achieve its core objectives of governing from afar and reducing excess costs<sup>4</sup>.

The state-led neoliberal project is the *source* of the imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, both real and discursive. Real in the sense that it represents a generative mechanism which is objectively occurring and which holds causal powers and capacities. 'Discursive' in the sense that the citizen is increasingly being recast as an active risk manager, responsible for dealing with risks, constantly negotiating risk opportunities and hazards throughout the lifecourse (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) and exercising prudential choices over lifestyle, personal insurance and pension provision, health choices and, not least, employment (Armstrong, 2005; O'Malley, 1996; Rose, 1996a, 1999b). Indeed, Chapter Two clearly demonstrated some of the typical effects – real and discursive – of this logic within the field of work. The core assumption is that people are best off dealing with risks on their own in a moral and responsible manner, without the over-burdening interference or expense of wider systems of risk management. Put another way, neoliberalism is facilitating a process whereby the responsibility for risk management is being progressively *privatised*, directionally away from institutions and towards individuals and from employers to employees. Whether or not this facet of neoliberalism comes to be empirically experienced by individuals, they are of course, increasingly being affected by it.

The conception I am proposing is also consistent with Beck's assertion that in contemporary (risk) society, individuals are compelled to seek 'biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' (1992: 137). Each of the three areas of current work and employment research examined in Chapter Two

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<sup>4</sup> In practice, neoliberalism does not always govern at a distance. It has of course aggressively used state power to defeat various obstacles (in the UK, most particularly seen in Thatcher's anti-union agenda) as well as to open up and police new markets (see for instance Harvey, 2005; Waddington, 2000).

confirmed that neoliberalism is facilitating a growth in terms of discourses and policies of individualised solutions to what are essentially structural problems. This was most clearly elucidated by Rutherford, when he summarised that recent advances in welfare reform have succeeded in rendering 'the individual who is incapacitated responsible for what are socially produced problems' (Rutherford, 2007a: 53). Again, this links to the now familiar observation that the more negative outcomes of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility logic fall most heavily upon those already occupying positions of structural disadvantage.

## **4.2 The Emergence of NSRs and WLB**

One of the observations briefly made in Chapter One was that a small, yet growing, body of research is recognising the emergence of WLB as a NSR to postindustrial society. However, little analysis has extended beyond this recognition, at least from a sociological perspective. Having discussed the transition to neoliberalism as capitalism's current regime of politico-economic organisation, this section and much of the remainder of this chapter aims, in part, to fill this gap. An appreciation of WLB as a form of NSR allows for the reintroduction of WLB and flexible working, whilst at the same time setting up subsequent discussion about the response of the neoliberal-influenced British state to these matters. This is important, since it is the first, and most macro, level of analysis at which a connection can be made between the notions of WLB/flexible working and theories and approaches to risk and responsibility.

### **4.2.1 Social Risks**

To begin with, what is meant by the notion of 'social risk'? The most prominent commentator on this topic has been Esping-Andersen (1999), who has described how an individual risk develops into being

'social' for three reasons. Firstly, when the fate of an individual (or individuals) becomes collective, that is, when the welfare of society is at stake; secondly, when society recognises the risk as warranting public consideration; and, thirdly, when the growing complexity of society produces an increasing share of risks from sources beyond the control of the individual (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 37). Social risks are rarely totally random. Instead, they tend to occur with sociological regularity, being stratified in terms of class, life-course and inherited ascriptions. Central both to this perspective and the claims of this study is the recognition that the welfare policies implemented by governments are, first and foremost, an *attempt to manage and minimise social risk*; that is, social risks are the building blocks of welfare regimes.

According to Esping-Andersen and his followers, three sources of managing social risks exist: the family; the market; and the state. The previous chapter highlighted how, during the post-war period, the state proved largely successful in minimising many OSRs (Bonoli, 2005, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004a, 2004b). This was achieved through the pooling, spreading and socialising of risks (i.e. the opposite of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk). In many ways, the extent to which a welfare regime pools its social risks amongst these three institutions actually defines it; along with the range of risks which are considered 'social' and the extent to which they are deemed eligible for protection (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 33). For instance, at one extreme, contemporary social democratic regimes as in Scandinavian countries allocate the state a central and comprehensive role, with the market and family on the periphery (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 85). At the other extreme, (neo)liberal welfare regimes, such as the UK, USA and Australia, give the state a minimal and residual role, with the role of the market occupying centre stage. As I go on to elaborate, while Esping-Andersen's analysis is useful, it omits the *individual* as the increasingly sought after domain of risk management by neoliberal ideology.

#### 4.2.2 Transition to Postindustrial Society – The Rise of NSRs

The post-war welfare state was premised upon particular assumptions about family structure and labour market behaviour which today are rendered largely invalid. This needs little repetition here, suffice to say that a growing number of commentators have recognised and begun to analyse the emergence of a fleet of *NSRs* which have come to prominence as society has made the transition to being what I loosely term 'postindustrial'. Bonoli (2006: 5-6) has defined NSRs as:

situations in which individuals experience welfare losses and which have arisen as a result of the socio-economic transformations that have taken place over the past three to four decades and are generally subsumed under the heading of post-industrialisation. Above all, deindustrialisation and the tertiarisation of employment, as well as the massive entry of women into the labour force, have increased the instability of family structures and the destandardisation of employment.

Thus, in line with this description, the work-life role conflict experienced by individuals as they seek to 'balance' their 'work' and 'life' responsibilities is itself a NSR to contemporary postindustrial society. This is a highly important point which, to repeat, has been articulated by a small number of welfare state researchers (Bonoli, 2005, 2006; Hildebrandt and Littig, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004a, 2004b) but surprisingly, is almost totally absent from the existing WLB work-based literature (with the exception of Blundson and McNeil, 2006). Other typical NSRs include single parenthood, having a frail relative, possessing low or obsolete skills and insufficient social security coverage (Bonoli, 2005, 2006). Along with WLB, each of these situations are caused by varying macro and structural factors, with two main similarities. First, they are all typical of postindustrial societies (during industrial society, these risks were at best marginal). Secondly, different NSRs tend to be concentrated among similar social groups –

usually younger people, families with young children, working women and those with low skills (Bonoli, 2006: 7-8).

Returning specifically to the matter of WLB, the substantial entry of women into the labour market has destabilised the standard division of labour within families that was typical of Industrial Society. Domestic and childcare work that previously tended to be performed on an unpaid basis by housewives now needs to be externalised via either the state or private market-based arrangements (an issue returned to shortly). Corresponding to the view noted earlier by Esping-Anderson (1999) regarding how an individual risk becomes 'social', a substantial and diverse body of research has attested to what can be understood as the associated risks of role-conflict (i.e. the inability to reconcile 'work' and 'life'). Clearly, this perspective emphasises the more negative aspects of risk; it demonstrates how outcomes associated with role-conflict manifest across the continuum from the individual to the social. Typical examples include: poor health outcomes (Sparks et al., 1997), specifically related to heightened levels of stress (Edwards and Rothbard, 2005; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2007; Evans, 2001; Zuzanek, 2005) and sickness absences (Jansen et al., 2007); decreased quality of life and lower levels of life satisfaction (Adams et al., 1996; Galinsky et al., 2001; Smith Major et al., 2002; Worrall and Cooper, 2001); decreased fertility rates; and the absence of parental supervision of children and other dependents (Albrecht, 2003).

It is clear, therefore, that the NSR of WLB holds very real implications not only for the state, but also 'for the long-term sustainability of individuals, families, communities and of workplace organisations that rely on their human resources' (Gambles et al., 2006: 54). Role conflict has come to embody a multi-level form of risk, posing challenges for the individual, households, employers and the state. Unquestionably, it is a risk which is profoundly *gendered* in nature - the division between paid and unpaid contributions to

families remains heavily unequal and reaches critical points at times of transition, such as the arrival of children.

Crucially, commentators such as Bonoli (2006: 4) have argued that the typical response by (neo)liberal states has simply been to *ignore* NSRs, leaving the responsibility for their management in the hands of the domestic sphere and the market. Regarding WLB, this observation is accurate, but only to a point. Rather, the neoliberal-influenced state has attempted to subtly extend and advance its influence upon people and the impact of NSRs via a move to *privatise* risk and responsibility. In the realm of WLB, this strategy is discernable at two macro levels – what I am terming its ‘life’ and ‘work’ focused responses. By ‘life-focused responses’ I refer to the trend to privatise social reproduction, whilst ‘work-focused responses’ primarily refers to the exaltation of individualised forms of flexible working. I now briefly examine the first of these in order to provide the appropriate context for consideration of the second – that which represents the focus of the remainder of the chapter and thesis.

#### **4.2.3 Neoliberalism’s ‘Life-Focused Response’: The Privatisation of Social Reproduction**

The neoliberal project is characterised by a number of core elements, one of which is the privatisation of social reproduction (Stanford and Vosko, 2004). As such, there exists a growing expectation among employers and the state that private households and/or third sector organisations will themselves manage the burden of *social reproduction*. By ‘social reproduction’ what is meant is ‘a range of activities related to the daily and intergenerational maintenance of people’ (Stanford and Vosko, 2004: 10). As Elson argues, flexibilisation polices ‘reduce risks for individual firms in the private sector, but at the cost of shifting risks to the domestic sector’ (1998: 205). This occurs in the context of wider state and employer withdrawal from the overall responsibility for the security of workers and their dependents (Stanford and Vosko, 2004).

Households are far more able to manage the risk of WLB in situations of rapid growth and full employment, particularly of course if they have easy access to high levels of social, cultural and economic capital. Similarly, it is also well-documented that households can manage this risk far more successfully in contexts of extensive work-life interventions from the state sector – most clearly demonstrated in the Scandinavian social democratic welfare states (Bittman, 1999; Brandth and Kvande, 2001; Cousins and Tang, 2004; Den Dulk et al., 2005; Leitner and Wroblewski, 2006). But when both these conditions are notable by their absence, it is over-optimistic to expect the domestic sector to be able to manage and absorb all the risks (Elson, 1998). Consistent with the findings of Chapter Two, this privatising impulse results in individuals being required to enter into private *market-based* arrangements, with the significant growth of this form of childcare most striking. However, research has attested to the fact that commercial services of this type remain expensive in the UK and, consequently, inaccessible for large proportions of the population (den Dulk et al., 2005; Dirk Vlasblom and Schippers, 2006).

Contra Bonoli (2006), this particular response by the UK's neoliberal influenced state to the NSR of WLB involves more than just ignoring it. Certainly, the state's non-interventionist stance has required the social actors of the family and the market to assume a great deal of the responsibility. Yet this shifting of responsibility, along with its correlate risk, is itself a particularly active and deliberate form of neoliberal governance. The next chapter builds upon these arguments to outline the main ways in which neoliberalism has responded to the NSR of WLB in terms of its 'work-focused response'. However, before this can be undertaken, it is essential to first consider the political context of the British state.

### **4.3 Political Context of the UK**

Two main ideas run through this section. The first is that, as numerous commentators have noted, New Labour can be seen to be strongly influenced by neoliberal discourse and practice. Secondly, in light of this recognition, the main way in which the specific ideology of the privatisation of risk and responsibility can be perceived discursively is in terms of the Third Way's mantra of 'no rights without responsibility'. Recognition of these points is vital if in later chapters I am to establish a link between the discourses and practices of neoliberalism, the way New Labour has responded to the NSR of WLB and how this comes to be experienced by employees at a typical 'best practice' workplace.

#### **4.3.1 The Third Way and New Labour**

Social policies, political decision making and responses to social risks do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are products of the social, cultural, economic and political – that is structural – environment in which they are situated. Here I examine what I consider to be the foremost aspect of the British state's response to the NSR of WLB at the end of the twentieth century/beginning of the twenty-first: the political context of the Third Way and New Labour (although of course this is intricately related to the social and cultural spheres).

First and foremost, the Third Way is the guiding philosophy of New Labour and other centre-left political parties across Western liberal democracies (Callinicos, 2001; Driver and Martell, 2000). On the surface, it is presented as an effort to construct a new social democratic agenda for contemporary society, one which succeeds in transcending the major political paradigms of the post-war years: classic social democracy (the old left) and neoliberalism (the new right). According to Giddens (1998: 26), it

represents 'a framework of thinking and policy making that seeks to adapt social democracy to a world that has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades'.

Of course, a vast literature exists debating the extent to which the Third Way and New Labour actually do mark a radical break from older political forms (see for instance Driver and Martell, 2000; Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2001). This is an important body of study which needs briefly alluding to, but is not the main focus here. For instance, Gray (1996, 1997) has been the leading voice to argue that left and right have been *transcended*. Others meanwhile, understand the reality to be more one of *synthesis* or *combination*, where traditional principles which have proved divisive such as equality and efficiency have been 'mixed together rather than left behind' (Driver and Martell, 2000: 154). Whilst still others have argued that the Third Way (and New Labour as a government of the Third Way) more accurately figures as a *continuation* (to lesser and greater extents) of *neoliberal*/Thatcherist ideology and practice (Callinicos, 2001; Cammack, 2004; Crouch, 2001; Fleetwood, 2007b; Hall, 2003; Hay, 1999; Heffernan 2001; Morrison, 2004; Smith and Morton 2006). For example, recent developments in the fields of urban governance arrangements (Fuller and Geddes, 2008) and social work and the Change for Children programme (Garret, 2006) have been interpreted as further evidence of this trend.

Consistent with the arguments presented thus far and as alluded to already, this study broadly adopts the latter position. Whilst Third Way and New Labour values and approaches to policy are *not* a straightforward and unequivocal continuation of new right/neoliberal ideology, I would suggest that they essentially *do* correspond to a 'social-democratic variant of neo-liberalism' (Hall, 2003: 22). Overall, New Labour claims for a Third Way have succeeded in further embedding the hegemony of neoliberal ideology; changing political formations and projects have adjusted to *capital*, allowing it to continue in its attempts to colonise all aspects of social life. Clearly, this perspective is diametrically opposed to that of

Giddens, who has been at pains to emphasise that 'Third Way politics is not a continuation of neo-liberalism, but an alternative political philosophy' (Giddens, 2000: 32-33; see also Giddens, 2007).

Given space limitations, the intention here is not to repeat and review these arguments, but to instead focus on the most distinctive and essential philosophy/value of Third Way politics, that of 'no rights without responsibilities' (Giddens, 1998: 65). My central contention is that this represents the *discursive translation of the neoliberal strategy to privatise risk and responsibility*. The Third Way finds its most explicit discursive expression in two publications, Tony Blair's *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century* (1998) and Anthony Giddens's *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998). Here I examine the latter, given its particular emphasis on issues related to responsibility and risk.

#### **4.3.2 Giddens and 'No Rights Without Responsibilities'**

In Giddens's account, five inter-related 'dilemmas' are identified which, it is argued, need to be tackled head on if social democracy is to be renewed: globalisation; individualism (a development almost identical to Beck's notion of 'individualization'); the gradual dissolution of the distinction between left and right; the extent to which political agency is moving away from orthodox practices; and the need to respond to ecological issues. It is against this backdrop that the Third Way emerges, premised upon the twin principles of 'no authority without democracy' and, most significantly, 'no rights without responsibilities' (Giddens, 1998: 65-66). According to Giddens:

Freedom to social democrats should mean autonomy of action, which in turn demands the involvement of the wider social community. Having abandoned collectivism, Third Way politics looks for a new relationship between the individual and

the community, a redefinition of rights and obligations. One might suggest as a prime motto for the new politics, *no rights without responsibilities*. (p. 65; original emphasis)

Giddens acknowledges that government retains a range of responsibilities in relation to its citizens (and others), particularly the protection of the vulnerable. One of the (many) critiques to be levelled at 'old style' social democracy is that it tended to treat rights as unconditional claims. In this sense, the Third Way agrees with the New Right belief that the classic welfare state bred dependence and fostered a dependency culture. Governments of the New Right sought to 'roll back' the welfare state, attempting to revitalise moral obligation and obedience (Dean, 2003). However, now, with the upsurge in individualisation, the Third Way frames this in terms of the need for an associated extension of individual obligations. 'No rights without responsibilities' therefore figures as one of the most important guiding *moral* principles of Third Way thinking (Fairclough, 2000), one which must be applied to all people. Social democracy is therefore characterised as wholly obsolete. As Cammack argues (2004: 156), Giddens's presentation of social democracy is itself highly selective, tending to crudely characterise social democrats as being reluctant to take responsibility for their own lives, passively dependent on the state and seeking collectivism as a refuge from the demands of responsibility and mutual obligation.

The association between Third Way politics and the neoliberal value of individual responsibility is easily stated. However, the relationship between the Third Way and the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk is slightly less obvious, though no less important. Given that Giddens, along with Beck, is one of the key theorists of the risk society approach, it is unsurprising that risk itself assumes an important role in his vision of the new politics. In light of previous discussion on this theme, the main point to emphasise is that Third Way thinking understands risk as a central and essential element of contemporary social life. As such, Giddens attempts to reconfigure our thinking with regard to the notion of 'security', questioning

the assumption that the welfare state successfully protected citizens from risk (Cammack, 2004: 159-160). Instead he suggests that the welfare state reflected a continuum with 'tradition and nature', as opposed to a concerted effort to protect individuals from risks 'which we have created ourselves' (Giddens, 1998: 62). To repeat a point made earlier, critically, risk is therefore not seen as simply a negative phenomenon, but rather, it is 'the energizing principle of a society that has broken away from tradition and nature' (Giddens, 1998: 63). This then provides evidence for the governmentality account of risk considered previously – the assertion that the neoliberal (or, advanced liberal) state is seeking to restore civic duty and to foster a new ethic of self-governance, compelling individuals to embrace risk (Baker and Simon, 2002; Rose, 1996a, 1999a, 1999b).

According to Giddens, in contemporary society the beneficial aspects of risk are reflected via direct exposure to capitalist market forces:

Opportunity and innovation are the positive side to risk. No one can escape risk of course, but there is a basic difference between the passive experience of risk and the active exploration of risk environments. A positive engagement with risk is a necessary component of social and economic mobilization. Some risks we wish to minimise as far as possible; others, such as those involved in investment decisions, are a positive and inevitable part of a successful market economy. (Giddens, 1998: 63-64)

Thus, from an initial concern with ecological issues such as BSE, Giddens moves to recalibrate the classic social democratic value of security in terms of structured risk and insecurity, via open exposure to the market. As Cammack (2004: 160) has forcefully argued, it is surely 'adding insult to injury to seek to legitimise the process in the language of social democracy'. Moreover, in line with the arguments

outlined previously, whilst I would agree that risk should not be understood solely negatively and that, to an extent, it may be 'energizing'; it is undoubtedly more energizing for some than for others (Atkinson, 2007; Elliott, 2002; McMyler, 1996; Mythen, 2005; Scott, 2000).

Overall, what is presented by Giddens then is a version of a new politics which closely aligns with neoliberalism's emphasis on personal responsibility and the individual embrace of risk. This is developed alongside a changing conception of rights in which individual rights are circumscribed, except for those which pertain to responsible citizens who hold 'the expression of personal voice, competence, and self-sufficiency; that is, as exemplars of neo-liberalism' (Ericson et al., 2000: 554). Furthermore, the compact between the state and individual is rarely an even one. The discourse of 'no rights without responsibilities' masks the inevitable imbalance of power relations to the extent that it is, in practice, fundamentally uneven (cf. Fleetwood, 2007b; Rutherford 2007a). The neoliberal-inspired Third Way readily acknowledges risk as central to contemporary life, urging both political and social policy to actively engage with the risk society. One of the primary means through which this may be achieved is through the shifting of responsibility away from the state, a strategy which is seen to energize both the state/economy and all other parties. In sum, Giddens' Third Way strongly contributes towards an intellectual justification for the neoliberal imperative to privatise the responsibility for the management of risk. Below I consider the extent to which this can be seen to have impacted upon New Labour.

#### **4.3.3 Impact of Third Way Thinking Upon New Labour**

Although the extent to which New Labour has actually been influenced by Giddens may be called into question (Driver and Martell, 2000; Morrison 2004), there can be little doubt that the Third Way represents the central political discourse behind New Labour (Leggett, 2005a). To repeat, the proliferation of Third Way discourse (particularly that of 'no rights without responsibilities') is one of the

prime methods by which the neoliberal strategy to privatise risk and responsibility has been translated into the realm of practice. There are many examples of politicians drawing on this discourse, although one of the earliest and most significant instances was provided by Blair himself in his 1995 *Spectator* lecture, entitled simply *The Rights We Enjoy Reflect the Duties We Owe*. Here, as often elsewhere, Blair links the notion of reciprocal rights and responsibilities with ideas of community and citizenship:

The rights we receive should reflect the duties we owe. With the power should come the responsibility ... we do not live by economics alone ... a society which is fragmented and divided, where people feel no sense of shared purpose, is unlikely to produce well-adjusted and responsible citizens. (Blair, 1995).

What Blair is arguing here is that the New Labour vision of society is one in which people should not simply claim rights from the state, but also accept their individual responsibilities and duties as citizens (as individuals, parents and members of communities, etc). Third Way-led government aims to stress the value of 'community' by supporting those structures and institutions of civil society which promote individual opportunity and ground 'responsibility' in meaningful social relationships e.g. the family and voluntary organisations (Driver and Martell, 2000). A further notable, and more recent, example of this type of comment was expressed by the then New Labour election chief, Alan Milburn when he opened the 2005 Election campaign by telling 'hard working people' that: 'if you play by the rules, you get a chance to progress'. Here, it is seen as in the interests of the wider community that individuals understand they have a responsibility to slot into the new economy (cited in Leggett, 2005a: 147).

As the above example by Blair demonstrates, it is not just the term 'responsibilities' which is counterposed to that of 'rights' – 'duties' and 'obligations' are also commonplace, although less used. This technique, as Fairclough (2000: 39-40) has shown, succeeds in combining moral with contractual

discourse which, in turn, interprets the distribution of rights and responsibilities metaphorically as a 'contract' or 'deal' between the individual and society and/or the individual and government. Of course, as I have already alluded to, much debate exists regarding the degree of change between New Labour and the 'old left' (Driver and Martell, 2000; Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2001). Whatever the extent of this, the main point to recognise is that there *does* appear to be a clear distinction between the notions of collectivism previously used by the 'old left', when compared to the inherently individualist and individualising discourse of New Labour (Fairclough, 2000). For instance, the 'deals' which are to now be 'contracted', are entered into by individuals of their own accord, and involve the acceptance of individual 'responsibilities' and 'duties'. By implication, it also emphasises the injustice of 'free-riding' on the efforts of others (Jordan, 1998). The picture appearing is clear. New Labour rejects collectivism and does not acknowledge the way in which structural and economic barriers constrain individuals. Instead, it aligns itself with the neoliberal project. Politics is being returned to 'active' citizens, in the form of individual morality and community responsibility (Rose, 1999a).

The emergence of this form of morally-loaded discourse is one of the significant features of New Labour and the Third Way. Frequently expressed by individual politicians and operationalized across large swathes of policy (not least that which was considered in Chapter Two in terms of employment), the neoliberal imperative to privatise responsibility which lies at its heart is extremely powerful and should not be underestimated. Critically, as I have shown, this logic necessitates a transferal of both responsibility and *risk* to the individual.

#### **4.3.4 General Implications For Employment**

Before closing, a brief word is necessary regarding what have been the general implications for the field of employment as a result of this political context. Since coming to power in 1997, New Labour has

followed a Third Way approach to regulation which represents a departure from 'old Labour's' social democratic perspectives on employment regulations and the role this sees for the state in addressing power imbalances between capital and labour. In sum, the abilities of employers to retain their efficiency within an increasingly 'flexible' labour market has been privileged over the fair treatment of workers. Although referring specifically to the field of industrial relations, the analysis of Crouch remains indicative of the broader category of employment:

New Labour represents a continuation of the neo-liberalism of the Conservative government, but one required to make more concessions than its predecessor with trade unions and social-democratic policy preferences. (Crouch, 2001: 104)

Generally speaking, this political ideology has tended to have been characterised by the rejection of an interventionist approach to employment regulation. For proponents of the Third Way, intervention is considered 'risky, futile and inappropriate', primarily because of the belief that over-regulation will deter investment and lead to it being transferred to nation states which possess more favourable regulatory regimes (Roper et al., 2003: 212). Intervention is also considered unsuitable because of the emergence of increasingly complex patterns of interests and values between labour and capital which have replaced previous, bi-polar formations (Giddens, 1998). In the context of what Ackers (2002) has termed the neo-pluralist reformulation of the role of the state, labour is seen as constituting only one competing interest group amongst many; considered against a wider array of individually and collectively organised producer and consumer interests and, additionally, value systems that the state needs to mediate between. As has been shown, Third Way ideology understands that Government today must work with the market, not against it:

The left has to get comfortable with markets, with the role of business in the creation of wealth, and the fact that private capital is essential for social investment ... Government must play a basic role in sustaining the social and civic frameworks upon which markets actually depend. (Giddens, 1998: 34, 38)

When intervention does occur (however minimally), it is purely so as to improve labour-market efficiency, in order 'to raise employment and develop a diverse pool of skilled labour' (Treasury 2002: 6). Typical examples regard initiatives such as the national minimum wage (Smith and Morton, 2006) and, as will be elaborated in depth in the following chapter, the WLB 'RTR' policy. However, as Howell (2004) has argued, regulation of this type must remain business friendly, not imposing labour-market rigidities or placing disproportionate costs on employers

One of the other main implications to arise from this particular context is the total and hegemonic elevation of paid work above all else, the prime means by which individuals can successfully negotiate the challenges of the risk society. For New Labour and the Third Way, the labour market is understood as the prime arena for removing dependency and enhancing participation in social life, as well as being the central source of identity formation. Not only is the work ethic of vital importance to economic prosperity and national regeneration, but also in carrying a moral benefit for the individuals involved and society as a whole (Kemshall, 2002). Again, countless examples of this discourse being articulated by politicians could be cited; Gordon Brown declaring that "The task is to revitalise the work ethic in our society" (Brown, 1998), as well as Jim Murphy (Minister of State for Employment and Welfare Reform) more recently arguing that "Work is the only way out of poverty ... the benefit system will never pay of itself [enough to lift people out of poverty] and I don't think it should" (cited in Timmins and Taylor, 2007), are two of many.

