SHAPING LIVES:
ELDER CARE, WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WOMEN IN SELF-EMPLOYMENT

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Work-life balance issues are often discussed, but there is little information on the effect that elder care is having in this area. If current demographic trends persist the proportion of elderly in the population will increase. At the same time, the women who are most likely to provide the care to support the elderly are increasingly remaining in the workforce or owning their own businesses. While there is growing awareness of the significance of work-life balance issues in general, there is little information on how elder care might contribute, particularly in relation to smaller businesses. It is this gap that needs to be investigated and this research begins this process. Using a qualitative and interpretive approach, eight women have been invited to share their stories about managing self-employment and elder care. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews undertaken as part of this research indicates that the additional responsibilities of elder care do affect the businesses and personal lives of these women. Interestingly, the emotional side of care-giving seems to have particular importance to the participants.

Keywords: work-life balance, small business, elder care, women, border theory

The issue of how work and family might affect each other has attracted considerable attention from researchers. Much of this research has concentrated on documenting the deleterious effects of work-life conflict, and has typically focused on employees in larger organisations who also have children (see, inter alia, Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley 2005). However, with changing demographics, and in particular, the number of elderly in the population forecast to increase substantially (Statistics New Zealand 2006) we need to consider how work-life balance works when elder care is involved. There is some relevant international research on elder support, which has mostly been carried out in the United States, Europe or Canada, but has mostly been in the context of employees working in larger organisations and has most often looked at the situation of the elderly, rather than specifically at the issues which affect the working care-giver (see, inter alia Merrill 1997).

With an ageing population and increased participation of older women in the workforce (Department of Labour, 2007), there is increasing demand for care-giving and a decreasing supply of
available care-givers in New Zealand. Government policy, which favours ageing in place, also relies on family support to be successful (Dalziel, 2001). As far as we are aware only one study looking at elder care and its effect on working people has been completed in New Zealand. Davey and Keeling (2004) looked at the impact of elder care on employees in two large New Zealand City Councils. Drawing on survey data and participant interviews their report commented on what elder care means to employed people, how employees manage elder care responsibilities, and employee perceptions of what might be helpful support. The researchers found a number of areas where further studies might be indicated, particularly in relation to larger organisations or entities which employ a significant number of low-paid workers. No mention was made of small business owners, yet small business forms a significant part of the New Zealand economy, with approximately 96% of all businesses employing fewer than twenty people (Ministry of Economic Development 2005). Moreover, New Zealand figures indicate that women make up a significant number of the self employed (Statistics New Zealand 2006). Gaining more flexibility and control over their working lives may be one reason why women enter self-employment, and yet women in self employment often appear to have little success in achieving balance (Boden 1999; Hughes 2003). It has been suggested that achieving the control and balance they seek may be more difficult for self-employed women due to blurring between the boundaries between work and other domains (Aldrich & Cliff 2003; Desrochers, Hilton & Larwood 2005).

More recently, there has been increasing emphasis in the research literature on how workers might achieve a balance between their work and other roles, looking at the tensions created by the various roles people occupy in their lives, and how they negotiate their way through these roles. There are still gaps in how we understand the process of achieving balance in work and life, and several theories have emerged to assist in this understanding. One of these theories is work-family border theory (Clark 2000), which provides the theoretical lens informing this study.

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1 The writers are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
In proposing work-family border theory Clark (2000) is critical of traditional conceptualisations of work-life conflict which, she argues, often treat individuals as passive recipients and tend to place undue emphasis on negative emotional linkages between work and family domains. Work-family border theory attempts a more holistic approach, one that is descriptive of the mechanisms underlying both conflict and balance, and also accords a pivotal role to processes of negotiation and the creation of meaning by individuals. Central to the theory is the notion that people shape, and are shaped by, their surroundings – they are enactive or proactive, rather than simply reactive. Clark suggests that individuals can separate their work and family roles (although the separate spheres do influence each other), and that they have control over how they make the transitions between these roles. The theory proposes that the main groups involved in work-life balance are the border crossers themselves, plus those people who have some measure of power over borders (border keepers) and other domain members (work colleagues, friends, family members and others who belong to a particular work or family domain). It is suggested that conflicts can be predicted by having more understanding in a number of areas, including how well the border crossers manage their various roles, the influences that border keepers have (particularly over any flexibility), and the level of empathy from other domain members.

