

Clerical Workers, Enterprise Bargaining and Preference Theory: Choice & Constraint.

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Summary

This thesis is a case study about the choices and constraints faced by women clerical workers in a labour market where they have very little autonomy in negotiating their pay and conditions of employment. On the one hand, clerical work has developed as a feminised occupation with a history of being low in status and low paid. On the other hand, it is an ideal occupation for women wanting to combine work and family across their life cycle. How these two phenomena impact upon women clerical workers ability to negotiate enterprise agreements is the subject of this thesis.

From a theoretical perspective this thesis builds upon Catherine Hakim's preference theory which explores the choices women clerical workers' make in relation to their work and family lives. Where Hakim's preference theory focuses on the way in which women use their agency to determine their work and life style choices, this thesis gives equal weighting to the impact of agency and the constraints imposed by external structures such as the availability of part-time work and childcare, as well as the impact of organisational culture.

The research data presented was based on face-to-face interviews with forty female clerical workers. The clerical workers ranged in age from 21 to 59 years of age. The respondents were made up of single or partnered women without family responsibilities, women juggling work and family, and women who no longer had dependent children and were approaching retirement. This thesis contends that these clerical workers are ill placed to optimise their conditions of employment under the new industrial regime of enterprise bargaining and individual contracts. Very few of the women were union members and generally they were uninformed about their rights and entitlements.

For my father Barry Thomson 1938-1999.

“Just about any dream grows stronger
if you hold on a little longer.”

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Table of Contents

Preface		i
Chapter 1	Clerical Work – An ideal occupation for adaptive women	1
Chapter 2	Industrial weakness of women Clerical workers in Australia	34
Chapter 3	Preference Theory: and explanatory framework to understand the work/family motivations of clerical workers	68
Chapter 4	Methodology	112
Chapter 5	Work/family motivations among clerical workers: A case study	129
Chapter 6	The gendered nature of clerical work	161
Chapter 7	Clerical worker's experience negotiating their pay and conditions of employment	202
Chapter 8	Clerical work: the ultimate family friendly occupation for adaptive women or white-collar ghetto?	260
Bibliography		283

List of Appendices

Appendix 1	Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) definition of clerical workers.
Appendix 2	The 20 Allowable Matters Minimal employee entitlements
Appendix 3	Questionnaires
Appendix 4	Consent form
Appendix 5	Outcomes of second round interviews
Appendix 6	A short biography of each respondent
Appendix 7	Duties undertaken by respondent

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis for any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in this thesis were approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Human Ethics Committee.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

..... / /04
LISA THOMSON

Preface

Clerical work: The author's first hand experience

Like some other researchers, (Butler, 1988; Lowe, 1987; Webster, 1996), my interest in clerical work was inspired by my own personal experiences. The motivation for this research came about for two reasons. Firstly, my concern and interest for the plight of clerical workers and secondly, a fascination with the changes which have occurred within the Australian industrial relations scene over the past twenty years. In particular I was interested in the impact of labour market deregulation on women and especially those in low status occupations. Having completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1984, I decided to undertake a Graduate Diploma in Secretarial Studies the following year. At the time I felt I needed a qualification which would provide me with tangible and practical skills such as typing and shorthand, something which, in my mind, my generalist degree had not provided. The course offered great promise for those who completed it. Two acquaintances of mine who had been awarded the Graduate Diploma were working as personal assistants to senior managers in prestigious organisations. I felt this qualification would provide me with a foot in the doorway as well as a stepping stone to a “glamorous” career in management.

In 1986 I commenced my first job as an administrative assistant at a university department where I was initiated into the world of work. I worked in this position for 18 months where I learnt a broad range of clerical and interpersonal skills. I always felt that the work I performed at this workplace was appreciated and well regarded by both students and academic staff. Hungry for a greater challenge, I applied for a more senior position as an Associate (personal assistant) to one of the Deputy Presidents of the now defunct Victorian Industrial Relations Commission. I was chosen for the position because I had tertiary qualifications. The position offered the permanency of the public service and was at that time, relatively well paid. It

was here I gained my interest in industrial relations, but it was also the place where I learnt about the reality of clerical work. The position description promised autonomy, challenging work, opportunity for promotion and the prospect of learning a broad range of new skills and tasks. None of these were forthcoming. Instead I experienced boredom, the under utilisation of skill, the stereotyping of clerical workers as being “sexualised bimbos” who worked for the gratification of their male bosses, low staff morale and clock watching. Most of the time I was given no work from my boss and had to rely on other clerical workers to pass on their excess work. I spent most of my days typing form letters. I was told that if I worked as an Associate for three to five years I could be promoted to a higher administrative role.

After seven months of brain numbing torture I resigned and took up post-graduate study in sociology. To support myself I did temporary secretarial work for two years. I worked mainly in the central business district of Melbourne in a broad range of organisations from large multinational companies to small businesses. I was employed either as a temporary word process operator or as a personal assistant. I tended to opt for short-term assignments of no longer than a week to keep my interest levels high. I enjoyed the challenge of going into a new job, learning the ropes and having to produce high quality work in a very short period of time. A favourable report from one job to the next ensured continued employment with the agency. Many jobs were busy and interesting, others were tedious but fortunately bearable because I was there for such a short period of time. I was awe-struck by the women who did these jobs on a full-time basis. I wondered how they coped with the boredom, the lack of meaningful work, the sexism within the office from male staff, the lack of autonomy, the limited prospects for promotion and their poor levels of pay.