## Summary

This chapter began by making clear how the transition to neoliberalism related to the subsequent imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, before then demonstrating the first means by which WLB can be understood in terms of the concept of risk: that of a NSR to post-industrial society. I then briefly highlighted how an examination of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility first requires consideration of the country's political context. In the case of the UK, I have suggested that the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility for risk management finds its most explicit expression in the Third Way's mantra of 'no rights without responsibilities'. From this point onwards, I can examine in greater detail the ways in which the state's response to the NSR of WLB has been in keeping with this particular ideology, and the typical affects of it upon employees.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE RESPONSE OF NEW LABOUR AND TYPICAL EMPLOYERS

### TO WLB

#### Introduction

Neoliberalism has had to respond to the challenge of the NSR of WLB on two broad fronts, what I have termed its 'life' and 'work' focused responses. Chapter Four briefly considered the first of these (the imperative to privatise social reproduction), whilst here I deal with the second at length. The chapter is divided into two main strands. The first examines the 'two-pronged' (Gambles et al., 2006) *state* approach to WLB. This incorporates the strategies of minimal state legislation (primarily seen in the RTR legislation) and the encouragement of best practice firms to go further. The basic argument is that neoliberal risk and responsibility privatisation represents the key driver behind this particular response. This strand is largely macro/meso in its scope, focusing on the relationship between the state and employers. The second strand examines the response of the typical *employer* to the NSR of WLB. Here, individualised FWP's are assumed to be vital, with discussion focusing on the effects of this strategy for employees in terms of risk and responsibility. Given space considerations and the fact that this study is mainly conceptual, this chapter largely does *not* engage with recent empirical data relating to issues such as current FWP availability, levels of FWP take-up or the 'success' (or otherwise) of the RTR.

#### 5.1 The 'Two-Pronged' State Approach to WLB

Without wishing to go over old debates which have in part been covered at the beginning of Chapter One, given the rise of WLB, the policy makers of New Labour essentially faced a significant and long-standing trilemma: 'how is it possible to sustain functional families, while maximising labour force

participation, yet minimise social spending?’ (Dean, 2002: 6). The strategy employed by consecutive Conservative Governments during the 1980s and 1990s was prepared to sacrifice labour force participation in order to preserve the ‘traditional’ family, whilst seeking to shift both power and responsibility wherever appropriate from the state to the family.

In contrast, New Labour’s approach has given greater recognition to the diversity of family forms, continuing its commitment to replace the male breadwinner household model with what Lewis (2000) has termed the ‘adult worker model’. Of course this, in and of itself, is a well-researched area. The key point is that, as previously demonstrated, New Labour is absolutely determined to promote the idea that *all* parents should be able to ‘balance’ their ‘work’ and ‘life’ domains and, in so doing, maximise labour force participation and minimise state welfare dependency (Dean, 2002). Thus, in line with the political context considered in the preceding chapter, the state’s response to the issue of WLB has, unsurprisingly, been largely minimal and non-interventionist; rather than regulating change, employers are encouraged to act voluntarily, as the market permits, (TUC, 2006). Gambles et al. (2006: 26) have usefully termed this the ‘*two-pronged approach*’, in which, firstly, New Labour has constructed a statutory minimum framework of rights in relation to WLB, and, secondly, simultaneously encouraged employers to go further in enhancing productivity and competitiveness. Throughout, the neoliberal imperative of the privatisation of risk and responsibility both feeds into and permeates this entire state response to the NSR of WLB.

Overall, there has been little legislative intervention from the British state with regard to the NSR of WLB. As will be shown, this is particularly interesting given the point made earlier that social policies in welfare states attempt to manage and minimise social risk (Esping-Anderson, 1999). Main policy interventions with regard to WLB in the UK include:

- Parental leave
- Child tax credit
- Free nursery places for three and four year olds
- Childcare vouchers
- Flexible working request

Space precludes a consideration of the first four of these here and, indeed, they have been effectively examined elsewhere (see for instance: James, 2006; Kilkey, 2006; Wattis et al., 2006). However, New Labour's introduction of the flexible working request in April 2003, known as the 'Right to Request and the Duty to Consider' legislation, is the most notable of these policies and the cornerstone of their response to the issue of WLB. The RTR is both extremely significant and applicable to the ideas put forward in this thesis and, as such, will now be discussed in some depth.

### 5.1.1 Minimal Legislative Intervention – The Right to Request

For the first time, the RTR offered eligible employees (those with children under six or disabled children under eighteen) the legal right to request a flexible working pattern, as well as placing a legal duty upon employers to consider their requests seriously. As would be expected, the RTR is routinely cited and discussed in the existing (largely British) work-life literature, yet comparatively few accounts discuss the precise context surrounding its design and implementation. This is surprising and needs remedying, not least because it is particularly relevant here.

In the previous section I considered the *political* context of the Third Way, which, as will be demonstrated, is strongly in evidence with the RTR. Here, I also examine the precise *policy making* context which shaped the legislation, as well as examining the policy itself and the Government

discourse that has accompanied it. Before progressing however, it is important to acknowledge that individuals' engagement with FWP is most likely to be determined at an *organisational* level (formally and informally, between employers and employees), rather than through engagement with legislation (DTI, 2007; TUC, 2006; Wattis et al., 2006). For instance, research by Wattis et al. (2006) found that, whilst the RTR was rarely specifically drawn upon, respondents considered it of some value as both a formal back-up and a fallback mechanism for employees who felt their employer was treating them unfairly. Nonetheless, this does not preclude analysis of the RTR, since it represents the foremost *state* response to WLB. In sum, the argument presented in this section is that the RTR represents a classic policy manifestation of the Third Way's mantra of 'no rights without responsibilities'. Therefore, given my identification of WLB as a form of NSR, the RTR can also be seen as an excellent example of the neoliberal desire to manage and respond to risk through privatising it down to responsible individuals.

#### *5.1.1.a Policy-Making Context*

Since coming to power, New Labour has relied on a mix of policy-making styles and methods. Larsen et al. (2006) have drawn attention to how, on the one hand, certain policies are formulated behind closed doors by leaders and particular special advisors, with opposition, interest groups and backbenchers excluded. This involves the classic, centralised and top-down approach, with the introduction of top-up fees being a relatively recent example. On the other hand however, there is a more bottom-up approach, where external civil society groups are invited to public consultations and participate actively in policy design – particularly those more overtly 'business friendly' such as the CBI and the Institute of Directors (Smith and Morton, 2006). This method is used primarily when Government attempts to intervene in the private or voluntary sector, due in part to the recognition that targets alone cannot secure a successful implementation. As Larsen et al. have shown, the precise influence of external organisations depends upon their power relations with government and the specific type of policy under

consideration. Whilst some reforms have merely involved the consent of particular stakeholders, the design of others has largely been left to non-state actors.

It is clear that a bottom-up, inclusive approach was utilised in the design of the RTR. A number of organisations played crucial roles in the initial legislative proposal, particularly the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC). These suggestions then fed into the December 2000 Green Paper, *Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice* (DTI, 2000), which sought views on a range of proposals relating to maternity, paternity and parental leave and the role of employers and the state in promoting WLB. Most significantly, the Green Paper proposed to give both fathers and mothers a right to work reduced hours. Undoubtedly, this was a large departure from the previous situation in which employee use of FWP's rested solely upon the particular employer's willingness to adopt a flexible working environment (James, 2001). In effect, for the first time, fathers were seen by the Government to have a caring role (Kilkey, 2006).

The Green Paper presented WLB as nothing less than a 'win-win' situation for individuals, families and businesses and spoke of the increasing need to balance the interests of parents and business. It made clear that there is a definite business case for making sure that the skills of women, when they have children, are not lost to employers and the economy. However, there was also an obvious timidity regarding the way in which the right could impact on business (Dean, 2002). For instance, there was a clear reluctance to legislate, since it might 'undermine best practice or stifle innovation' (DTI, 2000: 6). Further, the Green Paper proposed that employers would be exempted only when it could be demonstrated that the reduction in working hours would in some way harm the business and not merely if such an arrangement was impracticable.

Following the publication of the green paper, consultation again ensued between relevant stakeholders (those part of a short-lived 'Work and Parents Taskforce'), a process which is highly significant and may be considered in two principal regards. Firstly, consensus was reached (for different reasons) among both parent and employer groups to create a more flexible arrangement whereby the right to reduced hours would be broadened out to encompass more substantive alterations to working time and space, i.e. to allow entitlements to *change* (not simply reduce) the hours worked and opportunities to work from home.

The second outcome proved far more contentious, with employer groups dominating the political process. Whilst the more employee-friendly groups, such as the TUC and EOC, campaigned for more generous rights, employer groups, most notably the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), opposed any concessions. For employers, an automatic right was seen as a step too far, having a negative impact upon them in terms of factors such as costs, planning and bureaucracy. The CBI were also consistently strongly opposed to the proposal that employment tribunals could assess the reasonableness of an employer's decision to refuse a request in a particular case (Anderson, 2003: 37). However, the key area of contention concerned the DTI's directive to consult on a form of legislation which would provide for requests to be made by eligible employees which would then be 'considered seriously by the employer' (see Anderson, 2003: 38). As such, the question of what precisely constituted 'serious consideration' became the crux of the debate. Whilst the TUC campaigned for a high standard of objective justification for any refusal by employers, the CBI refused to accept anything other than a procedural right.

During Spring 2003, Larsen et al. (2006: 639) interviewed a number of 'leading policy actors' from a wide range of political parties, trades unions, employers' associations and campaigning organisations, on a variety of issues relating to welfare reform. At least two of their respondents were involved in the

post-Green Paper consultation process that is under discussion here, both of whom testified to New Labour's difficulty in overruling employers in this matter:

It comes to some key points where it is about power. The desire of the government not to upset employers too much ... The Confederation of British Industry [CBI] had an awful lot of influence over the final shape of the scheme [work-life balance strategy]. (Interview at the EOC, 3 March 2003)

The taskforce ... was heavily dominated by employers' organisations and it [the taskforce] did have a crucial impact on the results ... we had to fight very hard to get very basic rights for workers ... Employers have got their own way. (Interview at the TUC, 24 March 2003)

Following the consultation on the Green Paper in which employer groups played an unequivocally strong role, New Labour responded with the formation of the current legislation. Originally introduced under the 2002 Employment Act, the RTR came into operation on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 2003. Initially those employees with children under six or disabled children under eighteen were eligible. However, this was extended to include carers of disabled adults from 6<sup>th</sup> April 2007 – a development highly commended in certain quarters (James, 2006). Eligibility further rested upon: the request being submitted no later than two weeks before the child's appropriate birthday; the employee having worked for his/her employer continuously for 26 weeks at the date the application is made; not being an agency worker; and not having made another application to work flexibly under the RTR during the past 12 months (DTI, 2006: 6).

As was suggested by both employer and employee groups following the Green Paper, flexible working came to be defined more broadly than simply reduced working hours: '(as) any working pattern other than the normal working pattern in an organisation' (DTI, 2006: 9). More specifically, this includes the options of part-time, annualised hours, compressed hours, flexitime, homeworking, job-sharing, shift working, staggered hours and term-time working (DTI, 2006: 9-10); although the point to emphasise is that the precise arrangement is left to employees and employers *themselves* to negotiate.

#### *5.1.1.b Formation and Implementation*

Overall, the RTR represents a pro-business and 'diluted' (Kilkey, 2006: 171) version of the original proposal. This is a fact attested to by the Government discourse at the time (DTI, 2001: para.7) and the current head of employment research at BERR (Fitzner, 2007), both of whom referred to the RTR as a 'lighter touch' form of legislation; eligible employees have only the right to *request* to work flexibly, rather than a right *per se*. An in-depth exposition of the precise workings of the RTR is unnecessary here, suffice it to say that, from the perspective of the Government, the legislation operates thus:

The initial onus is on the employee to prepare a carefully thought-out application well in advance of when they would like the desired working pattern to take effect. The employer then follows a set procedure to help ensure a request is considered seriously, which seeks to facilitate discussion and enables both parties to gain a clear understanding of each other's thinking. An employer may only refuse a request where there is a recognised business ground for doing so. (DTI, 2006: 2)

Essentially, a written application has to be submitted to the employer 'well in advance' of when the employee would like the FWP to begin (DTI, 2006: 12). This is required to address a number of key

points, particularly regarding what effect, if any, the proposed change would have on the firm and how this might be addressed.

Amidst the vast array of legislation ushered in during the New Labour regime, the RTR embodies *par excellence* the notion of 'no rights without responsibilities'. Discursively, the title of the policy counterposes 'rights' with 'duties' rather than 'responsibilities'. This choice of term carries with it greater legal and contractual (as well as moral) connotations. Moreover, it successfully sets up a 'deal' or 'contract' between the individual and the employer. Consistent with my analysis offered thus far, this 'contract' is fundamentally uneven, concealing an imbalance of power relations between the state and employer on one hand, and the flexibly working employee on the other.

The initial way in which this imbalance of power can be rendered explicit is through a brief examination of the DTI's official guide to the RTR (DTI, 2006). Here, pages 3-4 detail specifically, firstly, the 'rights' and, secondly, the 'responsibilities and best practice' for what I understand as both the 'active' employee and the 'dutiful' employer. For example, particular *employee* rights include: 'To apply to work flexibly'; 'To have their application considered properly in accordance with the set procedure and refused only where there is a clear business ground for doing so'; and 'Where an application is refused to have a written explanation explaining why'. Resistance is restricted to the right to 'appeal against the employer's decision to refuse an application' and, if necessary, 'To take a complaint to a tribunal in certain circumstances'. Meanwhile, employees have the responsibility to, for example: 'provide a carefully thought-out application'; 'ensure their application is valid by checking that all the eligibility criteria are met and that they have provided all the necessary information'; and, 'If necessary, be prepared to be flexible themselves, to reach an agreement with the employer'.

For the *employer*, the rights and responsibilities are both fewer in number and less demanding. Their rights are ultimately reducible to the legal ability to 'reject an application when the desired working pattern cannot be accommodated within the needs of the business'. Their responsibilities meanwhile, do not extend beyond the obligation to 'consider requests properly in accordance with the set procedure'. I return to consider the further affects of this logic, particularly its relationship to power, shortly.

An examination of the context surrounding the RTR highlights the quandary which New Labour faced regarding the allocation of the management of the NSR of WLB. Given its decision to intervene, however minimally, in a realm traditionally seen as outside the domain of government – the working relations between employees and employers – this had to be achieved in a way which did not overly impinge on the primary stakeholders in the debate. The example of the RTR thus particularly demonstrates the importance, within the inclusive approach to policy formation, of pre-existing power relations between government and stakeholders (Larsen et al., 2006). Dean (2002: 9) has referred to this as reflecting state unwillingness to 'override the business case' – a point developed below.

Social policies of this type are intended to allow for the management of risk to be made easier and less 'risky' for those involved. Thus, the RTR ought to have made it less costly for employees to alter their working times and spaces and, consequently, more effectively 'manage' their WLB. What I want to stress is that, *ceteris paribus*, it is likely that this is the case. The RTR is a definite step in the right direction in terms of necessary state intervention in the realm of the management of WLB. To a large extent, it is unlikely that this can be 'proved' and quantified – the majority of requests to work flexibly occur informally, or at least outside official RTR protocol. Of most interest, however, is the fact that this has been achieved in a manner in keeping with the wider neoliberal strategy for the privatisation of risk: to shift both the responsibility *and* the associated risks for the management of WLB directly onto eligible employees. This is perceptible in three broad areas.

The first regards the RTR's *narrow and restricted focus*. Initially, this can be elaborated given the fact that the final formation of the legislation is a clear dilution from its original proposal. Downgraded from an automatic non-negotiable right to work reduced hours, to that of simply a right to request to work flexibly which hinges on consent from and negotiation with an employer, it undoubtedly places the employee (both mothers and fathers) in a weaker bargaining position (Kilkey, 2006: 171).

The exclusivity of the RTR is also relevant. In relation to the statutes offered by other European countries, the RTR is perhaps most similar to The Dutch Act on Working Time Adjustment (Wet aanpassing arbeidsduur) which has been in force since July 2000 and, since January 2001, The German Act on Part-Time Work and Fixed-Term Contracts (Teilzeit und Befristungsgesetz) (Burri et al., 2003). A close comparison of these two policies to the RTR is beyond the scope of this study. However, the main point of divergence regards entitlement. The British version is the narrowest in that, with the recent exception of parents of disabled children, it is limited to parents with children aged under six and applies only to a form of flexibility specifically designed to facilitate childcare. By implication therefore, the RTR excludes all other types of employee. Whilst there is nothing to stop others applying to work flexibly, employers are under no duty to even consider their request.

As has already been discussed at length in Chapter One with regard to the fifth aspect of work-life organisational culture, co-worker support, there has been considerable debate about the extent to which an individuals' FWP usage negatively (or not) contributes to issues of perceived fairness and organisational justice. Transposed to the realm of the RTR legislation, it could be argued that, given the high level of specificity and exclusivity which New Labour has built into the legislation, this has led to an inevitable polarisation of employees within the workplace between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' (employees with or without young and/or disabled children). Whether this is an accurate assessment or

not is, for my present purposes, besides the point (and there is no reliable empirical data to resolve this issue). Whatever else, the highly restricted and formalised nature of the RTR increases the *capacity* for perceptions of inequity amongst those ineligible.

The RTR also contains a further set of eligibility criteria for those wishing to apply. These include the legal requirements that the employee:

- Makes the request no later than two weeks before the child's appropriate birthday
- Has worked for their employer continuously for 26 weeks at the date the application is made
- Has not made another application to work flexibly under the right during the past 12 months (DTI, 2006: 6)

The latter is perhaps the most contentious: a large number of those who submit applications may find the highly formalised process difficult. Given that both errors in the formal submission and employer refusals are likely to occur, it seems punitive for the employer to then be able to prevent any further application being lodged for a year.

Taken as a whole, the RTR presents a form of (minimal) state intervention which is, in practice, voluntaristic and highly individualised. This has been specifically suggested by both work groups (Flexibility, 2003; TUC, 2005b, 2006) and academic commentators (Gambles et al., 2006; James, 2006; Wattis et al. 2006), with James arguing that:

the onus is still very much on the employee to make the request in accordance with the procedural formalities of the legislation ... This adds to the overall weakness of

the legislation from the perspective of employees who are attempting to manage their work/life balance without compromising the employment relationship. (James, 2006: 277)

Whilst the RTR has been initiated at state level, the burden of responsibility for the successful enactment and continuation of the new working arrangement lies firmly with the employee. As such, the responsibility for the management of the NSR of WLB is shifted directly away from the state and employer and towards the individual. In effect, a neoliberal-influenced New Labour Government has successfully achieved its desire not to 'tell people how to make use of this new-found flexibility, but to create the conditions whereby employers and workers tailor individual solutions to suit their individual needs' (Fleetwood, 2007b: 391-392). Whilst New Labour has provided the legal framework, the ball has been placed in the court of the employee to enact it (cf. Brandt and Kvande, 2001).

The *second* main way in which the RTR coalesces with the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility is in terms of its *protection of the interests of capital*. The final design and implementation of the RTR goes some way to revealing where New Labour's priorities lie – ultimately with the needs of capital over labour, more specifically, the needs of business over parents and families (Dean, 2002; Fleetwood, 2007b; Hegewisch, 2005; Kilkey, 2006; Roper et al., 2001). It is bound by one important procedural limitation: making the employee legally responsible for considering the business and organisational feasibility of their request at the time s/he submits it. Thus, unlike maternity or parental leave rights, or, for example, the Swedish right for parents to work a six-hour day (which employers are duty bound to grant regardless of the business context), these new working statutes are wholly conditional on the business context and, consequently, more limited. As Hegewisch (2005: 108) has pointed out, this form of approach involves 'an institutionalization of a 'high involvement' route to economic change'. Essentially, employees are only able to enact their 'right' if they correctly engage

with the business and organisational context of their employer and adapt economically sound solutions to their particular requests for flexibility. Employers meanwhile, may object to a request provided they can demonstrate that they have constructively considered the proposal.

Further examination of the discourse of rights and duties/responsibilities upon which the RTR is designed offers another means by which this imbalance of power relations is manifest. Fleetwood has argued that this 'is potentially dangerous because it builds in, while concealing, an asymmetrical power relation' (2007b: 397). For instance, an employer may legitimately not offer the opportunity for FWP usage using the defence that it is incompatible with the needs of the business. However, it is hard to envisage an employee refusing to accept what Fleetwood refers to as an 'employer-friendly' FWP (such as annualised hours) under the assertion that 'such arrangements are not compatible with the nature of the family' (Fleetwood, 2007b: 397).

Thus, the RTR provides little real redress in situations where employers are uncooperative (TUC, 2006), to the extent that Anderson (2003) has termed it little more than 'sound bite legislation'. There are few opportunities to challenge a refused application, with the role of unions being restricted throughout until the employee reaches a tribunal process. However, the employment tribunal can only verify that the correct procedure was followed, that the request was taken seriously and that denial was in accordance with the permitted grounds – they are not authorised to question the validity of the employer's decision (James, 2006: 276). In sum, despite the fact that the RTR offers an impression of symmetry, it remains weak from the employee perspective, with power remaining firmly entrenched in the hands of the employer.

The *third* means by which the RTR conforms to the privatisation of risk and responsibility regards *the formalisation of the request process*. Section 5.2, which follows, considers the ways in which this logic is

manifest in terms of an individual's FWP usage, i.e. at the level of employer to employee. One of the principal arguments I will present is that the FWP process is akin to a double-edged sword – it presents both new opportunities *and* drawbacks for 'responsible' flexible working employees. This applies directly to the RTR. As suggested, in the ideal-type workplace, an employee would have no need to appeal to the RTR in order to request to work flexibly. The general tendency is that FWP usage in the UK occurs *informally* (i.e. without the need of a formal contract), or at least outside the specificities of the RTR.

The RTR is also a particularly strong type of formalised employment policy. This increases the potential, both positively and negatively, of the double-edged sword. For instance, on the positive side, it may well be the case that an employee who works for a FWP/WLB *unfriendly* employer now has the legal ability to make a request in an easier and less 'risky' manner than prior to the implementation of the RTR. Conversely, at a number of levels, the processes surrounding the employee's approach to their employer and the preparation of a formal business case may be something quite daunting and not unproblematic for many individuals, to the extent that it may prove prohibitive. Indeed, the TUC have argued that the formalisation of the request process has meant that the majority of the applications are only likely to be submitted if the employee considers that they are likely to be accepted (2006: 47). In effect, therefore, the employee undergoes something akin to a risk assessment when considering whether or not to submit a formal request; to have a formal request refused outright under the RTR is perhaps one of the greatest risks employees face. Moreover, it is also likely that, as I discuss further in the next section, the very act of submitting a request goes against dominant notions of the 'ideal worker'. Taken together, a formal application to work flexibly, let alone a refusal, may not be conducive to the employment relationship.

To summarise, in keeping with wider neoliberal governance, New Labour's RTR legislation succeeds in managing and minimising the NSR of WLB, largely through shifting the responsibility for its

management away from the state and, ultimately, onto the individual. Of course, it would be wrong to underestimate or ignore the extent to which the 'light-touch' approach affects employers as the mediating agent between the state and the individual. Returning once again to the planning and consultation stage of the RTR, Larsen et al. have argued that the reason the consent of employers was particularly needed was because 'the financial burden of the reforms ... [fell] ... primarily on the employers rather than the government' (2006: 639). True, a number of procedural and economic risks are shifted onto the employer as a result of the RTR, yet, through a combination of its narrow and restricted focus, its protection of the interests of capital and formalisation of the request process, the RTR succeeds ultimately in privatising the responsibility for the management of the FWP upon the individual employee. Whilst many pro-business voices continue to argue that the RTR is a burden upon employers (see for instance Shackleton, 2005), it remains far weaker from the employee perspective.

### 5.1.2 Encouragement of 'Best Practice' Firms to go Further

The second option pursued by New Labour in its 'two-pronged' approach to WLB has been to *encourage* employers to go further in enhancing productivity and competitiveness, that is, to advocate organisations to further offer and promote FWPs outside of and beyond the realm of formal legislation. Those who comply are considered 'best practice'. To repeat, aside from the RTR and other minor legislation (such as parental leave) organisations are under little formal obligation to play any role in their employees' reconciliation of work and life. As such, again there is a shifting of the responsibility for the management of WLB away from the state and towards those 'best practice' firms who are themselves responsible enough to offer both formal and informal FWPs. Crucially, however, this logic of privatisation is only *partial*; the flexibly working *individual* becomes the central site of responsibility regarding the management of the work-life domain.

In practice, the logic of the encouragement of firms to go further has been primarily achieved in four main ways. Firstly, 'best practice' WLB employers are routinely named, promoted and discussed across a broad range of government publications and websites. Secondly, national awards are presented in order 'to celebrate employment success stories' ([dwp.gov.uk](http://dwp.gov.uk), 2008). A recent example of this was the launch in January 2008 of a new set of national awards for employers involved in Local Employment Partnerships by the Department of Work and Pensions. The 'Employer award for work-life balance' was one of the six categories of prize offered ([dwp.gov.uk](http://dwp.gov.uk), 2008). It is important to bear in mind that the responsible or 'best practice' employer is not, of course, encouraged to offer FWPs solely for altruistic reasons. On the contrary, it is intricately tied in with the 'business case' for change and the benefits it is perceived to bring to the 'bottom-line' (Arthur and Cook, 2003; Bevan et al., 1999; Comfort et al., 2003; Glynn et al., 2002; Gottlieb et al., 1998; Lee et al., 2002). Even a cursory glance through the flexible working web pages of the Department of BERR ([berr.gov.uk](http://berr.gov.uk), 2008) and its associated 'Business Link' site ([businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk), 2008) highlights the centrality of this perspective. For instance, returning to the example of the recently introduced DWP award (cited above), there is little ambiguity about what constitutes 'good practice': 'The winning employer will demonstrate the best approach to creating work life balance initiatives that encourage recruitment and retention' ([dwp.gov.uk](http://dwp.gov.uk), 2008). A sizeable BERR literature has built up to support this vision, exhorting employers to consider new ways of working, alongside the foregrounding of numerous organisational case studies where FWPs have been successfully implemented.

The third way in which the logic of encouragement has been translated into practice concerns the Government's establishment in 2000 of the WLB Challenge Fund. The stated aim of this initiative was to provide financial aid to employers in order to help them realise the bottom-line benefits of adopting FWPs, and subsequently to develop them. This was to be achieved by enabling employers to draw on monetary support to finance advice from specialist consultancy firms. According to its first official

evaluation, the Challenge Fund had 'enabled employers to introduce significant changes in their employment practices', although it remained 'difficult to measure bottom-line outcomes such as retention, employee absence and turnover, or to attribute any changes in these to the [Challenge Fund]' (Nelson et al., 2004: 9). As Gambles et al. argue (2006: 26-27), although this represents an 'innovative approach', funding has generally been short term and requires outcomes to be quickly reported – something which goes against the received wisdom that WLB initiatives need to be more long term if they are to begin to affect mainstream structures, cultures and practices.

