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Line manager involvement in work-life balance and career development: can’t manage, won’t manage?

Abstract

Line manager involvement in HRM is an increasing trend across Europe. With the numbers of employees taking advantage of work-life balance policies also on the increase, line manager responsibility for this specific policy area is likely to become more marked. In this paper, we argue that line managers have a critical role to play in the career development of reduced-hours employees, but that due to a number of cultural and institutional processes, the extent of this involvement is likely to be limited. Using qualitative data from interviews with police managers and police officers who have reduced their hours, we argue that gendered assumptions, deeply embedded in taken-for-granted organizational practices and structures, operate in ways that encourage line managers and reduced-hours workers to locate career barriers in the psyche of the latter. The implications of these processes for line manager involvement in the career development of reduced-hours professionals are explored and explicated.
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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore those processes that influence how managers interpret and understand their roles and responsibilities in developing the careers of staff that make use of work-life balance policies, focusing specifically on reduced-hours working in police work. We argue that reduced-hours workers face particular problems in terms of career development because of institutionalised patterns of acquiring developmental experiences that are deeply gendered. We argue that these processes can lead line managers to overlook the career development needs of reduced hours staff.

The paper is structured as follows. First we examine the emerging literature examining the career issues facing professional employees who make use of reduced-hours working. We then move on to examine factors that constrain and enable line manager involvement in careers in general, before focusing specifically on the implications raised for line manager involvement in the career development of reduced-hours professionals. We argue that the increasing trend for individual responsibility for career development poses particular problems for the reduced-hours professional, exacerbated by the gendered assumptions that are embedded in typical patterns of career development. We illustrate these arguments with data from qualitative interviews with police managers and police officers working reduced-hours, showing how line managers frequently locate the failure of reduced-hours
professionals to pursue career development opportunities in their motivations and attitudes. We present our conclusions and implications in the final section.

**Work-Life Balance Policies and Line Manager Involvement**

Organisations are becoming increasingly aware that work-life balance policies are required to retain skilled female employees and that a failure to do so can prove very costly (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995). The numbers of professional women opting to reduce their hours or, work more flexibly, continue to increase (Dex & Smith, 2002), illustrating the material effects of this awareness. Given that more and more organizations are devolving HR responsibilities to the line across Europe (Larsen & Brewster, 2003), the management of reduced-hours employees and of other staff that make use of various work-life balance policies, is likely to increasingly become a domain of responsibility for line managers. To date, the focus for much of the literature in this area has been on the experiences of managers and of reduced-hours professionals. This literature is in broad agreement that reduced-hours professionals face particular difficulties in terms of career development, which, in turn, are related to both how they are perceived and managed.

*Career issues for reduced-hours professionals*

Employees who reduce their hours, while experiencing improvements in managing the work/family interface, may find that their managers do not deploy them in ways that most usefully employ their skills, experience and abilities. This can mean that the reduced-hours employee becomes marginalised, lacks status, and may find that their access to training and promotion opportunities is hampered (Edwards & Robinson, 1999; Sheridan & Conway, 2001; Skinner, 1999). For example, professionals who
reduce their hours often do not enjoy the same training opportunities as their full-time counterparts (Tisdall, 1999; Wallace, 2003). They are either not invited to attend training and development exercises, because full-timers are prioritised, or they often cannot attend because their hours of work do not coincide with times of training (Skinner, 1999). In terms of promotion, many internal job advertisements are inexplicit about the suitability of the post for reduced-hours working. Moreover, professionals who reduce their hours often find that they are excluded from networking and communications at work, and feel that they are overlooked (Chessum, 1989; Edwards and Robinson, 2001; Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Skinner, 1999). For example, it has been found that female nurses who choose to reduce their hours, fall behind in terms of career development and promotion prospects compared to their full-time male counterparts (Lane, 1998; Whittock et al., 2002).