Other research has developed this theory in a number of ways. There has been discussion of flexibility and telecommuting (Hyman, Baldry, Scholaris & Bunzel 2003), blurring of boundaries and also quality of life overall (Desrochers et al. 2005; D’Abate 2005; Dallimore & Mickel 2006). This discussion has included looking at presenteeism, or when personal commitments overflow into the work environment, the difficulty people have in controlling their roles, rather than having their roles control them, and what benefits that boundary blurring may, or may not, have. What is notable is that to date there has been little consideration given to the influence of other family domain members (with the exception of spouses) on efforts to achieve balance, and how they might affect an individual’s experience of work-life conflict. Moreover, as we have already noted, for women in self-employment the blurring of the boundaries between work and other domains can lead to people spending time in what Clark (2000)
refers to as ‘border-lands’, where there are often significant difficulties negotiating balance between role commitments (Baldock & Hadlow 2004; D’Abate 2005). In addition, the emotional demands of elder care (which tend to be de-emphasized in work-family border theory) may be impacting on the ability of self-employed women to separate their working lives from their elder care role. It may be that self-employed women are at the forefront of negotiating what Dallimore and Mickel (2006) refer to as the overall quality of life framework.

Accordingly, this study has used relevant concepts from work-family border theory (in particular the concepts of blending and borderlands), to look at the emotional effects that elder care is having on self-employed women. We draw on qualitative and narrative approaches to explore how women might actively attempt efforts to construct boundaries and negotiate boundary crossing, and how they view their success in managing their elder care commitments while continuing to manage their business.

METHOD

The research method we adopted was exploratory, using a qualitative interpretive approach to gain greater understanding of the effect that elder care was having on the work-life balance of the participants. This reflexive approach has allowed for the gathering of rich, thick descriptions reflective of the lived reality of our participants (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, 2000) Concerned with the individual experience as part of the whole, the process has looked for meanings for the individuals involved (Ellis & Bochner 2000; Spradley 1979). The flexibility of this approach allowed the participants to tell their stories, resulting in richness of data and the scope for the women to take their stories into areas which were most important to them.

The participants were recruited into the study by various means, including word-of-mouth and advertisements. This type of recruitment does have limitations as the participants were largely self-
selected, but it was required as the participants needed to have specific qualities – they needed firstly to be self-employed, and secondly to have elder care responsibilities. Taking part in a semi-structured interview, the participants were asked to talk about the lives, with reference to their particular roles, and also about their perceptions of any crossing between these roles. Although the main aim was to look at the work-life balance of the participants, many of their stories revolved around the specific emotional involvement they had in their elder care.

Participants

Eight women from the Wellington region of New Zealand (and from a diverse variety of small businesses) participated in the research. These women came from a variety of environments, having different elder care requirements and businesses. Working part-time as a chaplain, Charlie has been attempting to launch her own small business as a marriage and funeral celebrant, while managing the care of her elderly father in another city. Dorothy had been involved in a successful massage therapy business for a number of years. However, recently she decided to make elder care her priority, and has let the business drift away to a large extent. Terry is a successful hairdresser whose business depends on her being available for clients in the workplace. She has had to sacrifice several business opportunities to deal with her mother’s needs and is considering letting this care go somewhat as she has sisters living nearby who have not always taken on what she considers to be their full share of the care-giving responsibility.