The fourth and most recent Government initiative has been to assist the charity Working Families in providing part-funding of a new interactive website, launched in June 2008, called 'Work Re-tune' (Working Families, 2008). The website is designed to help managers and their employers to understand, negotiate and, if possible, implement greater flexibility in their respective roles. Users work through a series of questions which help them to assess opportunities, barriers and concerns, both personal and professional, when considering a change in their work patterns. Advice is also offered on particular types of FWP, alongside the entire process involved when looking to make a request (e.g. negotiation and implementation, rights and responsibilities, the legal position). It is interesting that this scheme, like many others of its type, is aimed at professionals and managers – those often characterised as 'time-poor cash-rich' (Fleetwood, 2007a). Whilst the aims of the website are no doubt commendable, in reality it is probable that only those *already* interested and open to change and/or greater flexibility will be likely to take the time to work their way through the website and begin to implement changes as a result. The biggest challenge remains altering the mindsets and cultures of those organisations which are stubbornly resistant to change and the benefits of flexible working.

## 5.2 Employer Response: FWP as Individualised Risk Management

### 5.2.1 Individualised FWPs as the Most Desired Means of Managing WLB

I have argued that the response of the British state to the NSR of WLB has been organised around a 'two-pronged approach'. This has involved, on the one hand, limited, business friendly legislation (most clearly expressed in the RTR) and, on the other, the encouragement of firms to go further than they already are doing. Transferred over to the arena of the typical *employer*, in practice this places the role of individualised FWPs (be they formal or informal, but which occur *outside* the legislative remit of the RTR) as absolutely crucial, indeed the very crux of the entire attempt by the state to 'manage' the emergence of WLB as a key issue and social risk of our time.

Translated to the realm of the employer – employee, this creates a context whereby the dominant message from across the work-life managerial discourse is that a person's uptake of a FWP represents the best strategy towards the formal management of their work-life interface. The prime reason for this is that working flexibly maintains labour force participation (although in certain cases, particularly that of part-time working, this is of course reduced) whilst not relying (to a full extent at least) on state welfare provision. As I discuss below, the successful utilisation of the FWP is ultimately the responsibility of the employee, and not that of the state or the employer.

FWPs present a fresh opportunity for employees to attempt to more successfully manage, negotiate, bring under control and exert power over their personal work-life interface. On the surface at least, they offer workers the chance to reclaim a sense of agency over their increasingly complex, time-short, lives (Brannen, 2005). Viewed through the lens of neoliberalism, FWPs embody an individualised form of risk management. Put another way, if the NSR of WLB represents, broadly speaking, a structural problem,

then FWPs in turn represent a biographical solution of the type discussed by Beck (1992), Bauman (2001a, 2001b, 2003) and Bunting (2004).

### 5.2.2 Flexible Working and Work-life Organisational Culture

Analysis of the typical employer response to WLB in terms of neoliberal risk and responsibility privatisation necessitates consideration of the concept of *work-life organisational culture*. This strand of analysis is particularly significant, given that it provides the conceptual framework to be adopted for the empirical study. As documented in Chapter One, the notion of work-life culture is being drawn upon with growing frequency within the WLB literature. At its heart lies the assumption that traditional, deeply embedded and largely implicit/informal norms and assumptions regarding gender, the nature of work and what constitutes the 'ideal' employee (particularly the requirement to engage in high levels of 'face time') persist and tend to *negatively* influence the implementation, effectiveness and uptake of FWPs. So, whilst formal FWPs intended to enable employees to better manage their WLB may be important indications of an organisation's intent, they do not necessarily coalesce with the informal culture (Bond, 2004; Callan, 2007; van Doorne-Huiskes et al., 2005; EOC, 2007; Gambles et al., 2006; Hochschild, 1997; HREOC, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Lewis, 2001, 2003; McDonald et al., 2007; Rapoport et al., 2002, Thompson et al., 1999; TUC, 2006; Unison, 2006).

Critical to this study is the suggestion that the notion of work-life culture assumes greater significance when understood as essentially *structural* in nature. Understood in this manner, it allows an organisation's work-life culture to be conceived as that which affects and helps determine the way employees think and the way they understand their position in relation to others in the organisation, with action occurring within this set of pre-existing cultural conditions. Importantly, groups or individuals

retain the ability to *challenge* these particular cultural norms, typically through independent thinking, campaigning or persuasion.

I would suggest that this is precisely what occurs when employees opt to engage in the flexible working process, a fact best elucidated when compared with the 'ideal worker'. To borrow the language of Giddens, the ideal worker, as an actor within an organisations' dominant work-life culture, successfully 'embraces' the NSR of WLB head-on, fully playing the role required of them by the market economy and being 'energised' through this involvement. On the other hand, for those who wish to (for whatever reason) make concerted efforts to better manage their WLB, FWPs may be on offer in their workplace. These offer new levels of temporal and spatial *agency* whereby the domains of 'work' and 'life' can be 'balanced'. That is, the employee who opts to (formally) work flexibly is of course not released from their organisation's work-life culture, but, having received the go-ahead from management/HR, is permitted new agency within it. However, the crux of the matter is that, ideologically, the ideal worker *should not* and *does not* work flexibly. Put another way, the flexible worker problematizes and represents a challenge to their organisation's existing culture.

Crucially, FWP utilisation can only occur if it is simultaneously followed by a movement of risk and responsibility. These are shifted directionally away from those collective bodies which are constitutive of the culture/structure (for example the particular profession and the organisation itself) and towards the employee. Moreover, the greater the discrepancy between the flexible worker and the organisation's standard working practices and discourses of the ideal worker, the greater the shift of risk and responsibility. Below I consider in more depth the consequences of this neoliberal influenced logic, in terms of the related forces of risk and responsibility.

### 5.2.3 Privatisation of Responsibility

There are two main senses in which this trend can be perceived. The first relates to the individual's *initial engagement* with the flexible working process. In line with the recognition considered earlier by Giddens (1999), counterposed to risk, one way in which the concept of responsibility may be understood is when a person takes a decision with discernable consequences. Particularly within a neoliberal context favouring individualised and voluntaristic flexibility, whereby the emphasis is heavily on the employee as opposed to the employer, almost any level of employee engagement with the flexible working process (it may, for instance, simply involve the initiation of a dialogue with a manager regarding possible options for flexible working) *necessarily* involves a series of these types of decisions. For instance, consider the individual who requests to work from home two days a week. Assuming this is granted (be it informally or formally), such a decision necessarily holds a series of discernable consequences not only for the individual, but also for their manager(s), immediate colleagues, other technical staff (who in such cases are typically required to install the necessary technology at home and assess the site for health and safety), as well as potentially their household and service users or customers (cf. Van Dyne et al., 2007). Thus, the shift of responsibility to the employee becomes a natural by-product of the decision to work flexibly.

The second sense relates to the *ongoing* and day-to-day nature of working flexibly. The flexibly working individual must, in order to compensate for their deviation from the ideal-typical employee, necessarily hold a renewed sense of responsibility which actively demonstrates their commitment and gratitude to the organisation. Following the Third Way logic of a 'something for something' society, the employee is required to be *morally* responsible in order to enjoy the benefits which accrue from being better able to integrate their work-life domains. Evidence of this neoliberal responsabilizing approach is widespread across the managerial discourse on flexible working (and, of course, the RTR). For instance, consider the following by the CIPD:

Table 3 sets out the potential responsibilities of the various players involved in flexible working. It indicates the kind of role a manager could be expected to play in relation to flexible working. It also suggests the need for individual employees to consider seriously their responsibilities with regard to flexible working: a need for a considered and responsible approach rather than an assumption that flexible working is a right. (CIPD, 2005: 21)

This has produced a context in which flexible working, as a form of individualised risk management, has, in effect, become akin to both 'a moral obligation and a social constraint' (Coffield, 1999: 488). It confers a moral responsibility upon the active employee (who now holds new levels of autonomy) to undertake their FWP in a self-determined, self-sustaining manner which in no way negatively impacts upon wider group processes and the quality and amount of work achieved. It also functions as a form of social control in that it seeks to *regulate* and *limit* the use of flexible working amongst the labour force, helping perpetuate FWPs as contra typical and traditional working patterns.

#### 5.2.4 Privatisation of Risk

As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, I understand the concept of risk to equate to the possibility of outcomes (positive and negative) that arise from progress. Broadly speaking, therefore, risk in this particular context equates to the possible eventualities (cf. Ewald, 1991; Sparks, 2001) which arise as a result of the increase in complexity induced by an individual's engagement with the flexible working process. Put another way, risks are the externalities (positive, negative, complex; that is *double-edged*) to occur from the progress (new levels of agency) brought by the employee's disembedding from standard working practices within his/her organisation's work-life culture.

A brief elaboration on this is necessary. One of the main findings from Chapter One was the agreement that the reduction in face time brought about an individuals' uptake of a FWP (i.e. the new agency) holds the definite *potential* for both backlash and coordination problems amongst the wider work group. That is, flexible working tends to render the existing working processes of the individual and wider team more *complex*. Given that increasing complexity is one of the hallmarks of risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991), it is therefore unsurprising that the new set of potential eventualities (outcomes) which occur are themselves complex, non win-win and double-edged in character. Consequently, an individual's FWP usage has the potential for both gains *and* losses; but, to repeat, this distinction is not a simple either/or but rather a both/and. The main point to recognise is that, for the typical employee, these outcomes tend to be interpreted as part of the inevitable *trade-off* which lies at the heart of flexible working (Callan, 2007; Corwin et al., 2001; MacDermid et al., 2001; McDonald et al., 2005, 2007; Tomlinson, 2007). Certainly, this perspective is at odds with a large amount of the 'official' work-life discourse (predominantly from Government sources), where the option to utilise a FWP is rendered straightforward and unproblematic (Amble, 2005; DTI, 2006: 2).

Of course, caution is required to avoid crudely labelling certain outcomes as either 'positive' or 'negative'. Individuals interpret social processes differently, they are not robots. However, Chapter One surveyed the existing literature and, drawing on the conceptual framework of 'work-life organisational culture' (McDonald et al. (2007), demonstrated the most typical manifestations of the double-edged sword. The most prominent negative consequences to arise from an individual's FWP usage (which are themselves very occasionally articulated in terms of 'risks' in the existing work-life discourse) include: stalled career advancement; perceived lack of organisational commitment; backlash/resentment from co-workers; and coordination problems for the wider group. As would be expected, the possibility that

these risks may occur (and their intensity) will depend on the precise nature of the organisation's existing work-life culture and the extent to which it is receptive and adaptable to FWP usage.

Unquestionably, however, at the same time there is evidence that the take-up of a FWP creates a wealth of new opportunities to better integrate and manage the often competing demands of work and life, in ways which are almost impossible under standard working arrangements. These should in no way be underestimated and in this sense incorporate Giddens' observation that 'opportunity and innovation are the positive side of risk' (1998: 63-64). The point to stress is that, within the dominant context of individualised flexibility which has been established under New Labour, these risks – however positive, negative or complex their character – are ultimately shifted onto, and negotiated by, the employee themselves.

### **Summary**

This chapter has considered the work-focused response of New Labour and typical employers to the NSR of WLB. New Labour's two-pronged approach has succeeded in creating a context in which FWPs are held up as the foremost means by which responsible employees can manage their personal WLB – although these tend to be offered in a highly restricted, voluntaristic and individualised manner. Assuming they are eligible and their application is accepted, an employee is permitted to work flexibly, but the ultimate responsibility for successfully enacting and continually engaging with the flexible working process is that of the individual. In summary, the emergence of flexible working provides new opportunities for the management of one's WLB. However, given the enduring power of traditional notions of work-life organisational culture, such opportunities arrive under powerful discourses and practices of responsabilization, which in turn necessitate a concomitant privatisation of risk.

## Part II – Empirical Application

## CHAPTER SIX: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction and Research Questions

This, the opening chapter of Part II, explores the methodologies employed during the research process of this thesis. It is structured around justifying the choice of research instrument – a largely qualitative, critical case-study follow-up to the DTI's recent *Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey* (DTI, 2007) ('WLB3'). I explain the general reasons for the follow-up and how this particular method 'adds value', before examining in greater depth the purpose and uses of this survey in relation to its predecessors. Finally, I address the specific processes of how, in what ways and why the version I adopted was different from WLB3.

Commensurate with the range of analysis and arguments presented in Part I, three key research questions emerge which inform the remainder of the study. Each of these essentially probes whether there is an empirical utility to the conceptual framework proposed; in doing so each represents significant and original areas of contribution of the thesis to existing work-life literature:

1. Can a connection be drawn between the ways the neoliberal-influenced *state* has responded to WLB as a NSR and the particular experiences and perceptions of flexible workers?
  
- 2.a. What is the role of a typical WLB best practice *employer* when an employee utilises a FWP?

2.b. Is there a disjunction between organisation WLB/flexible working discourse and practice? If so, why, and what are the effects of this?

3.a. Is the flexible working process perceptible in terms of a privatisation of risk and responsibility for the *employee*?

3.b. Can it be understood as 'double-edged'? I.e. not 'win-win'.

In keeping with the nature of the thesis, these research questions are purposefully broad, each focusing on a different analytic level. Taken together, they feed into and underpin the choice of research instrument and sample, along with the subsequent research analysis.

## **6.1 Application of Case-Study Approach at AccountCo**

### **6.1.1 Justification of Case-Study**

The study took the form of a critical case-study. A detailed exposition of this method is unnecessary, but a few points merit discussion. To begin with, case-study research is generally intended to gain an 'in-depth' understanding of the particular phenomena in a 'real-life' setting (Dobson, 2001). However, whilst this provides a useful definition, it neglects the *purpose* of case-study research. Stake has usefully identified two forms. The first, the 'intrinsic case-study', is:

not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity and ordinariness, [the] case itself is of interest ... The purpose is not to come to understand some abstract concept or generic phenomena ... The researcher

temporarily subordinates other curiosities so that the case may reveal its story.

(Stake, 1994: 237)

On the other hand, the 'instrumental study' seeks to provide insight into an issue or a refinement of theory: 'The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else' (Stake, 1994: 237). Given my intention to demonstrate the utility of a largely original and broad conceptual framework (the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility) in relation to a particular field (WLB and flexible working), this study adopts the *latter* of these approaches.

One of the foremost proponents of case-study research, Flyvbjerg (2001, 2006), has argued that scholars have tended to conceive of it problematically. He suggests that there exists five common misunderstandings or oversimplifications about the nature of this type of research. Space precludes a detailed consideration of his interpretation of each of these, instead I refer to what I consider to be the *main two*, both of which directly apply to my study.

The first misunderstanding is that 'General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge' (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 221). However, this is shown to be inaccurate given the well-proven importance of 'context-dependent knowledge' in the study of human affairs – case-study research is far more valuable than the often ineffective search for predictive theories and universals, a characteristic emphasis of naïve realism. The second, and related, misunderstanding is that 'One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development' (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 221). Flyvbjerg cites numerous examples of familiar cases from both the natural and social sciences to prove otherwise, such as Galileo's rejection of Aristotle's law of gravity and Goldthorpe et al's 'affluent worker' study (Goldthorpe et al., 1968-1969). In sum, 'the force of example' (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 228) has for too long been

underestimated given that, in reality, it remains the most successful means by which theory – that is, propositions or hypotheses – can be tested.

### 6.1.2 Best Practice

The defining factor of the potential case-study organisation had to be its status as 'best practice' in terms of its WLB and FWP provision. Chapter One identified that amongst the *sociological* literature, this has not been a common occurrence. Thus, research at this type of organisation can be seen to add definite value to existing literature. Moreover, given the *generality* of the research and its intention to draw up connections between the macro, meso and micro levels, this type of organisation was considered the most appropriate context in which to examine this.

It would likely prove easy to find an organisation in which the double-edged sword of FWP utilisation was significantly more skewed in favour of employers. A typical organisation such as this would, at a formal level, offer no FWPs beyond that legally required. Informally meanwhile, it would be built upon a culture which militates against any deviation from traditional working times and spaces i.e. FWP usage. Thus, it could straightforwardly be concluded that this particular organisation manages none of the associated risks and responsibilities associated with FWP usage, but instead shifts all of these upon the individual. Hence, it would be of little surprise that levels of take up would be low.

The more interesting and perhaps more challenging task is to examine in detail those organisations which purport to model good practice. That is, to explore not only the flexible working policies and practices offered but, crucially, the processes whereby these are then successfully integrated into the wider culture of the organisation, such that both the employer and employee can derive benefits in a way which is truly characteristic of what Lewis et al. (2002: 1) have termed the 'dual agenda'. Such an

approach would also allow for a more sociologically informed analysis of the ways in which the neoliberal privatisation logic I have identified manifests itself in this context. Theoretically, a best practice organisation should, by definition, collectively absorb and manage the *majority* of the risks and responsibilities, rather than the flexibly working individual. However, in practice, it would be highly interesting to examine in detail any instances which could be found to highlight disjunctions between this type of best practice discourse propagated by the firm, and the actual practices themselves, as experienced by employees. Naturally, these are issues which will be dealt with more fully in due course.

### 6.1.3 AccountCo – Professional Context

Beyond its best practice status, there were no other specific requirements for the potential case-study organisation. As such, there existed a broad and diverse range of possibilities. Numerous websites and collected pieces of literature were examined, to ascertain those organisations which were geographically near to the large, provincial city in which I was based and proposed to conduct the research.

Among this list, the international, 'Big Four' accounting company AccountCo (pseudonym) stood out for two reasons. Firstly, its self-proclaimed and widely touted status as a best practice and market leading employer in terms of WLB and flexible working; reflected in its frequent placing at the top end of numerous 'WLB employers to work for' and national, regional and local award lists. Implicit in this of course is the fact that it offered FWPs over and beyond the legal minimum framework. As I was to later find out, formally at least, flexible working at AccountCo was essentially reducible to the policy that *any* individual could work flexibly in *any* way, so long as a thorough business case could be established. Access to a firm of this type would prove more than sufficient in providing a necessary case-study to explore the theoretical propositions put forward in Part I.

Secondly, a close personal friend worked at AccountCo. I emailed my friend about the proposed nature of the research, and they then provided email addresses of two members of the HR department. From this point, I then emailed these individuals a more thorough description of the purposes, nature and uses of the proposed research, as well as my intention that it would culminate in a summarised business report of my findings (considered more specifically in the 'ethics' section below). After five weeks, I received a reply stating that the proposed research had been cleared at board level and that AccountCo would be more than happy to accommodate it. Thus, in summary, the choice of AccountCo as the research organisation was part purposeful, part pragmatic.

In order to supplement later analysis, a brief word is necessary here on AccountCo and the professional context in which it is located. AccountCo are a member of the accountancy profession's global 'Big Four' firms. These are hugely powerful, with their fee income accounting for one third of the total market for accounting services. The gulf between the mid-tier and the Big Four is sizeable, with the next two largest firms having only one quarter of the fees of the fourth largest accounting firm (Shaoul, 2007). Together, these firms audit all of the top 100 and most of the top 350 UK companies, as well as offering a broad range of financial services that overlap with management consultancy and the legal profession.

Despite the fact that over 40 percent of new entrants to these firms are women, traditions persist of these being male-dominated and highly competitive, with many obstacles faced by women accountants in both their career and personal lives (Barker and Monks, 1998; Hantrais, 1995). Scholars have typically characterised the profession as built upon discourses and practices of long working hours, with this being the most common reason why women have failed to reach senior positions (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Cooper et al., 2001). In a fiercely competitive context, the UK accountancy profession holds ongoing concerns about recruitment and retention, especially among younger women accountants. This

has contributed to a number of high-profile campaigns on FWPs and WLB, particularly in the larger firms (Lewis et al., 2002). However, it has been demonstrated that this increase in organisational awareness of flexible working has coincided with greater pressures to work long hours and produce work to tighter budgets and deadlines (Lewis et al., 2002). Consistent with the findings of Chapter One, a moderate number of (largely US based) scholars have pointed to the fact that accountancy firms are continuing to suffer a lack of success in their flexible working policies and practices (Almer and Kaplan, 2002; Bladiga and Doucet, 2001; Cohen and Single, 2001; Cooper et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2008; Smithson et al., 2004). In sum, this is a highly appropriate context in which to reflect on some of the factors relating to how the privatisation of risk and responsibility plays out at the level of the employer to employee.

#### **6.1.4 Single Department – Scrutiny**

Chapter One demonstrated that most existing studies have been broadly focused in terms of their unit of analysis, viewing (often multiple) organisations homogeneously and as a unitary whole. Few, if any studies have focused their attention on a single department or sector within a larger sized organisation. As such, research took place solely in what I will refer to as the Scrutiny Department. This comprised of approximately eighty members of staff and was widely considered as central to the corporate identity of AccountCo. This has allowed for a far greater depth of analysis and strongly adds again to an approach which offers an original contribution to the literature. Of the approximately eighty staff, fifteen were formalised flexible workers.

### **6.2 Use of Existing DTI/BERR Survey**

#### **6.2.1 Justification of Follow-Up Method**

Both the research objectives and questions which flow from the theoretical position adopted are primarily concerned with macro socio-political concepts, the effects of these upon individuals and the multiple ways they are experienced. That is, they do not focus on the many factors/variables which relate to WLB and flexible working *per se* and which are the typical domain of HR and management studies; but rather the ways in which this broad field figures sociologically as a contemporary demonstration of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility.

This of course holds definite consequences for the research methodology. It meant that the sizeable and diverse body of existing literature considered in Chapter One contains many different, yet potentially relevant areas for further investigation. There would have been little point focusing on either one or a small set of these (e.g. perceived effect of FWP utilisation on career progression; levels of FWP take-up across a particular sector; extent to which employees perceive their employer has a responsibility to aid their WLB), since to do so would not have offered enough of the 'bigger picture' which was essential to this study. Rather, what was required was a means of covering a broad range of pertinent areas of investigation from a non-academic source and then drawing these together, in order to situate them in the relevant theoretical context. Put simply, it seemed sensible not to 'reinvent the wheel', but instead qualitatively build on and follow-up what has already been achieved elsewhere and then apply this to my own research agenda. A follow-up method of this type was also considered appropriate since the empirical study is only the minor component of this thesis. Bearing these factors in mind, the DTI's recent WLB3 survey seemed highly fit for purpose.

### **6.2.2 Choice of WLB3**

Since 2000, the New Labour government has commissioned five large scale studies to provide a nationally representative 'stocktake' of how its WLB and flexible working policies have impacted upon

employees in British workplaces<sup>5</sup>. Three of these were focused broadly on WLB and are commonly referred to by government sources and the field of employment studies as WLB1 (DfEE, 2001); WLB2 (DTI, 2004b) and WLB3 (DTI, 2007). The remaining two were aimed specifically at FWPs, known as FW1 (DTI, 2004a) and FW2 (DTI, 2005). Together these surveys carry significant legitimacy, being frequently cited and drawn upon by other agencies and organisations.

WLB1 (DfEE, 2001) was conducted in 2000 with three aims: to assess the extent to which employers operated WLB practices, to examine whether employees considered that the existing practices met their needs, and to provide a baseline against which future surveys could be compared. Building upon this in 2003, WLB2 (DTI, 2004b) had two principal aims. The first was to monitor change since WLB1 through collecting data in relation to employer provision of work-life balance practices and policies; employee take-up of, and demand for, these initiatives; and the impact of employers' provisions (including costs and benefits). Secondly, it was to establish a baseline for future evaluation of the provisions brought in under the 2002 Employment Act. Specifically, this referred to the RTR legislation, as well as the introduction of paid paternity and adoption leave. WLB3 (DTI, 2007) – that which the empirical component of this thesis is built upon – was conducted in early 2006 and published by the DTI in November the following year. The aims of the study were broadly similar to its predecessors. However, a greater emphasis was placed on the perceived inclusiveness of WLB policies, the detrimental effects of flexible working for employees, and the impact of WLB policies and practices in relation to employee commitment and the employment relations climate (DTI, 2007: 12-13).

The Flexible Working Employee surveys are smaller both in scope and size than their WLB counterparts. Unsurprisingly, their emphasis is specifically on FWPs and the RTR legislation, as opposed to broader issues relating to the balancing of the work-life domain. In terms of comparison,

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<sup>5</sup> Whilst all the research has been commissioned by the DTI/BERR (the DTI became BERR on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2007), the projects themselves have been contracted to various other organisations. In the case of WLB3 this was undertaken by ICM.

both asked questions which are extremely similar, if not identical to those in the WLB studies. It should be made clear that, for a number of reasons, WLB3 was elected as that which to follow-up as opposed to the flexible working surveys. Primarily, this was because as well as being the most recent, it was also the most comprehensive, containing both flexible working policy and practice sections and broader questions relating to WLB which are relevant to our purposes.

Each of the five surveys were reasonably similar with regard to the research techniques and type of samples employed. However, WLB3 is the only one to have published a separate technical report (ICM, 2007) – another feature of WLB3 which lent itself to a follow-up. WLB3 achieved a sample size of 2,081 (representative of people of working age who were current employees in organisations employing five or more people, and who were living in private households in the UK), with this being a response rate of 32 per cent. Telephone interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing, with these being structured around six substantive sections:

- Contracted hours of work, overtime, paid holiday entitlement and take-up
- Work-life balance practices and policies
- Employee attitudes to work-life balance
- Employee satisfaction
- Time off in an emergency and parental leave
- Employees with caring responsibilities for adults

The sections 'work-life balance practices and policies' and 'employee attitudes to work-life balance' (referred to in the report as sections three and four, respectively) were clearly the most pertinent and are those which the present study follows-up (DTI, 2007: 35-100). The methodology section of WLB3

summarises how these were structured (confusingly, the executive summary of the report describes both sections as occurring under the singular 'work-life balance practices and policies'):

The section of the survey on Work-Life Balance Policies and Practices asked employees about their satisfaction with their current working arrangements, and went on to ask what changes if any they had requested to their normal working arrangement, how they made the request, who dealt with it, whether it was agreed to and whether they had appealed the decision. It then went on to ask what working arrangements were available at their place of work and whether they worked any of these arrangements and the positive and negative consequences of their working arrangements. This section also asked about the working arrangements of their colleagues, and the consequences for the employee of these. Employees were asked why they used particular working arrangements, or why they did not make use of them, whether they would like any of these arrangements and whether their job could be done by someone working any of these arrangements. The section finished by examining whether employees felt that employers treated everyone the same when responding to requests to work flexibly, whether they did enough to promote work-life balance for their employees, and how important the availability of flexible working was to employees. (DTI, 2007: 13-14)

The point to emphasise is that, as might be expected from the above summary, most of the questions posed in these sections directly and indirectly related to the main issues which were identified in Chapter One. As will be seen in the following chapter, this is particularly the case in terms of the five dimensions of work-life culture. Again, the broad and yet empirically comprehensive nature of WLB3 lent itself directly to the more thematic and theoretically led approach I was proposing.

