Men, masculinities and flexible work in local government

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to establish the strongly entrenched connection between hegemonic masculinity and participation in full-time employment. It subsequently examines the extent to which male flexible workers in local government represent a challenge to this orthodoxy.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reports on findings from interviews with 12 men and 13 women undertaking flexible work in a local government authority in Australia.

Findings – It was found that while two of the male flexible workers articulate alternative discourses of masculine subjectivity dissociated from participation in full-time work, the remainder demonstrate the continued centrality of a full-time presence in the workplace to hegemonic masculinity.

Originality/value – This paper argues that these findings are indicative of the continued dominance of masculinities in local government organisations.

Keywords Flexible working hours, Local government, Australia, Employee attitudes, Gender

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The Australian local government sector has traditionally been a “male” environment (Paddon and Artist, 2004, p. 8) with women under-represented in management, professional, and trade positions, and overly concentrated in low level administrative employment (Dunn, 2001). In this respect it is illustrative of local government sectors in many western industrialised nations (Miller et al., 1999; Anderson, 2004; Reid et al., 2000). Despite this visibility, men and masculinities remain largely unexamined and unquestioned in mainstream local government studies (Pini, 2008). In this paper, we examine the historically well-entrenched relationship between hegemonic masculinity and full-time paid work. Data for the study are elicited from a case study of flexible workers in an Australian local government authority. This authority provide a particularly rich terrain in which to examine men’s engagement in flexible work as here men represent 53 of the 102 employees working flexibly. This statistic would suggest that a shift is occurring in men’s gendered identities within local government in that there is no longer an unequivocal conflation between being “a real man” and “a full-time worker.” However, the qualitative interviews with 25 male and female flexible workers demonstrate otherwise. That is, participation in full-time paid work remains a powerful symbolic and material expression of hegemonic masculinity in local government.
Following an overview of the theoretical framework which informs the research and we detail relevant themes from the literature which has already considered the subject of men, masculinities and employment. Data from the research reveal that despite the fact that the authority’s work-life policies are written in gender neutral terms, they are enacted in a context where the configurations and practices of employment are strongly connected to notions of hegemonic masculinity. Further, while men may constitute the majority of flexible workers in the local authority, this does not necessarily mean a shift is occurring in gendered assumptions about work. In fact, the male flexible workers reaffirm rather than destabilise dominant gender discourses as they dissociate themselves from other “women workers,” and from “young men.”

**Theoretical framework**

In this paper, gender is understood as discursively constructed. That is, there are different discourses – the historically, socially and culturally specific terms, beliefs, values, institutions, statements and practices – by which we may constitute ourselves as “feminine” or “masculine,” but there is no fundamental self-evident category “man” or “woman” (Weedon, 1987; Probyn, 1993). Hence, the terms “masculinities” and “femininities” have become widely used in gender scholarship. For scholars seeking to understand and theorise the relationship between varied and various socially constructed gendered identities, Connell’s (1990, 1995, 2000) notion of “hegemonic masculinity” has been particularly influential. To say that some masculinities are hegemonic is to say that they are “culturally exalted,” while others, such as the masculinities of young men, effeminate men, and homosexual men are marginal and/or subordinate (Carrigan *et al.*, 1985, p. 112). Hegemonic masculinity is thus the definition of “successful ways of ”being a man” in particular places at a specific time” (Beynon, 2002, p. 16). This idealised version of masculinity is articulated in opposition to “other” subordinate masculinities, as well as in opposition to femininities (Davies and Harre, 1991).

Hegemonic masculinity is accomplished in a myriad of settings and is associated with a range of tasks, but many commentators have suggested that it finds particular resonance in the world of paid work. Indeed, Fitzsimmons (2002, pp. 105-6) has written that “one of the most consistent themes that occurs and reoccurs throughout much of the literature on masculinity is the centrality of paid work” to men’s construction of masculinity. In short, men have “done hegemonic masculinity” through “doing work” (Hearn, 1992; Connell, 1995). There is, as Acker (1992) has so clearly demonstrated, nothing ambiguous, simple or gender neutral about the terms “worker” and “job.” She argues that there is an implicit and obvious disjunction between these terms and many women’s lives, as the disembodied “worker” who has a “job” does not procreate or have domestic responsibilities which impinge on their role in the public realm. The “worker” is thus, by definition, male, and a “job,” the preserve of men.