Sarah is a writer and editor who works from her home. She finds that her elderly mother usually understands that, even though she is at home, she may also be working. However, there are pressures around working from home which she finds difficulty managing, and she is also concerned that her mother’s increasing support needs will impact her business. Jackie is director of a small recruitment business which employs several people. Jackie’s elder father lives about a hour’s drive away, but she has

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2 No real names have been used.
a sister who lives closer who takes on the main day to day responsibility for their father. However, Jackie visits every Saturday and is involved in her father’s financial affairs.

Mary is the eldest in a very large family, and an independent consultant in the human resources area. Her mother lives in another city some five hours’ drive away, but Mary visits at least every second month. She is supported in her care-giving by several siblings who live closer, but as the eldest, Mary has financial responsibility for her mother’s care. Jasmine, works full-time so that her husband can reinvest all his income in their developing café business. However, as the only sibling in her family left in New Zealand (with both parents having health problems), and with her husband also suffering ill-health, the pressures of her care-giving are increasing. Jocelyn is a contract policy consultant. She shares elder care responsibilities with her sisters who live in the same city. Her mother has recently moved from the South Island to live closer to her children, and they all feel responsibilities around assisting their elderly parent to re-settle.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although all participants reported significant issues with managing or balancing their lives, they were endeavouring to be enactive or proactive as is suggested in work-family border theory. They tried to achieve control in a number of ways, including some compartmentalisation of their work and elder care. The diverse strategies adopted by these women to actively manage their various roles included using the flexibility of self-employment, reducing their working hours where possible, and trying to deal with their elder care responsibilities during the evenings or at weekends. Jocelyn’s words indicate the efforts which the participants made to make sure that their work and elder care were given the required attention.

As far as Mum’s concerned, in terms of during the day. As a contractor, I do very little personal stuff at work. Sometimes I don’t get in until 9.30 because I make phone calls and I do all that sort of stuff at home ... Jocelyn
Although only a small number of participants were involved in this particular study, they all believed that they were achieving some sort of control over their lives, often with support from their life partners. This control seemed to be tempered by their emotional attachment to their elders, and was at times extremely difficult, as is indicated by Jasmine.

*I’ve always seemed to have coped through the years. I’ve had certain coping mechanisms and rather than tell someone I’ve been putting it into boxes really. I deal with each problem at a time because I don’t look too far ahead – it’s just too mind-boggling. I just have no idea what’s going to happen further down the track …. Jasmine.*

Clark (2000) has been critical of approaches which have stressed the emotional links or connections in managing work and family. She suggests that ‘the primary connection between work and family systems is not emotional, but human’ (Clark 2000, p.748). While the human interaction is present in this study, what was evident in the narrative provided by the participants was that the emotional issues which surround elder care were very to the forefront for them. Because of their emotional commitment to their elder care, participants often found their attempts to be proactive in managing both their business and their elder care, were not always successful, leading to feelings of guilt and failure in some participants.

*I think I sometimes have feelings of guilt that I don’t do either well. ”.. Charlie*

*I mean, you know, the guilt just riddles you.”.. Dorothy*

This feeling of guilt may have similarities to the guilt experienced by working mothers when considering childcare responsibilities (Daly 2001). Guilt was mentioned in this research, but in addition there are other emotional dimensions which come into elder care. All participants talked about their own feelings of sorrow, grief and loss. These feelings came from seeing the increasing dependence of their elderly parents, and facing the loss of beloved members of their families. Although identity is not specifically covered in this paper, it is noted that there were also some identity issues, as participants felt
themselves changing from the ‘child’ role to having more responsibility for parent care-giving. Dorothy, coping with her Mother’s deterioration while still trying to stay in business, describes the pain and loss.

*With Mum’s dementia, it’s repeating yourself over and over again. And that’s tiring. You want to just scream and cry and say life’s really not that fair, and that’s not easy. Because I don’t want to feel happy – I don’t feel happy. I want to, but I don’t feel happy and I don’t feel like talking, because I’m going through losing my mother. And then going to my business and putting on a brave face – because people don’t want to see you miserable. … Dorothy*

Charlie’s words also epitomise how it feels when dealing with elder care, and her difficulties dealing with the emotional side of elder care in addition to the practicalities.