Another of the foremost reasons for opting for a follow-up of WLB3 regarded the issues of access, legitimation and recognition. Gaining access to any organisation is rarely straightforward and would likely require as many forms of potential legitimation as possible. In this light I considered a follow-up study to a recent, well known and highly respected DTI study a definite advantage. Indeed it was highly probable that a follow-up to a non-academic, government survey of this type would be better received by the management of an organisation than, for example, an overtly theoretically driven academic study which had little standing beyond academia. Moreover, a further potential advantage was thought to be the fact it would be a largely *qualitative* version of WLB3 – thereby allowing respondents to openly discuss their thoughts and elaborate face to face on what had previously been largely closed questions conducted over a telephone. I also felt that strong linkage with respected government surveys of this type might aid *future* recognition of the research. In summary, WLB3 was deemed the most appropriate means to attempt to overcome some of the methodological weaknesses inherent in this form of popular large scale survey and, in doing so, greatly aid opportunities for access into the chosen organisation.

### **6.3 Follow-Up Specifics**

Sections three and four of WLB3 were examined closely, leading to a final selection of sixteen main questions (about half the original amount) deemed most relevant (see Appendices One and Two for copies of the interview structures) and which formed the basis of a semi-structured interview. These were kept in roughly the same order that appeared in the original. It was felt that if this was to be a genuine follow-up, then the content must be altered as little as possible. However, a small number of modifications were necessary. These fell into three categories, which I have termed:

- Pragmatic/Methodological

- Qualitative
- Research Theme

### 6.3.1 Pragmatic/Methodological

Each interview would begin with a small introduction about myself and the purposes, format and uses of the research. It would then progress onto respondents providing a small amount of biographical and work-related details. Here they would fill out a form detailing their:

- Name
- Age category
- Family and household characteristics - whether they are a parent of a child and, if so how old they are
- Characteristics of their job – permanent/temporary, etc and their length of service with AccountCo
- Whether they held managerial/supervisory duties

Taken together, these details would prove vital for future analysis and allow for meaningful comparison between respondents.

The main pragmatic/methodological adjustment to be made regarded my choice of a *strategic sample* for the research population themselves. The sample was divided into two distinct halves: current FWP users (following WLB3's definition, those who had utilised a FWP in the past 12 months) and non-FWP users. FWP utilisation therefore functioned as the primary independent variable. Two of the main methodological findings of Chapter One were the recognition that existing research has, firstly, tended

to give insufficient attention to wider members of the organisation (i.e. individual colleagues, work team and managers) who are impacted when an individual utilises a FWP i.e. it has rarely offered multiple perspectives (Lewis, 2003: 16), and secondly, rarely used both a control and a comparison group within the sample. Use of such a sample would provide access to a range of voices, allowing me to make key comparisons and to develop and test my research questions in greater detail.

Having selected the relevant questions to ask, this meant making two slightly different variants of the interview structure – one for current FWP users and the other for non-FWP users. However, this variation closely followed the format of WLB3 whereby a series of questions were asked solely to FWP users (covering issues relating to personal experiences of FWP utilisation), with a set of generic questions posed to all employees. Whereas ICM interviewers originally followed computer prompts to guide them through the interview structure (a process which depended on the answers given by respondents and their personal demographics), I would simply build these differences into the original structure. The only discrepancy to this rule regarded Q.3. Here, WLB3 listed each individual FWP and asked *all* employees whether they felt it would be feasible to do their job flexibly in this way, if it was available to them. It was felt that this would prove a more meaningful question if it was posed solely to non-flexible workers. This was for two main reasons, firstly because these employees had chosen *not* to engage in the flexible working process and, secondly, in an attempt to prevent flexible workers being asked more questions than non-flexible workers.

The concluding section of the interview was a set of attitude statements (Q.16). Respondents answered each question along a five point continuum of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', but then elaborated upon this in terms of *why* they thought that way. Given that the overall emphasis was intended to be quality and not quantity, the original set of twelve statements (ICM, 2007: 43-44) were reduced to the

seven deemed most appropriate. However, two others were also added – considered under the Research Theme section below.

The final practical modification regarded those areas of WLB3 which were highlighted by the original authors themselves as problematic. The most notable example of this regarded Q.11<sup>6</sup>: 'What have been the negative consequences for you, of your colleagues being able to work flexibly?'. Originally, a significant number of respondents misunderstood this:

Although they were asked about what the consequences had been for them, of their colleagues' flexible working, some answered this question by citing what they thought the consequences had been for their colleagues. (DTI, 2007: 82)

In this light I would be able to clarify this question, so as to make sure that respondents fully understood what was being asked.

### 6.3.2 Qualitative

The second means by which WLB3 was modified regarded the attempt to make it significantly more *qualitatively* informed. That is, adapting it to be more flexible and sensitive to the social context in which the interviews would take place and allowing greater room to explore, for instance, employees' *perceptions* of FWP's and the *discursive construction* of FWP's by employers. As opposed to WLB3, interviews would take place face-to-face rather than over the telephone. This was appropriate given the, at times, sensitive and personal nature of the research topic.

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<sup>6</sup> Question C14j in the DTI's version (ICM, 2007: 36).

WLB3 is comprised of both closed *and* open questions, although the majority are closed. A number of these closed questions are simply inadequate and are deserving of more than, for example, merely a 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know' answer; as was the case for instance when the original question C25 asked 'Do you feel that your manager does enough to provide and promote flexible working arrangements?' (ICM, 2007: 39). The problem with the more open-ended questions however was that they also, though to a lesser extent, restricted respondents. ICM interviewers were under strict instructions not to engage in any form of dialogue with interviewees outside of posing questions and repeating (*not* rephrasing or paraphrasing) if necessary (ICM, 2007: 12). Certainly, no part of WLB3 fully allowed for either 'an interactional exchange of dialogue' or 'a relatively informal style'— two of the hallmarks of semi-structured interviewing (Mason, 2002: 62).

This meant that at the beginning of each interview I would carefully explain my intention that, after posing each question, respondents could answer freely and at any length which they considered suitable, hopefully drawing on personal insights and experiences where relevant. Rather than simply answering a closed question 'yes' or 'no' for example, it would be hoped that respondents could elaborate in more detail on this, where applicable. I aimed to therefore understand my role of interviewer, as far as possible, as a facilitator of social interaction; aiding the flow of the interview when necessary, rather than impeding it. Ideally, each interview would be allowed to progress for up to an hour. This would mean that respondents could expand on issues and raise themes not anticipated by either the original DTI researchers or myself (Legard et al., 2004), although I would certainly attempt to cover the original questions. Similarly, I would probe and ask respondents to elaborate when necessary. In summary, it is acknowledged that the chosen interview structure and format cannot lay claims to be wholly qualitative and respondent focused. Instead, however, it is semi-structured and certainly a great improvement on WLB3 in terms of the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructed rather than straightforwardly excavated (Mason, 2002: 68).

A brief word is necessary here on the theoretical status afforded to interview data. I understand interviews to allow for the analysis of underlying structures and individuals' interpretations of social processes (Winchester, 2004). However, whilst these structures shape the nature of the data acquired, they are not immediately apparent from it. The process of *interpretation* is vital, in a way which relates discourse (the interview data) 'to its referents and contexts' (Sayer, 2000: 20). Given that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it, social reality is only partly related to discourse - interview accounts are extremely useful in reflecting a reality, but cannot be expected to fully reveal the 'truth' about the reality under investigation (Silverman, 2000).

### 6.3.3 Research Theme

The third general area of modification to WLB3 was that made in relation to the research themes (incorporating both the research objectives and the more specific research questions) underpinning the thesis. Four extra questions were included in the interview in a way which attempted to add analytic value yet remain consistent with the tone and content of the rest of the survey.

An introductory question was inserted at the start, so as both to ease the respondent into the interview as well as offer an initial and overall glimpse of how they conceive of the flexible working process. Thus, Q.1 asked 'How would you define flexible working?/what do you think of flexible working?/how would you summarise it?'. It was felt that this could prove quite revealing and act as a marker for subsequent responses. Moreover, it aimed to highlight the extent to which the category of 'flexible working' is 'hearably linked' to those of 'women' and 'mothers' (Smithson et al., 2004).

Q.15 built upon the previous three in the 'role of the employer' section, asking 'How far would you agree with AccountCo's assertion that they are one of the top WLB 'best practice' employers in the UK?'. This aimed to explore how respondents made sense of the widely circulating firm discourse that it was an international, national and regional best practice employer for WLB and flexible working.

The final two attitude statements were also added. Q.16.8 declared that 'The working environment of my department is supportive of those wanting to work flexibly'. This aimed to more directly address the notion of work-life organisational culture. One of the general propositions reached in the previous chapter was that a work-life culture which more greatly responsabilizes the employee is one which is also likely to bring with it more risks and is therefore more likely to be experienced as 'unsupportive'. Secondly, Q.16.9 stated that 'Flexible working at AccountCo is equally available for all'. Without being explicit, this sought to probe the fact that at a firm such as AccountCo, in reality, FWPs are utilised almost exclusively by senior, female employees.

#### **6.4 Research Outcomes**

Twenty interviews took place during a five week period in June and July 2007 – ten for flexible workers and ten for non-flexible workers. All except one of the interviews occurred in a private meeting room within AccountCo. Whilst this was not as neutral a setting as originally hoped for, it proved the most popular choice with respondents since getting there meant minimal disruption to work responsibilities. One interview took place in a nearby coffee shop. After consent had been given, all interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Each lasted between fifteen (shortest) and forty six (longest) minutes, with the mean being approximately twenty seven minutes.

Attempts to modify WLB3 such that each question became less formal and more of an *informal* starting point to respondent-led discussion proved very successful, leading to a large amount of rich data. Following my introduction of the study, it was generally quickly understood that the aim was to talk openly and share opinions and experiences, with me speaking as little as possible (although, particularly on the more closed questions, it was not uncommon for me to have to follow-up the initial answer with something such as “why do you think that?”). The flexible nature of the interview structure also proved valuable, although respondents ranged in their attempts and willingness to rigidly keep to it. Interviews ended only when I was satisfied that the main questions/themes had been covered and after each respondent the been given the opportunity to add anything else they felt was relevant or had not been covered sufficiently.

The sample population was primarily acquired through the use of one of the heads of Scrutiny, Val, as a gatekeeper. I had been put in contact with Val by the HR representatives, with it being agreed that she would act as the point of contact for the research, as well as aiming to recruit volunteers on my behalf. Use of Val as gatekeeper proved invaluable. As well as adding a further sense of legitimation to the study, half of the respondents volunteered their services for the interviews off the back of her initial recruiting efforts. The remaining ten participants were enlisted via a snowball technique from Mary and Olive. Both these non-flexible workers were particularly interested in the research and were keen to offer their assistance in gathering their colleagues and team members from Scrutiny to help me reach my sample target. Again, this was extremely useful. All but one of the flexible workers were currently utilising formal FWP, with Anna having returned from a career break in the past twelve months.

**Table 1: Respondent Sample**

Name	FWP	Sex	Age	Children	Tenure	Managerial Status
<b>Flexible Workers</b>						
Anna	Career break	Female	25-34	None	2-5 years	AM
Beth	Part-time	Female	35-44	None	5+ years	PML
Claire	Part-time	Female	35-44	Aged 6-11 (2)	5+ years	DSNR
Dora	Part-time	Female	25-34	Aged under 6 (2)	5+ years	M
Emily	Flexi-time	Female	35-44	Aged under 6 (1)	5+ years	M
Fiona	Part-time	Female	25-34	Aged under 6 (1)	5+ years	M
Gill	Part-time	Female	35-44	Aged 12-18 (2)	5+ years	PML
Harriet	Part-time	Female	25-34	Aged under 6 (1), aged 6-11 (1)	5+ years	M
Iris	Part-time	Female	35-44	Aged under 6 (1), aged 6-11 (1)	5+ years	DSNR
Joan	Flexi-time	Female	35-44	None	5+ years	M
<b>Non-Flexible Workers</b>						
Kelly		Female	25-34	None	5+ years	M
Lee		Male	35-44	Aged under 6 (2)	5+ years	DSNR
Mary		Female	25-34	None	2-5 years	AM
Neil		Male	35-44	Aged under 6 (1)	5+ years	PML
Olive		Female	25-34	Expecting first child	5+ years	M
Pete		Male	25-34	Aged under 6 (1)	5+ years	M
Ruth		Female	25-34	Aged under 6 (1)	5+ years	M
Steve		Male	25-34	None	5+ years	M
Trish		Female	25-34	None	2-5 years	AM
Umar		Male	25-34	None	2-5 years	AM

**KEY:**

F= Flexible worker; NF = Non-flexible worker

AM = Assistant Manager; DSNR = Departmental Senior Manager; M = Manager;

PML = People Management Leader; SNR = Senior Manager

A breakdown of the final sample of respondents acquired is provided above in Table 1. At first glance, it appears that it is skewed in three main directions: that of an over-reliance on (i) female flexible workers; (ii) part-time as the predominant FWP and; (iii) all respondents held some form of managerial responsibility. Whilst this was not what had originally been sought, I would suggest that these are not causes for concern but instead indicative of a study of this kind in a Big Four firm such as AccountCo. However, a brief word on these is necessary before progressing.

#### **6.4.1 Over-Reliance on Female Flexible Workers**

One of AccountCo's HR managers provided me with a copy of a table detailing the use of formalised FWPs at the firm from January 2004 until July 2007. This additional data demonstrated the amount of requests made for FWPs and how many were rejected, as well as breaking down the individual FWPs utilised. Unfortunately, it omitted more in depth details such as the sex, level of seniority of flexible workers and changes over time. However, both Val and those interviewed noted that there were no formalised flexibly working males in Scrutiny and, anecdotally, there were few *if any* across the entire firm (hugely significant given it employs well over 500 people). Thus, a sample of wholly female flexible workers was representative of the broader research population of both the Department of Scrutiny and AccountCo.

#### **6.4.2 Over-Reliance on Part-Time as the Predominant FWP**

Whilst a greater range of types of FWPs utilised by employees had initially been hoped for, it quickly became clear that the predominance of part-time working was the reality of flexible working at AccountCo. Indeed, the Introduction Chapter discussed the debate regarding whether part-time work should even be considered a FWP. Following the example of recent sociological WLB/FWP studies

(notably: Callan, 2007; McDonald et al., 2007; Smithson et al., 2004 and Van Dyne et al., 2007), it reached the conclusion that it *was* appropriate to understand it in such a way. Certainly, this observation proved consistent with the experience of those at AccountCo where, in the last three to four years, employees have come to understand part-time working entirely under discourses of flexible working.

Furthermore, given the professional nature of AccountCo employees (whereby managerial seniority tends to equate to higher levels of informal temporal and spatial flexibility), part-time working cannot in any way be neatly separated from other FWPs. Most of the part-timers interviewed also utilised *informal* FWPs such as flexi-time and homeworking on a regular basis, whilst one formally worked both part-time and flexi-time arrangements (Joan). Crucially, those interviewed tended to see themselves first and foremost as 'flexible workers' rather than 'part-timers'. It should also be observed that variation existed between part-timers regarding days worked: the sample was split in half between those who worked three and four day weeks.

#### **6.4.3 Over-Reliance on Managers**

With regard to the flexible workers, again, no statistical data was available to demonstrate that this pattern was representative of the wider population of Scrutiny and AccountCo. Anecdotally however, most respondents commented that in practice, FWP usage at AccountCo was generally limited to those holding managerial responsibility. The first four interviews were all with flexible workers. This meant that once this trend became apparent, it made sense for the purposes of future analysis to then restrict the entire sample to those holding managerial responsibilities. Whilst this represents a further (largely unintended) modification to WLB3, this actually adds further value to the study and is in keeping with the first dimension of work-life culture identified by McDonald et al. (2007) – managerial support.

On the one hand this was a pragmatic decision brought about by the specific context of AccountCo; and on the other, researching solely managers actually rendered more explicit a number of the key issues relating to flexible working/WLB and risk and responsibility privatisation. Respondents were therefore asked to detail their level of managerial responsibility on the biographical details sheet at the beginning of the interview. These ranged across the levels of assistant manager (responsible for a small team of trainees), manager (responsible for a team of approximately eight), senior manager (responsible for a team of approximately twenty people), people management leader (senior figures in the department responsible for managing certain human resource issues, such as flexible working requests), and departmental senior manager (a core team of six, together responsible for the Department of Scrutiny alongside three Heads of Department). As I go on to allude to in the analysis chapters, the sample would certainly have benefited with the inclusion of a selection of AccountCo Senior Partners. These represented the most senior body of workers at the firm, none of whom worked flexibly. It is perhaps significant that at no point during the various techniques through which the sample was acquired, was their inclusion even considered by those interviewed. On the contrary, Senior Partners were presented as almost untouchable, with it being sufficient that they had given their backing to the project. In hindsight, greater effort should have been made on my part to attempt to involve this group directly in the research.

Interview transcripts were analysed at length using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. This proved a valuable analysis tool. Data was coded primarily in terms of McDonald et al's five components of work-life organisational culture. However, as I elaborate on in the following chapters, as analysis progressed, it quickly became clear that the strands of Account's work-life culture were more numerous and complex than simply those put forward by McDonald et al. In sum, use of NVivo *did* allow for an interpretive approach to analysis whilst using the program to better structure themes and ideas, with it being particularly useful for drawing out recurring issues (such as the fact many part-timers felt they

were underpaid for the amount of work they ended up having to produce) and interlinking themes (such as notions of face-time).

## **6.5 Limitations**

Contrary to WLB3, this study does not make grand claims for representativeness. Case-studies by their definition are highly specific (Maxwell and McDougal, 2004). Here I am concerned with a particular, highly skilled and high earning professional group, in a specific firm, location and department. Moreover, it has been suggested that the accounting profession may also reflect particularly traditional, 'masculine' values (Hantrais, 1995; Smithson et al., 2004). The external validity is therefore limited to a large extent. However, the findings are not claimed to be universal, rather they may be broadly indicative of the wider neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility and the way this manifests itself in a self-proclaimed WLB best practice employer. Given its qualitative emphasis on detail, context, perception and discursive construction, the study represents a definite contribution to existing research.

It is acknowledged that the interview data garnered is not necessarily a direct reflection on the 'real' (Sayer, 2000). It is quite possible that respondents may have, for example, exaggerated, lied, or presented only partial accounts of what they knew to be true, yet issues such as these certainly did not appear to be in any way commonplace. The closest to this type of problem was the occasional, what I perceived as, propensity for certain individuals to 'tow the party line', i.e. present overly favourable accounts of AccountCo. This tended to be by those more senior. When I considered this as occurring I attempted as far as possible to minimise it, through, for instance repeating the original question or asking for further clarification. The most noteworthy effects of this type of response are discussed in the final part of the Research Analysis chapter (section 8.2). Here I identify what I perceived to be a set of three managerial discourses – what I term the 'Primacy of the business case'; 'Flexible working as a 'two-way

street”); and ‘The flexible worker recast as the responsible flexible worker – which succeeded in facilitating and constraining FWP use and perception of at AccountCo.

The study could have benefited from additional quantitative data on flexible working at AccountCo (nationally and locally). This would have been particularly useful in terms of pay, in order to highlight whether there are any significant trends in pay levels between employees who have worked at AccountCo for similar amounts of time, controlling for FWP usage. Although, as pointed out by Smithson et al. (2004), it is perhaps no surprise that studies of WLB and flexible working routinely omit issues of pay since proponents of it may be damaged by the results highlighting this (i.e. FWP usage tends to negatively affect career progression). In hindsight, it would also have been useful to ascertain whether and how flexible workers are subject to review compared to non-flex workers. For instance, McDonald et al. (2007: 615) found that flexible workers were subject to more regular and formal review, which ‘indicated the normative or fall-back position was always a full-time, office role which could be reinstated at any time’.

## **6.6 Ethics**

Overall, the study presents few ethical issues. Individual respondents actively welcomed the opportunity to speak about their experiences, in part because the interviews functioned as a break from usual routines. To repeat, consent was primarily acquired through the self-volunteering of individuals to take part in the research (they approached me via email). It was also gained through the brief summary of the nature, purposes and subsequent anonymity of the study I gave at the beginning of each interview, with individuals then asked whether they were happy to proceed.

The vast majority of the interview data was drawn on during the course of data analysis and was suitable for reporting within the thesis. Only one area of this proved problematic: that relating to AccountCo's WLB Champion, Val. The original intention had been to include a much greater amount of responses both from her and in relation to her. However, in sum, it was felt that given the specificity of her position, this would have served to significantly compromise her anonymity. To an extent this is unfortunate, yet remains the only appropriate action if high ethical standards are to be maintained.

The interviews presented no difficulties in terms of my position as a young, white, male, educated, middle class, British citizen studying at a local university. In these respects I was of a largely similar demographic to those interviewed: a definite advantage. Given their high levels of educational attainment, it is unsurprising that respondents were familiar with this type of social research. All spoke freely, in fact it is highly likely that they were more open with me as a confidential outsider than they would had the research been carried out 'in house'.

Unquestionably, the promise of a submission of a concise business report of my findings proved invaluable in order to gain access. The report provided a half quantitative, half qualitative summary of the responses gained during the interviews, along with an overview of areas where the firm was doing well and those where there appeared to be room for improvement. As in the present thesis, full anonymity of individuals was maintained throughout. Of course, this thesis makes clear that AccountCo is a member of the Big Four, although these firms have many offices throughout the UK. In practice, all Big Four firms are highly similar in terms of their WLB policies and practices, such that AccountCo itself is indistinguishable.

## Summary

This chapter has explored the various methodologies utilised in the empirical component of this thesis. Following the definition of Stake (2000), I have adopted an instrumental case-study of a WLB 'best practice' organisation, by way of a largely qualitative, follow-up to WLB3. From this point I am now able to present the empirical findings garnered at AccountCo.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the empirical study. To recap, chapter's One and Five discussed at some length the importance of the concept of work-life organisational culture in helping scholars examine the extent to which FWP's are implemented, taken up, and prove effective (Bond, 2004; Callan, 2007; van Doorne-Huiskes et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 1999). The research of McDonald et al. (2007) was drawn upon, principally because it presents the first time the notoriously vague concept of 'organisational culture' has been empirically addressed in a systematic manner. Moreover, this sociological framework logically meshes with my argument that work-life culture is structural, in the sense that it constrains and facilitates action. Analytically, it also allows the flexible working process to be viewed as constitutive of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, in terms of the employer and employee.

Here then, I am concerned with only *reporting* the findings of the AccountCo case-study; Chapter Eight engages in the *analysis*. Consistent with the overall scope of the thesis, the research questions put forward at the beginning of the Methodology Chapter were purposefully broad. As such, detailed responses to each individual question are not provided in order; the emphasis is on letting the data speak for itself in light of McDonald et al's (2007) conception of work-life culture.

Exposition of the data is organised around three strands. It begins with respect to the first limitation of McDonald et al's framework: its lack of appreciation of the institutional factors which shape the way FWP usage is perceived and experienced by employees. In the second strand, the data is presented by

way of the original five dimensions of work-life organisational culture. Finally, the third strand demonstrates the empirical utility of further building on this framework, in light of what I have termed the 'privatised experience' of flexible workers. This is understood as the *culmination* of the five dimensions previously examined and is perceptible in terms of the twin themes of 'privatisation of responsibility' and 'privatisation of risk'.

### 7.1 Importance of Big Four Institutional Context

It is important to examine the vital significance of the *institutional context* provided by the accounting sector to the way in which attitudes and experiences towards WLB and flexible working were reported. This theme consistently arose and structured the perceptions and experiences of respondents; McDonald et al's framework incorporated this factor *to an extent*, but not sufficiently. Three points are worth elaborating here.

Firstly, and most significantly, the concept of WLB at AccountCo was constantly interpreted by the majority of respondents in relation to the accountancy profession's norm of *long hours working*. The requirement to routinely work over and above those hours to which one is contracted was rarely challenged, and instead accepted as a given in the pursuit of a successful professional career at the firm. Workers, flexible or not, who did not abide by this were seen as compromising this unwritten rule. This was the general consensus amongst all respondents, but was most sharply expressed by Mary:

If you come and work here, then you're coming because you're ambitious and also because you want to work for AccountCo. You want that credibility and reputation ... you want it on your salary and your CV. So it really annoys me when people think that ... and then show up as if they're working at the council down the road – people who

come in at 9 and leave at 4:59 just does my head in. We get paid as professionals, I think some people just take the mickey. (Mary, assistant manager)

This, in turn, affected the way flexible working, as the most practical attempt to manage WLB, was also understood. In short, endemic long working hours were seen by most as undermining the effectiveness of FWPs and, hence, as the predominant reason they were not more commonly utilised. Beth's response about whether or not AccountCo could rightfully be held up as a best practice employer for WLB was typical of this perception:

I wouldn't really know – I'm not sure what others do. I think whilst we are very flexible, I'm not sure that ... a lot of our staff believe flexible working will work for them. You know, it is a firm which, particularly in certain departments competes with the banks and so there's that kind of work ethic – that you have to work very hard to get to the top, and hard means long. I would certainly say we are one of the top WLB employers within the Big Four.

Indeed, this theme will be discussed in more detail under the fourth dimension of work-life organisational culture, 'organisational time expectations'.

As was also considered in the previous chapter when the institutional context of the Big Four was examined, the second theme consistently to arise was the extremely competitive market within which employees were situated. Specifically, this meant a strong awareness amongst all that AccountCo faced an ongoing battle to recruit and retain high quality accountants, particularly senior women, both nationally and locally. Whatever else, FWPs were widely cited as important mechanisms in this light.

Two flexible workers mentioned that they themselves would have left had they been unable to utilise a FWP.

It is interesting that the more senior managers – both flexible and non-flexible – tended to be more ready to admit that, whilst flexible working options were not altogether straightforward, if carried out properly the benefit to the firm in terms of retention outweighed other negative aspects. Claire summed up this perspective when she remarked that:

We wouldn't offer it if we didn't value them. It is a bit of a concession. There are sometimes difficulties in making it work, but on the other side, if we get the staff retention and loyalty then we get the benefit later.

Only a small minority (two people) viewed AccountCo's increasing offer of FWPs in more cynical terms. For instance, Lee argued:

Let's not be naive about it - it's basically to retain and motivate highly skilled people and encourage return to work for people on maternity and that kind of thing. So it's not that AccountCo is totally an altruistic charitable organisation, the real reason is that there's pound notes behind it. (Lee)

There was a common perception that better retention within AccountCo equated to higher levels of WLB for all. Conversely, given that Scrutiny was understaffed, it was consequently overworked: 'Generally everyone in my department is far too overworked – there is too much work and too little people. Everyone I think has a poor WLB at the moment' (Fiona). A further point of interest within this theme related to the findings from Q.12 which asked 'What single thing, if anything, could your employer

reasonably provide for you personally to achieve a better work-life balance?'. Only one flexible worker (Fiona, above) gave an answer which made reference to Scrutiny being understaffed. Conversely, only *one* non-flexible worker (Mary) *did not explicitly* mention the need for more staff.

