Caught in the Middle: Organizational Impediments to Middle Managers' Work-life Balance

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Abstract As increased work demands and longer working hours become the reality for many employees, the concept of work-life balance has received increasing attention. This paper presents findings from an exploratory study of Australian middle managers, which investigated the impact of middle managers' daily organizational experiences on their lives both in and beyond the workplace. We focus on respondents' reports of the difficulty in achieving work-life balance, specifically, the organizational impediments to creating balance. Three particular areas where these impediments were apparent are: the impact of new technologies; limits to autonomy and control in the middle management role; and difficulties in taking advantage of flexibility initiatives in the workplace. As middle managers are caught in the middle between work and personal life, there is a need for organizations to support middle managers' efforts to achieve work-life balance if the organization's long-term goals are to be achieved.

Key words flexibility · middle managers · work-life balance · workplace experiences

Work-life Balance and the Middle Manager

There has long been debate over how individuals can succeed in their working lives without sacrificing their personal lives (Lewis and Cooper 2005, p. 9). The interface between work and personal life (particularly family) has been characterised by terminology such as work–

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family conflict (eg. Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Frone *et al.* 1992; Reynolds 2005), work–family spillover (eg. Barnett 1994; Doumas *et al.* 2003) and work-life balance (eg. Perrons 2003; Dex and Bond 2005). Essentially, it is argued that interference often exists between work and non-work aspects of life, involving 'interrole conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect' (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985, p. 77). This conflict and spillover can occur in both the direction of work-to-home and home-to-work, as individuals negotiate their various roles in different domains, such as employee, spouse or parent (Coverman 1989; Eagle *et al.* 1997; Roxburgh 2002; Greenhaus and Powell 2003). However, it is the intrusion of work into non-work domains that has been found to be more prevalent (Frone *et al.* 1992; Morehead 2001; White *et al.* 2003).

The current organizational landscape, with its calls for flexibility, innovation and rapid response to change, has resulted in increased work demands and longer working hours for many employees (Brett and Stroh 2003; Lewis and Cooper 2005). These hours are not only being undertaken in the workplace; the development of new technologies such as mobile phones and laptop computers increases the potential for work demands to continue after leaving the physical work space. Increasing numbers of employees are working in their homes, either formally for one or more days (eg. Ellison 2004; Shumate and Fulk 2004), or "after hours" in addition to time in the workplace (eg. Wilson *et al.* 2004; Tietze and Musson 2005). As the demands of work intensify, there has been a continuing focus by many individuals and researchers on the notion of work-life balance and how this might be attained. Indeed, the term work-life balance has entered the public lexicon, with focus being given to varying degrees at governmental, organizational and individual levels (Lambert and Haley-Lock 2004; Lingard and Francis 2005).

The intensification of work regimes is of particular relevance for middle managers. The flattening of organizational structures over the past 20 years has resulted in middle managers having both wider spans of control (Klagge 1998b) and enlarged roles (Balogun 2003). Increased responsibility for such areas as decision-making (eg. Balogun 2003), people-management (eg. Currie and Procter 2001) and directing organizational change (eg. Fenton-O'Creevy 2001) have all contributed to growing difficulty in maintaining a balance between work and non-work activities.

This paper discusses findings from an exploratory study of Australian middle managers, which investigated middle managers' daily organizational experiences. In particular, we were interested in middle managers' own meanings of these events, and the personal impacts of these both in the workplace and when they left at the end of the day. While a number of themes emerged, this paper focuses on respondents' reports of difficulty in achieving work-life balance, specifically, the organizational impediments to achieving balance. Before discussing the study's findings on middle managers' workplace experiences, consideration is given to the changing organizational context for middle managers.

The Changing Context for Middle Managers

The downsizing and restructuring of organizations since the 1980s has had impacts for both the work patterns and career experiences of middle managers (Goffee and Scase 1986). In many cases, this involved the "flattening" of hierarchical structures (Staehle and Schirmer 1992), through reduction in the number of middle management levels (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999). For example, in the USA, middle managers accounted for 19% of job losses between 1988 and 1993, while at the same time making up only 8% of the workforce (Heckscher 1995, p. 3). This downsizing and organizational restructuring has meant both a

reduction in the number of middle managers in organizations (Staehle and Schirmer 1992; Cascio 1993), and a changed role for those who remain (Dopson and Stewart 1990; Wooldridge and Floyd 1990; Floyd and Wooldridge 1994).