While the identity of breadwinner engaged in full-time paid work has been a key signifier of hegemonic masculinity in western industrial nations, this is not uniform or absolute. Hegemonic masculinities will differ across time and space and be constantly evolving so they are always open to redefinition (Kimmel, 1987)[1]. In an illuminating study drawing on interviews with 25 members of men’s groups in regional Australia, social geographers Smith and Winchester (1998) examine men’s relationships to home/work and their discursive construction of a gendered self. The men’s narratives...
demonstrate that employment has continued potency as a marker of masculinity, yet they also provide some evidence of a dissolution occurring in the gendered binary between home and work. That is, the men emphasise their commitment to sharing household labour with their partners and undertake a range of domestic labour and childcare. In another study from Norway, Brandth and Kvande (1998) examine shifts in the masculine construction of the breadwinner identity. To do so they draw on data from what they acknowledge to be “a minority of highly involved fathers” who are sharing parental leave with their partners (Brandth and Kvande, 1998, p. 298). These men, the authors argue, demonstrate the emergence of a new form of masculine subjectivity which is distinctly different from a traditional breadwinner model. They find that even those men whose identities are strongly connected to income generating work are incorporating the mastering of childcare into their definition of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, like their Australian counterparts, the Norwegian men are reshaping their definition of hegemonic masculinity so that it is not solely connected to the public sphere and paid work.

As the men in the study by Smith and Winchester (1998, p. 327) describe seeking new ways of being a man, they report feeling constrained in the task by their workplaces which “enforced hegemonic masculinity.” For example, there was an expectation from their employees that they would work long hours, full-time, and that work would be given priority over and above other responsibilities. Since this time, however, organisations in industrial western countries have begun to offer work-life policies and programmes for men as well as women (Russell and Bourke, 1999; Bittman et al., 2004). To date, however, women with dependent children have been by far the largest demographic group to utilise these arrangements where they exist (Charlesworth, 1997), notwithstanding the gender-neutral terms in which the policies are described and therefore the availability of these options to all workers.

One such organisation to offer a generous array of work-life programmes to its employees is the local government authority case study reported in this paper. This authority differs significantly from many other organisations offering work-life programmes to men as here men make up the majority of those employees utilising the strategy (Eveline, 2001). The 53 male flexible workers in this authority are therefore different from their international peers, as well as the more specific Australian male population who do not only work full-time but typically have overly long working weeks of more than 49 h (Bittman and Rice, 2002; Wooden and Warren, 2003). These men are consequently of particular interest as they suggest that hegemonic masculinity may no longer be inexorably linked to full-time employment in the local government sector.

Methodology
The study addressed the following research questions:

- Compared to women who utilise flexible work policies, how do men reconcile notions of hegemonic masculinity with their non-standard employment practices?

- How do men and women differentially discuss their use of flexible work practices, especially in terms of the impetus for their uptake and the consequences of their use?
The organisation

The organisation that was the focus of the research is a large metropolitan local government authority in Australia. It is recognised through national and state awards and in the press as being an innovator and leader with respect to flexible work. There is also a long historical tradition of flexible work in the authority. “Flexitime” arrangements where employees could work a nine day fortnight were first offered in the early 1970s. More extensive and formalised flexible work options were instituted in the mid 1990s.

The gender profile of this authority’s workforce is typical of the over 700 local authorities nationally (Frizzell et al., 1993; ALGWA, 2001). That is, women are disproportionately represented in the lower tiers while men occupy the majority of positions of management. Of the 153 most senior executive positions in the organisation, 118 (77 per cent) are men. There is also a marked gender divide in the next tiers of management colloquially referred to as “team leaders.” This is more pronounced in some areas than others. For example, in the occupational fields associated with the traditional specialist functions of local government such as transport, planning/infrastructure and trade services, women’s representation in management is as low as 12 per cent, 7 per cent and 1.5 per cent, respectively.