A critical issue here is that managers find it difficult to manage reduced-hours professionals within systems designed for full-time employees (Dick, 2004; Edwards & Robinson, 1999; Skinner, 1999), which leads to problems such as inconsistent supervision (Kropf, 1999); communication and briefing problems (Edwards & Robinson, 1999); and deployment to the full range of professional tasks (Brewer, 2000), especially if these are time-bound and non-substitutable (Dex & Smith, 2002). Managers, in their efforts to deal with these problems, will often deploy reduced-hours employees to tasks and roles that are compatible with their work pattern, but not with their needs for professional or career development (Dick, 2004; Edwards & Robinson, 1999).
In sum, part-time professionals may experience marginalisation because they are generally constructed as ‘different’ to full-time employees. However, it is also possible that part-time working continues to be seen as a marginal activity, simply because those groups, i.e. women, that traditionally undertake it, are themselves marginalised in the labour force, whether they are full-time or part-time (Knights & Richards, 2003). Women are most likely to take advantage of part-time working in a range of occupations, and often this is a consequence of domestic and child care responsibilities (Blackwell, 2001; Hogarth, Hasluck, Pierre, Winterbotham & Vivian, 2001; Nollen, Eddy & Martin, 1978). Although the numbers of women in the labour market have been increasing (Social Trends, 2000), the notion of the male breadwinner is still very much the norm, and women continue to be positioned as primary care-givers (Bevan, Kettleley & Patch, 1997; den Dulk, Huiskes-Doorne & Schippers, 1996). Part-time work has consequently become feminised (Beechey, 1987), and is seen as a pattern of work designed primarily for women with caring commitments. In understanding the marginalisation of the part-time employee, issues of gender and working patterns are inextricably linked.

Thus, if, as the literature suggests, line managers are partly responsible for the career marginalisation experienced by reduced-hours employees, it is important to understand how managers understand their responsibilities towards the career development of such staff and how such understandings are related to these broader socio-cultural conceptions of gender. To address this issue, we first review the literature that has examined line manger involvement in career development in general, before moving on to examine those processes that may have a specific impact
on their understandings of their responsibilities for the career development of reduced-hours employees.

*Line manager involvement in careers*

In her review of the literature on line manager involvement in careers Yarnall (1998) discusses three groups of activities that have been identified as central to this process: promoting career development, by, for example, communicating its importance and meaning; spending time with staff individually, engaging in coaching, counselling and mentoring activities; and taking actions to further staff development such as redesigning jobs to create more challenging opportunities. As Yarnall (1998) notes, however, achieving this type of support from managers is not easy. Like other HRM practices that are devolved to line managers, the extent of management involvement in staff career development appears to be constrained by a number of factors, including reluctant attitudes and organizational culture.

Reluctance to engage in staff career development activities may stem from managers’ perceptions that they lack the required competences or capabilities (Garavan, 1990), which has been identified as a significant barrier to the devolution of HRM practices in general (Brewster & Larsen, 1992; Renwick, 2003). Research indicates that line managers themselves feel that they require significant support from the HRM department, which they view as the ‘expert’ (Renwick, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). However, Heraty and Morley (1995) argue that the extent to which this support is achieved is constrained by the degree of trust that exists between line managers and the HRM department and training specialists. Reluctance may also stem from the fact that line managers have other priorities, often those that are
concerned with meeting short-term operational goals (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981), and thus may lack time to undertake HR work, or feel overloaded (Renwick, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003).

Organizational structure and culture may act as further constraints. Where there is an emphasis on hierarchical relationships; where historically, HRM issues have been handled centrally; where HRM is not seen as central to the achievement of strategic goals, and where the HR department has a vested interest in undermining devolution of HR activities to the line, the conditions necessary to encourage line managers to undertake staff career development may not be in place (Bolton & Gold, 1994; Renwick & MacNeil, 2002; Yarnall, 1998). Clearly, in many organizations, these factors will have an impact on the extent of line-manager involvement in the career development of all staff. If, however, the emphasis is on individuals to self-manage their careers, and if line managers do not see career development as a priority, then it may be that those individuals who proactively enlist the support of their manager in securing promotion opportunities will be likely to be most successful (Yarnall, 1998). We would argue that part-time professionals may be particularly disadvantaged if this is the case.

Implications for line manager involvement in the career development of reduced-hours professionals

Career development in many large organizations consists of lateral moves into specific roles or projects that provide the individual with the necessary experience to advance in their careers (Liff & Ward, 2001). Increasingly, this is seen to be the responsibility of the individual him or herself (King, 2004), though, as we have seen,
line managers can play a critical role here, in helping employees identify and apply for suitable roles (Yarnall, 1998). Many roles that are considered developmental in career terms, carry the expectation that the employee will work full-time hours (Liff & Ward, 2001), or else training is designed around the needs of full-time employees (Skinner, 1999). Reduced-hours employees may therefore be deterred from applying for such roles and opportunities. More fundamentally, when reduced-hours employees ‘choose’ not to apply for such developmental experiences, the reasons for this choice are rarely located in these structural attributes, but in the attitudes, aspirations and dispositions of the reduced-hours employee, who may be perceived by their managers as lacking career commitment (Hakim, 1997; Jacobson, 2000). Despite research that suggests this view of the reduced-hours employee is based more on myth than reality (Lewis & Taylor, 1996; Skinner, 1999; Linehan & Walsh, 1999), if this is how managers perceive reduced-hours employees it will influence the extent to which they are likely to feel that they need to become involved in the career development of such employees, by, for example, encouraging them to seek developmental opportunities. Thus reluctance is not the only reason why line managers may fail to become involved in career development. In the case of reduced-hours employees, they may also be operating on a tacit assumption that such involvement is relatively pointless.