While authors agree that the middle management role has changed for those who remain in the organization, disputes have been played out in the literature over exactly *how* the role of middle managers is changing (Brubakk and Wilkinson 1996). Consequently, developing an understanding of this issue has been a key focus of the research conducted over the past 15 years. In particular, recent research studies of middle management have had a strong focus on how middle managers have been affected by organizational change in the aftermath of organizational restructuring and downsizing (Turnbull 2001). These studies have included consideration of such issues as the impact on managerial tasks, job satisfaction, and motivation. Here, we briefly consider three key issues which have emerged as important for middle managers, and have particular relevance to the themes presented in this paper.

Firstly, the flattening of organizational structures has led to wider spans of control (Dopson *et al*. 1992; Klagge 1998b) and enlarged roles (Balogun 2003) for many middle managers. While these changes have brought longer hours and intensified working regimes (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999), middle managers in a number of studies have indicated positive reactions to the increased responsibility and variety in their roles (Dopson and Neumann 1998). Middle managers have reported feeling more fulfilled by the increased challenges (Dopson and Stewart 1990), more in control with respect to decision-making and problem-solving (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999), and finding the greater job responsibility more rewarding (Brubakk and Wilkinson, 1996). However, not all studies have reported a sense of optimism among middle managers. In particular, Redman *et al*. (1997) found middle managers were being limited in their autonomy and opportunities for development. While they had enlarged roles, this was mainly in the areas of staff training and administration. Their study indicated that, while the middle management role may have been expanded, not all middle managers would appear to agree that it has been enhanced.

Organizational restructuring has not only changed the roles of middle managers. Over the same period, there has been a particularly intense focus on employee involvement and empowerment (eg. Denham *et al*. 1997; Honold 1997)—which has had further implications for middle managers. There has been a notable volume of writing on middle management resistance to empowerment (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999; Huy 2001), with the predominant argument being that this resistance arises from the fears of middle management with respect to a loss of control, a loss of power, and possibly even a loss of position (Klagge 1998a, p. 555). However, Klagge (1998a) found that the greatest concern for these middle managers was actually the time constraints associated with the initiative, because they believed that 'much of the organizational time and energy that would be required to successfully implement empowerment would be theirs' (Klagge 1998a, p. 556). The time and energy factor also comes into play for middle managers in other aspects of staff interaction. For example, organizational restructuring has also resulted in human resource management responsibilities being devolved to middle managers in many organizations (McConville and Holden 1999; Currie and Procter 2001; Harris *et al*. 2002). As well as supervising staff in operational issues, the "people management" aspect of the middle management role is now greatly increased (Staehle and Schirmer 1992). This involves middle managers not only providing coaching and training for their staff (Balogun 2003), but practical and emotional support through transition phases, often with limited or no training in these areas (McConville and Holden 1999).

Finally, the impact on career progression has also been identified by researchers as a key concern for middle managers in the era of the newly "flattened" organization. These

impacts can be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, the multiple rounds of downsizing in organizations have been identified with the breaking down of the psychological contract (Newell and Dopson 1996; Dopson and Neumann 1998). For middle managers, traditional benefits such as job security and career progression have now disappeared for many (Newell and Dopson 1996; Ebadan and Winstanley 1997). It is argued that this is particularly true for the public sector where 'an informal job-for-life culture and career progression had always been seen as compensation for relatively low salaries' (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999, p. 167). Scase and Goffee (1989) found this breaking of the psychological contract with respect to job security to be a contributing factor to the "reluctance" of managers to maintain commitment to their jobs. With the reduction in hierarchical levels in many organizations, the opportunities for promotion are now also greatly reduced. Many middle managers face the prospect of stagnation within the organization, or taking only lateral moves (Ebadan and Winstanley 1997). While a brighter picture has been painted by some writers of the "boundaryless career", depicting middle managers as being in control of their own destinies and able to regularly move on to new opportunities and challenges in other organizations, this is not a viable option for all individuals (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999). Overall, the majority of research on changes to the middle management role has reported negative impacts on career progression, with respect to both opportunities for promotion and job security within their organization.