Sample

The Human Resource area of the local authority has promoted flexible work as an option for both male and female employees. Currently, of the 102 employees registered as taking advantage of the policies, 53 are men. Data for the study were obtained from interviews with 12 of these men as well as 13 women. To select interviewees, sampling procedures followed the process of purposeful or theoretical sampling (Ritchie et al., 2002), where a broad range of experiences and perceptions of alternative work arrangements was sought. Thus, the sample included both men and women engaged in different types of work roles, from different levels of the organisational hierarchy and from the six divisions and four business units. We were particularly interested in talking to staff engaged in flexible work arrangements which reflected substantial and ongoing accommodations to work for the purpose of balancing non-work commitments. This is in comparison to employees who take discrete periods of leave or who make minor accommodations to their work schedules such as flexible start and finish times (flexitime).

To determine possible participants, assistance was sought from the authority’s Human Resources Department which provided a database list of staff recorded as being engaged in flexible work. This included 102 names[2]. Of these, 14 were in the part-time category, fifteen in the job share category and seventy-six in the formal work from home category. Of the 102, two were in blue-collar roles, but only one was available for interviewing. The final group of 25 who agreed to be interviewed was chosen on the basis of categories that reflected as broad a range of experiences and perceptions of alternative work arrangements as possible. Thus, both women and men were sought within each work arrangement category (part-time, job share or work from home). Fourteen had tertiary qualifications and the majority of those interviewed occupied middle management or junior occupational positions. The three identified categories of flexible work were all represented with 13 participants working part time,
six job sharing and six telecommuting. The sample was aged between 25 and 67 and had worked for the organisation for between two and 22 years Table I.

**Instruments**
The interviews were semi-structured in that while a general list of questions was prepared there was enough flexibility in the process to enable participants to raise unanticipated issues or for the researchers to ask probing or follow-up questions to the responses provided (Mason, 2002). Interviews covered a range of issues related to work-life policy and practice. Questions were asked about how the shift to flexible work was negotiated and organised as well as about the personal and professional challenges and benefits of flexible work. This provided insight into the gendered dynamics of flexible work as did responses to a broader question asking participants to comment on why they thought so few staff took up the option of flexible work.

**Analysis**
With the permission of participants, all interviews were taped and fully transcribed to assist with the process of analysis. This process was undertaken manually and involved the stages of thematic categorisation and coding in order to identify patterns as well as inconsistencies in the data (Seale, 2004). Codes were largely generated inductively, although the literature provided a starting point (Miles and Huberman, 1994). For the purposes of the analysis presented in this paper, particular emphasis was given to examining differences and similarities in men’s and women’s experiences and understandings of flexible work.

**Limitations of the study**
Although the two major forms of flexibility represented in the study (telecommuting and reduced hours options) met our definition of flexibility which was “substantial and ongoing accommodations to work,” some salient distinctions between these forms of non-standard employment are evident. For example, telecommuters are usually employed full-time and therefore conform more to normative notions of a fully committed employee. The use of telecommuting has also been associated with increased productivity and therefore enhanced career opportunities in some studies (Riley and McCloskey, 1997) and in macro-level research, with wage premiums (Gariety and Shaffer, 2001; Glass, 2004; Weeden, 2005). Conversely, part-time employment is characterised by lesser entitlements to salary increases and fringe benefits, perceptions of reduced commitment and lack of promotion and training opportunities (Kirby and Krone, 2002; Markey et al., 2002; Gender Males Females
Number (total) 12 13
Supervisory responsibilities 4 yes; 7 no 3 yes, 10 no
Age range (years) 28-67 31-43
Tenure (years) 2-22 4-20
Time in arrangement (years) 1-5 1-6
Part-time 6 6
Job-share 2 4
Telecommuting 4 3
Table I.
Lists characteristics of the sample group
Despite these differences, telecommuting and reduced hours employment in the study organisation share a number of common features. They are both enshrined in human resource documentation and communication under “flexible work arrangements,” require formal approval for the practice, and result in “absences” from the workplace which may be negatively evaluated. However, given the identified distinctions between these forms of flexibility, the analysis for this study actively sought any differences in respondent perceptions.

