

# Developing the Personal, Dissolving the Political

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**Abstract**—The emergence of person-centred discourse based around notions of ‘personal development planning’ and ‘work-life balance’ has taken hold in education and the workplace in recent years. This paper examines this discourse with regard to recent developments in higher education as well as the inter-related issue of work-life balance in occupational careers. In both cases there have been national and trans-national policy initiatives directed towards improving both personal opportunities and competitive advantage in a global knowledge-based economy. However, despite an increasing concern with looking outward at this globalised educational and employment marketplace, there is something of a paradox in encouraging people to look inward at themselves in order to become more self-determined. This apparent paradox is considered from a discourse analytic perspective in terms of the ideological effects of an increasing concern with the personal world. Specifically, it is argued that there are tensions that emerge from a concern with an inner-directed process of self-reflection that dissolve any engagement with wider political issues that impact upon educational and career development.

**Keywords**—Personal development planning, higher education, work-life balance, career.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS paper considers the ideological effects of recent person-centred discourse concerning personal development planning (PDP) and work-life balance (WLB). Two inter-related areas are examined as key sites of this discourse: student participation in higher education and the notion of work-life balance in pursuing a professional career. Whilst on the face of it this discourse may seem personally liberating there are a number of problematic issues that follow on from this inward focus on personal reflection. The root of this is the inherent voluntarism in such a focus and the concomitant dissolving of wider political matters that impact upon the individual into a private world of thoughts and feelings.

The two major discourses selected for scrutiny and critique have emerged over the past decade or so and are now entrenched in policy initiatives at national and trans-national level. Thus in the world of higher education there is an increasing emphasis on encouraging students to engage in PDP, both in an academic and vocational sense. This is taken

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as developing independence in students so that they can become more autonomous learners and career planners [1], [2]. Meanwhile in the world of work there has been a raft of ‘family-friendly’ policy initiatives that encourage people to attain a degree of WLB. The intention here is to afford employees the opportunity to achieve a degree of balance between their personal and professional lives, especially given the increasing emphasis on flexible working patterns [3], [4].

This paper therefore addresses these discourses in terms of the tensions that arise when educational and career matters are viewed as being related to individual reflection and choice. The first section considers recent developments in PDP in the U.K. and how this has led to a concern with instrumental approach to learning rather than one based on viewing knowledge as provisional and open to critique. The second section considers WLB and the way in which a gender-neutral terminology leaves matters up to individuals and obscures the issue of how this is addressed and targeted more towards women than men in the workplace. The argument advanced here is again related to the tensions inherent in this individualizing discourse that dissolves away any sense of the political backdrop to these matters.

## II. PDP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM THE U.K.

It has been just over ten years since PDP was proposed by the National Commission into Higher Education in the U.K. [5]. The discussion of PDP advanced in the report stresses a structured and supported process designed to help the individual student to reflect upon their own learning and to plan for their personal, educational and career development, has become a central feature of higher education. The basic principles of PDP are action-orientated and cyclical and include the following dimensions: (i) goal setting and action planning; (ii) doing (learning through the experience of doing with greater awareness); (iii) recording (thoughts, ideas, experiences, evidence of learning); (iv) reviewing (reflections on what has happened, making sense of it all), and (v) evaluating (making judgements about self and own work and determining what needs to be done to develop, improve, and move on).

However, whilst these principles are readily accepted, their translation into curricular developments and relationship with subject provision is less clear. This is a significant issue as the first ever mapping and synthesis review of PDP processes found that most, “adopted a prescriptive approach to PDP implementation in order to achieve course-specific outcomes” [6]. The danger with such prescriptive approaches is that PDP

may come to be seen as an imposition rather than something that is integral to the higher education experience. Moreover, it can be viewed as an end in itself rather than as a means to a genuine engagement with the provisional nature of knowledge.

Therefore, if the process of PDP is to become an integral part of the student learning experience, a number of fundamental constructs need to be accepted by academic staff and students. It is crucial that these processes are integral to the whole learning experience of a student in higher education and thus should be embedded firmly with the rest of the curricula and student experience, and not seen as a separate activity or concept. The process also needs to be underpinned by institutional strategies, especially for teaching, learning and assessment and student support and needs to be learner-centred, in terms of supporting of a wide-range of different learning styles and motivations. The main outcome from such processes in terms of personal development will likely be a significant contribution to students becoming independent, autonomous, self-aware learners. In other words, staff and students should be able to engage actively with the PDP process rather than experiencing it as an imposition.