*It’s because, he does occupy my headspace. Not in a bad way, but just thinking, you know, I should be making more contact, I should be doing more proactive things. But you know, I just need to get ahead and build this business. With Mum’s illness and deterioration, I very much felt that change of role that I became the parent – it was like parenting a child in some ways with her. With Dad, there is a little bit of that, but there is also the acknowledgement that the daughter role is different …. Charlie.*

The emotional involvement of the participants was a dynamic part of the whole process. Again, as they endeavoured to take control of their situation, they often found themselves more being shaped by than shaping their own environment, or slipping into reaction. One of the reasons for this was the influence of what Clark (2000) calls other ‘domain members’. Partner support was important in this area, and the elder person involved was a vital part of the process. Their influence was important to the participant, as their needs were impacting on the efforts of the women to achieve their balance. They may have had requirements, or resisted efforts by the participants to put in strategies, as they dealt with their own emotional issues. Other researchers have also commented that the expectations of the elderly have a strong impact on the ability of women to manage their own work-family balance (Merrill 1997). This influence of other domain members also played out in the experience of the participants who often reported frustration.
I thought I was going to be working at my desk this morning catching up, because I have just met a deadline. I thought I was going to have a morning to do some books and tidy the office, and then last night I got a call from Mum, whose hearing aid had broken and she needed to be taken to town this morning. She lives on the other site of town, which means I have to spend up to half an hour in the traffic to get to her. So it’s the unpredictability, and the distraction of elder care. It sort of knocks you off your course, so that it is an effort to get back on course. .... Stephanie

Conclusion

Achieving work-family balance appears to be a matter of personal negotiation and acceptance of the tensional nature that comes with the pursuit of some quality of life (Dallimore & Mickel 2006). This research shows that the women who participated are coping daily with the tensions resulting from their attempts to be proactive – they are trying to make some shape to their lives.

Work-family border theory suggests that, in seeking some balance in their lives, most people are proactive or enactive. However, when dealing with elder care, the participants in this research often found themselves forced into a reactive role. While endeavouring to organise their roles and activities, these women were also coping with the unexpected – which was, in many respects, becoming the norm. As the dependence of their elders increased, what had been a ‘once-off’ was becoming just another task to be fitted into an already busy schedule. This meant that the organisation the women were seeking was continually being disrupted, leading to frustration, lack of balance, and increasing feelings of guilt.

As Clark (2000) suggests, the stories of these women show their attempts at being proactive are frustrated in two main areas. The first is their difficulties with identifying their roles – particularly their role as ‘child’ or caregiver to an elderly person. The second is the attitude and understanding of the border-keepers – mostly the elderly persons, but also the formal caregivers, medical staff and others who have expectations around family involvement in elder care. Further research exploring such issues would be valuable. We also note that the participants in this research were a relatively homogeneous group in
terms of socioeconomic status and cultural background. Clearly, the dynamics of elder care, border
crossing and work family conflict may be quite distinct for those experiencing different socioeconomic
circumstances or for those from other cultural backgrounds, and future studies might look to explore the
impact of these important contextual variables (Davey & Keeling, 2004; Durie, Allan, Cunningham,

Success in achieving work-life balance is an individual thing. All the women who participated in
this study indicated that they felt some measure of success. This may have been simply that they had done
everything they needed to do today, and were not going to worry about tomorrow until it happened. In all
cases, their businesses were limited by any emphasis they put on the elder care responsibilities. More
importantly, they were emotionally tied to the elder care responsibilities, often putting their own health
issues secondary to the immediate needs of their elder. Because of their emotional connections and elder
care requirements all the participants felt that they carried their many roles with them. Their diverse
experiences may have made them more able to negotiate their way through their difficulties, and also to
understand and accept any perceived successes. In a dynamic and individual process, they were reaching
for life quality.

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\(^3\) The writers are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.


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