Another limitation of the study is the nature of the sample and corresponding generalisability. First, the sample was confined to white collar workers and, while we attempted to include some blue collar or manual employees in the interview pool, this was not possible due to difficulties with electronic information transfer in blue collar areas of the organisation. The conclusions must therefore be confined to office workers. Second, the organisation itself was a public sector agency, chosen for its overt supportiveness of work-life balance and the availability of a wide range of flexible work options. As such, the findings may vary from those found in the private sector which have historically shielded themselves against unnecessary costs and excessive government regulations (Wisensale, 2004). However, the shift in emphasis in the public sector from administration to management and efficiency which occurred in the late 1980s (Reitman and Schneer, 2003) may have diluted the contrasts between these sectors. Third, the types of flexible work explored in the study were distinct from other forms of flexibility such as flexi-time, compressed work weeks or leave arrangements which may impact differently on discourses related to gender and flexible work.

Results
Men, masculinities and full-time work in local government
As employees within the Australian local government sector, the participants involved in this study are in a position described by Pocock and her colleagues (2001, p. 1) as “doing more with less.” Devolution by the state and federal governments as well as increasing community expectations have significantly increased the roles undertaken by local governments, but there has been no equivalent increase in the resources allocated to the sector to undertake these tasks (Johnson, 2003). The ascendancy of managerial discourses of efficiency, productivity and business across the public sector internationally has also had an impact on the participants’ work environment. As one male worker commented:

We have downsized here and I’ve inherited more work each time someone has gone. There’s almost an expectation that you’ll do a week’s work in a day. It’s hard because you don’t want to let other people down.

The intensification of work in the local government sector has therefore had an impact on flexible employees who, as one participant explained, wanted to be seen to be “pulling their weight” when colleagues were overworked and under-resourced.

Arguably in this context, flexible work may be problematic for all employees. However, it seems to be particularly so for men given the prevalence of gendered assumptions about care and work in the narratives of participants. As one female employee asserted, “Flexible work is thought of as something for women with children.” Another female interviewee suggested that flexible work would be difficult for men as they would “worry about perceptions if they took it.” Concurring with this
sentiment, a third female participant explained that male flexible workers would have
to deal with people who “think there’s something wrong with them.” What is apparent
in these comments and those many other participants made that were similar to them
is that the employees of the authority are highly aware that embedded in the
organisational fabric, and broader society, are dominant values, beliefs and discourses
about masculine identity, which, if transgressed, can lead to censure and critique.

Central to these masculine discourses is the configuration of man as breadwinner
and full-time paid employee. One older male flexible worker articulated this view
clearly in response to what he found difficult about his employment:

It’s not the blokey thing to work part-time. If you are a real man you work full-time [. . . ] they
still have this image that men are the breadwinners and that if he isn’t working the whole
time then what is he doing? Bludging at home or something (Interview 3).

Interviewees were conversant with organisational and societal discourses that went
beyond “real” men work full-time, to “real men work long hours.” The pervasiveness of
the belief that bodily presence in the office is commensurate with organisational
commitment and a necessary precursor to career progression was referred to by all
interviewees. One male human resource officer had seen the regulatory impact of such
a discourse across the authority on aspiring women managers, commenting that:

Women will try to conform to that. They will see how things are done around here and what’s
valued so they will work long hours and come in early and so on (Interview 18).

This quotation is useful in demonstrating that men do not have a monopoly on
the “doing of masculinity” (Gardiner, 2001). This is a performative role that may also
be undertaken by women, and thus not all women are necessarily disadvantaged by
the dominance of discourses of hegemonic masculinity which require an employee to
work long hours and full-time to achieve career success. There are, however, two
caveats to this assertion. The first is that women continue to undertake a
disproportionate amount of familial labour and are largely concentrated in part-time
employment which affects their capacity to comply with a discursive regime which
requires one to work long hours and full-time. The second is that even if women are
able to enact and emulate hegemonic masculinity by working long hours and denying
outside responsibilities, they will not necessarily be judged in the same way as men.
This is because, as the gender literature reminds us, “it is not masculinity per se that is
valorized in organisations, it is masculinity in men” (Rutherford, 2001, p. 330).

Overall, participants were highly conversant with the view that there is a link
between masculinity and full-time work, and that deviations from this norm are policed
both within and outside the organisation. Given this knowledge, how did men who
worked flexibly position themselves as gendered beings? Importantly, men who
engaged in flexible work did not necessarily reject traditional definitions of hegemonic
masculinity. In fact, for two groups of male flexible workers the conflation between
hegemonic masculinity and full-time work remained unquestioned. This was the
perspective of a group of younger male flexible workers. These men drew a clear
distinction between themselves and women flexible workers. They viewed the latter as
choosing to work flexibly for caring and familial reasons. Indeed, of the 12 women
interviewed all but one stated that their main reason for working flexibly was to care
for children and/or elderly parents[3]. In contrast, of the 13 men, just two claimed
familial work was the reason for them undertaking flexible work and only one of these
men had opted for the more substantial accommodation of part-time work. Of the remainder, four were undertaking study, two were conducting a private business and four cited lifestyle reasons as a motivating force.