Gender is heavily implicated here. Because it is mainly women who work part-time and do so primarily for reasons of child-care, they are generally perceived, and perceive themselves, to have prioritised caring commitments above career, a choice that is culturally seen as legitimate due to dominant discourses about women’s domestic roles (Lazar, 2000). Thus, the emphasis on self-management in careers and the possibility that line management involvement in this process needs to be actively
sought by the employee, means that reduced hours employees may be perceived, and perceive themselves, as having shelved the idea of a career. As we have implied, however, this choice cannot be divorced from broader socio-cultural and organisational structural processes and properties, and the ways that these are deeply gendered. We will now move on to illustrate these arguments.

**Method**

*(i) Research setting*

Reduced-hours working in the UK police service was deliberately introduced in 1992 in an attempt to deal with the problem of retaining police women (Tuffin & Baladi, 2001). The retention of women officers was considered important not only from an Equal Opportunities perspective, but also because of the costs associated with the loss of well qualified and trained staff. Additionally, the police in the UK have been deliberately trying to change their image from one based on force and coercion to one based on service and responsiveness (Edwards & Robinson, 1999). Women are perceived to contribute to this shift in culture and mission, bringing with them personal qualities thought to be more suited to this approach (Gaston & Alexander, 1997). The data reported here were collected from three metropolitan police forces located in the North of England, of similar size, geography and policing demands. The forces will be referred to hereafter as Force A, Force B and Force C. The take-up of reduced-hours working in each force was 2%, which is comparable with the take-up rates in other professions (Hogarth, et al, 2001).
(ii) Data collection

The data reported here were collected as part of a wider research project investigating the development and management of flexible working practices in policing. An earlier pilot project revealed that reduced-hours working was considered to be particularly problematic in the area of operational beat policing (see Dick, 2004; Dick (In Press)). Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 8 triads of police officers in each of the three forces. Each triad comprised an operational police officer who had reduced their hours; the officer’s manager and a colleague of the officer. This was done to generate a deliberately pluralistic account of how reduced-hours working was perceived, experienced and managed (Dick, 2004). Interviews were additionally conducted with key stakeholders in the management and development of flexible working, including members of the HR department in each force and an individual in Force B, responsible for planning and advising on work patterns. Additional data was gathered from focus groups in each force, comprising reduced-hours officers, managers of reduced-hours officers, colleagues of reduced-hours officers, members of the HR department and police federation representatives. Each focus group was comprised of between 8 and 12 individuals. In total therefore, we conducted 75 individual interviews, and 3 focus group discussions.

The interviews covered a range of issues connected with the perceptions, experiences and management of flexible working in the police force. All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the interviewee. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim, anonymised and sent to the participant for checking.
(iii) Analytic technique

The data were analysed using a template (King 2004). This technique involves the systematic identification of categories and themes from textual data. It is usual to identify some of the codes used in the template apriori, and these are then elaborated and refined as the data analysis progresses. The initial template therefore consisted of the interview questions used with the individuals and with the focus groups. From here, each section of the template related to each of the interview topics was further analysed, and codes were developed to summarise segments of text within each topic area. This initial analysis was carried out with 10 interview transcripts, and the template was then applied to a further 10 and was modified as necessary. This iterative development of the template continued until all the transcripts had been analysed. The resultant, final, template was then used to re-analyse all transcripts (see Appendix)

Once a template has been developed that can satisfactorily summarise the data obtained, it is necessary to move beyond the descriptive nature of the summary towards interpretation and theorisation (King, 2004). This is achieved by applying sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) to the data summaries in order to assess their explanatory value. Sensitizing concepts are described as “directions in which to look” (Blumer, 1954: 4) for suitable theoretical constructs or frameworks. All researchers will have an array of possible theoretical constructs available to help make sense of the data they have obtained, and, while the construct that is selected is not understood as definitive (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), it must be sufficiently persuasive, to enable the reader to make a ‘naturalistic generalisation’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That is, the interpretation enables the reader not only to make sense of their own experiences, but
to extend his or her understanding of them. Clearly, given the amount of data
generated, there are many ways in which the template could be interpreted. In the
analysis that follows, we have focused on accounts generated by line managers and
reduced-hours officers in response to specific questions about career.