However, whilst such an approach can be enabling for students in their learning there are tensions that emerge with such a focus on the individual student. These are often political issues concerned with matters such as (i) national, institutional or departmental PDP policies; (ii) access to PDP records; and (iii) academic or vocationally driven. These are issues which can become dissolved in the instantiation of PDP in terms of the overall focus on the individual and the need to get such a policy translated into action, and especially via the increasing reliance on virtual learning environments. The nature of any virtual learning environment defines the nature of the learning process via provision of tools and templates for actions. All too often the learning process can be subtly moulded as an instrumental rather than a critical process. Learning in this context can become a process of managing information (including personal information) rather than discovery, insight and growth [7]. Thus as some have suggested this has enabled a managerial model of learning to be surreptitiously substituted for the dialogic and critical model which characterises the ideal of learning in higher education [8].

Others have pointed towards the tensions that arise in the different uses to which PDP is put. Three "ideal types" encapsulating the attitudes of different subject or discipline areas, have been distilled. The first ideal type, the *professional*, is strongly governed by the requirements stipulated by professional and statutory bodies such as specific health care professional bodies. The second, *employment*, includes both a general orientation to graduate employment and also specific work placement during study. This model is associated with areas such as management and business, sport and leisure, and those areas of applied science and engineering where the course focus is primarily towards employment rather than discipline. The final model, *academic*, is focused on the academic development of the student, incorporating meta-cognitive skills and those of the specific subject discipline. Humanities and social sciences predominate in the

academic. The model also included some areas of pure science where the emphasis was more on subject understanding. [9].

The aforementioned tensions in PDP were drawn out and articulated in interviews conducted with staff and students in the social sciences in one recent study [10]. One major aspect of this is the extent to which PDP is dealt with on an institutional-wide basis and its relevance for social science. In effect this is an issue of generality versus specificity. However, there is also more to this that bears closer inspection in terms of the way that PDP can, at a broad level appear to be related to the issue of enhancing employability, which some staff do not see as their *subject* in the sense that it is not an academic matter as such. On the other hand, there are members of staff who have suggested that PDP is something that *could* be used to encourage reflexivity which they see as a key academic skill for social science students. A key issue that cuts across the above practical concerns is that of ensuring that the 'personal' nature of the process stays with the student whilst ensuring engagement in order to bring about the stated aims of PDP. On the one hand, it is something that is within the individual student's control, but on the other hand its needs to be accessible to allow staff to assess its impact.

However, it is also clear that whilst PDP is almost universally accepted in *principle*, the perceptions of implementation raise some problematic *practical* issues. Perhaps this is not to be entirely unexpected given that PDP has to function as a public institutional quality enhancement measure related to such themes as employability and the development of graduate attributes, and also as something that is private and personal to the student and within her control. It is precisely this tension between an advocacy of principle versus practice that is where political matters come into play. A discourse focused on personal development is something that is almost universally agreed upon as beneficial in principle. However, it is when people come to flesh out and specify what this means in practice that political matters are at stake. This is the point at which there has to be a commitment to action and where responsibility for those actions is apportioned.

One of the central tenets of a focus on analysing discourse is the examination of the variable deployment of such discourse and its ideological effects. When considering the discourse of PDP it is clear that whilst there is a positive connotation with the notion of personal development, this is not simply about a neutral inner process in isolation but rather is related to wider political and policy related issues. Thus there is often a concern with the notion of individual self-direction and planning related to politico-economic aims such as employability and improving the nature of graduates as future employees in terms of national competitiveness in the face of a globalised knowledge-driven economy.

There is a clear tension here for some between what they regard as the academic nature of personal development leading to personal growth and the concomitant contribution to an educated citizenry, and the underlying national imperative that requires knowledge linked to economic wealth creation. However, in an era of mass higher education it is often the latter that is a priority for governments. This political dimension to PDP can be lost when located inside the practical matters associated with education as an inner-directed process.