The third theme in this respect highlighted the fact that employees in Scrutiny are 'client facing' – a feature of the job seen by most as largely incompatible with flexible working. That is, a significant amount of most individuals' time is spent either with the client at their location, or working back at the AccountCo office in such a way as to be available for the client where, and when, needed. This arrangement was seen as integral to the nature of the job and the most commonly cited reason by all respondents as to why they either could not, or would not like to, work flexibly in any way (or, for flexible workers, more than they were doing at present). Responses to Q.3 particularly touched on this theme. Amongst non-flexible workers, regular homeworking and annualised hours were the two main flexible arrangements which could *potentially* be possible, but these were made less attractive by the extent to which their role required that time was spent out of the office with clients (and compromised internal visibility; a fact considered further below under 'organisational time expectations').

## **7.2 Work-Life Organisational Culture**

### **7.2.1 Manager Support**

This first dimension of McDonald et al's (2007) conception of work-life culture proved particularly interesting given the sample employed, because it did not prove as significant a factor as originally expected. Discussion pertaining to manager support was mainly in relation to those questions grouped under 'role of employer' (Q.12, Q.13 and Q.14), although it was of course raised intermittently throughout.

The institutional context section above highlighted Q.12 and the fact that this was understood by non-flexible workers almost exclusively in terms of the need for more staff. What was not mentioned was that flexible workers interpreted the question in a variety of ways, although the overall consensus was that, given that their request to utilise a FWP had been granted, there was now little else that either their manager or AccountCo could do to benefit their personal WLB. Rather, the responsibility was now very much on them as an individual to make it a success. Given their higher levels of autonomy, this was most acutely felt by those who were more senior. Gill (PML) summed up well the general feeling amongst flexible workers when she remarked that:

I don't think so really. I think the majority of it is up to the individual really. I suppose I'm in a bit of a different situation in that as you get a bit higher up you've more control over what you do anyway. I personally have the support of the secretarial team who will take messages, know what is important and what's not, and pass stuff onto others to deal with.

Q.13 directly addressed the issue of manager support, asking 'Does your manager do enough to provide and promote flexible working arrangements?'. Nine out of ten flexible workers *agreed* with this, with answers falling into two main categories. The first group stressed that everything that could be done by senior management had already been done and that it was essentially the responsibility of the *individual* to pursue it further. The second group all mentioned the importance of the fact that their immediate managers were themselves flexible workers and, thus, acted as strong *role models*. Consider, for example, Dora: 'Well she works flexibly herself. That's what she does and that's her role model. I guess that's quite a big promotion in itself. I think it is quite widespread now'.

Only one flexible worker, Iris (a departmental senior manager), responded negatively to Q.13. She reported that certain directors and other senior managers were frequently *inflexible* in their approach to flexible workers. This was typically in terms of their unwillingness to fully consider her, as a part-time worker, in their scheduling of meetings:

One particular occasion actually ... the arrangements I had to make to go for a one hour meeting on my day off. As it happens, my daughter was throwing up all the night before and everything. How I actually got there was an absolute miracle.

In addition to Iris, Fiona also specifically mentioned that her managers had arranged meetings on her days off, although not in response to Q.13. From Iris's perspective, this occurred with such regularity that it signaled an unwillingness by the firm to support and work around her formalised flexibility.

Much greater consensus was found amongst non-flexible workers regarding the extent to which managers should provide and promote FWP's. Current levels were deemed highly acceptable, with few thoughts about what else could be done. Neil was notable in that he was the only respondent to argue that AccountCo senior managers had perhaps gone *too far* in this area:

I think we do a hell of a lot for flexible workers, and I actually think we do a hell of a lot more than most other firms. And perhaps the problem with that is that people then say "I have a right for this" – rather than a right to ask for it and can be a bit upset if they don't get their own way.

Q.14 further probed the importance of managers to flexible working at AccountCo, asking 'Has your employer ever consulted employees or their representatives about adjusting working arrangements, so

they can strike a better work-life balance?'. Answers here were not affected by the type of job people held. Ten respondents felt that they had been consulted, five thought they had not, with the remaining five unwilling to answer either way. Overall, there was strong consensus that the firm should *not* need to make any effort to consult more than they were at present.

### 7.2.2 Career Consequences

As expected, the relationship between FWP usage and career consequences proved extremely significant. The issue was consistently raised, both when prompted (attitude statement 16.5 declared 'people who work flexibly are less likely to get promoted') and when not, with a range of perspectives put forward. Interestingly, the two independent variables of flexible/non-flexible and managerial status did not seem to affect this dimension.

Two main findings were apparent. Firstly, a majority *did* feel that FWP usage negatively affected career development. This was reflected throughout the course of the interviews, but most acutely in the fact that eleven respondents either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that those who work flexibly are less likely to be promoted, whereas only seven thought the opposite. The remaining two were 'unsure', but it is worth noting that both of these were flexible workers who in their follow-up answers appeared to actually *agree* with the statement, but were reluctant to be identified in such a way. For instance, Emily herself represented a particularly interesting example of this:

I'd say people see that to be the case. I wouldn't like to say one way or the other because I literally got promoted and then got pregnant so ... I got promoted and then fell pregnant, but if I'd got pregnant before, whether I'd still be promoted, I wouldn't like to say. I think I would have still been promoted or I'd like to still think I would be.

Both Dora and Harriet, on the other hand, were more certain that they had *not* been affected in such a way, whereas Iris was the only flexible worker to maintain that she personally *had* been negatively affected. The second main point to arise from the data was that respondents tended to stress that, whatever the exact relationship between flexible working and career consequences, it was something *highly informal*. For instance, it was described as a 'general feeling' (Joan) and something 'not formally engaged' (Neil) or 'written down anywhere' (Lee).

A consistent line of argument was presented by those who sought to justify both their personal opinion and their experience in Scrutiny that FWP usage equated to negative career consequences. The dominant view was that, in a meritocratic organisation such as AccountCo, flexible workers *had not earned* the right to be promoted. Accordingly, regular usage of a FWP was seen to present fewer opportunities to demonstrate their ability. The following excerpts illustrate this view:

I would like to think that to a certain point yes you could, but to reach the ... Some people have, but to reach the absolute highest levels requires a lot of networking, time spent outside the 9-5, networking, bringing in new business, which I think someone working flexibly might struggle to do. (Gill)

I think they'll get promoted but it'll take longer. I do think we have quite a good merit based system of being promoted – so obviously, if you're working less hours that's going to take you longer to do. (Mary)

To be able to excel, to service your clients and win business and the other things you need to do to get promoted, it requires working more hours. It's a time restraint really

as well as quality. I'm not saying though that it's not possible to get promoted working flexibly, I'd say it's just more difficult. (Pete)

The non-flexible worker Ruth actually elaborated on this perspective to suggest that certain workers used their FWP usage as an *excuse* to explain their inability to gain promotion, thereby allowing them to 'save face'.

A smaller number of respondents, both flexible and non-flexible, built on this meritocratic logic to evoke the notion of 'choice'. The arguments made here were that workers ultimately make a lifestyle decision to commit more to either their 'work' or 'life'. An emphasis on life was widely seen to be a legitimate constraint on promotion at work:

In terms of negatives, I don't feel I've progressed as much as maybe I would have. That's not a conscious thing from AccountCo – because you're working flexibly, you're not able to do certain types of work and projects. Some of our work is quite intense, working a lot of overtime to meet a client deadline – you're not available to do that type of work. Those that are, they get more experience and are recognised for it. For me, to be honest it doesn't bother me. If I really wanted to move on, I'd try and do something to make it happen. (Claire)

A career is in terms of doing a job you enjoy, but when there are other things in play, it becomes less important to strive for the next level as such. So I don't know ... I haven't thought, well it crosses your mind, but not in a negative way. Because you've chosen this path and its working and its right for you. You needed to have consciously

taken different decisions earlier, other things are relatively more important to you.

(Gill)

I think there are some other people who take the view, and again, I have no qualms with this, "my priorities are different, I've got a family, I want to be able to take my kids to school, I want to spend Thursday and Friday with them or whatever", and in which case that will impact on their ability to get promoted because they haven't got as much experience at doing the job. So I think it might just take them longer, it's not that they won't be promoted simply because they're flexible workers. (Neil)

AccountCo's senior partners were regularly cited as representing the tangible antithesis of flexible working. In line with each of the five dimensions of work-life organisational culture, partners were seen to implicitly and explicitly discourage FWPs and the attempt to 'achieve' a better WLB. For example, as has previously been mentioned, both Fiona and Iris commented how meetings arranged by partners often seemed to be scheduled at inconvenient times for flexible workers (without their opinion being sought). According to respondents however, the biggest implicit factor was that of the approximately fifty partners, none worked flexibly.

It was surprising that, amongst the minority of those who felt FWP usage did not, or at least should not, equate to negative career consequences, only one individual was able to offer a cogent line of argument to endorse this perspective. Dora drew on the same logic of meritocracy as many of her colleagues, yet reached a different conclusion:

If people are achieving what they said by working flexibly, it shouldn't make any difference. So, if they said I'm going to work from home, and in the end they don't

deliver what we expect they would, then yes that's going to impact. But that's not because they're working flexibly, it's because of their overall performance. It's the merit of what you do.

In short, she suggested that so long as a flexible worker was achieving what they were expected to achieve, in principle this was no different to her/his non-flexible counterparts.

### 7.2.3 Gendered Perceptions of FWP Use

In practice, FWP usage at AccountCo remains highly gendered. Overall however, this was rarely challenged and only occasionally commented upon; gendered perceptions of FWP use were seen as largely natural and of little cause for discussion. Whilst no questions directly addressed this dimension, four were closely related (Q.1; Q.7; Q.8 and Q.16.9), leading to the familiar finding that FWPs are widely perceived as existing mainly for working mothers. As with career consequences, the two independent variables of flexible/non-flexible and managerial status did not overly affect this dimension.

Despite the confirmation of gendered policy use and perception, this did not prove as significant as expected in terms of the first question asked. As explained previously, Q.1 was purposefully added to the original WLB3 schedule, in order to provide an initial window on people's thoughts on flexible working/WLB. Following the research of Smithson et al. (2004), it also aimed to examine the extent to which the category of 'flexible working' was 'heavily linked' to those of 'women' and 'mothers'. Here at least, only a small minority of respondents reported that they defined and understood 'flexible working' in ways related to gender. Instead, by far the most popular form of response regarded notions of non-standard working *time*. The following quotes are representative: 'Not necessarily working 9-5, which has historically always been the obvious working hours' (Joan); 'It's working the hours that I chose to work to

fit around my life. It's not working 9-5 basically. I wouldn't say it's working a reduced week, as some people think it is ... it's working to fit your lifestyle basically' (Fiona); and 'Anything that's not the standard, Monday to Friday 9-5 which is our contracted hours – anything different from that' (Mary).

Q.7 asked flexible workers (all women) what were the main reasons they worked flexibly. It found that the single reason for all those who were parents (seven out of ten) was simply their desire to care and spend time with their, predominantly young, children<sup>7</sup>. The following two excerpts illustrate this:

Purely for the children. I have two daughters, one of which is five and the other two. I didn't want to give up what I've worked hard for: going to uni and doing my professional exams. I didn't want to give that up just because I'd got children. But then I didn't want the other extreme – yes I like having a successful career and everything else, but I'm a mum as well. (Dora)

Purely spending time with the children. I'm not a believer in having children and coming back to work full-time – because why do you bother having them? So it was just a case of that it worked great, earning enough money for us to have a nice lifestyle and then have four days solid with my children. That's been a really nice balance. (Iris)

Q.8 further confirmed this trend. It asked what had been the positive consequences of working flexibly and, again, found that parents in every case enthusiastically cited the increased time spent with their children. Anna, on the other hand, had recently returned from a year long career break principally because she was 'young, had left university and wanted to go travelling'; Beth was married to an

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<sup>7</sup> All of the children of the seven flexible workers, with the exception of Gill, were aged under eleven.

AccountCo partner which meant part-time working enabled her to spend more time performing household tasks and pursuing her hobby of horse riding; whilst Joan had opted for flexi-time working because it made her daily eighty mile commute much easier.

Whilst the *practice* of FWP usage at AccountCo was highly gendered, the *perception* of it being this way was rarely commented on, even amongst men. Essentially, it did not appear to be an issue worthy of much comment amongst respondents, restricted instead to the odd passing remark, such as 'I think you always assume it's women who do flexible working' (Joan). The main exception to this was Claire who on a number of occasions pointed to the cultural factors which inhibit males utilising FWP:

I do think it's the blokes who often suffer, there's a few which have kids themselves in senior roles ... they don't get the same level of understanding. They do want to be home and see the kids in the evening as well, but often they'll be expected to put a lot of hours in and that will impact on them and their family. There isn't the same level of understanding. I think that's the way it tends to work, quite a male dominated organisation. The more senior partners are all male, and I think they put pressure on their fellow male colleagues.

This view was reinforced when, given the opportunity to add anything else at the end of the discussion, Claire stated that she would 'like to see the first male in our department put in a flexible working request, because at the moment it's very much biased towards the working mums really'.

Of the men interviewed, only Lee and Neil explicitly raised the issue of gender outside of the final attitude statement (considered below). This appears indicative of their higher seniority and regular involvement in the management of flexible workers, in contrast to Pete, Steve and Umar. For instance,

when presented with the list of FWP's on offer at AccountCo and asked whether any appealed to him (Q.3.5), Neil replied that:

I'd love to work a compressed week but that could prove tricky with the clients. And actually I think a client would take a dimmer view of me taking a Friday off than if a working mother did it. Because that's the way perceptions have built up over the last few years, if you're not a working mother then you'll be there Monday to Friday.

Lee built on this, describing at some length the discrepancy between the ratio of females to males in Scrutiny who are at manager level, compared to partner:

If you look down the building, there's probably about fifty partners in AccountCo, and there are less than five women, and they've got to where they've got to despite their sex rather than because of it, I would hope anyway. The management team from my department went for drinks Monday night – we were in the bar and a couple of the blokes had gone to get changed, and we were in the pub and I looked around and realised that I was the only bloke here and that there was seven women. Because in our department, there's probably about ten managers and probably sixty/forty female/male, and our recruitment is probably fifty/fifty female/male and has been for the past five years. Yes they should go up [*be promoted*], but the women will leave and won't make it to director or partner level.

As well as highlighting the overlap across the five dimensions (principally in terms of career development), this comment particularly demonstrates the gendered nature of FWP usage at AccountCo. Significantly, it was one of the very few occasions where a respondent challenged the

existing work-life culture of the firm. As an aside, Lee also proved later to be the only respondent prepared to enter the debate as to *why* FWP's remained so heavily gendered:

It's partly a function of UK society where men are by and large breadwinners and get paid more, but we're not here to sort out the equalisation of pay rates or anything like that, but, empirically, men are main breadwinners and earn more money. They probably know enough how hard it is to look after children – that's why they go back to work [*laughter*].

Finally, Q.16.9 sought to address this issue in a more direct manner (yet remaining gender neutral), asking to what extent 'flexible working is equally available to all'. Unexpectedly, the defining feature in the majority of answers was not gender, but rather *level of seniority*. That is, most people answered that flexible working could only be used by those with high levels of discretion within their role, i.e. managers. Interestingly however, this proved to not be the case for two of the three remaining male non-flexible workers, who up until this point had not referred to gendered patterns of uptake. Both Pete and Steve mentioned for the first time that, in reality, flexible working at AccountCo was aimed at, and taken up by, working mothers, rather than fathers.

#### **7.2.4 Organisational Time Expectations**

Organisational time expectations, particularly the notions of long hours working and face time, were consistently shown to underpin experience and perception of FWP usage. No question directly addressed this dimension, although it was a theme consistently referred to throughout; whilst it bore no relationship to whether an employee was flexible/non-flexible or a manager.

As highly skilled professionals working on a variety of projects at any one time, respondents were keen to stress that they were task, and not time, oriented. 'Getting the job done' was the ultimate arbiter of success at work, with this superseding any of the firm's contractual time restraints (i.e. 'full time' was understood as a forty-hour week). Fiona summed up this attitude when she described how, at AccountCo, employees are able to request and utilise any FWP: 'So long as you do your job ... we're not a 9-5, clock in, clock out type place. The question is how efficient can you be'. It is largely as a result of this recognition that subsequent issues related to time expectations become comprehensible.

As was previously discussed in the 'Importance of Big Four institutional context' section, long working hours proved one of the foremost factors associated with FWP usage, as indeed did the associated notion of face time. I would suggest however, that the latter is most susceptible to both cross firm and cross department/sector variation. Thus, respondents frequently identified that there was a particular need to be *seen* working specifically within Scrutiny, more so than other departments at AccountCo. Face time tended to be most clearly brought to the surface in terms of the issue of regular homeworking. This figured as the most popular type of FWP which respondents felt they could either potentially work, or would like to more formally (and therefore more frequently) than at present. Moreover, a number felt that working from home actually *increased* their efficiency and productivity levels by removing them from the common distractions of office life. Steve was typical in that he generally aimed to work from home once a month:

I do work from home just because you don't have to answer the phone, so it's more ... just more efficient. It saves me an hour and half coming in every day, so that is quite a significant thing and I do like the flexibility you get ... you know you can wear your own clothes. I find it effective. (Steve)

Nonetheless, desire for more regular homeworking was consistently hampered by the requirement to maintain visibility, that is *face time* (see Q.3 and Q.4). The flexibly working people management leader Gill expertly summarised the general feeling of many when she commented that:

Perhaps there's a bit of a perception that if you're working from home you're not really working. You know, we're a professional firm. We ... I wouldn't say discourage ... but you do need to be seen to be ... I wouldn't exactly say putting in the hours, but need to be seen to be there in the department. It's partly a presence in the department, when you get more senior you need to be more available. If you're working from home then you're not there as someone's first port of call if they have a query on something. So that's a bit more difficult.

As Gill mentioned, the need for workers to remain visible was something only rarely made explicit. Typically, it was left unsaid and remained informal. Of the whole sample, only Lee made clear his dislike of regular homeworking. Despite the fact that he felt homeworkers tended to be more efficient, their reduction in visibility rendered this an unacceptable trade-off, particularly for managers:

I'm not a fan of home working at all, because I believe the role of a manager is to be available to their teams and visible to their teams. Now if you're working from home – albeit working and not just in inverted commas “working” – paradoxically, you probably work a darn sight harder when working at home than you do than if you're in the office. But you are self evidently not visible or available to your team as much as you would be if you were in the office.

Only a very small number of respondents demonstrated any form of resistance or objection to the normalcy of long hours and face time at AccountCo. For instance, Q.16.4 sought to determine the extent to which respondents felt the employer has a responsibility to help people balance their work with other aspects of their life. Very few answers made reference to the issue of long hours (and face time). Thus, whilst it had been consistently raised throughout the course of most interviews, it was rarely considered something that the firm held a responsibility to try and limit. Of all workers, Fiona was the only one to comment on this at length:

Sometimes in this place you need someone to tell you to go home to get something done, because so many people are thinking they've got to work work work to get where they want to go. Actually sometimes you need someone to say "no, you're doing ok as you are, you can have a social life". It's driven in to you almost, "the more hours you work, the faster you'll be promoted", which is totally the wrong message to have. It shouldn't be like that.

In terms of regular homeworking, only Iris made clear her objection to the fact that the 'overall impression' she had been given was that, as a three day a week part-timer, she should not expect to also homework. When asked to elaborate more on this, she argued that:

I could still do it just as well at home. It's just breaking down that barrier of people thinking you don't do an awful lot when you're at home. Actually I probably get twice as much work done as I do here ... end of the day I've got broadband, a Blackberry, my mobile – there's every possible way people can contact me, they could keep tabs on me if they wanted. It would save the commute and the kids could have an extra

hour in bed which they could do with. So I must admit, going forward it's something I think I'm going to push more on.

### 7.2.5 Co-worker Support

In line with the findings presented of Chapter One, co-worker support proved significant, but not straightforward. In summary, respondents *were* supportive of AccountCo's attempt to provide and promote FWP's, but the effects of this upon workers were disputed given the potential (real and perceived) for an individual's FWP usage to pose coordination and motivation problems to the wider group. However, there was definite consensus that the flexible working environment of the department had improved in the past few years. Key differences existed here between flexible and non-flexible workers, whilst gender and managerial status did not prove important. This dimension was closely related, but not specific to, a number of questions (predominantly: Q.8, Q.9, Q.10, Q.11).

On the surface at least, there was very strong consensus amongst all respondents that the working environment of Scrutiny *was* supportive of those wanting to work flexibly. Q.16.8 probed this explicitly, finding that, of the whole sample, only two flexible workers did not either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with this. However, these findings are mitigated somewhat by replies to other questions throughout the course of the interview which allowed for greater freedom and interpretation.

If the *overall* responses from the interview data are considered, the most appropriate way to understand the dimension of co-worker support from the perspective of flexible workers is in terms of the idea of 'backlash' (incorporating resentment and jealousy). Interestingly, this did *not* prove salient to non-flexible workers. Instead, responses from this group are most comprehensible in terms of Van Dyne et al's

(2007) notion of group-level coordination. Detailed analysis of this crucial distinction will be provided in the following chapter. Here, I report solely the empirical findings.

For flexible workers, no examples were provided of backlash occurring overtly. Far more common however, was an underlying discourse of *subtle* resentment. This was typically expressed in terms of 'jokes' and 'comments' and may have incorporated a sense of jealousy from non-flexible workers. Approximately half of flexible workers made reference to this, with Fiona articulating her experiences most clearly:

There is, despite the fact that AccountCo offers all these policies and we are an excellent firm doing it, there is a lot of resistance from people who don't understand flexible working. Because every day I have to leave at 4:30, to get the train and get my child from nursery ... the amount of comments you get when you leave at 4:30: "oh its all right for you part-timer". You think, I go home at 4:30, I pick the child up at 6, I go home, have an hour with him – that's it – bath time, bed time. 7pm, laptop is back open and I'm working for another two hours sometimes. But because you're not in the office, people don't see it, and there's quite a lot of negative ... "part-timers, it's easy for you"... and you think "no, I do just as many hours as you and I'm having to manage a family and stuff as well". And you get that mostly from your peers more than anyone else, who just don't understand. They don't say it in a hurtful way ... but it still makes you think. So I think there's a bit of a stigma attached to flexible working.

Iris meanwhile mentioned that, because of her childcare responsibilities, she regularly had to send emails at 11pm. On one occasion she had been made aware that a male full-timer had commented to her team that:

“Oh I’m sure Iris just puts her computer on at 11 at night, whips an email out, just to make everyone else think she’s been working all night”. That isn’t particularly, supportive of my work. Anyone else that was listening would think “oh, is that what Iris does then?”, instead of just thinking, “oh, well he’s just being malicious”. The fact is I’ve been working from all the way through till 11, and it really annoys me that someone would say something like that.

Conversely, only one non-flexible worker, Ruth, referred to this form of subtle resentment, couching it in terms of a general attitude of non-understanding. Clearly, it was her status as a working mother herself which led to her being able to understand the situation from the perspective of the flexible worker:

Referring to the same person, she worked on one client that I worked on. I had just transferred to this office and I just heard the team sort of, you know, making comments that “oh, she can head off when there’s work to be done”. At that time I was pregnant, and I totally understand if you’ve got to go to collect children, there’s a certain point when the nursery closes the door and you have to go. It was just an attitude – everyone was busy, especially the more junior staff who weren’t married and didn’t have a family – they didn’t understand.

Thus, with the sole exception of Ruth, all non-flexible workers primarily understood the dimension of co-worker support in terms of *group coordination challenges* which arise from individual FWP usage. That is, whilst the majority supported their colleagues who worked flexibly, they also stressed the subsequent challenges it meant for them being able to efficiently carry out their own work responsibilities. This distinction was most apparent in terms of Q.11 which asked all respondents ‘What have been the

negative consequences for you, of your colleagues being able to work flexibly?'. All ten non-flexible workers responded with at least one negative outcome, although it should be stressed that the seriousness of these greatly varied. At the most critical end, Mary expressed the clearest disdain for flexible working:

Because you're not working flexibly, you still have queries at 5 or 6pm and on a Friday. And depending on who it is, say for example Fiona, she will still want to know. So you end up ringing her up, on her day off and so you just feel crap and she's having to work extra hours and it's just stressful. Or, you leave it, and then clients get fed up because "why is it taking four days to come back with this query?". "Oh because my manager doesn't work Monday or Friday". And so it just ends up being ridiculous ... So in principle it's nice, but in practice, normally, it's an absolute pain ... and it just stops with whoever's got the responsibility. It's not great. For me I just have to get on with it.

Others however were less severe in their criticism, but still keen to emphasise the difficulties they encountered. This middle-ground was occupied by the majority of non-flexible workers and is illustrated in the following responses:

Some of it's a perception and some of it's a reality. If you have people working a three day week, clients don't have three day weeks, they have five day weeks. If something happens on the person's day off then someone else needs to react and take their work on board. That means there's extra pressure on those people taking on stuff, on top of their own ... The danger is people seem to just want this [*flexibility*] to be in their

favour and don't necessarily think about the benefit to the firm. It's almost an assumption that "yeah I'm allowed to do this", but forget the rest of the team. (Neil)

Yes there has been, where you know clients may not have signed up to the fact that there's no one available. Especially if that person is quite senior like a manager or senior manager. There is an expectation from a client that there is always someone there who's available if they need some advice. (Pete)

The third group were those who recognised the difficulties, but also that these could be adequately managed given due attention and flexibility from the wider work group. For instance:

There is always the restriction that they have to leave at 5pm. But if I've been made aware of that, then it's not going to cause a problem. Some work may not be able to be finished, but it's certainly not a negative consequence. Overall it hasn't affected me a great deal. (Olive)

Sometimes it can be "oh, I need to get hold of this person, oh they don't work Fridays", but equally I know that they don't work Friday's so it's just a matter of scheduling your stuff around it. If it's an emergency, people are usually pretty good at being available if they have to. So again, it's not something that really impacts me greatly. It's just something you have to remember and try and work around. (Kelly)

Responses to the same question however, were noticeably different amongst flexible workers. Seven answered that *no* negative consequences arose from their colleagues' FWP usage. Only one respondent, Claire, mentioned coordination challenges with this merely a passing comment: 'impact on

colleagues and them having to pick up work you can't otherwise do'. Fiona meanwhile elaborated more on what she had previously referred to as 'the stigma' of flexible working – that FWP users tended to be looked down on by colleagues.

This trend was later reinforced by Q.16.6 which probed the extent to which 'people who work flexibly create more work for others'. At a surface level, the results for the two types of worker were largely similar: only two non-flexible workers either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with this, whilst the remainder were opposed to it. However, closer analysis highlights a discrepancy in that the answers provided by flexible workers were typically much shorter and more simplistic: their FWP usage did not create more work for others. Non-flexible workers on the other hand, tended to provide more in-depth answers, stressing that, whilst *in principle* this should not be and is not the case, there was definite *potential* for extra work to be created if the FWP was not managed by the individual adequately. Trish meanwhile provided a unique take on this issue. She explained that she routinely had to pick up extra work on behalf of her flexibly working manager. Although, this had been positive for her own career progression, since it meant working on tasks which would otherwise have been above her level.