Analysis

(i) Line manager involvement in career development?

All three police forces operate formal career development programmes which involve
the line manager setting development plans with the employee. While all of the
managers we interviewed acknowledged that they had a role to play in career
development, when discussing the career progression of reduced-hours employees,
few articulated any notion of personal responsibility for, or involvement in, these
processes. In fact there was only one manager who reported taking an active role in
the development of his reduced-hours staff:

Manager (Force B): I’d like to think it [career development] is one of my strengths. I
think the only thing is having just, as you say, quadrupled my staff, it’s very time
intensive. Career development is time intensive, to do it properly. To sit down with
people, see where they’re up to. Actually get out with them, give them feedback, it’s
very intensive. I mean I..we managed to do it on my last relief because we had three
very, very good sergeants, so between the four of us, looking after 22-23 people, we
were able to fairly intensively career develop people and that’s great, you know! And
that’s the way it should be.

Interviewer: What kind of things would you do?
Manager: Just looking at where at they’re going. I mean one of the part-timers is keen to do her [promotion] exam this year. So it’s sitting down and plotting that through and saying “Well what should you be doing now?” I’ve managed to get her tutoring. I’ve got her on a tutor constable’s course. She’s the tutor constable now, the probationers are looking to her for a lead. She’s very, very good. Very thorough.

As the following extracts reveal, despite the formal policies that exist, career development is understood by the vast majority of the managers we interviewed as a process that is primarily the responsibility of the individual, who needs to identify appropriate departments or roles that can offer the developmental opportunities desired:

Interviewer: Do you think that individuals that work reduced-hours are disadvantaged with regards to their career advancement?

Respondent (Force B): Umm (long silence). I think they may think they are, but I think if they actually went for whatever it was they were looking for, they would find they weren’t. I would suggest that if they actually looked at it properly and went to the management of the department [they were interested in], the management would say, “It’s not a problem. You know, you tell me what hours you want to work. If they fit in with us or I can make them fit in with us then, it won’t be a problem,”

Interviewer: So you think they maybe rule themselves out for things?

Respondent: I think..yeah. I mean, but that again is only my perception..

Interviewer: Do you think that reduced-hours working hampers career development for the individual?
Respondent (Force C): I can’t quote anybody I know of or have heard of has been held back from promotion or other lateral development purely because they work part-time. In fact I think we go the other way in this force. It’s not a bar to advancement or career progression in any way, shape or form. So, you can apply for a job as a part-time worker. You can apply for any job basically.

Interviewer: Do you think that reduced-hours working hampers career development for the individual?

Respondent (Force A): I don’t see that. I don’t see that at all. I think your career development is more a matter of what you want to do and how keen you are to do it. I don’t see reduced-hours working as hampering anybody’s career.

Managers tended to attribute the reasons for reduced-hours workers failing to apply for developmental opportunities to these employees’ personal characteristics, such as “commitment” and the extent to which they were prepared to put in the necessary efforts:

Interviewer: Do you think that part-time working hampers career development for the individual?

Respondent (Force C): Not particularly. I mean I think in practical terms it could mean that they are excluded from certain [training] courses. So people are sort of excluded in a way and development would be delayed. And then the onus then is on them to go full-time to do that training. So I don’t really know whether it hinders people. I mean I think there has to be a bit of flexibility from part-time people and I guess there should be arrangements for part-time people, but it’s very difficult to
cater for a smaller number of people. I suppose it’s really down to the commitment of a particular person if they want to do a particular course or career development. It would mean changing their hours and then....

Interviewer: Do you think that reduced-hours working could hamper the career development for the individual?

Respondent (Force A): Theoretically no, because (force) Police have got an equal opportunities policy. Practically, possibly. Certainly ... there’s ... my experience of working with part-time officers, there’s very few that have moved on, either got promoted or moved into a specialist department. They’ve [the reduced-hours worker] got that much on their plate that they haven’t got time to be revising or completing application forms because to be honest the police process of say promotion for example, you have to go through quite a lengthy theory exam which you have to put quite a lot of work into ... background work, and you’ve got a practical exam after that where you can go on courses to assist you. Then after that you’ve got your interviews, so there’s three areas to get promoted. Plus then there’s an application form. If you’re just wanting to go for a specialist post, the application form is quite detailed and for those that have had no experience of doing application forms it can be quite daunting and that can be off-putting and if you’ve got other issues, ie, childcare, you don’t really want to be bothered.