After I completed my Master of Arts I worked as a social researcher for a number of years. Most of the work was inadequately funded and meant that I was employed on a casual and short term basis. When I was between jobs, I sporadically returned to temporary clerical work to earn an income.

As a young feminist woman, I saw that many clerical workers were employed in manifestly iniquitous organisational structures and cultures and were being dealt a raw deal from their bosses, while others were in responsible positions where they enjoyed challenging work and autonomy. Yet, all of these women would always be subordinate to a mostly male boss. Naively I had idealistic notions that I could improve the status of secretaries or in some sense become their personal crusader. From a practical point of view I had no idea how I would do this, but the one thing I was certain of was that I needed to further my understanding of a perplexing paradox where on the one hand clerical work is undervalued and on the other it is an integral part of the functioning of many organisations.

Preference theory: a theory of choice

The central arguments in this thesis have been formulated around preference theory which was developed by British sociologist Catherine Hakim. Although Hakim's work has been unpopular among some feminist academic circles it struck a chord with me at a time and a place where her main arguments were directly relevant. During the writing of this thesis I had two children close together. Up until that point in my life I had not appreciated how difficult it was to undertake post-graduate study, work and juggle the needs of my young children.

I became increasingly disillusioned with some of the current and past feminist theory which focussed on women emulating men in the labour market. The argument was that if women had access to improved maternity leave provisions (paid and unpaid) and quality affordable childcare they could return to work on a full-time basis. I believed the central tenet of preference theory - that not all women have the same work preferences - had wider applicability to not only myself but women generally. Broadly speaking, some women want to be career oriented and may choose to remain childless, others may pursue a life at home tending to the family, while the vast majority of women prefer to combine both work and family. Among my friends who were both tertiary and

non-tertiary educated there was a clear pattern. Most wanted to take extended breaks from the paid labour market when their children were small and then return to work on a part-time basis as secondary income earners and later return to full-time work when their families were older. This sentiment was supported by a number of studies which found that women with family responsibilities who worked part-time were the most satisfied workers (Bearfield, 2003; Wolcott and Glezer, 1995).

Preference theory provided an ideal framework in which to study clerical work. Over one million Australian women are employed as clerical workers and account for just under one third of the total female labour market (ABS Labourforce, Catalogue No. 6204 1986 to 1997). Preference theory offered one of the best explanations as to why this occupation has such an enduring appeal among women. Clerical work provides women with the opportunity to pursue their ideal work preference because it accommodates full-time work, interrupted careers and provides part-time employment. It is available in most industries and can be sought in a location close to home. My focus on enterprise bargaining was chosen because wages and conditions of employment exemplify deeply entrenched segregation in workplaces. The research undertaken as part of this thesis aimed to explore whether the outcomes of enterprise bargaining were due to women compromising their pay and conditions of employment in order to achieve the necessary flexibility to achieve their work and life style preferences. On a broader level the aim is to question whether patriarchal discourses within macro social structures mitigated the chances of clerical workers receiving due recognition or recompense as a means of control and/or to minimise costs.

Although I am in agreement with the main tenor of Hakim's work I disagree with other features of her work; in particular the issue of agency versus structure. It is the contention of this thesis that agency is the product of social structure that skews the priorities of individuals. This can be highlighted by the dialectic between choice and constraint. I agree with the notion that women use their agency to make work and lifestyle choices. However, there is a need to look at the impact of structural factors such as organisational culture, gender

ideology and fiscal and government policies in determining their choices. For example, a woman with family responsibilities may have a preference to work part-time but if her partner is on a low income or unemployed she may be forced to work full-time to support the family. Further, if there are no part-time jobs in the area in which she lives or if she is unable to find suitable childcare, the ability to secure employment is going to be severely curtailed. Essentially, it is structural factors which constrain the personal work preferences of many women.

This thesis will build upon some of the key precepts of preference theory. At the same time it will critique some of the explanations offered by Hakim in relation to occupational segregation and work commitment. The overall aim of this study is to provide a more comprehensive and explanatory overview of how and why clerical workers make personal work and lifestyle choices in the context of social and structural constraints. Using data from a case study of forty clerical workers this thesis will explore how respondents in this study negotiated their levels of pay and conditions of employment in the workplace. An extensive discussion will ensue around how work and lifestyle preferences impact upon clerical workers' ability to negotiate employment contracts in a deregulated labour market in the light of their current and/or anticipated family responsibilities.

An overview of this thesis

Historically clerical work evolved as a low status and low paid "feminine" occupation. It has moved from being a male occupation to one which is predominantly female. Chapter one discusses how women's labour market participation is largely shaped by gender ideology where there is still a widely held view that women should follow a marriage career rather than a full-time job. When women do participate in the labour market the most preferred status is as secondary income earners. Women are socialised through their family and social networks to aspire to feminised occupations such as clerical work because it provides them with the opportunity to earn an income when

they have a family. Even though many jobs are low in pay and low in status with little prospect for promotion, it would appear that clerical work still has an enduring appeal for large numbers of women.

This chapter explores why clerical work is an ideal job for women wanting to combine work and family over their life cycle. The term “ideal” is a value laden social construct. It is the contention of this thesis that clerical work has been constructed as an “ideal job” because it conforms with what is expected of woman as workers and carers.

