

## Chapter 9: Case Resistant identities in professional part-time working

This case would be useful to use in a lecture or seminar looking at:

- Identity, power and resistance
- Career progression of women professionals

Issues that are raised by this case include:

1. What are the benefits of examining the responses of part-time professionals from a post-structuralist perspective?
2. What does this case suggest about what organizations might need to do to improve the career development prospects of part-time professionals?

### Suggested response

*What are the benefits of examining the responses of part-time professionals from a post-structuralist perspective?*

The most significant advantage in analysing this case from a post-structuralist perspective is that it enables us to understand choice from a sociological, rather than a psychological point of view. If we understand professional part-time women to have made relatively unconstrained choices about their life priorities, then there are no reasons to intervene to make their lot more equitable with that of their full-time counterparts: if they are happy with their lot, so be it. The post-structuralist perspective would be that this choice is not a product of psychological attributes, like motivation and attitudes, but of structural constraints and how these are embedded in discourse. For example, one of the reasons why professional part-time staff decide not to pursue promotion is because many of the processes involved would disrupt the work-family balance achieved through their reduction in hours. Examples include, needing to put a lot of work into studying for promotion panels, gaining breadth of experience by transferring into different roles and the tendency for senior roles to be full-time. In turn, these processes and practices are products of discourses that suggest that promotion has to be earned by proving oneself through studying and through gaining different experiences. Post-structuralism encourages us to deconstruct these discourses, questioning whether there might not be different ways of demonstrating competence for promotion – ways that would not effectively discriminate against some groups.

A further advantage of the post-structuralist perspective is that if we understand choice as a product of social rather than psychological factors, we can begin to think about how changes might be brought about. As an example, many women at the turn of the century did not disagree with the fact that women were not allowed to vote – they were, like part-time professionals today, mainly content with the situation. Once campaigners like Emily Pankhurst succeeded in achieving the vote for women, however, this had a distinct effect on the identities of women: they began to see themselves as citizens with the same rights and freedoms as men – the right to work; the

right to be financially independent and so on. Likewise, if the promotion system in organizations changed to better accommodate part-time professionals, we may well see changes in their identities and in their aspirations.

*What does this case suggest about what organizations might need to do to improve the career development prospects of part-time professionals?*

The case suggests that a number of steps could be taken to improve the career development prospects of part-time professionals. Training courses could be designed in ways that would allow part-time professionals to attend. This could involve holding training during, say, 10am and 4pm, perhaps over longer periods, or developing forms of training that could be undertaken from a remote location. Promotion practices could be carefully examined to determine the extent to which these inadvertently discriminate against part-time professionals, and could be changed accordingly. For example, many organisations rely on quantitative measures of experiences, such as the number of projects undertaken or the number of clients handled. Such measures may be difficult for part-time staff to demonstrate, and they need to be judged using different criteria.

Mentoring may also prove useful for part-time professionals. Being encouraged to think about developing their careers and exploring ways in which they could be facilitated to do this without incurring costs to their work-life balance might increase the numbers of part-time professionals who 'choose' to pursue a career.

Finally, organizations might think about improving and encouraging work-life balance for all staff, not just part-time professionals. Not only would this help to move away from the notion that work-life balance is primarily a female concern, but might encourage all staff to consider ways in which they could be helped to develop their careers without having to work excessive hours or even full-time.