Once set within this discourse then the practicalities of such matters curricular design, delivery and assessment come into play. Moreover, if PDP is viewed as being driven by students themselves then the political dimension dissolves away as they engage in the practicalities of the educational process. An inner-directed focus is not one that usually leads to a reflexive engagement with the political nature of PDP and the location of agency within the individual. Learning the process of PDP becomes the end in itself in an instrumentally-driven fashion. In this way learning is depoliticised in the sense that its purpose is driven down to the level of the personal.

### III. WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS GENDER NEUTRAL DISCOURSE

This kind of focus on decision-making in terms of personal development can also be found in the emergence of a discourse concerning 'work-life balance' and 'individual choice' rhetoric in today's workplace [11]. The use of gender-neutral language in the WLB rhetoric of today's world of work can lead to the impression that gender stereotypes are no longer a constraining factor, especially for women. Parents are seen to be exercising choice when they take up the flexible work options on offer in order to balance their family and work commitments in accordance with their needs.

Embedded within this discourse of balancing work and family commitments, and the employment policies and practices predicated upon this, is the view that as far as is reasonable, employers and employees should work together to try ensure that family commitments are not sacrificed at the expense of work. The complexity of balancing work and family demands has been recently examined in terms of understanding the demands of both settings, the resources of both settings, the specific abilities of the individual parent or partner, and the fit between these aspects [12]. For example, many occupations may require additional hours at unexpected times in order to complete a project by a set deadline. This is a demand, but it may also provide an additional resource in terms of personal prestige and career advancement. However, determining the actual benefit of this may require additional cost in terms of decreased time with a partner or children. The concept of *boundary spanning* has been used to explain this in terms of the impact that meeting the demands of one setting has on the other setting. Thus, determining what makes for balance between work and family requires assessing the settings, resources, and demands separately, and then assessing the trade-offs individuals make between them, and the impact this has on the whole family.

As in virtually all occupations, women as the child-bearers carry the major responsibility of child care arrangements (as well as the care of ageing parents), and unless 'family-friendly' policies are part of the work environment, women employees are less likely to have a long-term and sustainable career and may have to take career breaks. Returning to work after such a break becomes an increasingly difficult task given that the time away may lead to unfamiliarity with new technologies and work procedures. Furthermore, pregnancy and child-bearing have particular negative consequences for women in the early part of their careers, given that achievement and promotion during these years coincides with fertility.

Hence the turn to current approaches that call upon the need for more recognition of the diversity of flexible working styles and WLB needs, rather than policies which specifically enable working mothers to manage paid work and family needs. The aim is try and move beyond simply viewing equal opportunities policies as being a matter of human resources, and one primarily directed at women, to being concerned about all employees and an issue of concern for all employers and organizations [13], [14]. This discourse of diversity is meant to be open to all and is based upon the view that it is a matter of individual circumstances and choices. However, this approach to diversity management whilst focusing on the individual has a blind spot when it comes to the issue of power differentials or structural inequalities [15]. The argument that we are all individuals and are all have different circumstances effectively ensures that the pervasive male models of work are left unchallenged in the background [16]. In doing so, a focus on diversity can actually absolve political and organizational responsibilities for tackling equal treatment and equal opportunity for women at work [17].

In one of the earliest applications of this approach a study of equal opportunities talk, similarly found a mix of 'principle versus practice' discursive constructions with regard to gender and employment opportunities [18]. Supporting equal opportunities in principle, positioned the speaker as liberal and fair-minded whilst talking about (external) practical employment issues (e.g. maternity cover, childcare, emotional unsuitability to stressful working environments) served to undermine this without any personal negative attribution to the speaker. In other words, participants in the study could at one and the same time appeal to identifying in *principle* with equal opportunities in an abstract sense whilst citing *practical* affairs as somehow inevitably at odds with this in how things are in the 'real world' of day-to-day living. In more recent work in this vein, sameness and difference discourses have been identified as being used by bank managers when alluding working mothers whilst the work context was portrayed as gender neutral [19]. It has also been shown how an abstract principle of individualism is favoured in professional men's accounts on discrimination and equality [20].