The second chapter explains why clerical workers are industrially weak and how they have had little or no support from a predominantly masculine union movement. This chapter explores the notion of skill and how prominent stakeholders within the industrial arena such as the trade union movement, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, and organisational culture systematically undermine the skill associated with clerical work.

Family friendly initiatives in the workplace come in many guises. They include permanent part-time work, access to paid family leave, ready access to annual leave, job sharing, and career breaks. Chapter two will explore the availability of these initiatives and the likelihood of either one or all of these initiatives being included within clerical workers’ conditions of employment. This chapter will also provide an overview of the Australian industrial relations scene and how the move to labour market deregulation has been a prominent feature of the Australian industrial landscape for the past twenty years. Particular attention will be given to the industrial relations climate in Australia at the time the interviews were conducted in the mid 1990s to the present. Academic research indicates that women fare best under centralised systems of regulation rather than under enterprise bargaining because it lessens the likelihood of wages dispersion across industries and reduces the gender pay gap.

Preference theory has been used as the theoretical framework which explains the enduring success of clerical work among women. As noted above, one of

the central arguments posited by preference theory is that not all women are career focused and aspire to full-time professional jobs. A large number of women are content to undertake clerical work because it fits in with their life cycle. Chapter three provides a critical evaluation of Hakim's preference theory and offers a new theoretical paradigm in which to study the work and life style preferences of clerical workers.

Building upon the typology identified in Hakim's preference theory, chapter three also refines the adaptive type to provide a more comprehensive way of understanding how the life cycle determines women's choices. Four new sub-categories are introduced: women in family mode, pre-retirees, pre-reproductives and drifters. These are applicable to not only clerical work but also to other occupations.

Chapter four details how I adopted a case study approach to research the work and family experiences of forty clerical workers. The findings of this study are based upon semi-structured interviews with respondents. This chapter details the research questions, the method of data collection and data analysis.

Chapters five to seven provide an in-depth analysis of the findings of the study. Where applicable, each chapter provides a comparative analysis of how respondents when classified according to the four new sub-categories experience the world differently. Chapter five describes the work and family motivations of the women in this study. It explores why they chose clerical work in the context of their age, educational background and current and anticipated family circumstances. It also looks at how women use their agency to determine their attachment to the labour market and explores the sorts of structural constraints they faced which had impeded the realisation of their work and lifestyle choice.

Where Hakim focuses on women's choice to integrate work and family, this thesis moves beyond this point and explores what happens to women once they are in the workplace. Chapter six looks at the skill levels respondents

bring to their jobs and how they are perceived by not only themselves but the organisations in which they are employed. Skill is defined not only by tasks which are overtly apparent like typing, computer operations or telephony but also encompasses those tacit or behind the scenes tasks such as interpersonal skills, patience and empathy. An analysis of skill level provides a starting point to ascertain whether these workers are being adequately remunerated for the jobs they perform.

Chapter seven describes how respondents' conditions of employment were determined. The main impetus of this chapter is to describe how aspects of organisational culture largely shape the experience of clerical workers in the workplace. This chapter will look at how the culture of long hours and work intensification impacted on the daily work lives of respondents, the availability of family friendly initiatives, how respondents negotiated pay rises and other conditions of employment and perceptions around trade unions and collective bargaining.

Finally, chapter eight draws together all the findings of this study and provides a more comprehensive overview of preference theory which takes into account not only the importance of agency but also the impact of macro-structural factors on the choices and constraints faced by women clerical workers in relation to enterprise bargaining. Finally, it explores the question: is clerical work an ideal occupation for adaptive women or is it a white-collar ghetto?

Chapter 1

Clerical Work – An Ideal Occupation for Adaptive Women

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to look at the nature of clerical work from a historical and theoretical perspective. It will also look at how clerical work has developed as a feminised occupation over the past 100 years in the light of economic and social developments within advanced capitalist societies. Further, this chapter will explore why clerical work as a feminised occupation has an enduring appeal among women across their life cycle even though it is generally low paid and low status with limited opportunities for promotion.

The term “adaptive” is an ideal type developed by British sociologist Catherine Hakim (2000). Adaptive women in contrast to women who are home-centred or work-centred do not want to devote their entire lives to working at home as wives and mothers, nor do they want to be solely career focussed; their work and lifestyle preference is to combine both work and family (Hakim’s ideal types will be discussed further in chapter three). Research on work and family by leading Australian academics such as Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley, (1997), Ken Dempsey, (1997), Janeen Baxter, (1993) and Barbara Pocock, (2003) indicates that the burden of unpaid domestic duties still falls mainly to women. The opportunity and desire for women to secure paid employment is largely shaped by their domestic role as wives and mothers. A majority of women with family responsibilities where practicably possible prefer flexible employment arrangements because it enables them to strike a balance between paid work and unpaid domestic labour. Clerical work is an ideal occupation for women who wish to combine work and family because it is available on a part-time and casual basis and is widely available in a broad range of industries and sectors.

From the mid 1960s to the mid 1990s women's labour force participation in Australia rose from 36 per cent to just over 50 percent, while for married women the change was much greater, increasing from 29 per cent to just over 50 per cent (Mitchell, 1998: 25). Clerical work is still one of the largest occupational groups in Australia and employs over one million women. Over the past 25 years the number of women who worked as clerical workers has remained relatively stable with about one third of the total female labour market employed as clerks (ABS Labourforce Australia, Catalogue Number 6204).