The current study sought to explore the personal experiences of middle managers, asking the question: 'What are the day-to-day work experiences of middle managers, and how do these experiences personally impact them in and beyond the workplace?' Given both the work intensification experienced by middle managers in the wake of downsizing actions, and the trend towards devolving of human resource management tasks, it is perhaps inevitable that middle managers in the study raised concerns about the issue of work-life balance. As respondents spoke about the effects upon their personal lives, a number of concerns emerged, including impacts on family, friends and health, which we have discussed elsewhere (Parris et al. 2009). In the current paper we focus on the aspects of middle managerial work which were found to have an effect on individuals' personal lives, that is, the organizational factors that have an impact rather than all the consequences of these.

Understanding the Middle Management Experience

Guided by the research aims, an interpretive phenomenological methodology was chosen for this study, with its focus on revealing the richness of individual experience (Baker et al. 1992). The aim was to both gain a description of respondents' lived experiences (Oiler 1982), and learn the meaning that experience held for them (Drew 1989). Purposive sampling was used to access participants who had experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell 1998), and could provide rich insight into the area of interest (Patton 1990). The criterion for participation in the study was that respondents were currently working as a middle manager within an Australian private sector organization. The exploratory nature of this study necessitated a broad definition of middle management be used, following the precedent of other research considering the middle management experience (eg. Dopson et al. 1992; Dopson and Stewart 1993; Frohman and Johnson 1993). The definition used for participant selection was: 'Middle managers include all levels of management between the supervisory level and the top of the organization' (Robbins et al. 2000, p. 7). Respondents came from a wide range of industries and varying levels of middle management.

The research study was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved data collection through the method of data generation by correspondence (Kralik *et al*. 2000), which entailed a process of written correspondence between the researcher and each respondent over time periods of 3 to 6 months' duration. This correspondence was conducted through the medium of electronic mail (email), with the asynchronous nature of the process providing time for reflection between receiving and responding to questions (Murray 1995; Heflich and Rice 2001). The correspondence process commenced with 14 open-ended questions on such areas as participants' interactions with managers, colleagues and staff, and the impacts on their time and relationships outside the workplace. As issues and concerns were raised by the respondents, these were further explored as part of an ongoing dialogue between the researcher and the respondent. Fifteen middle managers participated in the first stage of the study. The number of emails received from each respondent varied, ranging from one to 12, with an average of seven. After answering the initial focus questions, on average, two to three broad issues were pursued in each subsequent email.

Thematic analysis was conducted following the first stage, looking for patterns in the data collected (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). The purpose of the analysis was to understand the shared experiences of these middle managers, and to reveal the meaning and understanding of these experiences for the study's participants (Benner 1994). Through analysis and coding of data, a number of themes were developed (Leonard 1994), which identified additional focus areas for exploration in the second stage.

The second stage involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, which further explored the themes which had emerged and focused on hearing respondents' stories of their 'everyday existence' (Polt 1999, p. 45). As additional issues of relevance emerged, the second stage allowed further understanding of shared meanings for respondents (Sorrell and Redmond 1995). Six middle managers participated in this stage (including one from the first stage), with each interview lasting between 1 to 2 hours. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was again conducted.

The following discussion presents these middle managers' concerns for the workplace impediments to work-life balance. A number of exemplar stories are shared which reveal the meaning and understanding of these experiences for the study participants (Benner 1994). Respondents have all been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Direct quotations are identified as either email or interview responses.

Organizational Impediments to Middle Managers' Work-life Balance

In speaking of work-life balance, we note that the customary use of the word "balance" may be something of a misnomer, with its inference that equal weight is given to work and non-work activities. It has been argued that the notion of striving for balance between work and personal life is problematic and could be further adding to the pressure felt by organizational employees (Rapoport *et al*. 2002). Our discussion acknowledges instead the term 'work–personal life integration' (Lewis *et al*. 2003, p. 829), with its recognition of how different areas of life necessarily interact with, and impact on, each other. It is middle managers' stories of the impact of *work* on aspects of their personal lives which are highlighted in this paper.

In presenting middle managers' stories at the nexus of work and personal life, it is pertinent to briefly consider these respondents' beliefs about how separate or connected work and the rest of their lives should be. There were quite polarised views on this issue. One group of respondents were of the opinion that work and personal life cannot be

separated, that there is something fluid in the interaction between the two. Conversely, the second group of respondents spoke very definitely about maintaining a separation between work and home. These respondents expressed their intent to compartmentalise work, as Victor noted: 'My policy is: what happens at work stays at work.'