A more recent discourse analytic study has shown how gender-blind approach to talk about such issues through terms such as 'flexibility', 'flexible working' and 'work-life balance' were used to occlude inequality for women [21]. The exclusion of talk about men or fathers in managers' accounts, and the construction of a 'generic she' or 'generic female parent' implicitly assumes that the mother, and not the father, is responsible for childcare [22]. Participants' interview accounts routinely followed a 'gender-neutral' trajectory, by moving from an opening response to such questions in terms of gender making no difference, to talking about gender problems in a careful and implicit manner, and then by concluding that gender is not issue. This three-part discursive sandwich embeds any talk of gender as problem within an overall gender-neutral account as follows:

- A: Suggest gender is not an issue
- B: Describe a gender problem or inequality
- C: Conclude that gender is not an issue

However, such accounts are problematic given that they dilute any sense of gender as a political issue because they fall back on a 'generic she' as the subject of equal opportunity. In effect they minimize any notion of gendered work practices and fail to tackle the male model of work. The net effect of this is to therefore reproduction of gender differences within a rhetoric of working in a non-gendered organization.

This work lends support to other research findings from interviews with banking sector workers, in which tensions emerged between 'active parenting' and senior work roles [23]. The distinction between male model of work as the norm and any deviation from this as problematic is why many women still feel compelled to fit in with this prevailing view as the acceptable nature of how employment is structured. The use of gender-neutral terms inevitably leads to falling back on the individual as the source of freely made decisions about working hours, parenting and childcare. So long as both women and men construct these 'decisions' and 'choices' as primarily a matter for women then a gender-neutral language of work-life balance may do little more than preserve the status quo of male patterns of work.

There are also generational and socio-economic class issues that are bound up with the discourses that women draw upon when discussing the relationship between work and family commitments. Data from in-depth interviews undertaken as part of a generational study of Australian women and found that the 'progress narrative' is no longer a major discourse for young women, but rather gender equity is taken for granted. Motherhood continues to define and shape their working arrangements, but the discourses they use to make sense of the work-life balance tensions are framed in terms of 'choice', not 'equity'. The roles of 'mother' and 'worker' are not talked about by younger women as separate, but rather inter-twined. Gender still shapes young women's working lives, but in more complex ways than previously, and is related to the expansion of lifestyle options as well as class factors.

The young women interviewed place the constraints that affect achieving work-life balance in terms of the limited resources they have available to them as self-directed *individual* women. Gender equity discourses were therefore not used by the young women interviewed to understand the pressures and constraints that confront them, given that they presented themselves as facing individual choices in their lives. This discourse of individualism was also apparent in how they talked about perceived obstacles that they face as individual agents, who also happen to be women. As such choices are presented as depending on the availability and of resources and access to them. They did not identify with a particular social class but rather talked about life choices as being the result of their own individual achievements or failings. This discourse of WLB as being a matter of individual choice does not stem from notions of equity as a driving force for policies in this area but rather is about meeting the demands of different expectations and preferences for the ways in which people organise their lives according to different access to resources [24].

Previous research has highlighted the complexity of how people can at one and the same time support family-friendly policies as well as undermine such support through talking about local practical concerns. These discursive constructions

therefore constitute a barrier to the promotion of WLB issues. The current rollout of WLB initiatives across the European Community does little to tackle the engrained ideology of this being more of a concern for women rather than men. The male model is left in place and whilst the issue of attaining a favourable WLB is constructed as a problematic issue where policy initiatives need to be directed.

In a climate when it is regarded as 'politically correct' to espouse a positive endorsement of work-life balance initiatives and policies then this does not pose a problem for men who can show support for such a position safe in the knowledge that it does not impact on them to nearly the same extent as women. It is also the case that engrained views on women as being responsible for childcare restricts their geographical mobility unlike men and, as in many fields of employment, mobility is often an advantage in terms of gaining experience and promotion. The net effect of this is that it leads to women working lower down the career ladder with men pursuing their careers at higher levels and in senior positions. This maintains a role model of top professional workers as male, again maintaining such work as a normatively male pursuit whilst women are predominately in junior or support roles given their work-life balance 'needs'.