In differentiating themselves from the women, male flexible workers gave considerable emphasis to their differing rationales for choosing flexible work. This was exemplified in a response from one of the men involved in tertiary study in reply to a question about whether he thought flexible work would hinder his career prospects:

I couldn’t see that would be an issue for me, because the reason I’m working at home is for studying. I think you would be looked down upon if you were doing it because you were driving your kids to childcare or whatever [...] I don’t think it’s really an issue because it’s not really my intention to stay working like this for too much longer (Interview 22).

In replying to the question posed, the above participant distances himself from any feminine assumptions associated with flexible work. In the first instance, he makes it clear that he is not undertaking flexible work to do family or care work which he positions as subordinate and unimportant. While he works flexibly he is doing so to study and further his work prospects, and so his status as a “real” man committed to paid work and career progression remains intact. In the second instance he highlights the fact that his decision to work flexibly is only temporary. Any deviation from prescriptive gender discourses is therefore short-term.

In a very similar response another male flexible worker in his mid thirties claimed that he was in a “different sort of box” in terms of the career implications of his decision to work flexibly. This was, he claimed, because:

My study is contributing to my work and I am improving myself. Studying shows you are a bit driven and it’s relating back to the work you are doing here (Interview 14).

What is (re)produced through this narrative is the belief that paid work is central to one’s life and identity. One of the (few) legitimate reasons to take an alternative path and work flexibly is to develop greater skills and knowledge for the world of paid work.

Male participants such as those cited above, rationalised their departure from working full-time, and thus from hegemonic masculinity, by emphasising their adherence to other aspects of this dominant gender identity. That is, their work commitment, capacity for career success, ambition and singularity of purpose. Thus, while they work flexibly they are doing little to undermine or reshape hegemonic masculinity as it has traditionally been defined. This process of legitimatisation and reification was also evident in the narratives of a second group of male flexible workers who stated that they were involved in flexible work for “lifestyle reasons.” This group was all over the age of sixty. Like the younger men these older workers saw themselves as “different” from women, but also “different” from young male workers. One older male commented:

I think everybody accepts the job share role and the part time roles for women coming back into the workforce after having a family [...] but I don’t know how they’d react to a younger man working part time and wanting to go places (Interview 9).

What is interesting about the above quotation is its emphasis on a particular version of masculinity – that of youthful masculinity – which is viewed as being closely connected to ambition, drive and determination. This participant, like others in their
sixties, positioned himself as no longer needing to subscribe to dominant gender discourses by virtue of age. These men suggested that their work ambitions (and subsequently hegemonic masculinity) had already been fulfilled. Now, a different masculine identity was acceptable. One man in his early sixties working from home for lifestyle reasons stated:

I am very happy with my life now because my level of personal and professional ambition has been satisfied and I can get my validation from somewhere else [...] but if I was younger and I needed to climb up through the ranks, I think you couldn’t do that if you worked from home (Interview 7).

These older men commented that they would not have contemplated flexible work in their youth nor expected it to be granted to them. Further, as young workers they had been industrious, successful and career-focused. For these men it was not that “all real men work full-time” but that “all real young men work full-time.”

Men, masculinities and flexible work in local government
The two male interviewees who worked flexibly in order to care for their children were in the mid thirties, tertiary educated and had partners who also worked part-time. They presented themselves and their choices in terms of being “slightly on the progressive side” and “early adopters” and as “believing in equality.” In positioning themselves this way, they drew comparisons with their fathers and fathers-in-law whom they said had been little involved in family life. However, they shared anecdotes of contemporaries which demonstrated the fact that their own views were not necessarily shared by all men of their generation. One stated:

I had a conversation just the other day with a guy who was telling me how almost word for word that your sense of self is around what you do, what you do for your work explains what you are as a person, not your actual occupation but what you do in that role, how much you deliver, etc. I can see some sense in the way you approach things reflects who you are but I think that if you are going to define yourself by what you do for another organisation eight hours a day then there’s going to be a lot of gaps in your life that are not going to be filled (Interview 1).