These two extremes have been identified in other research considering work-life balance. The view articulated by the first group has been labelled integration, where individuals move readily and easily between work and non-work domains (Nippert-Eng 1996; Clark 2000). The second group indicated segmentation of these activities, with a clear delineation between work and non-work (Ashforth *et al*. 2000; Wilson *et al*. 2004). However, regardless of their views on the necessary separation (or otherwise) of work and non-work, all respondents expressed concern for the intrusion of work on other areas of life. For those who believed work and home should be separate, there was an ongoing battle to achieve this. And even those who saw work and home as more fluid spheres of activity spoke about the unwelcome encroachment of work on their personal lives.

Respondents' stories revealed three particular areas where these encroachments—or impediments to creating balance—were apparent. The first area was the advent of new technologies, and how this had altered the experience of work. The second issue was the reality of how much autonomy and control respondents had over the undertaking of their role as middle manager. Finally, the third area discussed related to the use of flexibility initiatives, and who was actually benefiting from their introduction.

Technology

The intrusion of paid work into non-work time and space has been particularly accelerated by the development of new technology, such as mobile phones and laptop computers, potentially making people available 24 hours a day. The impact of technology is, of course, being felt by many employees, not just managers. This is especially true for those involved in knowledge work (Lewis and Cooper 2005). However, the potential benefit of technology to "free up" people from the workplace does not appear to have been realised (Davis 2006). Instead, it has increased the expectation that decision-makers—particularly managers—can be accessed at any time. Most respondents told of taking work home with them at least some of the time, and a number were also on-call to be reached if problems arose when they were not in the workplace. Peter spoke about this intrusion:

> There is a grey blur, especially with the advent of mobile phones and home PCs, etc. I have a client who regularly calls me at 6.30 AM or earlier. The same person started calling my wife at 7.30 PM on weekdays because he couldn't instantly track me down in the office (I may have been driving home or away from my desk).—*Peter (email)*

Peter's story revealed that, despite his efforts to keep work and the rest of life separate, there was an intrusion of work into both his personal time and space. This invasion of work into other areas of life was evident in many of these middle managers' stories, and beyond the applicability of technology. However, while respondents expressed frustration at the intrusions, there appeared to be little or no moves to alleviate them. There appeared to be acceptance that these were now "part and parcel" of their managerial role.

Ivan and Lionel were both on-call as part of the managerial staff in their manufacturing organizations, while Jeremy had to be constantly available for problem-solving in his role within the IT industry. Ivan spoke of the interruption of social occasions and commented that 'at certain times of the year this occurs quite regularly' (email). Lionel discussed a

similar issue. He explained that there was a roster of managers for after-hour calls, as his company had 24 h operations. This meant he could be called at any time of the day or night, often interrupting his sleep. When asked how regularly this occurred, Lionel responded:

> **Lionel**: Oh, not that regularly. [slight pause] Once every two weeks, or something like that.

> **MP**: That's a little bit.

> **Lionel**: Yes, that's reasonably regularly, isn't it?—*Lionel (interview)*

We note that Lionel later commented: 'Once every two weeks, I don't consider that very often'. However, the nature of this intrusion of work into his home life did not only impact Lionel. His wife and children could also be woken by the telephone ringing in the middle of the night. Although Lionel said his family were 'good about it' with 'not too much whinging and complaining', we wonder if they also considered this interruption once every two weeks to be not very often. Furthermore, Lionel revealed that while these queries from the factory floor did not always require him to go into the office, at times he stayed awake mentally ticking off the things he would need to address when he did go into work. While receiving a telephone call every couple of weeks may not seem a major interruption, the potential for broken sleep highlights the degree of intrusion.

There were other aspects of the middle manager role which were taken as a given by organizations, but were frequently not acknowledged as work. Peter commented:

> Then there is the whole issue of the pressure to be at work social events in your own free or family time, dinners with clients, parties, golf, etc. It can be quite irritating and steals your free time away (or more accurately the time you need to keep up with the demands of running a house and looking after a family). And of course the one we love most; the holiday that isn't really a holiday, because someone contacts you from work!!!—*Peter (email)*