The rhetoric of WLB is often equated with that of personal choices and decisions. This creates a dichotomy between personal life and career and the notion that this tension requires some resolution. The solution to this is offered in terms of a discourse of individual personal choice and decision-making. Thus, individuals can weigh up matters up about attaining a WLB through adjusting their personal lives or the occupational role aspects of their identity. However this again ignores the extent to which an occupational role is contractual and normatively presented as a given whilst personal life is not subject to the same legal-rational authority [24]. In other words there is less scope to change an occupational role than there is to change personal circumstances. A rhetoric of individualism ensures that the gendering of child-bearing and care are cloaked within a language of personal choice, as if such matters were equally distributed amongst men and women when patently they are not. As previously noted this kind of gender-blind rhetoric may at first seem liberal and reasonable but can in fact serve to work against women.

The final point to make revolves around the 'sameness-difference' opposition. Given that occupational roles are in themselves gender-neutral then the assumption is made that all who undertake an occupation can do so in the knowledge that it is performance in the occupation itself that matters. It is the demands of the job itself that are taken as requiring that those who undertake this work to be treated as being the same, irrespective of gender. To argue for gender difference and its impact on occupational performance would be to go against the task requirements of work. However, people can switch between the 'same-difference' ends of the explanatory dualism when it comes to talking about equal opportunities in employment and the position of women [25].

Discourse analytic work has drawn attention to the way in which this kind of explanation is ideological in that people can offer up accounts that are contradictory and draw upon the tensions of pitching the individual circumstances and choices

against occupational role requirements. Ideology cannot be straightforwardly read off how they talk about gender in work in a one-dimensional fashion; for example, in terms of underlying attitudes. Rather, the nature of ideology is related to practice and to the ways in which opposing and contradictory propositions are drawn upon and negotiated.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The emergence of a discourse of personal development related to education and the workplace has intensified in recent years. On the face of it, this may at first appear as a welcome development. The fast-paced and evolving nature of the knowledge economy has led many to argue for a more flexible workforce capable of keeping pace by planning and managing their own learning, developing themselves, and managing their own career. Mass higher education has also come to be regarded as an essential means of meeting the demands of the knowledge economy and students are urged to engage in PDP in order to make themselves more adaptable and marketable through this process. In tandem with this has been a concern to manage the demands of work and family life, and again this has been placed in the hands of the individual. Therefore a rhetoric of the individual as being much more in control of their own destiny has taken root.

However, this paper has argued that this largely illusory, and that the psychologisation of these matters has ideological effects. A neo-liberal discourse which stresses individual control, planning and choice is often justified in terms of a paradoxical discourse of a global knowledge economy that *requires* and structures the need for a greater focus on the flexibility of individuals. It is not the case that individuals can simply develop themselves through exercising freedom of choice but rather that an internationalised and globalised knowledge economy demands that people are ever-increasingly more adaptable to change. As we look outward to the global impact of this world upon our lives, so we are encouraged to look inward as a means of generating our capacity to change to meet these demands.

The effect of this focus on the individual is to dissolve away a focus on the political nature of this concern with self-direction. As people are encouraged to look inward and adopt a more rationalist and instrumental approach to their lives, so their view outwards is occluded in terms the focus on the personal as having political implications. It is then but a short step for people to view problems and seek solutions as being their own responsibility rather than requiring an examination of political issues that confront them collectively. Moreover, it may well be the case that certain problems veil issues that have arisen due to policy initiatives. For example, it is somewhat paradoxical that in higher education the notion of widening participation and access has come at the expense of actual contact with other students and teaching staff. It is now individual students who must participate and learn by themselves as they engage in PDP, often mediated via a virtual learning environment. It is moot point to consider this distant and introspective form of 'participation' as the result of expansion of higher education to meet the demands of the knowledge economy without much in the way of an accompanying expansion of resources.

The various contrastive constructions outlined above point to the need to study how these are discourses are deployed in various circumstances and how they may be used so as to explain away, excuse, justify and maintain the focus on the personal. The ideological import of this conclusion is that people have at their disposal a set of discursive resources that are available to them to legitimate the focus on the personal and in so doing by and large maintain the status quo. Mass higher education coupled with a de-regulation of the workplace to enhance productivity has naturalized the discourses of PDP and WLB.

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