The final observation to briefly make in this section concerns the *positive* aspects of co-worker support. Responses in keeping with this theme were mentioned far less than the negative aspects. Half of the flexible workers reported that being in a department with other flexible workers was itself supportive, helping to create an environment/culture where they would be more likely to want and be able to request a FWP, as well as to then undertake it more successfully. According to the flexi-time worker Emily for example, this meant she was 'more confident' that she would be able to request to go part-time after returning from maternity leave.

### 7.3 Privatised Experience

Building on what has just been considered, the remainder of this chapter demonstrates how examining only the five (or six when including 'institutional factors') dimensions of work-life culture put forward by McDonald et al. (2007) is useful, but empirically (and conceptually) limited. Drawing on the analysis of Part I, I would suggest that, together, these dimensions *culminate* for the employee in what I am terming a 'privatised experience'; with this being perceptible in terms of the associated themes of 'privatisation of responsibility' and 'privatisation of risk'. This section focuses on the more *tangible* ways in which both of these can be seen to have been observed and experienced by respondents. Subsequently, the following chapter extends this discussion to explore the more *intangible* ways in which the risk and responsibility privatising logic was activated and demonstrated at AccountCo.

#### 7.3.1 Privatisation of Responsibility

The notion of 'responsibility' proved a highly significant nodal point around which all respondents made sense of WLB and flexible working. At times this was explicitly drawn upon, at other times it was more implied. To begin with, this can be elaborated via a comparison of Q.16.1, Q.16.3 and Q.16.4 (each of which were retained from the original WLB3). The first stated that 'everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way that they want'. Here there was definite consensus: fifteen out of the twenty respondents reported that, in principle and so long as the needs of the business were also being met, they either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' (results were near identical between flexible and non-flexible workers).

Q.16.4 built on this, declaring that 'it's *not* the employer's responsibility to help people balance their work with other aspects of their life'. There was a slightly higher rate of consensus here – sixteen out of

twenty either 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed'. Whilst none of the respondents stated that it was the sole responsibility of the employer, there was widespread belief that, as a progressive and 'best' practice organisation, the firm did have something akin to a 'duty of care' (Olive) over its staff. For instance, Gill pointed out that: 'I think it partly is the employers' responsibility yes. I think if we didn't promote that in some kind of way, we wouldn't be the best employer and all that kind of stuff'. Those who answered this question the strongest tended to be flexible managers who were more senior, often drawing upon the business case informed argument of the necessity to maintain 'a healthy and happy workforce' (Claire).

However, the preceding statement (Q.16.3) suggested that 'employees must not expect to be able to change their working pattern if to do so would disrupt the business'. Responses to this attitude statement were the most diverse of all; eleven either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed', whilst seven either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. Neil's answer was typical of the former responses: 'Yes you can ask to vary your working patterns, but you can't disrupt the firm by changing them. You can't expect to just change, you've got to have some more give and take'. On the other hand, the best articulated reply among those who disagreed was from Iris: 'If it disrupts the business then you wouldn't be able to do it. But that's not necessarily what I believe ... I believe that there must be, especially in bigger organisations, some way round'. The crux of the issue therefore concerns the extent to which the employee should expect to attempt to 'achieve' a WLB if it conflicts with the needs of the business.

Despite attempts by AccountCo to raise the profile of flexible working (typically on the intranet, creation of flexible working champion role, 'retaining talented women' seminars, etc), in reality, FWPs are rarely openly promoted and are never actively encouraged. In part, this has been mentioned under the 'manager support' section, where it was shown that nearly all respondents felt that their manager *had* done enough to 'provide and promote flexible working arrangements' (Q.13). However, if I extend this

observation, a recurring theme was that, given AccountCo's generous initial offer of FWPs, it was now the responsibility of individual employees *themselves* to pursue and initiate the flexible working process. There was consensus about this among all workers, though it tended to be most keenly expressed by those who were non-flexible. Lee summarised this perspective particularly well, when he stated that 'Flexible working is not a free ride and requires commitment from the employee. AccountCo have already made their commitment by offering it'. Neil's response was similar:

Gill our people manager doesn't go round to each manager and say "have you ever thought about flexible working?" and "why don't you do part-time work for me, or flexi-time?". She's never done anything like that, and I don't think that she needs to. Enough is out there for people to take it up if they want to. It's a voluntary thing; it's not a foisting upon kind of thing.

As I have shown, in practice FWP usage was rarely wholly straight-forward, but required certain levels of *persistence and determination*. Beth reflected the views of other flexible workers when she said of co-worker support: 'You've got to have the desire to do it that matches the slightly bitchy comments that might be made to you'. Similarly, most flexible workers reported having *become more efficient and focused* since utilising their FWP. This tended not to be a choice, but rather a necessity given the workloads they were expected to deliver. Dora spoke for many when she pointed out that:

I think the other thing is I feel so much more focused on what I want to do. If you think that if I come in on a Thursday at 9:30 and I know I have to leave at 2:30, it's unbelievable what I achieve. People laugh and say that I run to the printer, and I really do! I've become so much more efficient, because you've got these over-riding, "I've got to go at 2:30", it's not like a normal day where 5 comes and 6 comes. I've got to

focus and be at school by 3. I've made a commitment to the children in the morning that I'd be there and that is really important.

It was important that *flexible workers be seen to be taking on more than was typically expected of them*. Just under half indicated that they did this, with the consensus being that it represented an attempt on their part to justify their non-standard (and occasionally problematic) working arrangement to others. Indeed, this trend had been noted by non-flexible worker Kelly:

I suppose I find flexible workers to be more open to help when they are in the office. There's almost an element of wanting to prove you are putting the hours in and wanting to contribute. I've always worked very well with flexible workers.

Linking clearly with the findings presented in the organisational time expectations section, flexible workers were also seen as being personally responsible for *maintaining their availability*. When no longer physically present at the office, there was an expectation that they remain fully contactable at all times, staying close to their mobile phone/Blackberry and regularly checking emails. This need to remain available was expected of everyone (given the time spent off-site at the offices of clients), but applied particularly to the more senior flexible workers, when either working from home or, in the case of part-timers, on their day(s) off. Approximately half of all respondents referred to this, with it tending to be understood neither negatively or positively, but simply an inherent aspect to flexible working. Gill described this situation when asked what had been the negative consequences of her FWP usage: 'Being available 100% of the time – it's not really a negative, it's just something you have to do to make the situation work successfully'. Iris however had experienced it more negatively. On repeated occasions she elaborated the lengths she went to in order to remain available and the trouble she often had proving this to colleagues. For example:

I've said to them: "if you can prove to me that I'm not flexible and that you find you can't get hold of me or you can't do anything on a Thursday or Friday then fine". But no-one has been able to prove that to me.

From the interviews, there was little evidence that this type of responsibility was ever given as an *explicit* instruction to flexible workers; rather it was mainly unsaid and taken for granted.

### 7.3.2 Privatisation of Risk

As expected, only very rarely during the course of the interviews was the actual term 'risk' explicitly articulated. However, given that I am understanding risk in this context to refer to the outcomes/externalities (both positive and negative) to arise from the progression from being a 'standard worker' to a non-standard flexible worker, it is clear that the data attests to the empirical utility of the concept.

The section above on gendered patterns of uptake highlighted the most significant *positive* outcomes to arise for those seven flexible workers who were parents: the new opportunities to better care and spend increased time with their children. Similarly, Beth and Joan were keen to emphasise their new abilities to enjoy and be more productive with their time outside of work. For instance, Beth argued:

It allows you to bring a lot more perspective on the job, particularly in a managerial position. The ability to leave on a Thursday evening and just chill, thinking you've got three days to worry about what happens on Monday. You can bring a bit more sanity

and perspective into the work situation ... There's positive consequences for the team as well, in that I think they get calmer people working for them and clearer direction.

Interestingly, this was one of the few occasions where a flexible worker reported her belief that an individual's FWP usage was beneficial for the wider group. Conversely, only one positive individual *work*-related outcome proved notable; most flexible workers reported an increase in their efficiency and focus.

The majority of the more negative aspects of risk were elucidated in terms of the aforementioned six dimensions of work-life culture. As such, it was most common to hear about the possible risks of: negative career progression; subtle backlash/resentment from co-workers (from the perspective of flexible workers); and coordination problems for the wider group (from the perspective of non-flexible workers). However, there are two additional ways in which this proved relevant, neither of which is adequately covered in McDonald et al's framework.

The first of these concerns the issue of *overwork*, in part referred to already within the 'Big Four institutional context' section. Despite its close relationship to both this and the time expectations dimension, it more closely relates to the notion of risk, given its strong negative connotations. According to most respondents, overwork incorporated both a perceived increase and intensification of workloads<sup>8</sup> closely associated with the issue of understaffing. The consensus was that *everyone* was overworked, with approximately half of respondents admitting that they regularly worked from home in the evenings. This of course was not out of the desire to be flexible, but rather as a necessity to attempt to manage strenuous workloads.

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, the degree to which this was real or perceived is beyond the scope of the study.

For flexible workers however, particularly part-timers, the perceived increase in overwork presented a more *complex* set of issues than it did for those who were non-flexible. One of the most common points to be made was the fact that part-time work inevitably meant having to work for periods longer and more pressurised than those formally contracted. Significantly, this was seldom raised by non-flexible workers. To put it another way, part-time workers felt that they did *proportionately* more work than their full-time counterparts. This was accepted as largely a given and part of the inevitable trade-off for working flexibly in this manner. The concise thoughts of Anna (herself not part-time) on this are representative: 'Every manager I've seen who works part time, basically ends up working on their day off anyway. If you've got a client, no-one else can really help. You're the point of contact'. Mary described this scenario when asked if it might be possible for her to work part-time:

You wouldn't stick to your hours. The people I know who say "Right, I'm only on 25 or 32 hours a week" – you still have to do your job. So fair enough your job might get reduced, but you can't stick to your hours in our job at all.

Fiona meanwhile, was the only part-timer to report that she had attempted to resist the dominant trend that part-timers inevitably work more than they are contracted for:

My biggest decision was whether I do three or four days. It wasn't financial. I'd have liked to have done three days, but I've seen in practice those who have done three but who end up doing four days work, in three days. I thought I'd be clever about it – I'll say I'm going to work four days, but I'll try and take on a work load which is equivalent to three days ... but which I know will always spill into four. So I'd rather have four manageable days than whatever else. There's no way I'll work a weekend now I have a child.

Overwork of this type for part-timers also incorporated to some extent the risk of increased pressure and an intensity of workload. Whilst a large number of flexible workers, as I have shown, reported the necessity to be more efficient, a minority spoke about this more negatively in terms of *pressure*. For example, Claire commented that:

Sometimes it does put more pressure on, in that you're doing less hours than other people. At certain times you've just got to leave the office because you've got to be there at the school gates. Whereas often, working a full day you decide when you're going to go home and you take it from there.

The second main way in which the privatisation of risk was rendered comprehensible was with respect to reported feelings of *guilt*. This was experienced exclusively by flexible workers and mentioned by just over half, and tended to arise in relation to co-worker support issues. The most common example of guilt related to those occasions when flexible workers left the office early. Emily's comment on this is indicative of others: 'The work's got to be done for a tight deadline and in a sense I feel like I'm letting some of my team down because I have to walk away, although I do take work home with me'. Interestingly, Dora mentioned how she experienced a two-way sense of guilt, directed at both her work and her 'life':

Well ... [*sigh*] ... I think ... sometimes you feel quite guilty. You think ... because if I give away my Tuesdays for work, then I'm missing a day with my little one and I'm kind of farming her into nursery as if she's there full-time ... like this week, last week and next week. So you do get that bit of guilt. And I suppose the same on the work side. If I do have my day off then maybe other people pick things up to help me out.

## Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings to arise from the WLB3 follow-up, undertaken as a case-study of AccountCo. In doing so, it has attested to the general empirical utility of the concept of work-life organisational culture as proposed by McDonald et al (2007). However, more detailed analysis has shown this to be somewhat limited, primarily in terms of its omission of the institutional factors which shape and determine employee experience of WLB/flexible working and what I have termed the 'privatised experience' FWP usage necessitates. The stage is now set for a more in-depth and conceptually laden analysis, which considers these findings in light of the issues to arise from earlier chapters.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: RESEARCH ANALYSIS

### Introduction

This chapter *analyses* the empirical research in light of the main findings, conceptual arguments and research questions presented throughout the previous chapters. As such, it illustrates the utility of the notion of the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility in light of the AccountCo case-study. It is divided into two main sections. Section one represents the natural continuation of the previous chapter, with the analytical lens remaining primarily on the *employee*. Continuing to utilise and extend McDonald et al's (2007) five-fold concept of work-life culture, here I examine the ways in which risk and responsibility were privatised and manifested at the level of *practice*. The second section, meanwhile, builds on this to discuss more specifically the role of AccountCo as the *employer* in the flexible working process. Here, I examine the role of managerial *discourse* in shaping and determining practice.

### 8.1 Salience of Work-Life Culture Framework: Impact Upon Employee

#### 8.1.1 Institutional Factors

As I highlighted in the previous chapter, McDonald et al's (2007) original framework fails to adequately capture the importance of particular *institutional* factors which relate to an organisation's work-life culture and how these supplement their five dimensions. In the case of AccountCo, these institutional factors/professional norms were primarily those of long working hours, the highly competitive context of Big Four accountancy and the need to remain constantly 'client-facing'. Together, these helped further determine the success, or otherwise, of FWP usage at AccountCo.

The most significant institutional factor related to the oft-cited norm of long-hours working: this tended to be understood by respondents as, simultaneously, integral to the accountancy profession and in opposition to FWP usage. The trend towards longer working hours is one which has been widely reported (Beynon et al., 2002; Fagan, 2003; Green, 2001; TUC, 2006) yet is particularly relevant in professional contexts such as accountancy where the economic value of time is non-explicit (Van Dyne et al., 2007) (i.e. it is *task* not time oriented). Given this recognition, this theme will be elaborated upon in the organisational time expectation section. The second institutional factor meanwhile, that of the competitive accountancy market, will also be considered later, in the 'role of the employer' section.

As accounting professionals within Scrutiny, employees understand and are complicit with the need to remain *client facing*. In effect, this confers upon employees both an economic and moral responsibility to be constantly responsive to the needs and whims of external stakeholders (fee-paying clients). As Epstein et al. have shown, this type of behavioural mandate for the professional is 'both ideological and practical' (1999: 20). Practically, it means that a sizeable amount of time is spent out of the office and at client locations, occasionally for extended periods of time. It was also seen practically in terms of the need to build and maintain the right long-term relationships with clients; a feature of the job which was proving increasingly important given the intensified competition amongst Big Four firms. More significantly, in *ideological* terms, respondents perceived this as involving a sense of *unpredictability*, with this, in turn, being understood by many as one of the main factors explaining the low levels of interest in, and take-up of, FWPs in the Department of Scrutiny. However, it is interesting that at no point were any specific examples cited of occasions when FWP usage had actually prevented or damaged an employee's ability to service clients. Therefore, from the interview data at least, there existed a clear disjunction between the widespread belief that FWP usage harmed the ability to be client facing and the actual reality.

### 8.1.2 Manager Support

Chapter One clearly demonstrated the important contribution of supportive supervisors/managers to an organisation's work-life culture (Bernas and Major, 2000; Bond et al., 2002; Friedman et al., 1999; Hopkins, 2005; Maxwell, 2005; Ray and Miller, 1994). Attention was briefly given to Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) who found that an individual's FWP usage is likely to be greater if they work with powerful supervisors (and colleagues) who can 'buffer' them from perceived negative effects on their careers. Thus, an alternative way to understand this dimension is in terms of the ability and willingness of managers to buffer/manage the *risk* of their subordinate's FWP usage, thereby helping create a greater culture of legitimacy for flexible working. This may be achieved via supportive attitudes and management behaviours shown towards FWP users (Friedman et al., 1999), or through managers utilising FWPs themselves and therefore acting as role models (Bond et al., 2002; Hopkins, 2005; Kossek, et al., 1994; Smithson et al., 2004). My findings support this proposition, particularly given that most of those who had flexibly working supervisors referred to them as role models.

However, contrary to the framework of McDonald et al., *overall* there was little explicit acknowledgement by respondents themselves that managers at AccountCo play an important role in FWP usage. This would appear to be mainly due to the nature of the sample. The original hope was that the sample group would contain a representative cross-section of flexible workers taken from across different levels of seniority within Scrutiny. However, this proved impossible, given that all flexible workers held some form of managerial status. Indeed, no-one spoke about how they considered their personal FWP usage to have helped create a more supportive environment. Moreover, most of those occupying the more senior positions seemed either unwilling or unaware of the fact that they *personally* held a powerful role in the implementation and take up of FWPs amongst their co-workers and subordinates.

Four of the flexible workers themselves (Beth, Claire, Iris and Gill) held managerial discretion over the FWP usage of their subordinates. Interestingly, discussion with these individuals occasionally highlighted their discomfort at having to evaluate their multi-faceted professional identities of employee, flexible worker and senior manager with discretionary power. For instance, Gill consistently struggled with this issue:

AccountCo do have procedures and policies in place now and as far as I'm aware none or virtually no requests have been turned down. I think they are pretty reasonable to hearing what you request and seeing if we – sorry I mean 'I' [*laughter*] – can oblige.

In agreement with earlier arguments, successful FWP usage was ultimately considered the responsibility of the *individual* user. Given that the firm had already made WLB policies formally available, managers were widely seen as absolved of any responsibility to promote FWPs or to further consult employees on how they might be better implemented. This perception was equally strong amongst both sets of respondents and, again, serves to highlight the privatised nature of flexible working as inherent within the culture of a firm such as AccountCo.

### 8.1.3 Career Consequences

It is unsurprising that, consistent with earlier discussions, the empirical study demonstrated the continuing persistence of this cultural facet. To repeat, the majority of respondents agreed with, and sought to justify, the fact that FWP usage at AccountCo negatively affected career consequences. For the firm to grant a FWP request *was* widely interpreted as 'a bit of a concession' (Claire), given that they

are non-standard and hold the potential for wider coordination and motivation problems. Stalled career advancement was typically understood as the legitimate *trade-off* (cf. Callan, 2007; Corwin et al., 2001; MacDermid et al., 2001; McDonald et al., 2005, 2007; Tomlinson, 2007), with the most cited anecdotal evidence for this being the senior partners at the firm, none of whom worked flexibly.

This is an important finding, particularly given that the sample was comprised entirely of managers. Consequently, this is perhaps the clearest way in which the shifting of risk can be perceived during the flexible working process. Put simply, the career-FWP trade-off was understood as the responsibility of the flexible worker themselves. It was they who had opted to work that way, thus it was they who were made responsible for the management of the risk of a stalled career. Three flexible workers answered that they either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the proposition that 'people who work flexibly are less likely to get promoted' (Q16.5). However, whether perceived or not, and despite the fact that it was 'not something written down anywhere' (Lee), the risk was real, with definite and tangible consequences. It is significant that, amongst the whole sample, no evidence was provided of definite examples to the contrary.

A further interesting point to consider here is *why* there is a negative relationship between FWP usage and career consequences, despite the official attempts of AccountCo to suggest otherwise. For example, AccountCo's staff intranet pages were routinely referred to by respondents as highlighting successful case studies of senior flexible workers, whilst a key factor in their winning of several regional, local and national WLB awards (and therefore conferring upon them their status as 'best practice') had been their ability to demonstrate that FWP usage did not negatively affect career consequences. The study found that most respondents drew on *meritocratic* arguments to suggest that flexible workers had not earned the right to be promoted. Examination of the quotes cited in the previous chapter highlights the common perception that flexible workers are not able to demonstrate many behaviours which go

beyond the formal requirements of the job (Rogier and Padgett, 2004), for instance attending evening networking events and being able to participate in meetings at irregular and inconsistent times.

This is interesting since it attests to the fact that most tended to understand flexible working simply in relation to part-time/reduced hours working, when in fact both the Government (Directgov, 2008) and AccountCo recognise seven types of FWP. As an aside, this implies that AccountCo still has some way to go to educate its employees about the broad range of FWPs which are available and which do not necessitate reduced hours working. The second most popular rationale was in terms of notions of *choice and commitment*, suggesting that flexible workers had made the decision to commit more to their 'life' at the expense of their 'work'. Thus, the case-study of AccountCo demonstrates that conceptions around promotion continue to be largely predicated on notions of *quantity* and not quality; an assumption concisely summed up by Pete who stated that 'to get promoted, it requires working more hours'.

These findings are largely similar to those of other studies (Cohen and Single, 2001; Epstein et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2008; Rogier and Padgett, 2004). However, a comparison can be drawn with the work of Smithson et al. (2004) who also examined the accounting profession. They found that the negative impact of flexible working upon career progression was mainly reducible to the belief that flexible workers were *too family-oriented*, as opposed to:

the amount of time and commitment given to the organisation. In these ways part-time and flexible workers face discrimination not for the amount or quality of work they produce, but for perceptions of commitment and orientation based on gendered valuations of time. (Smithson et al., 2004: 125)

In contrast, respondents from AccountCo reported that discrimination against flexible workers *did* occur primarily in relation to notions of quantity, whereby the standard of a person's work was seen to relate to the amount of time it took to (be seen to) achieve it. Thus, it was not so much that they were seen as lacking commitment to the firm, but rather that their non-standard working arrangement meant that they had less time to demonstrate behaviours which went beyond what was formally expected.

Resistance to this particular work-life facet was evident, if only in a minor way. Inverting the meritocratic logic drawn on by others as the rationale for the trade-off, the flexible worker Dora suggested that successfully achieving tasks whilst flexible should still equate to opportunities for promotion. Undoubtedly, in principle this observation is correct, yet it sits awkwardly with a culture underpinned by notions of the ideal worker.

#### **8.1.4 Gendered Perceptions of FWP use**

Unquestionably, gendered perceptions of the uptake of FWPs proved a significant dimension of AccountCo's work-life culture. However, consistent with the ideas posited throughout this thesis, the data confirmed that gender is but one of a number of important variables which affect the experience and perception of FWP usage. Moreover, it is particularly difficult to neatly separate the influence of gender from the other dimensions. For instance, it has been widely argued that the notion of the ideal worker is premised upon gendered valuations of time (Acker, 1990; Smithson et al., 2004).

To summarise, in *practice* the pattern of FWP uptake at AccountCo was highly gendered, yet there remained a discrepancy between this and the extent to which it was *perceived* as significant and worthy of comment by respondents. This proved surprising, particularly given that similar research on accountants by Smithson et al. (2004: 121) found that the category of 'flexible working' was 'heavily

linked' to those of 'women' and 'mothers'. McDonald et al's (2007: 613) own study also led them to conclude that 'the reality that most users in this and other organisations are women remained largely unchallenged', with this trend proving worthy of sustained comment from their interviewees.

The dominant pattern at AccountCo, on the other hand, was that FWP's were much more *implicitly* associated with gendered dimensions – a feature I consider as significant. It is to be welcomed that respondents very rarely made overtly gendered comments akin to Pete's that 'it's normally mothers who work flexibly'. However, rather than indicating that flexible work at AccountCo is gender-neutral, this in fact masks a more subtle, deeply embedded and taken for granted cultural facet of highly gendered patterns of FWP uptake. The strength of this dimension also makes it particularly hard to challenge (cf. McDonald et al., 2007). The only example of resistance in this respect was that of the flexible departmental senior manager Claire, who, on repeated occasions, stated her desire to see men engage with the flexible working process. It is likely that a continued trend of overtly de-gendering flexible working at AccountCo will only perpetuate existing and deeply-ingrained patterns in the future.

Examining the findings specifically in relation to men further elucidates notions of risk and responsibility. According to the respondents, there were no male flexible workers either in the Scrutiny department or the local branch of AccountCo as a whole. Both Claire and Lee were able to identify limited examples of flexibly working men of whom they were aware were working for AccountCo in other locations, although these individuals had already reached high levels of seniority and/or were nearing retirement (cf. Smithson et al., 2004). In the words of Claire:

I think I've come across one or two males in the past doing a four day week. I think the more senior one is working towards retirement, cutting back a bit. I can also think of one man down in the *[other city]* office. I think though he's now ... not been

demoted, but gone back down to the previous level – downscaling. For his WLB I guess.

Again, the central point to reiterate is that the engagement of *any* individual with the flexible working process necessitates a transferral of risk and responsibility, directionally away from the firm and onto themselves. However, both my findings and those of the existing literature suggest that to work flexibly is inherently more 'risky' for men than it is for women. Despite structural changes to the economic model of the male as breadwinner (Crompton, 1999), masculine identities – associated with the male breadwinner and the primacy of career progression – remain strong, at least in the accountancy profession. Women, meanwhile, remain closely tied to care-giving roles, both ideologically and empirically (Bittman, 1999; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Wajcman, 1996). Transferred to the realm of flexible working, male usage of a FWP consequently represents a greater departure from the ideal worker model (itself highly gendered) than it does for women. Steve (aged 25-34 and single) echoed this perspective when responding to the final attitude statement 'flexible working is equally available to all':

I'd say it's equally available but not equally taken up. So they do say that anyone can work flexibly, but whether that's because people are still viewing it in a traditional way, for mums basically, or just because they're the ones taking it up ... it doesn't necessarily mean it's unavailable. I don't know how the department would react if I went in and said I only want to work four days a week! [*laughter*]

*That would be interesting wouldn't it?* [interviewer]

I think I'd get very short shrift from the partners ... then again I don't want to do it, but I think if I had a really valid reason why I wanted to do it then I'm sure if I went to HR then they'd back me up. So maybe I need to find one! *[laughter]*

This argument echoes the findings of Johnson et al. (2008) in their study of FWP usage at Big Four firms in the US. One of their main conclusions was that managers viewed non-traditional working practices as more appropriate for women, whilst 'participation in a full-time AWA appears to differentially harm a male's long-term career prospects' (Johnson et al., 2008: 66).

Chapter One considered the valuable contribution of Brandth and Kvande (2001) to this issue, also highlighting that they are among the extremely few contributions within the sociological work-life field to have referred to ideas of risk (albeit extremely briefly). In short, their argument is that, given wider cultural norms about gender and flexibility, contexts which favour individualised responses to flexible working tend inevitably to inhibit male usage. Certainly, this is the case in the UK where, as I have shown, a two-pronged approach has been adopted which has created a restricted, individualised and voluntaristic culture of flexible working at the level of the typical organisation. Unsurprisingly, played out at AccountCo, this logic had created a context in which the greater burden of responsibility for the successful enactment and continuation of the FWP was placed on the shoulders of the employee. This is potentially difficult for *all* employees, although particularly men given that wider societal culture views FWPs as mainly for women (Reeves, 2002). I agree with Brandth and Kvande that what is required instead is greater intervention from the state in order to provide 'the necessary legitimacy' to normalise flexible working. Overall, my research confirms that, despite AccountCo's claims to be a WLB best practice employer, it still has a long way to go until its flexible working policies can be seen as gender equitable.