On first reading these comments, we saw them as intrusions on people's non-work time, that is, they were effectively working longer hours. However, the use of language is telling. Peter spoke about these social events being *in his own time*. Irene used the exact same words when talking of trying to reduce this intrusion: 'I do less now in my own time where possible' (email). This could be a slight nuance, but it was a distinction that was present among some of these respondents' stories—there was "work" time in the office (and often from early in the morning until late in the evening) and work "done in their own time". When asking young lawyers and management consultants about their work and non-work time, Wilson *et al.* (2004) made a similar finding. Many of their respondents, all of whom conducted a large part of their work via telephone and computer, did not consider themselves to be "working" when outside their normal working environment, even when they were undertaking identical tasks (Wilson *et al.* 2004, p. 192). This mirrored the stories of a number of these middle managers. The very meaning of work was impacted as work and personal life became unavoidably enmeshed. Here is an "integration" of work and life which was not welcomed, yet was an aspect of their role over which these middle managers felt they had little control.

Control over Time Demands

In speaking of work demands that can spillover into the home domain, White and colleagues noted that these demands are not only the number of hours worked, but work

intensity, that is, the pace of work and 'the proportion of working hours spent in work activity' (White *et al*. 2003, p. 179). A key concern among the middle managers in this study was that the volume of work they were required to accomplish was frequently impossible to accommodate within their working day. This necessitated working long hours and not being able to take breaks during the day. Irene shared how one of the highlights of her week had been the fact that she had "almost" achieved control:

> I almost got up to date with the paper work without working ridiculous hours. I only worked 9 hour days (usual is 10) and got out to lunch × 3!!—*Irene (email)*

In today's workplace, it could be argued that this feeling of having insufficient time to deal with the various demands of work is not uncommon across all levels of the organization (eg. Fleming and Spicer 2004; Porter 2004). However, entering into a middle management role, and the movement upwards in the hierarchical structure this involves, implies an increase in autonomy. Researchers have also indicated that the changing role of middle managers has involved greater responsibility, more authority, and higher levels of decision-making control (Miller and Longair 1985; Dopson and Neumann 1998; Thomas and Dunkerley 1999). It could be expected that this increased responsibility and authority means that middle managers are better placed to be able to control their time and achieve their own aims. However, respondents' stories indicated they were often thwarted in these, frequently by senior managers. Many decisions were still made by senior management which they had to incorporate into their working day. Although they may have had some control over their own team or department, these middle managers were in turn answerable to someone else who could control their work or time. Meredith shared an example:

> Often I get to 4 PM in the afternoon and everything is tracking well, until a general manager comes along and wants something now. And once again, I am phoning home to say I'm going to be late again.—*Meredith (email)*

Meredith's experience showed that her own time management skills mattered little when another manager could step in and make immediate demands. Although middle managers may have more responsibility and authority than in previous positions, they still have *less* power and control than those more senior in the organization. Their efforts to handle both their time and their work can often be confounded by the demands of others. This issue is particularly relevant for those in the lower levels of middle management, such as Meredith, who had one reporting level below her and three levels above. For these middle managers, there are a number of individuals in positions above them, all of whom may call upon them for assistance at any time. Jane also spoke about having to "drop everything" when she received a request from her manager:

> I get frustrated sometimes at management. Senior management doesn't really understand the job we do on the ground. They'll ring up and ask me for the most stupid thing, or something that I think is really stupid. They obviously feel that it's important. But I've got to drop everything and respond to them, when they need to let me get on with the job that I'm here to do, which is to put people into work. And I often feel that *that* gets clouded.—*Jane (interview)*

Jane's comments were useful in considering why these middle managers felt so frustrated in their working lives. What aims *were* being thwarted? Jane commented that senior managers would ask for something she thought was 'really stupid', and this

distracted her from getting on with her job. It could be argued that dealing with a request from senior management was also part of her job—and she should just deal with it. However, we suggest that the frustration came about because these middle managers were being diverted from tasks that allowed them a sense of achievement. Sarros and Santora (2001) conducted a survey of the value orientations of Australian executives. They found a strong orientation towards achievement among these executives, indicating a high need for personal success. This need for achievement also appeared to exist among the middle managers in this study. In Meredith's example, the pleasure of accomplishment came from a day where she had managed her time and the volume of work well, and was able to get home at what she saw as a reasonable time. Instead, this was negated by the general manager's demands. In Jane's example, the sense of achievement came from concentrating on the challenges of her job and working to overcome these. The request from senior management took her away from this. In both cases, the respondents were "busy" without feeling the satisfaction in achievement which they reported as being so important to them.