The pursuit of flexible work to undertake the care of the children had not been without its problems for both of these participants. They emphasised the critical role immediate supervisors played in the take-up of flexible work. One interviewee was unsuccessful when he first tried to gain permission to work part-time seven years ago. He commented, “I obviously didn’t fill the criteria of a mother and therefore it was more difficult for them to accept.” Acceptance was also an issue for the second male flexible worker who had recently moved into a new position and found his new supervisor not as supportive of his decision to telecommute as his previous supervisor. He explained that in the past month he had come in every Friday at the request of his boss despite the fact that this was his formal work from home day. The supervisor had made it clear that this would be a requirement of the position arguing that employees “needed to be flexible” about any workplace flexibility they negotiated. At present, this participant has the capacity to alter his arrangements as his partner is at home on maternity leave having their second child. He was concerned, however, that when she returned to work, he would not be as flexible as he would have responsibility for the care of his three year old.
Like the women interviewed, both of the men were of the view that working flexibly would harm their career. They were as aware as other participants of the dominant organisational discourses which prescribed working full-time and long hours to achieve career success. In response to a question as to whether he thought working part-time would impact on his capacity for career progression, one commented:

Yes. Definitely. If I wanted to get any higher. My commitment to my family is already holding me back, because I know that I can’t give more than a reasonable day in terms of hours [...] If I was to pursue a higher position, even though no-one would be allowed to say as much, I am sure that my need to leave at a reasonable hour of the afternoon, limited ability to put effort into work out of hours – would preclude me from a high powered position (Interview 1).

The participant’s perspective, that there are unspoken organisational rules about career success and career progression which are counter to the official policies on work flexibility in the local authority, was one made across the interviews. What is of critical importance is that imprecated in these unofficial policies and procedures are the dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity. These provide a powerful counter to the gender neutrality of the official policies and procedures on work-life balance in the local authority and limit women’s, and some men’s, capacity for career progression.

Discussion
In his seminal study Discovering Men Morgan (1992) suggested that great insight into masculinities could be gained by focusing on areas where masculinities are called into question. Two such areas, he claimed, were when men become unemployed and when men enter fields of female dominated employment. In these situations, normative definitions of masculinity are potentially destabilised. In this paper, we have taken Morgan’s (1992) advice and focused on a further situation in which the performance of masculinity may be problematic. That is, when men use flexible work. In order to situate the data, the paper began by arguing that historically hegemonic masculinity has been strongly associated with the world of paid work and the identity of full-time breadwinner. As Smithson and Stokoe (2005, p. 164) have argued in their study of gendered patterns of the use of work-life balance policies, “men do not normally ‘do’ flexible working.” Thus, those male employees who are working flexibly are consequently an aberration as they are not performing as “real” men should. It may therefore be imagined that such men offer a challenge to hegemonic masculinity, and an alternative to the view that a masculine identity is most legitimately connected to full-time work.

However, the data did not support this view. In fact, the majority of male flexible employees interviewed in this study were reinforcing rather than countering dominant gender discourses. A number confirm their masculine identities by dissociating themselves with flexible workers who are women involved in care work, that is, the majority of women flexible workers. Others assert a masculine identity, despite their involvement in flexible work, by emphasizing their age, and their accomplishment of hegemonic masculinity in their youth. In both these instances the relational nature of hegemonic masculinity is brought to the fore. The men articulate their hegemonic masculinity – despite their involvement in flexible work – by differentiating themselves from other subordinate gendered identities associated with women and/or older men (Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998; Connell, 2000). Importantly, both discourses leave traditional definitions of hegemonic masculinity intact.
Given that contemporary gender scholarship has emphasised the temporality, fluidity and precariousness of gendered identity scripts (Connell, 1995, 2000), it is highly significant that the connection between hegemonic masculinity and full-time employment appears to be so impervious to change. It is possible that there is ambivalence about this construction of masculinity amongst men in the local authority, but, like the men interviewed by Smith and Winchester (1998), they find articulating a new definition of masculine subjectivity problematic in such a gendered organisational environment. Indeed, operating in the context of the demands of new public management and discursive imperatives to be efficient, competitive and businesslike, male employees may be less likely than they would have been in the past to seek alternative means of employment for the purposes of familial or care work. This may then be further evidence of the re-gendering of the public sector occurring under managerialism (Barry et al., 2003).