The feminisation of clerical work – a brief history

The evolution of clerical work is bound up with time and space dimensions and has been profoundly influenced by gender ideology which defines acceptable roles for men and women. Clerical work has moved from being a craft occupation predominantly undertaken by men at the end of the nineteenth century to an occupation which is feminised and undertaken almost exclusively by women. Anderson (1988:2) believes that no other occupation has experienced a complete gender reversal so quickly and completely as clerical work. The process of feminising clerical work has been a total experience in terms of organisational role, meaning and status (Pringle, 1993: 5).

During the nineteenth century clerical work in advanced western economies was almost entirely a male occupation. Women in Australia, the US and the UK were recruited into office work in significant numbers from the 1880s with rates rapidly increasing during the 1920s. Clerical work offered women, particularly those from the well-educated middle classes, an attractive employment alternative to nursing and teaching. It was seen as a clean, 'easy' and respectable profession for middle class women and a means of upward mobility for working class women (Barker and Downing, 1980: 77; Hedstrom, 1988: 149). Despite lower levels of pay than men, women could still earn more as clerical workers than most other forms of female employment (Hedstrom, 1988:148). Although women moved into clerical work in unprecedented

numbers during this period, Lowe (1987: 20,54) believes that there was still a fundamental belief that a woman's natural role was to be wife and mother and that upon marriage she would retreat to the home.

The expansion of clerical work was a direct result of an administrative revolution which occurred with the rise of corporate capitalism after 1900. As western economies expanded companies generated more and more paper work which required processing. Ad hoc practices were replaced with scientific systems of management which streamlined tasks and bureaucratised offices. New work practices focussed on task specification. Instead of working on a multitude of jobs, tasks were streamlined so that clerks performed simple jobs repetitively. These changes in work practices were cheaper and allowed greater regulation and monitoring of output. The sorts of mundane jobs generated as a result of the administrative revolution were less appealing to male clerks who expected good salaries and upward mobility. To fill the large number of vacant positions, employers found women an appealing alternative because they had higher levels of education, were willing to receive lower levels of pay and were available to undertake menial tasks (Lowe, 1987:4).

By the 1930s there were two classes of female clerks: the first consisted of a huge group of women performing routine and often mechanised tasks and the second was the smaller and more privileged group of women with the exalted position title of 'private secretary' (Lowe, 1987: 21). The private secretary was the pinnacle for female office workers who generally started as stenographers and typists and worked their way up the ranks. Although it was very uncommon, up until the 1960s this was the only path in which women could move into management (Pringle, 1988: 159). Clerical work afforded men who were not tertiary educated a career by allowing them to work up the office hierarchy, while women did not have the same opportunities to carve out a career path and tended to congregate in the lower ranked clerical positions until they got married (Pringle, 1993: 135). It was still assumed that upon marriage or the birth of a first child that a woman would withdraw from the labour market (Crompton and Sanderson, 1994 : 272).

The period following World War II saw a large increase in the number of married women in the Australian workforce. At the beginning of the 1950s only 12 per cent of married women were in paid employment, but by 1974 this had increased to 40 per cent (O'Donnell and Hall, 1988). Further, in only one generation from the early 1970s to 1996 the labour force participation of young women aged between 25 to 34 had increased 40 per cent to 71 per cent (Pusey, 2003: 84). The increase in women's employment, particularly among married women and those with family responsibilities, may be partly explained by a significant rise in service work and a relative decline in manufacturing in most advanced capitalist economies (Bradley, 1999: 17). The growth in service work has largely benefited female workers in occupational groups such as clerical work. Despite women's increased access to education and qualifications and the growth in female employment, the opportunities for women to enter the labour market after having a family are still largely determined by gender ideology.

Gender ideology and women's place in the labour market

Gender ideology defines women primarily in terms of their familial relationships with men. Ideally a "good" woman is a "good" wife and mother (Baxter, 1993: 1). Gender ideology in relation to the division of labour dates back to the time when industrial capitalism emerged. Labour activities were no longer confined to the home and men sought work outside the home within newly emerging manufacturing industries. The notion of the male breadwinner was born at this time (Baxter, 1993: 21). The breadwinner role was also tied up with the masculine model of full-time work where men were expected to have an uninterrupted career over their lifetime (Crompton, 1998: 2). The primary role of men was to provide an income for his family by working in the public sphere and women were expected to care for the family at home.

The occupational structure has therefore developed to reflect the division of labour where male dominated jobs are given precedence over women's jobs (Crompton, 2000: 177). Men also have material motives for maintaining job segregation. Lower female wages ensures their continued dependence on

men which in turn, maintains their subordinate position both in the home and workplace. In this context male workers can be seen as having complementary interests to capital in maintaining the sexual division of labour (Greico and Whipp 1986: 118).

Post-industrial society has challenged to some degree the traditional division of labour. Uncertainties within the labour market brought about by globalisation have meant that the family and labour market can no longer be treated as being completely separate entities. A consequence of post-industrialism has been an emphasis on the interconnectedness between the family, the labour market and gender. Challenges to the traditional breadwinner ethos have come from an increase in the number of married women entering the labour market, a rise in part-time and non-standard employment arrangements, changes in family and household types and high levels of unemployment and underemployment (Baxter and Western, 2001:2, 12). The precariousness of the labour market has also made it more acceptable and heightened to some degree the need for women to maintain their skill levels and therefore continue in the labour market even though they may have family responsibilities (Beck, 1992, 112).

