Rethinking potential connection between gender, work- and family life and how to link the emerging reasoning to well-being

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1. Introduction

How women and men negotiate roles and relationships is crucial for having the potential to combine paid work with other parts of their life. How women and men actually do this can be understood as constrained by what women and men are expected to do. Earlier research on organizational working patterns has revealed links between such constraints and gender relations (Acker, 1990). “Processes of transformation” (Gustafsson, 2007) is a theoretical concept that will be used here in this paper to explore a potential connection between working life and family life, as varying and gendered. How these two spheres of life are situationally connected will have implications for well-being. It is this theoretical reasoning that will be illustrated in this paper, how it works in practice, through the use of empirical examples from an ongoing larger study on work and health.

In mainstream literature, the term “work–life balance” is frequently used, often in very simplified ways, concealing underlying dynamism and complexity. “Women” as a group and “men” as a group are often seen as fixed, unproblematic gender categories, classifying bodies and therewith define gender. It is therefore not surprising that gender categoricism can become the basis in occupational health. If categorical thinking on gender is parked on the top of biological difference, gender relations and “roles” correspond with natural differences and thus serve to mask how underlying gender relations, contradictory and ambivalent, produce and reproduce men’s privileged position simultaneously with women’s subordination (Connell, 1987). Using categorical thinking on gender risk to become contradictory, since expected change in health promotion programs at work may fail.

To understand how a balance can be struck between work and family-life obligations, contradictions and ambivalences need to be made visible and gender variations as well as nuances have to be sought for. We herewith call for a re-thinking of how the connection between gender, work, family and well-being can be seen and practiced through occupational health policy. An analytical tool able to facilitate this re-thinking in occupational health practices will be suggested in this paper. We are convinced that it is this kind of concepts that are needed right now in order to mobilize an acceleration of ongoing gender transformation that would contribute to improve health and well-being, both in work and family spheres of life.

This paper is part of a comprehensive intervention study on occupational health and well-being among blue- and white-collar workers, both women and men, in three companies in Sweden. In the baseline questionnaire, the employees mentioned that work–life balance is most significant for them as they strive to achieve well-being and health. This is the motivation for a study whose overall purpose is to contribute to a better understanding of potential linkages between gender, work and family, and well-being. The aim of this paper is threefold. First, it focuses on how employed women and men “do gender” when combining earning and caring activities and looks at the contributions or limitations or both. Second, it considers how the gender regime can be seen as providing a context for various gender-related limitations and opportunities, and differences and similarities between the employed women and men in three companies in Sweden. Third, it illuminates an alternative approach for combining gender, work, family and well-being.

2 Method

Social processes and social relations are at hand and to describe the involved dynamism and complexity required a qualitative approach.

Selection of participants was undertaken with the intention to cover variation in work-life balance, a procedure facilitated by the HR managers of the three companies within the water and energy sector in Sweden. 31 interviews were conducted, using a gender theoretic approach focusing three dimensions of gender relations (Connell, 1987): division of labor, authority and emotions, at both work- and family settings. The interviews lasted around an hour, were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The transcribed interviews
form the basis of individual case studies that will be grouped and compared, and the main findings of the study will derive from these comparisons.

Life-history method was used as it has been proven particularly fruitful for social analysis in general and gender analysis specifically: to decode the dynamics of the gender order (Connell, 2010). Stories focusing on specific lives will be used as empirical examples to illustrate ‘processes of transformation,’ how gender related episodes and events are laid down in a body and stored, to then be transformed into preferences of certain ways of doing before others. How the situational embodiment and transformation are taking place influences the potential to combine work- and family life will be illustrated as well as its consequences for well-being.

3 Results

The analysis is ongoing. Results and conclusions will be presented at the conference.

4 Discussion

Rethinking gender as two distinct categories will have implications for occupational health practice, not least because the result of this will probably open up opportunities for more sustainable efforts to attain well-being and health.

Keywords: gender, work, family-life, well-being

References