### 8.1.5 Organisational Time Expectations

Results from the empirical research highlighted the centrality of organisational expectations and conceptions of time to non-standard/flexible work and, though to a lesser extent, space. According to the interview data at least, flexible working was first and foremost understood as any type of work founded upon non-standard working *time* arrangements, as opposed to a gendered form of work. As has just been considered, the extent to which this was the case proved something of a surprise, particularly given the findings of Smithson et al. (2004) whose data stressed the primacy of gender. Building upon this observation, the main area for discussion in this section concerns the effect of the respondents' status as *professionals*. In short, it was this perhaps more than any other cultural dimension which seemed to structure (that is, enable and constrain) perceptions and experiences of FWP usage.

For professional employees, the economic value of time is non-explicit; they are not are not paid by the hour and are subsequently *task* rather than time oriented (Kalleberg and Epstein, 2001; Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Van Dyne et al., 2007; Zerubavel, 1981). Professional work tends not to be strictly determined by a timetable, such that paid overtime is rarely used and having worked fewer hours tends not to equate to lower pay. According to Lawrence and Corwin (2003) therefore, the work time of the professional is largely *socially constructed*. Transferred to the realm of AccountCo, the social construction of working time manifested itself in a number of readily identifiable outcomes, particularly the issues of long hours working, overwork and *face time*. However, given the conceptual approach I have adopted, only the latter of these will be considered here (long hours working was examined in terms of institutional factors; whilst overwork will be discussed as part of the privatisation of risk section).

The most prominent finding from the study relating to this dimension proved to be the significantly high levels of unmet demand for one particular FWP: *regular (formal) homeworking*. Given the close relationship between this and the conception and use of time by professionals, it is surprising that this issue has not been more regularly reported in other, similar, flexible working studies. All types of respondent felt they either could potentially work regularly from home, or would like to more formally (and therefore more frequently) than at present. A large number also presented business case reasons to argue that working from home actually *increased* their efficiency and productivity levels; with only one individual (Lee) making clear his dislike of it. Nevertheless, these perceptions occurred within a working culture predicated upon an ambiguous concept of time, such that notions of presenteeism, visibility and *face time* – all constitutive of the ideal worker – were accorded elevated status. To be *seen* working in Scrutiny was therefore the most reliable, yet *implicit*, indicator of professional and firm commitment (Felstead et al., 2005; Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Lewis, 1997, 2001; Perlow, 1998).

It follows then, that regular homeworking received by some distance the highest levels of *unmet* demand as compared to other FWPs, given the inherent way in which it problematised the firm's work-life culture. Despite the small sample size and consequent lack of generalisability, not a single respondent had yet opted to work from home in a more formal and regular manner. To occasionally and informally work from home was seen as legitimate. However, to opt to formalise this into an official FWP was, whilst in theory viable, seen as involving too big a removal from organisational expectations of time and conceptions of the ideal worker. This observation is largely consistent with the arguments of Epstein et al. (1999) examined in Chapter One, despite their explicit focus on part-time professionals. Considered thus, homeworkers within Scrutiny were not so much stigmatised as 'time deviants', as seen as 'face time deviants': those who violated organisational norms that require near-constant devotion to firm and client. The example of homeworking at AccountCo points again to the double-edged/trade-off nature of flexible working. Clearly, according to this sample at least, the decision to work from home on

a more formal basis was a trade-off perceived more negatively than positively. The new levels of agency and business benefits which homeworking could bring about were insufficient to counter the subsequent transferral of risk and responsibility to the individual.

#### 8.1.6 Co-Worker Support

The final dimension of McDonald et al's framework is premised upon a comparison between flexible and non-flexible workers. As such, the findings here proved particularly revealing, given that the sample contained ten of each type of worker. Responses highlighted that levels of co-worker support for FWP users in the Department of Scrutiny have improved in recent years, with this mainly attributable to the increase in both flexible working discourses and practices at AccountCo. In the interviews at least, the vast majority of respondents displayed attitudes highly supportive of flexible working. Closer analysis of the data, however, leads to the main finding here: the cultural dimension of co-worker support remains contested between those who work flexibly and those who do not. This is an important observation which has not been noted elsewhere in the existing WLB/flexible working research.

I have previously drawn on the theoretical proposal of Van Dyne et al. (2007) to suggest that McDonald et al's conception of co-worker support omits adequate consideration of the coordination challenges which can occur for the wider group when an individual works flexibly. Put another way, this dimension is complex and is not reducible to perceptions of fairness (backlash). More practically, an individual's FWP usage can hold a series of discernable consequences for others in the organisation. Analysis of the interviews confirmed, and further built on, this prediction. Beginning with flexible workers, it was found that this group *did* interpret the issue of co-worker support in terms of the idea of 'backlash' (with this incorporating resentment and jealousy). Despite the fact that it was almost entirely subtle and non-explicit (Felstead et al., 2005; McDonald et al., 2007), it remained an ongoing and widespread problem.

Furthermore, there was virtually no recognition from this group that their FWP usage either does, or could, negatively affect those in the wider work group.

On the other hand, non-flexible workers interpreted co-worker support with respect to group-level coordination challenges. Three groups of non-flexible worker were apparent in this regard: those who felt an individual's FWP usage created strong negative coordination challenges for others in the work group; those who recognised the problems, but saw them as less severe; and those who considered the difficulties to be slight and manageable. Indeed, Ruth was the only worker of this type to report having witnessed backlash against flexible workers. Consequently, there existed a significant discrepancy between the two types of workers with regard to perceptions of co-worker support. Further research is needed to examine both the extent to which the competing discourses match the practices of what is actually occurring in the Department of Scrutiny, as well as the reasons why perceptions on these issues differ to such an extent.

Again however, the multi-faceted lens of risk aids understanding of these social processes. The data confirms the earlier observation that, particularly within a team working and client facing environment such as AccountCo, an individual's uptake of a FWP will always *to some extent* affect those in the immediate and wider work group, as well as clients. Put another way, it necessitates an increase in *complexity*, which, as I have shown, is both one of the hallmarks of risk (Beck, 1992) and that which the flexible worker is to be made responsible for. Some of the more important manifestations of this risk have already been noted and, indeed, will be further elaborated upon as this chapter progresses. The main point here is that co-workers, like managers, also have a pivotal role to play in aiding in the management/buffering of this risk for the flexible worker (cf. Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002). According to the interviews, the foremost example here involves an awareness of the times flexible workers are unavailable and a willingness to plan ahead for this and themselves be flexible. Given the extent of the

differing reports from the two types of worker regarding this dimension, AccountCo would appear to be, despite its status as a WLB 'best practice' employer, some distance from achieving a context in which flexible workers are adequately supported by their co-workers. The data points to a definite need for all organisations to take more proactive steps to increase levels of understanding/risk management between flexible *and* non-flexible workers regarding both the backlash and group coordination problems shown to exist.

### 8.1.7 Privatised Experience

While extremely useful, McDonald et al's original work-life culture dimensions present only a partial understanding of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility from the perspective of the flexible worker themselves. Rather, the framework needs to be supplemented with the facet of 'privatised experience', with this considered the *culmination* of the flexible working process, largely observable in terms of the twin themes of the privatisation of responsibility and risk. Below, I demonstrate the more intangible and conceptual utility of this suggestion. Overall, the data supports the suggestion that flexible workers are made responsible for the management of their own risks.

#### *8.1.7.a Privatisation of Responsibility*

Chapter Five proposed that there are two main senses in which responsibility is privatised as a result of engagement with the flexible working process. The first of these regarded the employees' initial request to work flexibly, with the second relating to the ongoing and day-to-day nature of working in this manner. As will be demonstrated below, results from AccountCo largely confirm both of these suggestions. The three attitude statements which explicitly referred to responsibility will be considered below in section 8.2.1.

Beginning with the first proposal outlined in Chapter Five, there was a clear sense amongst all respondents that, given AccountCo had demonstrated its commitment to flexible working with its generous provision of FWPs, it was now the responsibility of employees *themselves* to pursue and initiate the flexible working process. Further, FWPs were not, and did not need to be, openly promoted by either the firm itself or individual managers. Given the wider state context whereby FWPs are offered only on a restricted, voluntaristic and individualised basis, respondents perceived, and were widely cognisant with, the fact that the responsibility for the enactment of a FWP at AccountCo had been placed on the shoulders of the individual (Flexibility, 2003; Gambles et al., 2006; James, 2006; TUC, 2005b, 2006; Wattis et al. 2006).

The four remaining main findings here all related to the second proposition. Again, in line with classic neoliberal doctrine (Dean, 1999; Ericson et al., 2000; Rose, 1996b; Shamir, 2008), this suggested that a *moral* responsibility is shifted to the employee to continuously undertake their FWP in a self-determined, self-sustaining manner which does not negatively impact upon wider group processes and the quality and amount of work achieved. However, as I have described in relation to the co-worker support dimension, surprisingly, flexible workers did not really comment on the need to work in such way as to minimise any adverse affects their FWP usage might have on those around them. Instead, they reported having to: personally remain resolute in spite of the associated difficulties; become more efficient and focused; be seen to be taking on more than was typically expected of them; and make every effort to maintain their availability. Whilst each of these were characteristics which to some extent applied to all workers at AccountCo, they were commonly understood as being principally applicable to flexible workers, given their departure from the ideal worker type.

The final point recognised above, that of the need to maintain availability, is particularly indicative of the neoliberal concern to privatise responsibility. Gill's quote on this is extremely instructive. To repeat, she provided the following answer when asked what had been the negative consequences of her FWP usage: 'Being available 100% of the time – it's not really a negative, it's just something you have to do to make the situation work successfully'. Gill's experience here is consistent with that of other flexible workers. The new types of responsibility/characteristics of working life which are to be individually borne tend not to be experienced either negatively or positively, but rather as the inevitable, yet acceptable, double-edged trade-off which must be personally adopted in order to enjoy the benefits of flexible working. Considered thus, the echoes of the Third Way's 'no rights without responsibilities' logic are clear.

#### *8.1.7.b Privatisation of Risk*

This thesis has suggested that there exists a close relationship between the concepts of responsibility and risk, and that there is definite sociological merit in both of these being applied to the field of flexible working/WLB. Chapter Five sought to clarify risk in this context, understanding it as the possible eventualities which arise as a result of the increase in complexity induced by an individual's engagement with the flexible working process. Following this definition, the data both empirically and conceptually demonstrates the utility of the notion of the privatisation of risk.

The six facets of work-life culture examined above routinely highlighted the various ways in which risk was manifest for flexible workers within Scrutiny. The most typical *positive* outcomes associated with FWP usage did prove to be increases in the amount and quality of time spent with children. This is unsurprising, given that, in seven out of ten cases, this was the solitary reason for the request to work flexibly. A minority of respondents also considered in a positive light the increase in their work-related

efficiency and focus. This however seemed more akin to purposeful necessity than a possible eventuality. Conversely, there were five principal *negative* outcomes associated with FWP usage. Three of these have been considered elsewhere: stalled career advancement (incorporating the risk of not being seen to demonstrate the right career-oriented behaviours and a perceived lack of organisational commitment); subtle backlash/resentment from co-workers (from the perspective of flexible workers); and coordination problems for the wider group (from the perspective of non-flexible workers). Outcomes four and five meanwhile, require further consideration.

Outcome four, the strong tendency for flexible workers to work proportionately more than other, standard, workers (what I am terming 'overwork'), largely results from the fact that the economic value of time for AccountCo professionals is non-explicit. In short, flexible workers, particularly part-timers, problematised this traditional approach, given their generally much greater requirement for temporal rigidity (e.g. having to pick up a child from school at a specific and regular time). Part-timers reported having to achieve workloads which were inconsistent with their reduced numbers of paid hours and which, consequently, undermined somewhat their attempt to achieve a greater WLB (cf. McDonald et al., 2007). Indeed, Neil's comments on this were extremely insightful (particularly given his status as one of the Department's people managers) when he commented that part-time work 'puts a lot of rigidity in their day which perhaps isn't ideal in this scenario'.

Interestingly, McDonald et al's (2007) study of a local government organisation also found a number of these types of inconsistencies (such as the requirement that part-timers attended a similar number of meetings and fulfilled comparable corporate responsibilities to full-time staff, subsequently taking up a higher proportion of their work hours), arguing that they were largely *employer-driven*. There was only minor comparable evidence of this at AccountCo. Here, overwork was less of a conscious strategy on management's part and more related to a broader range of factors, most notably: the sheer amount of

work with which all were faced (an institutional factor); the fact that part-timers tended to be more senior (with others therefore having higher expectations of their workload); self-imposed excessive workloads (an inability to say 'no' to work, often related to the desire to over-compensate for being non-standard); and senior managers not ensuring enough consistency between workloads and work hours. Certainly in respect to the final factor, the firm itself has a definite responsibility to ensure such consistency.

The sixth negative outcome was common experiences of guilt. Given the strength of AccountCo's work-life culture, certain acts by flexible workers were seen as particularly constitutive of their status as non-standard. When these acts occurred, they quite often resulted in feelings of guilt. Respondents suggested that these feelings arose regardless of whether or not any negative consequences occurred as a result. The most commonly cited example of this was having to leave the office early; guilt tended to be experienced, even if the flexible worker had made adequate provision to minimise any subsequent disruption or coordination difficulties. Undoubtedly, this type of situation is counter-productive for all parties. The employer (and ultimately of course the state) holds a wider responsibility to help create a context/culture in which flexible work is normalised so that it does not represent as great a disjuncture from standard notions of working. One of the many positive outcomes from this would be that the widespread 'stigma' (Fiona) surrounding flexible workers would decrease, as would associated levels of guilt on the part of those utilising FWP's.

### **8.1.8 Reflection Upon Usage of Work-Life Culture Framework**

Having examined the data, it can be concluded that the concept of work-life organisational culture has proved highly useful in contributing to my primary purpose of examining the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility in terms of the field of flexible working and WLB. Here, I stress five

points which supplement the analysis presented thus far. This is not intended as a summary, but rather as a reflection upon the utility of the work-life culture framework.

Firstly, and overall, both the work-life literature and the AccountCo case-study emphasise the importance of not simply the *concept* of work-life culture, but also my call for it to be viewed as essentially *structural*. Repetition here of arguments presented earlier is unnecessary. The point to emphasise is that the data confirms that AccountCo's work-life culture was underpinned by a number of different, yet inter-related dimensions. Crucially, these served to facilitate and constrain, firstly, the way all employees thought about and understood the issues of WLB/flexible working (e.g. whether a childless male should work flexibly), and secondly, the extent and nature of the subsequent action which occurred (e.g. what type of FWP a person utilised and the affects of this upon their rate of career progression). Whilst McDonald et al's five-fold classification of work-life culture is extremely valuable, this has been enhanced through the addition of the dimensions of 'Institutional Factors' and 'Privatised Experience'.

Secondly, the research strongly endorses the claim of Thompson et al. (1999: 394), that work-life culture is essentially 'the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organisation supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives'. The taken-for-granted and highly informal nature of this culture was routinely demonstrated throughout the AccountCo case-study, but was usefully and concisely elucidated in the response provided by the flexible worker Beth when asked whether 'the working environment of the Scrutiny Department is supportive of those wanting to work flexibly' (Q.16.8):

Agree. I wouldn't go as far as strongly. I still think some people ... you can get ... it's hard to explain. I don't think you have physical barriers to working flexibly, it's just that

... it's the kind of little comments people make: "oh enjoy your day off", no, I'm not contracted to work that day. Less strong willed, you might feel put off from doing it. I think it may discourage those who don't have a strong desire to do it. But then we have never rejected any case within our department. We've asked people to amend their proposals slightly, but we've never flatly refused. I think if people wanted to do it they would. But you've got to have the desire to do it that matches the slightly bitchy comments that might be made to you.

Thirdly, a considerable amount of cross-over is evident between the dimensions, such that they can in no way be understood as mutually exclusive. This supports both the observations in Chapter One and the eventual findings of McDonald et al. (2007: 617) themselves. Whilst each facet proved important, *time expectations* was perhaps the most significant in terms of its power to influence and shape the other factors. Consider for instance its relationship to career consequences: to be seen to be working long hours is closely associated with opportunities for promotion. This is also strongly linked to the importance of manager support; managers' ability to decide who can work flexibly and the precise form this takes is underpinned by the particular ways they perceive and value working time. Notions of the ideal worker, meanwhile, are themselves heavily premised upon ideas about working time, with this itself being highly gendered (Acker, 1990; Smithson et al., 2004).

The 'Privatisation of Risk' section helped elucidate the externalities which arise following the individual's move from being a standard worker to a flexible worker. This study highlighted the positive and negative aspects of this, although it needs to be emphasised that this was very much an ideal-type distinction. The data corroborated the view that, in practice, the outcomes for the employee are complex and double-edged and, consequently, cannot be neatly categorised. Thus, any attempt to determine which form of risk holds most power to shape employee experience is something of a red-herring. The main

point to reinforce, in agreement with a number of other scholars (although not of course considered in terms of risk and responsibility), is that the more negative consequences were largely considered as part of the inevitable and acceptable trade-off which flexible working and the individual's drive for a greater WLB necessitates (Callan, 2007; Corwin et al., 2001; MacDermid et al., 2001; McDonald et al., 2005, 2007; Tomlinson, 2007). The clearest example of this proved to be the double-edged trade-off between the opportunity to fulfil childcare responsibilities and the negative impact upon career progression. Certainly, the AccountCo study serves to challenge the assumption that flexible working can be win-win.

The fifth point to address concerns the question: for which type of worker is the privatising logic most acute? To repeat, the conceptual model I have adopted posits that, given the strength of an organisation's typical work-life culture, *all* forms of employee who opt to engage in the flexible working process are subject to an inevitable disembedding from standard notions of the ideal worker; this in turn necessitates a privatisation of responsibility and risk. However, the data points to three main categories of employee at AccountCo for whom the privatising logic that I have identified is most acute: men, those less senior and those without childcare responsibilities. Particularly in light of its status as 'best practice', formally, and so long as a business case can be provided, there is nothing to prevent these workers from utilising FWP. Ideologically, on the other hand, it is far more difficult for these to be legitimated; the trade-off is too great, again, principally in terms of career consequences. Put another way, it is perhaps too risky. It is therefore unsurprising that take-up rates amongst these groups are virtually non-existent. As Claire admitted, flexible working is always a concession from the perspective of the firm; thus, in this sense, the least worst flexible worker type remains the senior woman with childcare responsibilities.

One of the greatest strengths of McDonald et al's framework is that it privileges the employee's perspective, in contrast to the bulk of previous HR/managerial FWP research. However, despite the salience of the first dimension, 'manager support', the framework omits broader critical consideration of the managerial strategies and discourses used to limit and control flexible working. Thus, having examined the data in this section largely in terms of the employee, I now present an account of the role of AccountCo as employer.

## **8.2 AccountCo: The Role of The Employer**

Here, I build on the previous section in a direct attempt to engage with the second research question posed at the beginning of the methodology chapter: 'What is the role of a typical WLB best practice employer when an employee utilises a FWP? I also address the sub-question: 'Is there a disjunction between organisation WLB/flexible working discourse and practice? If so, why, and what are the effects of this?'. The central argument made is that three key managerial discourses can be identified, each of which proved largely successful in helping to control and limit the use of FWPs at the 'best practice' WLB employer AccountCo. To repeat, each of these emanated from AccountCo itself, thereby reflecting the firm's interests. I have termed these:

1. Primacy of the business case
2. Flexible working as a 'two-way street'
3. The flexible worker recast as the responsible flexible worker

Like the dimensions considered above, each of these were so engrained into the work-life culture of the firm that they were almost totally internalised and taken for granted, helping to structure the perceptions and experiences of all workers at AccountCo. That is, they strongly relate to, but are analytically

separate to, the previous work-life dimensions. They also closely relate to each other – such that they cannot be considered in isolation. Again, therefore, I am arguing that a consideration of these three managerial strategies helps to further elucidate the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility within this field.

### 8.2.1. Primacy of The Business Case

Analysis of the data demonstrates that AccountCo had successfully integrated its private sector/Big Four ideology of the primacy of profit accumulation into the domain of WLB and flexible working. Respondents understood and were complicit with the perception that they, as highly skilled accounting professionals, were located in an extremely competitive institutional context. Transferred to the realm of flexible working, this meant that employees were responsabilized to consider all attempts to work flexibly as subservient to the needs of the firm and the ability to provide a thorough and robust business case.

This managerial discourse was routinely expressed in a variety of ways. For instance, many responses, from *all* types of worker, utilised the expression ‘at the end of the day’. This was typically followed up by comments such as: ‘we’ve got a job to do’; ‘the firm has to make money’; ‘we’re a business’; or ‘this isn’t a social organisation’. Again, these served to reinforce the widely-held perception that flexible working at AccountCo was not straightforward, but rather a concession granted by the firm.

More specifically, the somewhat inconsistent findings from attitude statements one, three and four also highlight this discourse. On the one hand, there was general consensus that all employees *should* be able to attempt to ‘achieve’ a WLB (Q.16.1), with AccountCo seen as holding a responsibility to enable this outcome (Q.16.4). More relevantly for current purposes however, there was clear disagreement (both in Q.16.3 and throughout the interviews) regarding *what* should have ultimate priority in relation to

a person's FWP usage. The majority opted for the business case (eleven) over the individual's right to manage their WLB (seven). In a truly best practice organisation, these two factors should coalesce and not be understood as mutually exclusive, but clearly this is not the case at AccountCo. It was also interesting that despite the seven respondents to place greater emphasis on the individual's personal WLB, the flexibly working departmental senior manager Iris was the only person to suggest that, given its size and resources, the firm *itself* held a responsibility to be flexible in order for FWPs to be a success. I would certainly agree with this perspective. It should be briefly noted too that this discourse also fed into the common acknowledgement that, although flexible working is a concession, it is worthwhile in terms of retention and thus, ultimately, the bottom line.

### **8.2.2 Flexible Working As a 'Two-Way Street'**

The second managerial discourse deployed was that of the 'two-way street'. This attempted to create a context in which flexible working at AccountCo was understood as being based around reciprocal notions of rights and responsibilities between the employer and employee. In practice, it succeeded in masking broader inequalities of power (cf. Elliott, 2002). Examples of this were found across the majority of workers, although it was most explicitly articulated by Lee and Neil, both of whom were non-flexible, male and highly senior (although only Lee specifically used the term 'two-way street'). Given the limited sample, it is impossible to suggest to what extent strong accounts of the discourse were simply reflective of these two individuals, or whether it was more widespread. For instance, unfortunately the sample contained no senior, non-flexible workers who were female.

Lee repeatedly referred to flexible working as a two-way street. Again, the association with the 'no rights without responsibilities' philosophy of the Third Way is striking. For example:

I've always said that it's a two-way street, so you need to meet us half way flexible worker person please. Yes, we will offer this flexible working option to you, but everyone needs to be grown up and realise that this is not just a free ride and that the commitment back from the employee is really important to me as the department senior manager and as a colleague. Because if it doesn't get done, then it has to get done by someone and someone ends up picking up the pieces.

Neil also invoked this logic on numerous occasions, not least in his insistence that 'I think there needs to be a bit more give and take. At the moment it's a lot of give by the firm and take by certain employees'.

Recognition of this Third Way-resonant discourse allows for a comparison with the earlier observation of Chapter One (point 1.3.4) that the sociological concept of responsibility (as well as risk) is almost totally absent in the existing work-life literature. It was also shown, however, that one of the few exceptions relates to the (rarely made) assumption within human resource management that best practice flexible working involves a 'dual agenda'. AccountCo's managerialist discourse of the two-way street is strikingly similar to that of the dual agenda. Both suggest a shared sense of responsibility between the individual and the organisation, such that the needs of both are ultimately met (Britten, 2002; Lewis and Cooper, 2005). In theory, this is to be applauded. Yet, as I have frequently shown, in practice the greater burden of responsibility (and hence risk) is inevitably loaded upon the *individual*. Consider, for instance, the following comment by the flexible worker Dora:

The amount of work that is pushed at us and that people are expected to deliver, probably really goes against WLB. If you take the hours that people work, AccountCo doesn't promote WLB at all. But in terms of what they offer, it does. So ... it's up to

everyone *individually* to make it work for them. So the offer is brilliant – but you have to make it work for *you*. [emphasis added]

It is significant that Dora has recognised that there is a disjunction between AccountCo's WLB discourses (seen via their self-promotion as a WLB employer of choice) and its practices (endemic long hours working and increased work intensification). However, having now utilised a FWP, she has fully understood and is complicit with the highly individualised nature of flexible working.

Dora was typical of the majority of those interviewed, given her inability/unwillingness to challenge AccountCo about any ways in which it could be seen to not be fulfilling *its* rightful duties as part of the two-way street. Most were content that the firm had satisfied its obligations, in light of its agreement to go over and beyond legislative requirements (the RTR) by offering FWPs to all so long as a business case could be presented, an offer Dora described above as 'brilliant'. Also, despite the strength of the two-way street discourse, according to the interviews at least, in practice there were virtually no examples of occasions on which this had ever been abused by the flexibly working employee. To elaborate on this point, I now progress to the final managerial discourse in circulation at AccountCo.

### **8.2.3 The Flexible Worker Recast as The Responsible Flexible Worker**

It has been highlighted throughout that standard working practices tend to be founded upon notions of the 'ideal worker'. This social construction succeeds in presenting an ideal-type of worker – one characterised as traditionally masculine, able to neatly separate their 'work' and 'life' and to visibly concentrate fully on the former – against which all others are evaluated (Bailyn, 1993, 2003; Callan, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Lewis, 1997; Rapoport et al., 2002). Here I extend this long-standing

conceptual observation to suggest that FWP usage at AccountCo is underpinned by managerial discourses pertaining to both the economic and moral construction of the *responsible* flexible worker.

Traditional work-life culture posits that the ideal worker should not, and does not, work flexibly. Given the reality that employees do opt to utilise FWPs, in *discursive* terms there existed two forms of flexible worker: those aligned with the ideal-typical, responsible, flexible worker and, conversely, those framed as being irresponsible. Thus, Fiona articulated the more general thoughts of many when she spoke about those returning from maternity leave:

There's two camps. The people that come back and basically just coast along without putting in the extra hours ... then they're the sort of people who'll whinge that they don't get promoted and you think, well, you're hardly doing anything. And the others, like me, who'll come back, be flexible and make it work and do an evening if they have to.