Other aspects of the respondents' work were also determined by the organization, again resulting in adverse effects on their time. Peter spoke about meetings encroaching on his time:

> We're all familiar with the email nightmare of mountains of emails each day you can't keep on top of. And that's before the endless rounds of meetings that just suck up time.—*Peter (email)*

Writers have drawn light-hearted attention to the time-trap of meetings in organizations, with comments such as Matejka and Julian's (1994) that the 80/20 rule can be applied: '80 percent of the people are tied up in meetings and the other 20 percent are handling all the real work' (p. 62). However, these comments hide a serious impact for respondents. Luong and Rogelberg (2005) found a negative relationship between meeting load and employee wellbeing. In particular, one of the findings of their research was that the frequency of meetings attended had a stronger association with negative consequences than overall time spent in meetings. They noted that this was consistent with research on the concept of interruptions in daily work, and that multiple short interruptions have a greater effect than a single longer interruption (Zijlstra *et al*. 1999; cited in Luong and Rogelberg 2005). These negative outcomes from frequent meetings have particular relevance for middle managers, as the nature of their roles involves liaising in the middle of the organization. This often entails multiple meetings both within and across departments. Daphne illustrated this concern when she spoke about the number of meetings she had to attend and the lack of time she had for staff:

> An example of what I didn't expect would be: the time I have to interact with staff is minimal. My role was supposed to be mainly people managing which I don't have the time to do properly. My days are full of going from meeting to meeting, and I actually joked today when I ducked in to visit one of my teams before attending another meeting that I just wanted to say Merry Christmas in case I didn't see them before then.—*Daphne (email—written in June)*

As well as illustrating the time burden of meetings, Daphne's comments again highlighted her concern for the lack of control over how she both worked and managed others. This act of being frustrated in managing the time and content of their work was repeatedly identified by these middle managers as a major workplace concern.

Flexibility

The global competition that has impacted the roles of middle managers has also led to growing expectations for both organizational and personal flexibility (Anell and Wilson 2000; Reilly 2001). This includes the notion of temporal flexibility, that is, varying of working hours in line with business demands (Reilly 2001, p. 33). Organizations have couched this concept in a compelling light, developing "family–friendly policies" to incorporate such areas as flexible work schedules, working from home, and the provision of leave for both childcare and eldercare (Johnson 2004). However, employees vary in their use of these initiatives—and not only in relation to their perceived utility (Lambert and Haley-Lock 2004).

We spoke earlier about how the meaning of work appears to have changed. In particular, these middle managers viewed work done at home and outside "normal" working hours as different to that completed in the workplace. We believe this distinction in the meaning of work has implications for these middle managers' use of flexibility initiatives. While the idea of flexibility with respect to working hours sounded good in practice to these middle managers, few appeared to take advantage of it. Many of the tasks and activities undertaken outside the workplace (but which were still *work*) were peripheral to their main job, and this still needed to be completed. Lionel spoke about times when he was called away from home in the evenings and on weekends. The opportunity was ostensibly available to "make up" this time, but he did not often utilise it:

> **Lionel**: And you think, 'Well, I'm going to balance that off by going early one day', and that sort of thing. I think you have to think that way. OK, somebody's imposed on me to do something, but I'm going to do what *I* want to do when the time comes. And I think you feel better when you go, 'Right, I'm going to borrow some time off the organization to do it.'
>
> **MP**: And you are able to do that?
>
> **Lionel**: Not very often, no.—*Lionel (interview)*

Lionel's situation was a little different to most of the other respondents in that he was solely responsible for a number of technical aspects of his job, rather than having a team of people working on them. However, many respondents also had elements of their work which they could not pass on to others, not least of which were direct staff management issues. In a study of work-life balance among both managers and executives in Hungary, Toth (2005) found that executives reported less work-life imbalance than managers. One of the directors in her study stated that this was assisted by having both more freedom in determining the content of her work and a greater opportunity to delegate work than lower-level managers (Toth 2005, p. 367). These findings are of interest when considered alongside the experiences of middle managers in the current study. These middle managers often had work passed down to them, but were not always able to delegate other tasks on to their staff. This was reflected in Lionel's comments. He could not (or would not) take the opportunity to make up time lost because there was work he had to complete.