Even though there has been an increase in the number of women in the labour market, there is still a widespread perception that women are secondary income earners rather than primary earners. Some sectors of the community believe that married women in the labour force work for 'pin money' to pay for shopping, school fees, holidays and childcare. In contrast, wages from the male breadwinner are seen as contributing in a more substantive way such as providing a roof over the family's head (Bittman and Pixley, 1997, 208, 221; Crompton and Jones, 1984: 149; Lockwood, 1989: 151). The gender division of labour and gender ideology legitimates and reinforces women's primary role as homemakers and secondary income earners which ensures that they remain economically dependent upon men.

Although the division of labour has been shaped to a large degree by the capitalist mode of production, it also emanates from the organisation of

reproductive relationships between men and women. There is no disputing that women's reproductive capacities are a critical aspect of gender differentiation. However, it is the social construction of pregnancy and childbirth and the way it perceived to impact upon women's ability to combine paid and unpaid work which creates inequalities between the sexes (Bradley, 1999:22). From a practical perspective, the more family responsibilities women have in relation to household matters, the less time they have to devote to paid employment. It is therefore not surprising that women select occupations and jobs which allow them to combine work and family. Generally speaking these tend to be feminised occupations such as clerical work which provide women with flexible hours. As noted above, clerical work has evolved as a feminised job, but it is also developed as an occupation which suits adaptive women who prefer to combine work and family.

Past and more recent perspectives on clerical work

So far this chapter has discussed why women still shoulder the burden of domestic responsibility and how clerical work has evolved as an occupation which suits the needs of women across their life cycle. This next section will look at how sociologists have viewed clerical work both in the past and in more recent times.

Early writers on clerical work were concerned with where clerical workers fitted into the class structure, and how they aligned themselves with trade unions and management. Most adopted a Marxist approach to try and understand where clerical workers fitted into the class structure. Women's labour market segregation was related to the capitalist mode of production and their main role in the labour market was seen as providing capital with a reserve army of labour.

During the 1950s sociologists had a preoccupation with trying to ascertain the class position of clerical workers. David Lockwood (1989) wrote about clerical workers as the "black-coated workers" in the UK. Using a Marxist framework

Lockwood argued that clerical workers were just like blue-collar workers in terms of undertaking routine and factory like jobs. Lockwood coined the term “white-collar proletariat” to describe clerical workers’ relationship to the means of production. Lockwood thought it was paradoxical that clerical workers aligned themselves to the middle classes even though their terms and conditions of employment were little better than manual workers. Further, their relationship with management and trade unions was unlike blue collar workers who tended to choose confrontation and militancy to achieve workplace change. Instead of adopting solidaristic attitudes and behaviour, clerical workers tended to align themselves with and support the ideals and expectations demonstrated by management.

Similarly, C. Wright Mills was interested in the notion of “prestige” and status among white-collar workers and the links with middle class consciousness and aspiration in America. What is interesting about these two accounts of clerical work is the way in which women are portrayed. Mills (1971: 202-204) provides an interesting insight into how women clerical workers were perceived during the 1950s. Clerical work provided women with the opportunity to undertake “clean” and “respectable” employment before they got married. If the clerical worker was fortunate enough, she may have met an eligible bachelor from the ranks of the male executive or salesmen. Lockwood (1989:68) spoke about women working in routine clerical jobs which provided male clerks with the opportunity for promotion. He noted that by 1951 clerical work had become one of the most popular jobs women undertook before they got married. Both authors fail to discuss in any meaningful way the low status of clerical work among women which is not surprising given the peripheral nature of women’s labour market participation at that time. They do however acknowledge that there was little scope for promotion for women because a marriage career was their primary goal in life.

Rosabeth Moss-Kanter’s book titled *Men and Women of the Corporation* was based on an American Corporation called Industrial Supply Corporation (Indsco) and was published in 1977. Moss-Kanter wrote extensively on the boss-secretary relationship. She describes how young white women were

recruited from “parochial schools” upon completion of high school or finishing school. It was argued that these women were used to “hierarchical discipline” and were therefore less likely to develop any resentment in relation to the arbitrary nature of their conditions of employment, workloads or lack of career progression.

Moss-Kanter described how a secretary was chosen on the basis of her ability to enhance her boss’s personal status. Well educated and highly skilled secretaries were preferred even if their workloads did not warrant such skills. High levels of boredom and dissatisfaction were evident among these women. Secretaries derived their status from their boss rather from their own skills and input within the organisations. Moss-Kanter described the arbitrariness involved in judging the performances of secretaries used by their bosses. In the absence of a job description or key performance indicators bosses determined levels of remuneration based on intuition rather than measurable indicators. Secretaries were rewarded for the loyalty and devotion to their bosses and the quality of relationship they had with their boss. These rewards did not necessarily translate to higher pay, greater recognition or autonomy in their job. Rather, their recompense consisted of symbolic rewards such as status and flattery.

Essentially, secretaries in Indsco had very little room for promotion; they were “locked into self-perpetuating, self-defeating cycles in which job and opportunity structure encouraged personal orientations that reinforced low pay and low mobility...the fact that such jobs were held almost entirely by women also reinforced limited and stereotypical views of the ‘nature’ of women at work” (p.103). Moss-Kanter luridly describes the secretary/boss relationship in terms akin with the master/slave dialectic. However, she does not say why these women chose clerical work as a career and how they fitted their personal lives around the job. Further, there was no mention of how these women negotiated their family commitments with their bosses.