This is not to suggest that there is no evidence of change occurring in gender and work discourses and the relationship between the two. The final section of the paper reported on the perspectives of two men who are contesting the view that masculinity can only be constructed and satisfied through involvement in the world of paid work. In seeking to adopt new masculine subjectivities, however, these men are limited and regulated by a myriad of very potent gender discourses operating within the organisation and in the broader society. There is, for example, the discourse of what Sheridan (2004, p. 207) has labelled men’s “chronic presenteeism” as a criteria for career success. This is the notion that being engaged in full-time work, and indeed, full-time work while not impeded by domestic responsibilities, is synonymous with career commitment. Participants in this study who utilised flexible work arrangements also appeared to buy into a discourse of rights and duties, whereby they accept apparent fairness and symmetry and find themselves trapped by a quasi-moral obligation of reciprocation (Fleetwood, 2007). McDonald et al. (2007), for example, found that female local government employees experienced “quid pro quo” expectations whereby promotion or development prospects were gratefully traded off for the privilege of employer-sponsored flexibility.

Further, the related discourse of “careerism” was evident. Careerism suggests that career progression is dependent upon working long hours and being constantly available to the organisation unfettered by outside roles (Collinson and Hearn, 1996, p. 5). The pervasiveness and strength of these gendered assumptions make flexible work a problematic option for men if their purpose for choosing a different mode of employment is to care for family. There is also a suspicion about men who choose to work flexibly to care for their children. In these respects, the type of masculinity practised by men who are flexibly employed for care work is what Connell (2000, p. 30) would describe as a “marginal masculinity.”

Conclusion
This paper has both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, it raises critical questions about the successful and equitable implementation of family friendly polices in the local government sector. More broadly, the findings speak to organizations concerned with supporting the integration of employees’ work and non-work activities, as well as the potential to leverage recruitment and retention advantages from flexible work policies, across a range of industries. Clearly, the mere existence of policy is not
sufficient in itself, given that discourses of hegemonic masculinity continue to infuse contemporary workplaces and inform beliefs about the appropriateness of flexible work for female and male employees. Thus, organizations seeking to open up opportunities for flexible work for all employees regardless of their gender, need to address and challenge cultural norms that privilege certain patterns of work above others. In particular, the problems faced by male flexible workers in pursuing flexible arrangements to undertake the care of the children highlights the critical role of immediate supervisors in assessing the legitimacy of requests, as well as the gendered assumptions which may underpin such assessments. Hence, the study demonstrates that although the official policy language of this (and most) organisations is gender-netural, there remains strong and persistent gendered trends in the take-up of flexible work policies (Liff and Cameron, 1997; Moen and Yu, 2000) and that employees consistently reformulate the debates around gendered explanations and assumptions (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Reflecting on reports of the disproportionately high workloads reported by some part-time employees, or “doing more with less,” equitable implementation also incorporates a fair expectation of working hours for flexible workers, commensurate with any reductions in pay or other benefits. Theoretically, the paper has highlighted the need for further work on the prevalence and practice of masculinities in organisational settings. Such work is important in uncovering and revealing the often hidden gendered power relationships which continue to curtail the employment choices, opportunities and advantages for many women and some men in the contemporary labour market.

Notes
1. This is an important point to highlight as in recent commentaries “hegemonic masculinities” has come under criticism for being essentialist and reductionist (Jefferson, 2002; Whitehead, 2002; Hearn, 2004). It may be that the criticism should not be directed at the term itself but how it is applied. (Skelton, 2001, p. 52; Pini, 2008).
2. Several departments within the organisation do not report their employee data to the corporate Human Resources system and thus, this total of 105 under-estimates the number of staff working in these arrangements. Human resource staff also suggested that staff may be working flexibly, but not using a formal arrangement. These informal agreements between an employee and supervisor would not be officially recorded.
3. The remaining woman worked flexibly to run her own business.

References
Australian Local Government Women’s Association (ALGWA) (2001), National Framework for Women in Local Government, Department of the Prime Minister, Canberra.


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