

Empowering lives through work-life balance : a critique

Abstract

This paper has emerged from conversations with colleagues in a network. We were discussing why all of us had made the decision to become self-employed. The answer centred on the need for more control over what we did and who we were. So after this rather smug agreement the conversation drifted onto family and our lack of a social life, in particular how we didn't seem to have the time or energy to fulfil commitments on both fronts. It became clear that the very thing we had wanted to get away from had re-emerged but in a different context. What was going on? Were more systemic processes at work within the areas we had chosen to live and work? Above all, could we really differentiate clearly between our working lives and the rest of what we did?

The discourse on 'work-life' and 'balancing' is all pervasive (Smithson and Stokoe 2005). The paper will demonstrate how such discourse embraces many concepts of time, nature of work, happiness, employers' responsibilities, and work stressors and outside work stressors, freedom, choice, exploitation and marginalised groups. This paper cannot within its confines hope to embrace all of these but they do indicate the complexity around this area of peoples lives, and the caution needed to proceed when trying to make sense of so-called 'work/life balance'. For within this supposed complexity, it will be argued, are many assumptions of how social phenomena are described and then acted upon, or not. It is this more critical stance which questions the ideology of individualism that 'encourages us to assume that we are each sovereign, self-determining beings' [Alvesson and Wilmott 1998:13]. Such assumptions concerning the power of individuals to change and manipulate conditions within their lives, the author contends, underpin current work-life empowerment discourse.

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