As women increasingly entered the workforce in larger numbers during the 1970s and 1980s, feminist analyses focussed on the way in which their family

responsibilities prevented them from participating in the labour market as equals to men (Probert and Wilson, 1993: 8).

Linda Valli (1986) conducted a qualitative study on why young women at a secondary school in the US became clerical workers. She was also interested in discussing how young women are socialised into feminine occupations such as clerical work. There are some links with Moss-Kanter's study particularly in relation to the recruitment of secretarial staff by large companies and the role schools play in not only the training but grooming of young women for this role.

Valli found in her study that young women chose clerical work because it provided them with instant access to a job. This was particularly the case among those students from low income families who could not afford to send their children to college. Having completed office studies at school, most of the young women saw clerical work as a clean job which allowed them to maintain a sense of feminine identity. For some young women the decision to become clerical workers was heavily influenced by the experience of family and friends. Valli notes that these young women chose clerical work because it fitted in with their plans to have a family at a future time. Most of the respondents in this study were patently aware of the occupational limitations available to young women in the light of the sexual division of labour in the labour market and in the private sphere.

Valli was not only interested in finding out what motivated these young women to take up clerical work but how their training at school was involved in perpetuating the socialisation of young women as docile and feminine workers. As part of the curriculum, students internalised a culture of femininity which transformed them into co-operative and compliant workers unlikely to create any resistance in the workplace. Many of the jobs these young women undertook consisted of routinised and low skilled office work. Valli concluded that ultimately a culture of femininity perpetuated by schools was inherently involved in locking young women into subordinate positions in both wage and domestic labour. Much of Valli's work focuses on structural issues which impinge and influence young women's decision to become clerical workers.

There is little discussion on the issue of agency and whether there was any significant resistance from these young women to the cultural indoctrination to which they were exposed. There is an underlying perception that women passively accepted the programming meted out by the education system.

Rosemary Crompton and Gareth Jones' book titled *White-collar Proletariat* (1984) again raises the issue of identifying the class location of clerical and administrative workers in the context of the 'proletarianisation' thesis. Three distinct organisations in the UK formed the basis of this study. The authors believed it was impossible to understand the class position of clerical workers without examining how occupations became feminised. They described in detail the nature of clerical work and in doing so were able to ascertain how deskilling, routinisation and fragmentation created an office proletariat. The authors argued that the introduction of computer technology had led to the deskilling of clerical workers. They conclude that computerisation does "deskill tasks, it enhances the level of functional specialisation and centralises control within the organisation" (p. 53). As a result of this new technology clerical work has become increasingly stratified with low level clerks performing routine data entry and processing to higher level staff who process the information.

The study by Crompton and Jones is one of the few pieces of empirical research which compares the experience of men and women doing the same work. Their research found that female employees in the three organisations studied occupied the lowest clerical grades. Findings such as this support the notion that female clerical workers can be seen as part of the white-collar proletariat. When comparing the careers paths of both men and women, Crompton and Jones found that most men who pursued white-collar careers would have been promoted by the time they were 35 years of age. They argued that promotion opportunities for men had been sustained and were contingent upon the lack of promotion and high turnover levels among women who were located in the lower levels of clerical work. Women and men were not competing on a level playing field for promotion because women did not have access to post-entry qualifications, continuous service and the ability to geographically relocate to wherever the job required.

Internal labour markets within the three organisations studied showed that men were given a direct path into management. In contrast, women were seen as a reserve army of labour which served to maintain internal job hierarchies for men. Crompton and Jones conclude that men had not been proletarianised because they were promoted.

Although their study was not designed to investigate the work orientations of men and women, it does distinguish between the experiences of women during different parts of their life cycle. They note that the impact of a woman's life cycle does affect attitudes to career development and promotion. They found female employees who had not had a career break were more likely to be interested in promotion and were promoted. However, as these women moved through the stages of the domestic life cycle from marriage onwards, their level of interest in promotion declined. Women returning to the labour market in the second phase of their working lives were more likely to be part of the secondary labour market working in unsatisfactory low status jobs and were less interested in promotion. The authors attribute the lack of career ambition to the fact that young women are socialised at an early age to have a marriage career rather than pursuing a career in the workplace.

C. Davies and J. Rosser (1986) argue that clerical work is a gendered job because it is closely aligned to a woman's life cycle and home commitments. They believe the qualities and capabilities women bring to clerical work are not seen as emanating from any formal training or experience in the workplace, but rather from qualities associated with being a woman. In their study of clerical workers within a Health Care Organisation in the UK, the authors identified three types of workers which represented the various stages over a woman's life. The first type refers to young women who are married. It is anticipated that they will leave the organisation and have a baby in the near future. Because of anticipated family commitments, these women were not career minded. They did their fairly routine work without complaint. The second type described women aged between 35 and 45. They may have children at school or children who were no longer dependent. Because their

families were less demanding they may have achieved the level of office manager. They usually enjoyed their role within the organisation and were seen as being indispensable. The third category referred to women over 45 years of age who no longer had dependent children. Such women had years of accumulated work experience and knowledge but were unable to secure a promotion into higher grade jobs. They had trained younger people who were promoted ahead of them. Without the prospect of promotion these women felt resentful and were frustrated with the lack career prospects until retirement. These ideal types serve to illustrate how women fit their paid employment around their family life and how they are penalised for not having continuous employment histories. The authors describe how patriarchal controls maintain the low status of women's jobs and ensure that they have limited access to promotional opportunities.