Notable in these extracts is that the practices and structures that constitute career development are not in any way problematised by these managers. They are taken for granted as ‘givens’ to which the individual has to adapt. Thus in the first of the two extracts above, the design of training to cater for the full-time majority is seen as
normal and appropriate, with the manager seeing flexibility on the part of the reduced-hours worker as key to securing training opportunities. In the second extract it is the lengthy processes involved in applying for promotion that are constructed as normal, resulting in a situation where a reduced-hours worker may become overloaded due to their dual commitments. These are deeply gendered propositions. For instance, in suggesting that part-time workers need to show flexibility, the constraints that women in particular face are effectively glossed over. A woman who would like to participate in a training event designed for full-timers will have to arrange alternative child-care arrangements, for example. We are not suggesting that is it is unreasonable to expect women to do this, but the use of the term ‘flexibility’, with its attitudinal connotations, implies that the reasons for women’s lack of flexibility resides in factors more internal than external to them. Likewise, the assumption that it will be women in particular who struggle with dual commitments underscores discourses that construct women as the best and most natural carer or parent.

(ii) **Constraints on the reduced-hours employee’s opportunities for career development**

Competencies required for specialist roles and for promotion to the next rank are made explicit in job descriptions and employees need to be able to ‘evidence’ their development of these competencies through gaining appropriate experience. This evidence is presented on applications for roles and departments, and on the individual’s performance appraisal, which is conducted on an annual basis by the line manager. However, gaining both enough and the ‘right’ type of experience that is required for moving to specialist roles or for promotion can be difficult for reduced-hours officers
Interviewer: Do you think that part-time working hampers the career development for...

Part-time respondent (Force B): Oh yeah (laughs) I think people, a lot of managers look on part-time working as a problem. I can remember ringing the control room and asking if they’d got any vacancies and would they be prepared to look at people who were part-time. “Who’s going to do the other half of the job” was the answer I got, and they weren’t even prepared to sort of even think about it.

Part-time respondent (Force A): I tell you another thing which really upset me. They monitor how many files you’ve put in, stuff like that....

Interviewer: For your performance indicators?

Part-time respondent: Mine were really low and I were getting a slating in the office until another sergeant said, “Yeah, but (name)’s part-time.” And if you do liaison or rape training, you don’t get ticks for them and of course they take up a lot of my time. Whereas the lads in the office who deal with burglaries, robberies and that, they’re getting all the arrests, they’re getting all the files in because you can do them daily.

As these extracts reveal, reduced-hours employees can face particular difficulties gaining the ‘right’ experiences, either because developmental roles or departments will not accommodate a reduced-hours officer, or because their reduced-hours are not taken into account when their performance is being assessed. Furthermore, since some roles for which many female officers are specially trained, such as family liaison and dealing with rape victims are less visible in performance terms than other activities, their contributions can be overlooked. Previous research into the deployment of
female officers, suggests that full-time as well as part-time females can be disadvantaged in terms of gaining access to experience that is considered valuable in developmental terms (Brown, Maidment & Bull, 1993). However, in certain departments, like CID, managers tend not to deploy part-time staff to tasks requiring continuity, such as burglary or murder investigations, preferring to utilise the part-time female to conduct specialist interviews as part of ongoing investigations into rape or child abuse. As a consequence it appears that part-time officers may additionally disadvantaged compared to their full-time female counterparts.

**Full-Time Manager (Force C)** “If two people are working together they need to do two weeks worth of work as part of an investigation, and need to know as much about it as each other. Now if I’m a reduced hours worker and I’ve been off for 5 days and then come back while you’ve been working on it for 10 days, you can see there’s an issue...there’s a difficulty with picking up the thread. So reduced hours officers may not get these experiences simply because it’s too difficult to give them that experience.”

In addition to these issues, as the final extract below reveals, if an officer is successful in a promotion bid, the location and nature of the more senior role is not up for negotiation: officers are sent to roles that require that particular rank of officer. Again this taken-for-granted practice is one that is heavily gendered. Women with dual commitments who have arranged their work pattern and child-care arrangements to coincide both temporally and geographically are clearly not in a position to easily move locations on promotion.
**Interviewer:** But what about you developing with CID?

**Part-time respondent (Force B):** Well, I would be able to put myself forward for ... If I was to pass all the sergeant’s exam I’d be able to put myself on a list to ask to go as a detective sergeant in CID. They would probably find it easy to facilitate that for me, although we are expected to do what’s called area nights every so often, but they’re that few and far between, they’re probably about four times a year. I think I would be selfish and unrealistic if I didn’t for those four times find assistance and do them. So, it would probably work better in the CID role, but you can’t always make an assumption when you get promoted that you’re going to go where you want to.