In this consideration of flexibility for middle managers with respect to time, Meredith's story stands out. She was the only respondent who had attempted to take advantage of flexibility practices. Meredith had worked for her organization for 15 years and, after the

birth of her second child, requested to work part-time. Her main reason for this was a desire to spend time with her family and try to decrease the invasiveness of work, as she shared:

> My daily experiences have also allowed me to observe others in similar positions and the impacts on their home and family lives. These experiences have helped me decide that I do not wish to work five days a week, particularly at the expense of my family and friends. ... Currently I work three days in the office, and one from home. If I am forced at any stage to permanently work five days in the office, I will most likely resign.—*Meredith (email)*

I (Parris) must confess that during my correspondence with Meredith, even as I asked more questions about her experience, I locked in to her description of herself as working part-time. She was, in reality, working a full-time load. She described working 10- to 12-h days on the 3 days she was in the office, as well as the workday at home. Interestingly, her comments regarding this indicated a similar view to that previously discussed, that this was somehow less work:

> Working three days in the office provides me an excellent balance between work and family. Although I do about 10–12 hours over three days, it is worth it to have the remaining time at home.—*Meredith (email)*

Here again, Meredith differentiated between work done in the workplace and work done in her home. This was despite telling us how her workday at home was kept busy both reading and writing reports and preparing presentations. Furthermore, she was available to her staff on the fifth weekday as well: 'I have access to email at home and a mobile phone, so I am contactable at all times.' Despite all this, she had to endure comments from her colleagues:

> There is often comment made about my 'long weekends' and how lucky I am. And innuendo such as 'Where did you go for lunch/coffee/playgroups, etc yesterday?' Also at times I have not been involved in some projects because 'You only work three days'. ... Some upper level managers (old school) do not agree with part time workers at all. One in particular is a personal friend, and has regularly told me (on a social level) that he thinks part-time managers are a joke and that they can't possibly be as committed as full-time.—*Meredith (email)*

The comments of Meredith's "friend" regarding her commitment to the organization reveal an underlying assumption that working longer hours is associated with loyalty and dedication. Furthermore, for Meredith to be seen as dedicated, this working time apparently needed to be undertaken in the workplace where she was visible to others. This definition of commitment is a traditional and gendered one, where the committed worker is seen as someone for whom work is primary and the demands of family and other non-work areas are secondary (Lewis 1997; Perlow 1998). Lewis (2003) argued that this definition serves the needs of neither women nor men. Certainly, while Meredith persisted despite the daily battle with these perceptions, it raises the question of how many men would have asked for this option in the first place. The gendered nature of these assumptions would almost definitely lead to questions about a man's commitment both to the organization and his career.

Meredith definitely felt that her commitment was being questioned, even if this was unspoken by some in the organization. As with the introduction of other workplace policies, the importance of managerial support has been identified for those using flexible working arrangements (Perlow 1995; Thompson *et al.* 1999). Although Meredith had this support

from her immediate manager, the continual barbs from her colleagues made her work life more difficult. There was a focus in her actions in the workplace on proving others were wrong. She spoke about rarely having sick leave and not taking long lunches when at work, using these as a demonstration of her dedication to her job. It is questionable, however, whether these particular behaviours would have any effect on others' perceptions of her commitment. By persisting in this way, she may just be making her life more difficult—and negating the benefits of work-life balance she was trying to achieve.

Nevertheless, this notion of having to demonstrate their commitment to the organization and constantly prove their abilities was apparent for many middle managers in the study. Furthermore, they expressed a sense that they had to consider others' perceptions of them in all their actions. Respondents expressed concern for how they were viewed by others in the organization, whether their staff, colleagues or senior managers. Certainly, these middle managers appeared conscious of the need to create a positive impression in undertaking their roles. Furthermore, progressing in their careers was a persistent consideration for most of the respondents. Thus, the need to provide senior managers with positive impressions of their performance needed to constantly be at the forefront of middle managers' minds. However, the nature of their roles often left them little time to even give attention to these issues, as Peter expressed:

> My managing director and his equivalents ... can just make their own "guidelines and acceptable standards" up as they go along. ... Because they are less involved in day-to-day operations, they have more time to think through broader managerial matters and therefore look more impressive from a "leadership" perspective. (In actual fact, I am sure those immediately beneath them would look better and more capable if only they had more time to focus!)—*Peter (email)*

Research has considered the important role that impression management can have in career success and advancement (eg. Palmer *et al.* 2001; Singh *et al.* 2002). If career development in the organization does rest heavily on the informal influence processes which impression management can best affect (Singh *et al.* 2002), then Peter's comments are particularly relevant. Do senior management get more senior, and middle management become stuck where they currently are, due to this disparate attention to personal impression management? Certainly, as Peter suggested, senior managers are better placed to both protect and promote their own self-interests, delegating work down to middle managers. This leaves them more time to focus on the political activities and self-promotion which have been associated with success in career progression (eg. Luthans 1988; Rudman 1998). To be able to look "good" to senior managers, these respondents needed to somehow find more time.