The Marxist feminist tradition of viewing women's attachment to the labour market became less prominent at the end of the 1980s with the collapse of the socialist states in Eastern Europe (Franzway, 1997:136). Over the 1990s feminist academics argued that Marxist feminism no longer provided the best framework to explain women's disadvantage in both paid and unpaid work (Crompton, 1999:5). Implicit within Marxist feminism is the assumption that women passively accept employers' strategies, state policies and male domination (Webster, 1996: 14). Focussing primarily on structural aspects of the labour market was not only deterministic and essentialist but failed to take into account the issue of agency and how people actively shape their everyday lives. In contrast, post-modernist and post-structuralist feminists negated all unitary concepts of women by highlighting the notion of heterogeneity as well as the implications of cultural texts and discourses relating to power and resistance.

From an Australian perspective one of the most significant studies on clerical work was published by Rosemary Pringle (1988) titled *Secretaries Talk*. This piece of research was one of the first to adopt a post-modern stance where the focus was not in defining the labour process or the nature of work, but rather in understanding the way in which stereotypical views of secretaries depicted in

popular culture were translated into the workplace. Pringle represents secretaries in familial and sexual terms. Many of the duties they perform such as making coffee, personal services, are an extension of their domestic life. Further, the expectations around the way they dress emphasise not only their femininity and sexuality but are also central to their working relations.

Dissecting the boss-secretary relationship is a central theme in the book. As a starting point Pringle defined three secretarial discourses: the “office wife”, the “dolly bird” and “careerist”. The office wife is middle class and as the name suggests she is like a wife, being available to meet her boss’s needs. She is devoted, trustworthy and has an intimate knowledge of his work and job schedule. The dolly bird or the ‘sexy secretary’ is predominantly young and working class. She is seen as somebody who should be sexually and visually appealing. The careerist strives for recognition on her own merits. She wants to develop her skills and desires a career path. As is revealed in Pringle’s book the operation of these discourses are central to the formation of workplace power relations. Whatever ideal type the secretary (personal assistant or executive assistant) is classified as she is expected to work the same long hours as her boss and be available to meet his needs.

The boss-secretary relationship is highly sexualised and can be the subject of rumour and conjecture on the organisational grapevine. The marriage metaphor is apt to describe the expected level of service and closeness of the relationship. The ideal secretary is meant to be feminine, demure, loyal and highly committed. Like Moss-Kanter’s analysis, Pringle’s study gets to the heart of office dynamics between the secretary and her boss. She describes their relationship as being akin to a master and a slave. The boss takes the role of the masterful male, while the secretary who has been excluded from the hierarchy of authority and has no clear line of advancement is his subordinate and follows his lead. Other discourses identified by Pringle are the mother/nanny-son discourse and the team discourse which suggests equality. Power and resistance between secretaries and their bosses is one of the core themes in Pringle’s book. She describes the way in which secretaries have developed strategies to deal with the power differential between their boss and

themselves. One of the core arguments in this book is the interplay between discourses and structures. Discourses enable Pringle to define subjectivity, sexuality, work and culture, while at the same time contextualising these within organisational and institutional structures and frameworks.

Pringle briefly touches on the personal lives of secretaries and highlights that these women are wedded to the job and must work very long hours to meet the needs of their boss. Many of the women in Pringle's study had either delayed marriage and/or children or remained single. The expectations around the role precluded women with very young families. These women were often forced to take a demotion if they decide to move into part-time work in other administrative or clerical roles. Essentially the personal assistant or secretary role is not an ideal job for an adaptive woman because there is no room for flexible work arrangements.

Another Australian study undertaken by Claire Williams (1988) looks at bank workers in Queensland and builds upon some of the central precepts identified in Crompton and Jones (1984). Williams was interested in finding out whether bank workers had been proletarianised in terms of promotion and levels of remuneration. Female white-collar bank workers in this study tended to have a pessimistic outlook on their opportunities for promotion because of perceptions of discrimination. Williams describes their experience of working in a bank as one of frustration and disappointment. On the one hand, some women did not want careers and did not actively seek promotion. On the other hand, gender discrimination embedded within organisational arrangements promoted a widely held belief that married women were less committed to their work and should therefore not be promoted. Further, women bank workers were not given the opportunities to enter promotional structures and were denied the same level of access to staff training courses as men. Finally, the women bank workers in this study were not given the same level of support from male-controlled unions as their male colleagues and as a result had few weapons with which "to fight patriarchal opposition" (p.180).

Belinda Probert and Andrew Hack (1991) conducted a study looking at the relocation of an Information Processing Centre in Morwell, a regional town in Victoria. The primary activities conducted in this centre constituted back office functions. The relocation of this centre could have quite easily gone off-shore but the Australian Securities Commission decided to trade off lower wages for local labour where it was anticipated there would be low turnover and highly motivated workers which would in turn ensure increased levels of productivity. High levels of unemployment in Morwell meant that jobs in the Centre were highly sought after. The authors had expected to find a labour force whose main fulfilment in life was as homemakers: women who were willing to accept low skilled and routine positions because it enabled them to earn an income as secondary earners at a workplace close to home. Instead, the research found that women workers in the Processing Centre were interested in undertaking further training and would have liked the opportunity for advancement beyond routine data processing. However, the conundrum faced by women at the Centre was the lack of opportunity for advancement either within the Processing Centre or in alternative jobs elsewhere. Studies such as this highlight how clerical work can harbour white-collar ghettos, and how socio-economic structures outside urban areas can affect the quality of work available to women.