**Interviewer:** When you get promoted is it kind of a thing like you get posted?

**Part-time respondent:** You go where you’re put. It’s just happened to one of my colleagues...She’s devastated. She’s just got herself promoted, but she’s been shoved ...to (HQ) in the communications room.

However, it is not only managers that fail to problematise taken-for-granted organizational structures and practices that deter career advancement for reduced-hours workers. They themselves perceive their position in the organization to be a consequence of their ‘choice’ to reduce their hours. Reduced-hours employees are thus deterred from seeking particular developmental opportunities for fear that this may disrupt their reduced-hours schedule, and may exclude themselves from certain roles or experiences because these are perceived to be unsuitable for a reduced-hours worker:

**Interviewer:** Do you think that working reduced-hours, can hamper the career development for the individual officer?
**Part-time respondent (Force B):** Um (long pause), No I don’t think so, because, I don’t think it’s the fact of reducing the hours, I think it’s.. I mean there’s things that I would like to apply for now and I know that I couldn’t be refused because I work reduced-hours, but, my hours that I’ve agreed suit, and me location suits me, so I..so rather than working reduced-hours hampering it, it’s my personal choice cos I’ve had a baby at the moment, for the moment I’ll stay as I am ...But it doesn’t stop me going for promotion or anything like that, so no, I don’t think it would really...

**Interviewer:** Some people would argue that if you reduce your hours your ... you know, your career development is hampered because of maybe what other people think about that. Do you think that that is true or ...

**Part-time respondent (Force C):** I don’t think it’s true, no...I would say I’m quite capable of carrying out the duties and if I wanted to become sergeant ... I know of sergeants ... policewomen that have ... are working part-time and it hasn’t hampered them at all ...they have been promoted while they’ve been working part-time..The only thing that hampers me slightly is if I wanted to say go into another ... like a team or a drugs team I would probably find it difficult to work around their hours because they’re not like the hours I’m working now. I could probably do it, but I’d have to work out ... I’d have to change the hours ... the shifts, if you like that I’m working now. Not reduce them, but possibly change them round a bit...

**Part-time Respondent (Force A):** So I said I wanted to get to Inspector before I had my little girl just because I thought it would hamp... It’s not the part-time that I thought would hamper career advancement. I thought it would be like babies would
hamper career advancement!  (laughs) Because I just think I’d never have time to study and things like that.  So I thought, “Well, I’ll get there and sort of do that and then go part-time.”  So I haven’t tried to advance whilst I’ve been on part-time...

Interviewer:  Finally, do you yourself have any aspirations for the future in terms of a career or not.

Part-time respondent (Force B): Not at..no. I mean I tried for my Sergeants and failed it so, and now I’m..just..at this time my main priority’s my home life, um, I’m happy in what I do because people think I’m mad still working section, um, but I’m happy, so I don’t see the point of changing.

In the first two extracts above, the reduced-hours officers take it as ‘given’ that their decision to reduce their hours has excluded them from particular career development opportunities, without challenging why this has to be the case. In the last two extracts, both respondents suggest that it is their own lack of career aspirations which can explain their position in the organisation. Despite the fact that the officer in the third extract notes the difficulties of combining child-care with studying, the ‘problem’ is located in former, not the latter. In the final extract, the officer attributes her changed aspirations to her prioritisation of her family life, not in the difficulties that that seeking promotion causes in itself.

Commentary and implications
We suggest that the analysis above raises three key and interrelated issues relating to line manager involvement in career development. First, the hegemony of the notion that child-care is the problem for the lack of career progression experienced by
reduced-hours staff. Second, the institutional expectation that staff take responsibility for their own career development, and third, the gendered assumptions that are embedded in taken-for-granted modes of acquiring career developmental experiences.

The concept of hegemony draws attention to the fact that any given social order is not the ‘natural’ state of affairs (Gramsci, 1971). The social order has to be constantly negotiated through processes aimed at securing consent from those within it that are relatively disadvantaged, either materially or symbolically (Bourdieu, 1977). In the UK context, the notion that child-care constitutes the core problem for women’s limited career progression has achieved the status of hegemony and is deeply gendered. Central to this notion is the common-sense belief that a woman is not only the better and most natural parent (Cockburn, 1991), but that she will inevitably prefer child-care duties over career advancement (Hakim, 1991; 1995; 1997). This hegemony operates not only to render gendered organizational practices as natural and normal (Dick & Nadin, 2006; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005) as illustrated in our interview extracts, but also operates through the identity of women themselves: they attribute their unwillingness to pursue career development not to these gendered practices but to their own attitudes and aspirations. Research in the UK and other cultural contexts, however, reveals that women’s attitudes towards child-care and careers is related to welfare state policies and the way that these construct and sustain gendered assumptions. Fagan (2001) for example, argues that the male breadwinner ideology is sustained in the UK through government policies which render it more economically viable for women to assume the role of primary child-carer. In contrast, in Finland, and other Nordic countries, societal arrangements are based on an egalitarian-individualistic, double-earner understanding of family, where men and
women are considered to be individual bread-winners. These understandings are sustained by government policies in which the state assumes responsibility for child-care costs. Merilainen et al (2004) argue that in this cultural context, women do not perceive themselves as the primary child-carer. Instead men and women, perceive themselves as being both parents and workers, with equal responsibilities in each sphere.