Unquestionably, this distinction proved highly influential. In Chapter Five (point 3.3.1) I suggested that the Third Way's 'no rights without responsibility' philosophy had helped fashion an organisational context in which flexible working could be understood as akin to both 'a moral obligation and a social constraint' (Coffield, 1999: 488). Combined with the managerial prerogative to recast the flexible worker as the responsible flexible worker, this is applicable here in two senses.

Firstly, it discursively constructs the responsible flexible worker as someone who understands, and is complicit with, each of the processes that were listed earlier under point 8.1.7.1; for example, the requirement that the individual makes every effort to at all times maintain their availability and not negatively impinge on the work of others. They have incorporated this neoliberal-inspired logic and

constantly undertake their FWP in a self-determined, self-sustaining manner which does not adversely impact upon wider group processes and the quality and amount of work accomplished. This category is similar to Van Dyne et al's ideal-type description of the FWP user who demonstrates 'proactive availability and group coordination'. This is seen to occur:

When individuals with reduced face time demonstrate proactive availability by initiating formal and informal communication and by being flexible ... this heightens shared awareness among group members, helps coordinate temporal interactions in the group, and reduces coordination challenges. (Van Dyne et al., 2007: 1133-1134)

Secondly, the discursive construction of the responsible flexible worker helped prevent too many standard workers utilising FWPs, given the high degree of reciprocal obligations required of the individual. Again, the departmental senior manager Lee was particularly forthcoming about the tension AccountCo faced in, on the one hand, designing its FWPs so as to remain a 'best practice' employer of choice and, on the other, attempting to avoid a scenario in which they 'set that precedent, where every man and his dog goes and does it'.

It is likely that there have been some occasions in which 'irresponsible' flexible workers have abused the 'two-way street' at AccountCo. However, no specific instances of this were cited; once more, there existed a disjunction between rhetoric and practice. This inability to offer relevant examples was actually articulated by a small number of individuals, for example the non-flexible worker Olive:

Overall it [*flexible working*] hasn't affected me a great deal. You know, I've heard stories of people who do work flexibly ... but they're not sort of ... it's nothing I've experienced myself, it's all just stories.

The most revealing comment, however, was again from Lee:

I think there's always the potential perception of the free-rider problem. I haven't seen any personal evidence of that and I can point to examples of the people I know who are flexible workers and say that I know them, have worked with them for a number of years, and that they aren't free-riders and the reason it works is because they meet us half-way. I'm not saying there isn't the risk that someone could take the piss, but I've never seen it. So I think that's the potential negative, but it's a potential rather than an actual reality.

Despite Lee's recognition here that the notion of the irresponsible flexible worker is largely hypothetical, he makes sense of this within a wider context highly consistent with the Third Way's principle of reciprocity and mutual obligation, in which the injustice of free-riding is explicitly articulated (Jordan, 1998; Kemshall, 2002). On three occasions during the course of his interview, Lee followed up his analogy of the two-way street with a refutation of the 'free-rider' – despite the inability of any respondent to provide an example of a 'free-rider'. In sum, AccountCo have pursued a neoliberal-inspired discourse in which the flexible worker has been recast as the responsible flexible worker.

### Summary

This chapter has covered a large amount of ground. It has pursued an approach consistent with my suggestion that work-life culture facilitates and constrains action and experience, in order to draw together the empirical findings from the AccountCo case-study and the key ideas introduced and discussed in earlier chapters. Overall, it has sought to highlight the empirical utility of the conceptual

framework proposed throughout the thesis – the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility  
– both in terms of the typical flexibly working employee and employer.

## CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

This study has identified and critically examined the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, taking as its case-study the field of work-life balance and flexible working practices. In this concluding chapter I review the main findings and consider each of the significant contributions made by the thesis. Consistent with the approach adopted throughout, rather than having to list the major contributions one after another, the most appropriate method of achieving this is by returning to the original research objectives and research questions and considering how far each of these have been achieved. To repeat comments made earlier, each of the research objectives and research questions arose out of the findings of the literature reviews, with these, in turn, structuring the totality of the analysis and arguments made. That is, each in and of itself by definition represents a definite contribution to existing (political and work related) sociological literature. Throughout the chapter, I also attempt to point out those areas of the study which I consider to be particularly strong, as well as those where there room for improvement; alongside possible future areas of research to arise from the thesis.

### Research Objectives

My research objectives were set out in the Introduction and served to set the general conceptual parameters of the study, primarily in relation to Part I, but they also structured the empirical analysis of Part II. Research objective 1.a stated the broad intention to ‘examine the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility’ – a task accomplished throughout. More specifically however, it has been achieved through, firstly, its identification as a core element of neoliberalism (Introduction Chapter) and, secondly, a consideration of it as one of the primary means by which neoliberalism has sought to manage risk in

such a way as to create the widest possible conditions by which markets can flourish and the state remain minimal (Chapter Four).

Until now, the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility has not figured as a specific field of research. Whilst the idea of the privatisation of risk has occasionally been engaged with (Calhoun, 2006; Hacker, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; O'Rand and Shuey, 2007; Rutherford, 2007b), these contributions are highly limited, not least in their failure to recognise its status as an integral feature of neoliberalism and their exclusion of the related concept of responsibility. Thus, the study fills a significant gap – particularly within the field of political sociology. Elliott (2002) has been identified as one of the few scholars to have, albeit briefly, written specifically about 'the privatization of risk'. Significantly, this occurred by way of a critique of Beck's risk society approach in terms of its analysis of power and domination, in which Elliott argues that 'the sociological task is to analyse privatization' as a 'channel of risk management' (Elliott, 2002: 306). Having therefore examined the typical ways by which neoliberalism has managed the NSR of WLB in such a way as to maintain and reproduce the power of economic elites to accumulate capital, this represents an original and direct response to this call. More research is now needed which further examines this concept, paying particular attention to its emergence alongside other tenets of neoliberalism and its relationship to other forms of risk privatisation during early liberalism. These would certainly have benefited my analysis but were beyond the scope of this study.

Research objective 1.b sought to 'examine this in relation to the field of work and employment'. This was achieved primarily of course in relation to the issues of WLB and flexible working throughout the study, but was also addressed at a more general level in Chapter Two. Here, the fields of unemployment, lifelong learning and the employability agenda, and retirement and the new pension environment were identified as the three clearest areas where this logic is increasingly being manifest. Whilst existing work

and employment scholars have certainly engaged with the types of arguments I have presented, none have articulated developments in these fields in terms of neoliberalism's imperative to privatise risk and responsibility. In this light, these arguments contribute not only to each of these individual fields (pensions, unemployment and training/lifelong learning), but also to the sociology of work itself. Certainly, given the utility and broad resonance of this framework, further research of this type will benefit this field.

Research objectives 2.a and 2.b made clear the requirement to apply this set of ideas to the areas of WLB and flexible working. 2.a was specifically aimed at the socio/political (macro) level, asking 'how and if this logic has affected the way the British neoliberal-influenced state has responded to the emergence of WLB'. To achieve this, three main lines of argument were presented; the first two of which were located in Chapter Four, whilst the third occurred in Chapter Five. Drawing upon two welfare state scholars (Bonoli, 2005, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004a, 2004b), the first made clear the initial sense in which the issue of WLB is influenced by notions of risk and responsibility: that the integration of 'work' and 'life' domains increasingly figures as a NSR to post-industrial society. To repeat, this recognition has only briefly figured in existing sociological work-life literature (Blundson and McNeil, 2006) and, prior to this study, has not been either conceptually or empirically extended. Moreover, this extension of the concept of social risk figures as a specific contribution to the field of welfare state research.

The second form of argument necessitated consideration of the British political context of New Labour and its guiding philosophy of the Third Way. Much, of course, has already been written debating the extent to which New Labour presents a continuation of the neoliberal agenda. The thesis presents further evidence to support this view. However, it then builds on this to present the argument that neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility and its accompanying changing conception of rights finds its most explicit discursive expression in the influential New Labour/Third Way mantra of 'no

rights without responsibilities'. In doing so, the study represents the first occasion in which the neoliberal strategy to privatise risk and responsibility has been explicitly coupled with New Labour.

In light of this context, I was then able to elucidate more precisely the response of the British state to WLB (the third line of argument). Given earlier recognitions of, firstly, the requirement that NSRs need to be managed and, secondly, that neoliberalism is increasingly pursuing a strategy of risk and responsibility privatisation, New Labour's response to WLB was shown to neatly fit within this paradigm. Gambles et al's (2006) brief observation that this has taken the form of a 'two-pronged approach' – consisting of the encouragement of organisations to go further alongside a minimal framework of legislative intervention – was *extended* at length (another clear area of contribution to existing work-life discussion). Attention was given particularly to the latter form of approach, with this shown to be most clearly expressed in the RTR (the principal work-focused, state response for the management of WLB), itself perhaps the archetypal policy example of the 'no rights without responsibilities' discourse. Few other accounts have critically discussed the wider social and political context of FWPs (see as the most notable example, Fleetwood, 2007b).

Research objective 2.b built on this analysis regarding the meso/micro levels of the employer/employee. It sought 'to explore how and if this logic has permeated to affect the way employers deploy FWPs and how these are then utilised and experienced by employees'. Within Part I, the second half of Chapter Five dealt primarily with this. Here, it was argued that the political context considered previously has succeeded in creating the conditions necessary by which formalised FWPs are now offered by most employers, as the foremost means whereby responsible employees are able to manage their personal WLB – albeit in a highly restricted, voluntaristic and individualised manner. Crucially, it was suggested that the successful enactment and continuation of the flexible working process therefore figures as the responsibility of the flexible *employee*, rather than the employer.

Further analysis of flexible working, both in terms of ideas of risk and responsibility and from the perspective of the employee, was then shown to necessitate detailed consideration of the increasingly utilised concept of work-life organisational culture. In sum, I extended the analysis of several other work-life researchers (particularly McDonald et al., 2007) to suggest that, given the enduring power of traditional work-life cultures (premised upon notions such as the 'ideal worker') to constrain and facilitate action, FWP utilisation is only possible in exchange for a shift of both risk *and* responsibility – directionally away from the employer and towards the flexible worker. A number of outcomes of this were then put forward, such as the requirement that the employee undertakes their FWP in a morally responsible manner and the contention that the flexible working process ultimately figures as a double-edged sword, equating to both opportunities *and* drawbacks. Unquestionably, this contributes to the full breadth of flexible working research, but most particularly and originally to the popular field of work-life organisational culture.

### Research Questions

Located at the beginning of the methodology chapter, the research questions structured Part II of the thesis. These attempted to determine, through the case-study, the extent to which there is an empirical utility to the conceptual framework proposed in Part I, within and across each of the analytic levels of the state, employer and employee (although emphasis was primarily on the latter two of these categories). As such, the initial question was particularly broad, focusing on the first, macro level. It asked: 'Can a connection be drawn between the particular experiences and perceptions of flexible workers and the ways the neoliberal-influenced *state* has responded to WLB as a NSR?'

Overall, it can be concluded that the empirical study *did* produce definite evidence in support of the ideas set out in Part I. Thus, the answer to the first research question was largely *implicit* throughout Part II. Despite its status as a best practice employer for WLB, AccountCo provided a case-study example of a firm which offered FWP in a restricted, voluntaristic and individualised manner – an approach commensurate with the state’s two-pronged approach to WLB. Interview data then confirmed that this context significantly structured patterns of uptake for FWPs, as well as the perception and experience of FWP usage. Indeed, personal experience of flexible working was shown to be analytically reducible to the metaphor of the double-edged sword (itself underpinned by notions of privatised risk and responsibility).

Whilst a detailed analysis of the relationship between the response of the state to WLB and the lived experience of employees regarding FWPs was beyond the scope of the study, a definite connection has been provided. The research concurs with the findings of Brandth and Kvande (2001), that there remains a highly important role for the state in providing collective, standard solutions to WLB which have the positive effect of helping to normalise FWPs and increase levels of gender equity; that is, to greater manage the associated risks and responsibilities surrounding the NSR of WLB. The RTR, for example, has proved a definite step in the right direction but, as I have argued, its power remains limited.

The second set of research questions concerned the role of the *employer* and the *organisation*. Before progressing, however, it is appropriate at this point to briefly reconsider the merits of the particular research instrument utilised. A largely qualitative, critical case-study follow-up to the DTI’s recent *Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey* (DTI, 2007) (‘WLB3’) was adopted. This allowed for a highly novel contribution to the existing research, in which a well-known and oft referred to (particularly outside academia) large scale Government survey on the issue in hand could be extended. This occurred in

such a way as to overcome some of the methodological weaknesses inherent in this form of research and, in doing so, increase opportunities for entrance into the potential organisation. As described in detail in Chapter Six, this form of research method offers a major area of originality in comparison to other work-life studies. Indeed, given its inherent advantages, it is surprising that so few other sociological studies have undertaken follow-up research of this kind.

The Big Four accounting firm 'AccountCo' was selected as the case, primarily in light of the finding of Chapter One that there has been a distinct lack of sociological work-life studies to have examined organisations which purport to model 'best practice' in their WLB/flexible working policies. This allowed for an in depth examination of both the flexible working practices of AccountCo *and* the complex social processes which underpin these. In summary, the additional main areas of strength of the empirical research were its unusual focus on a single department (Scrutiny), and a sample consisting of both flexible *and* non-flexible workers, all of whom were *managerial*.

Thus, 2.a posed the general question of 'What is the role of a typical WLB best practice *employer* when an employee utilises a FWP?'. Conceptually speaking, this also was largely implicit at various stages throughout the study. Again, to summarise, theoretically a best practice organisation is one which successfully manages and absorbs, to as large an extent as possible, the risks and responsibilities associated with an individuals' FWP usage, alongside offering FWPs in a manner over and beyond legislative requirements.

Throughout, my analysis of AccountCo was largely critically informed. Indeed, this is in keeping with my role as a social researcher. Nevertheless, in hindsight, perhaps greater discussion ought to have been provided regarding those areas where AccountCo *could* be seen to be positively creating a flexible working culture of, or near to, 'best practice'. For example, the firm *does* offer a relatively large number

of FWPs over and beyond part-time working, and it does attempt to actively promote the role of Val as 'Flexible Working Champion'. However, discussions of this type were always likely to prove difficult given my use of a single case-study organisation. Again, a further potential weakness of the study is its inability to make wider generalisations and comparisons with other firms (be they best practice or not). Future research would certainly increase the number of case-studies.

To return to the issue of the Research Questions, 2.b then asked more specifically 'Is there a disjunction between organisation WLB/flexible working discourse and practice? If so, why, and what are the effects of this?'. The second section of Chapter Eight addressed this directly, a task which was made easier given that the sample, although originally unintended, was comprised entirely of AccountCo *managers*. The main argument was that yes, a disjunction *was* found to exist between the discourses AccountCo promoted about flexible working and the need to maintain a healthy WLB, and the actual practices that occurred at the firm on a daily basis.

Critical analysis of the data revealed three key overlapping managerial discourses, what I termed the 'Primacy of the business case'; 'Flexible working as a 'two-way street''; and 'The flexible worker recast as the responsible flexible worker'. Each of these figured as integral components to the organisation's work-life culture, arising from and operating in the interests of the firm. Together they succeeded in managing the usage of FWPs at AccountCo. In sum, FWP utilisation necessitated an extra sense of moral responsibility on behalf of the flexible worker. This was in order to nullify any potential negative effects on their own case-load of work, the wider work group and AccountCo itself. Yet, no respondent was able to provide any instances in which this 'two-way street' had ever actually been abused.

At a conceptual level, as was the case with the State, this thesis argues for greater effort to be made by employers (particularly, of course, those which claim the status of 'best practice for WLB') to manage

collectively the risks and responsibilities associated with individual FWP usage. In contrast to all other work-life studies, the analytical approach adopted (i.e. risk and responsibility privatisation) allows for the conclusion that, given enduring notions of traditional work-life culture, some level of *disembedding* from this will *always* occur when an individual opts to work flexibly. I have argued that the organisation holds a definite responsibility not only to limit this and prevent it from happening to such an extent that it proves prohibitive (as was the case at AccountCo, for example, regarding men), but to actively pursue an approach to flexible working in line with what Lewis and Cooper (2005) have termed the 'dual agenda'. More practically, increased levels of education across the workforce are needed to raise awareness of flexible working and the many issues that surround it, such that it be further normalised. There is also a particular necessity for greater managerial transparency regarding the relationship between FWP usage and career consequences.

The final research question concerned the micro level of the *employee*. Divided into two halves, it asked, firstly, 'Is the flexible working process perceptible in terms of a privatisation of risk and responsibility for the *employee*?' (3.a), and secondly, 'Can it be understood as 'double-edged'? I.e. not 'win-win' (3.b). The answer to the first proved relatively straight-forward: yes, the AccountCo case-study demonstrated that the notion of the neoliberal privatisation of risk and responsibility *was* salient in explaining respondent experience of FWP utilisation. However, as expected, 3.a was most perceptible in light of consideration of 3.b; with this, in turn, most obvious via a modified application of McDonald et al's (2007) concept of work-life organisational culture.

To repeat again therefore, this research contributes significantly to the emergent area of organisational work-life culture. Reported experiences and perceptions of flexible working/WLB at AccountCo were broadly consistent with McDonald et al's five dimensions of 'manager support', 'career consequences', 'gendered policy use', 'time expectations' and 'co-worker support'. However, these presented only a

partial view, and required supplementing with the additional dimensions of 'institutional factors' and 'privatised experience' (consisting of both 'privatisation of responsibility' and 'privatisation of risk'). The study therefore serves as a further addition to the finding that, despite the claims of Government (Amble, 2005; DTI, 2006) and those academics who conceptualise flexible working uncritically as 'high road' (Bone, 2006; Michie and Sheehan, 2003), FWP's are *not* wholly win-win. Rather, from the perspective of the typical employee, the decision to work flexibly is best seen as a trade-off (Callan, 2007; Corwin et al., 2001; MacDermid et al., 2001; McDonald et al., 2005, 2007; Tomlinson, 2007), with the constant, day-to-day engagement with the flexible working process most appropriately conceptualised in terms of the metaphor of the *double-edged sword*. An individual's formal uptake of a FWP results in process gains *and* losses for not only the individual, but also the wider work group and organisation as a whole. Again, this suggests a sustained need for research which examines ways to overcome the negative outcomes which can tend to arise for the wider group associated with an individuals' FWP usage (c.f. Van Dyne et al., 2007).

Put another way, I have argued that workers made responses to the risk of taking up a FWP in a number of ways which cannot be neatly categorised. To an extent, they underwent a form of privatised risk management, weighing up the potential opportunities and negatives and making a decision based on that. Risk in this sense proved most perceptible in terms of the negative outcome of stalled career progression. However, the extent to which this process was conscious varies. For example, some respondents were acutely aware that FWP usage was bad for their career development, whilst others were either not aware or reported that it made no effect. Consistent with both my findings and those of the work-life literature however, there does seem to be a clear relationship between FWP usage and stalled career progression. I would suggest that, in particular, future research on this theme develops in greater detail my notion of the double-edged sword.

It is important to briefly stress a final point with respect to the flexible working process figuring as both a trade-off and akin to a double-edged sword. Despite being facilitated by and finding its clearest expression within a context of the neoliberal imperative to privatise risk and responsibility, this outcome for flexible workers is not, of course, limited to neoliberal states. As long as traditional norms about work-life culture and the ideal worker exist, flexible workers will continue to be seen as deviant from the norm (Bittman, 1999; Brandth and Kvande, 2001; Ellingsaeter, 2003; Hochschild, 1997); difference will perhaps always bring with it risks and responsibilities. But, as I have demonstrated at length, this is most acute in neoliberal contexts where the state and employers have played a limited and largely 'hands-off' role in the reconciliation of work and life, and where the ball has been firmly passed to 'responsible' employees.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX ONE – INTERVIEW STRUCTURE: FLEXIBLE WORKERS

Note: Comments in [brackets] indicate the original number of the question in the WLB3 technical report (ICM, 2007), or whether the question has been added / amended by the author and is therefore categorised as 'new'.

### General Understandings of Flexible Working and WLB

Q1. *How would you define flexible working? / what do you think of flexible working / how would you summarise it?* [New]

### Take-Up of FWPs

Q2. *In what ways do you currently work, or have you worked, flexibly in any way in the last 12 months at AccountCo?* [C13]

Q2.1 *How long have you been working flexibly?* [New]

Q4. *'In your current job would you like to . . .? (work flexibly in an additional way)*

*Regularly home-work*

*work term-times*

*work part-time*

*Work a compressed week*

*Work annualised hours*

*Work reduced hours for a limited period*

*Flexi-time (glide time)*

*Job-share* [C18]

Q5. *'In April 2003, the Government introduced a new right for parents of children under the age of six, or disabled children under 18, to request a flexible working arrangement. Employers have a statutory duty to consider such requests seriously. Are you aware of the right to request flexible working arrangements which was introduced in April 2003?'* [B17]

Q5.1 *Is knowledge of it widespread amongst workers here?* [New]

Q5.2 *What are people's general thoughts and, experiences of the RTR?* [New]

Q6. *'Over the last two years, have you approached your current employer to make a request to change how you regularly work for a sustained period of time?'*

(Yes)

Q6.1 *'How did you submit your request and who dealt with it?'* [C7 + C4]

Q6.2 *'What was the outcome of your request?'* [C8]

Q6.3 (If declined...) *'Did you appeal against your employer's decision?'* [C11]

### Reasons for Working Flexibly

Q7. *What are the main reasons why you work flexibly?* [C16]

**Positive and Negative Consequences of Flexible Working for the Individual**

Q8. *What have been the **positive** consequences of you being able to ...?* [C13i]

Q9. *What have been the **negative** consequences of you being able to ...?* [C13j]

**Positive and Negative Consequences of Flexible Working for the Colleague**

Q10. *What have been the **positive** consequences for you, of your colleagues being able to ...?*  
[C14i]

Q11. *What have been the **negative** consequences for you, of your colleagues being able to ...?*  
[C14j]

**Role Of Employer**

Q12. *What single thing, if anything, could your employer reasonably provide for you personally to achieve a better work-life balance?* [C27]

Q13. *Does your manager do enough to provide and promote flexible working arrangements?*  
[C25]

Q14. *Has your employer ever consulted employees or their representatives about adjusting working arrangements, so they can strike a better work-life balance?* [C26]

Q15. *How far would you agree with AccountCo's assertion that they are one of the top WLB best practice employers in the UK?* [New]

**Attitudes to Work-Life Balance**

Q16. *How far do you agree or disagree with the following nine statements? Choose one of the nine attitudes and please explain why you think this is:* [G4]

Strongly Agree – Agree – Neither Agree Nor Disagree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
--

Q16.1 *Everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way that they want*

Q16.2 *Employers who offer flexible working value their staff more*

Q16.3 *Employees must not expect to be able to change their working pattern if to do so would disrupt the business*

- Q16.4 *It's not the employer's responsibility to help people balance their work with other aspects of their life*
- Q16.5 *People who work flexibly are less likely to get promoted*
- Q16.6 *People who work flexibly create more work for others*
- Q16.7 *People who work flexibly need closer supervision*
- Q16.8 *The working environment of my department is supportive of those wanting to work flexibly* [New]
- Q16.9 *Flexible working at AccountCo is equally available for all* [New]

## APPENDIX TWO – INTERVIEW STRUCTURE: NON-FLEXIBLE WORKERS

Note: Comments in [brackets] indicate the original number of the question in the WLB3 technical report (ICM, 2007), or whether the question has been added / amended by the author and is therefore categorised as 'new'.

### General Understandings of Flexible Working and WLB

Q1. *How would you define flexible working? / what do you think of flexible working / how would you summarise it?* [New]

### Take-Up of FWPs

Q2. *In what ways do you currently work, or have you worked, flexibly in any way in the last 12 months at AccountCo?* [C13]

Q2.1 *How long have you been working flexibly?* [New]

Q3. *'Could your job be done by someone (else) working . . .'*

*Regular home-working*

*Term-time working*

*Part-time working*

*Work a compressed week*

*Work annualised hours*

*Work reduced hours for a limited period*

*Flexi-time*

*Job-share* [C19]

Q4. *'In your current job would you like to . . .? (work flexibly in an additional way)*

*Regularly home-work*

*work term-times*

*work part-time*

*Work a compressed week*

*Work annualised hours*

*Work reduced hours for a limited period*

*Flexi-time (glide time)*

*Job-share* [C18]

Q5. *'In April 2003, the Government introduced a new right for parents of children under the age of six, or disabled children under 18, to request a flexible working arrangement. Employers have a statutory duty to consider such requests seriously. Are you aware of the right to request flexible working arrangements which was introduced in April 2003?'* [B17]

Q5.1 *Is knowledge of it widespread amongst workers here?* [New]

Q5.2 *What are people's general thoughts and, experiences of the RTR?* [New]

Q6. *'Over the last two years, have you approached your current employer to make a request to change how you regularly work for a sustained period of time?'*

(Yes)

Q6.1 *'How did you submit your request and who dealt with it?'* [C7 + C4]

Q6.2 *'What was the outcome of your request?'* [C8]

Q6.3 (If declined...) *'Did you appeal against your employer's decision?'* [C11]

(No)

Q6.4 *If in the last 12 months you have not asked to work flexibly, why have you not made such a request?* [C17]

### Positive and Negative Consequences of Flexible Working for the Colleague

Q10. *'What have been the **positive** consequences for you, of your colleagues being able to ...?'*  
[C14i]

Q11. *'What have been the **negative** consequences for you, of your colleagues being able to ...?'*  
[C14j]

### Role Of Employer

Q12. *'What single thing, if anything, could your employer reasonably provide for you personally to achieve a better work-life balance?'* [C27]

Q13. *'Does your manager do enough to provide and promote flexible working arrangements?'*  
[C25]

Q14. *'Has your employer ever consulted employees or their representatives about adjusting working arrangements, so they can strike a better work-life balance?'* [C26]

Q15. *How far would you agree with AccountCo's assertion that they are one of the top WLB best practice employers in the UK?* [New]

### Attitudes to Work-Life Balance

Q16. *How far do you agree or disagree with the following nine statements? Choose one of the nine attitudes and please explain why you think this is:* [G4]

Strongly Agree – Agree – Neither Agree Nor Disagree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
--

Q16.1 *Everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way that they want*

Q16.2 *Employers who offer flexible working value their staff more*

Q16.3 *Employees must not expect to be able to change their working pattern if to do so would disrupt the business*

- Q16.4 *It's not the employer's responsibility to help people balance their work with other aspects of their life*
- Q16.5 *People who work flexibly are less likely to get promoted*
- Q16.6 *People who work flexibly create more work for others*
- Q16.7 *People who work flexibly need closer supervision*
- Q16.8 *The working environment of my department is supportive of those wanting to work flexibly* [New]
- Q16.9 *Flexible working at AccountCo is equally available for all* [New]

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