The concern for impression management was also seen in respondents' reluctance to take advantage of available flexibility initiatives. A number of middle managers expressed concern for the utilisation of these options if they wanted their careers to progress within the organization. Meredith exemplified this:

> Although we have excellent work/life balance protocols, it often depends on who the manager is at the time as to what their expectations are. Sure, we have the option to say no to additional hours, but you can pretty much assume your career won't progress as far as those who are willing to do the hard yards.—*Meredith (email)*

Here again, the concern for how others perceived them was important. Meredith spoke of doing 'the hard yards', implying this was a rite of passage to progress through the

organization. Although the modern career is argued to be based on merit rather than seniority (eg. McKinlay 2002), these respondents' comments indicated that there was still a particular path that needed to be taken. This again tied in with the idea of impression management and being *seen* to want to progress within the organization. These respondents' concerns for how their use of flexibility options may be viewed here were justified by an American study of accounting professionals (Almer *et al*. 2004). Using vignettes which depicted both managers who used flexible working arrangements and those who did not, this study revealed that senior managers made a judgement that the former groups were less likely to be committed to the organization and their careers than those in the latter group. Despite the espousal of personal and organizational flexibility by many workplaces, there would appear to be grounds for Meredith's concerns for how her use of the initiatives as a middle manager may not be viewed positively by senior management.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some middle managers were willing to accept this situation for the short-term, seeing it as a necessary sacrifice for their future, as Daphne shared:

> As a new manager, I'm willing to forgo some personal life for the short term until I am comfortable in my position and have the necessary education to establish a career path.—*Daphne (email)*

Other female respondents also spoke of how, although at times being frustrated by the imbalance in their lives, they saw this as an inevitable aspect of pursuing their careers. In her final email reflecting on the experience, Daphne again raised this issue. She commented that some of the questions had made her realise how much she was sacrificing for her job. However, she said: 'I am not dwelling on them because I know I am doing what I need to do to secure the future'. It is worth questioning, however, whether that future would ever truly be secure. In a study of senior managers in Ireland, Drew and Murtagh (2005) found that a vast majority believed that choosing flexible working arrangements would adversely affect their career prospects. For middle managers, it may be that their choice is career progression *or* work-life balance.

Conclusion

Amidst discussion of work-life balance—and consideration of employees' responsibilities and rights—the stories of these middle managers warrant attention. In investigating the personal impacts of middle managers' experiences, it became apparent that work was difficult to separate from the rest of their lives. Even those respondents who stated that they were actively striving for separation revealed experiences where "work" did not remain in the workplace but became an element of their "own time". The notion of these respondents being in the middle extended beyond the workplace as they endeavoured to create some balance between work and personal life.

Being caught in the middle between work and personal life brought with it frustration, stress and fatigue, as respondents were often unable to control the workplace factors intruding on their personal lives. Technological advances such as laptop computers and mobile phones, in conjunction with increased organizational expectations, meant that these middle managers were seeing more and more of their "own time" being engulfed by work. Furthermore, the middle managers in this study spoke about their feelings of lacking control over their work and in managing their staff in the desired manner, despite the apparent flexibility options available.

The perceived ability to take advantage of flexibility initiatives to support work-life balance is important. The stories of these respondents indicate that *knowledge* of both the existence and value of these initiatives is not sufficient. There must be a true *ability* to create some balance between work and personal life. Organizational focus must move beyond merely increasing individuals' awareness of the benefits of balance between work and the rest of life; organizations need to better enable these practices to be put into action. In particular, middle managers need the ability to engage in such practices themselves, rather than just ensuring their own staff are utilising them. Senior managers must provide support for middle managers' effort to create work-life balance if the organization's long-term goals are to be achieved.

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