While the expectation that staff take responsibility for their own career development is becoming more wide-spread throughout industry, this expectation is institutionalised in policing, as it is in other male dominated, quasi-militaristic organizations, where it is expected that employees are able and willing to be transferred to different roles and locations to acquire developmental experience or to obtain a promotion posting (Young, 1993). These are deeply gendered practices. Their necessity, in terms of how they actually deepen and broaden the skills and competencies of employees is seldom questioned. While these practices may well operate to provide important developmental experiences, they also serve to particularly disadvantage female officers with child-care responsibilities. In the case of the police service, therefore, this institutional expectation further impedes the likelihood of line manager involvement in career development. Not only do line managers in the police tend to see HR matters as welfare issues, best dealt with by specialists at Headquarters, but they take for granted the idea that truly committed officers will seek out their own developmental opportunities. This coupled with the hegemony of the child-care ‘problem’ discussed above, operates, we would argue, to render managers disinclined to consider that their reduced-hours staff have career development needs.
Implications for line manager involvement

We would argue, that in the case of reduced-hours professionals, line managers have a critical role to play in career development. However, the extent to which they can be persuaded to become involved depends on a number of cultural and institutional factors that organizations, like the UK police service will need to address if they are to improve the position of reduced-hours employees.

We agree with Yarnall (1998) that coaching, counselling and mentoring are key line manager activities in career development. The extent to which line managers can or are willing to develop and use these skills is, however, contingent on the cultural context. In the police, for example, historical modes of management favouring a ‘command and control’ approach, within which negotiation, discussion and reciprocal communicative exchanges are impeded by the nature of the asymmetric hierarchical relations between different ranks (Dick & Jankowicz, 2002; Waddington, 1999), renders the likelihood of wholesale adoption of the counselling approach problematic. Nonetheless, as our data reveal, one of the line managers in this study was adopting such an approach, which was confirmed by the reduced-hours officer who worked under him. Organizations, like the police, need to reward these instances of good practice, and make sure that they are incorporated into management training and development activities.

Line managers can also play a role in ensuring that employees gain the developmental experience they need to progress their careers. To do this they need to be discouraged from accepting a reduced-hours employees’ assurance of their satisfaction with their
current role, and instead should be educated as to why reduced-hours officers might be expressing such satisfaction. Clearly, we are not advocating that line managers should force reduced-hours employees to undertake developmental activities which they do not desire nor find acceptable, but they should create space and time to encourage reduced-hours employees to perform roles that are developmental and that do not interfere with the reduced-hours employee’s work pattern, such as the leadership role discussed by one of our line managers, above.

At an institutional level, organizations like the police need to think very carefully about the necessity of some of their taken-for-granted career development and promotion practices. While many of these practices may well provide officers with critical developmental experiences, promotion criteria could be broadened to reflect different modes of acquiring developmental experience as well as different types of experience. For example, depth of experience in specific fields, like family liaison, or dealing with rape victims, could be included as relevant and important criteria for promotion. Likewise, the practice of blind-posting following promotion should be reconsidered. From an HR perspective, it would make far more sense to promote people into roles that they actually want and for which they are qualified.

Challenging gendered assumptions
If the career development of reduced-hours staff is to assume a central place on the Equal Opportunities agenda in many organizations, the hegemony of the child-care ‘problem’ must be challenged. At a recent conference, a leading (male) academic in the careers field asked one of the authors to justify why it made sense to change organizational practices to suit what amounts to 2% of staff of the organization. This,
in our view, exposes the deeply embedded nature of gendered assumptions in our society. What is taken for granted in this question, is that the practices and structures that constitute organizations like the police, are natural and appropriate and that those people, largely women, who are unable to conform to the activities and identities produced through them are the ‘problem’. In fact, if organizations changed their practices and structures to facilitate all staff to achieve work-life balance, and emphasised this, the notion that it is mainly women who are interested in life outside work could be more effectively challenged.

Fagan’s (2001), study, for example, reveals that men and women in the UK who work full-time, would prefer to work less hours and achieve a better work-life balance, indicating that there is a receptive audience to such changes. There are also examples in the literature on work-life balance, which illustrate that such challenges are already taking place. Lawrence & Corwin (2003), found that part-time female professionals were able to influence dominant organizational practices and subsequently enhance the way that their performance was evaluated by colleagues and managers, by insisting that valued interaction rituals, like meetings and drinks after work, were scheduled at times that suited their domestic requirements. Friedman et al (1998) report that in the USA, organizations that wish to take work-family balance seriously are reconsidering their traditional modes of organizing, willing to make structural transformations within work groups and departments that encourage all staff to re-think work-life balance. For example, they site instances of managers who help and encourage employees to experiment with new ways of organizing work that challenge the legitimacy of existing practices.
It is only through continually challenging the dominant order that space will be created from which more fundamental transformations may emerge. However, gendered assumptions in the UK are not only sustained by welfare state policies, but at the micro-level, by individual men and women, who consent to the dominant order and their place within it. As we argue elsewhere, the processes through which this consent is secured and sites at which the dominant order is being contested, need to be central foci for future empirical work in this area (Dick & Hyde, In Press).

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have sought to identify and understand those processes that may influence line manager involvement in the career development of reduced-hours professionals. Our core argument is that gendered assumptions, deeply embedded in organizational practices and structures, may render the career development needs of reduced-hours staff invisible to many line managers. We believe, nevertheless, that line managers have a critical role to play in the career development of reduced-hours staff, though we recognise that this role is bounded and heavily constrained by broader cultural and institutional processes. It is our contention that the hegemony of the notion of natural differences between men and women must be challenged if the constraints on line manager involvement are to be reduced.

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References


1. REASONS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF PART-TIME/FLEXIBLE WORKING
   1.1 Retention
   1.2 Equal Opportunities
   1.3 Internal pressures stemming from the needs of staff
   1.4 Natural progressive evolution
   1.5 Reputation/image
   1.6 Reduce sickness absence/stress

2. THE NEGOTIATION CONTEXT
   2.1 Successful when:
   2.12 Flexibility shown by both parties
   2.13 Arrangements meet the needs of the individual and the organisation
   2.14 Perceived as equitable by all involved
   2.15 Third party intervention can be used when negotiations break down
   2.16 Manager is creative in thinking about how to accommodate part-timer
   2.2 Less successful where:
   2.21 Managers are frightened to refuse a request
   2.22 The individual is disorganised or incompetent
   2.23 Organisational culture
   2.24 Lack of standardisation across the force/division

3. BENEFITS OF PART-TIME WORKING
   For the part-timer
   3.1 Less stress
   3.2 More contented
   3.3 Better home-life balance
   3.4 Better management of home/work interface
   3.5 Amenability of colleagues
   For the organisation
   3.6 Retain skilled staff
   3.7 More efficient/productive staff
   3.8 Keeps manpower more constant

4. DISADVANTAGES OF PART-TIME WORKING
   For the part-timer
   4.1 Attitude/orientation of manager
   4.2 Pay and pension issues
   4.3 Workload
   4.4 Child-care
   4.5 Can be perceived as less useful/committed
   4.6 Training and development
   4.7 Loss of camaraderie
   For colleagues of the part-timer
4.8 Manpower loss
4.9 Increased workload
For managers
4.10 Calculating managing payment/roster systems
4.11 Manpower loss
4.12 Line of sight supervision
4.13 Arranging training/development opportunities

5. CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF PART-TIMER
Can be hampered because:
5.1 Unwillingness to rock the boat having had pattern of hours agreed
5.2 Part-timers are overlooked as they are perceived to lack relevant experience
5.3 Part-time work limits experiences necessary to gain promotion
5.4 Part-timers choose to sacrifice career for domestic priorities
Not necessarily hampered:
5.5 Equal Opportunities
5.6 Progressive management

6 OTHER FORMS OF FLEXIBLE WORKING
6.1 Difficult to accommodate because:
6.12 The nature of policing
6.13 Organisation structure/systems
6.14 Police officer mentality
6.15 The nature of tasks
6.16 Statutory obligations
6.2 Could be accommodated

7. Policy issues
7.1 Access
7.12 Intranet
7.13 Hard copy
7.14 Chief Constable’s orders
7.15 Line management/personnel contact
7.2 Communication
7.21 Insufficient publicity
7.22 Inadequate information
7.23 Inadequate/insufficient training