The study of clerical work had its heyday during the 1970s and 1980s because it was one of the main occupations which employed vast numbers of women. Women's increased access to education meant that their opportunities for paid employment became more diversified from the 1980s. Subsequent studies looking at the occupational status of women have shifted their focus from clerical work to women in the professions and management. Although clerical work is still being researched at the current time, there have been very few major pieces of research like the ones described above. There have however been a number of studies done on large organisations which have looked at clerical work as just one occupation among many (for example Bradley, 1999). There have also been a number of studies which provide a comprehensive overview of the changing nature of clerical work during the 1990s which have not been based on specific empirical research or case studies. Such studies

include for example those by Juliet Webster (1996) and Joan Greenbaum (1995, 1998) which have focussed on the impact of technology, computerisation and deskilling, the temporisation and casualisation of the labour market, the changing nature of clerical work and the outsourcing of clerical work to developing countries. Most of these studies do consider the feminisation of clerical work in terms of occupational segregation but do not discuss why women continue to choose this occupation and its enduring popularity among women.

Other studies have looked at new types of clerical work such as telemarketing in call centres (Rose, 2002) and homeworking (Hakim, 1988). Common themes which were identified by Marxists in relation to white-collar work are still evident when looking at new developments in clerical work. These include routinisation of tasks, piecework and tighter supervision and managerial control over work output and are still evident in low skilled clerical jobs. In contrast, post-modern perspectives have shifted the focus from macro level analysis of clerical work to studying everyday interactions at the workplace such as power and resistance discourses between staff and management. An example of this is the function of bitching within offices as a way of counteracting the lack of powerlessness women experience at the workplace (Sottirin and Gottfried, 1999). Another example relates to research undertaken by Alicia Leung (2002) who did a study on the sexual dynamics between secretaries and their bosses in the context of Chinese cultural values and traditions. There have been relatively few studies which specifically discuss why women continue to choose clerical work even though it is a low status and low paid job (for example Walsh, 1999; Pascall, et al, 2000).

A number of themes have recurred throughout the literature. For many women clerical work is seen as a clean, feminine job which is available to them at different stages in their life cycle. However, for many women employed in low skilled and routine office jobs they often experience boredom and frustration. Another issue is the way in which women are socialised to aspire to feminine jobs such as clerical work through not only their own personal and family

networks but also through the education system. With a modicum of training in office skills most women can access some form of clerical work fairly readily.

The maintenance of the organisational hierarchy is dependent upon the exclusion and subordination of women. Clerical work is predominantly found in the lowest ranks within organisations which are occupied by women. Occupational structures, lack of training opportunities and non-continuous work histories ensure that women are unable to compete with men for promotion. There is also a significant number of women who are not interested in promotion because the part-time work offered in clerical occupations allows them to attend to their family commitments. Further, there is a widely held perception within some organisations that women are less committed to paid employment because they have competing responsibilities with their families.

The next section will build upon some of the concepts introduced by Crompton and Jones, namely the nature of clerical work and how perceptions of skill are linked to stereotypical notions of clerical work as a feminised occupation. There is a lack of willingness on the part of some organisations to recognise the level of skill involved in clerical work. Without dissecting the nature of clerical work and its incumbents we are unable to make an assessment as to whether poor levels of remuneration or lack of career paths are justified. Secondly, there is a need to explore whether the nature of clerical work has evolved to meet the needs of adaptive women or whether adaptive women have been instrumental in charting its current flexible, low status and low paid state.

Heterogeneity of clerical work and notions of skill

As a feminised occupation the skills associated with clerical work go largely unrecognised because many workplaces cannot distinguish between the level of skill required from one position and another. In order to understand the feminisation of clerical work we need to look specifically at the types of clerical work available and the skill levels involved at each level. The Australian

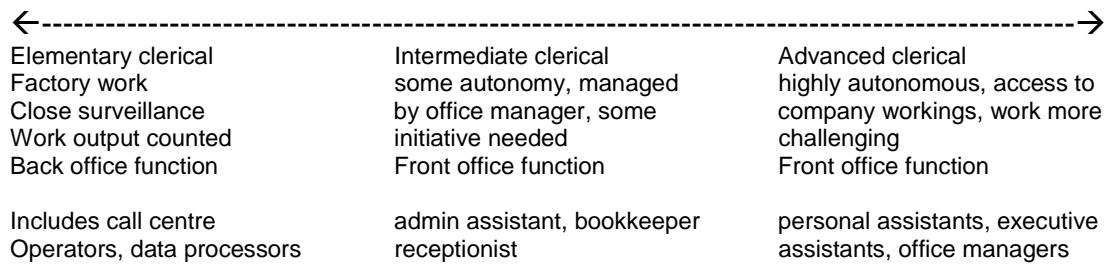
Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) definitions divides clerical work into three distinct groups. These are:

- Advanced clerical and service workers;
- Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers;
- Elementary clerical, sales and service workers (See Appendix one for a full explanation of the definitions.)

Greenbaum (1995:96) delineates between two distinct groups of clerical workers. The first group are those performing front office functions. These workers generally have contact with the public and provide personalised service to clients and customers. These positions are usually more skilled in terms of requiring high levels of interpersonal skills as well as technical knowledge. The second group of clerical workers undertake back office functions which are generally highly routinised and mechanised. These include telemarketers and data process operators. There is a third group of clerical workers, which falls into the front office category, who have experienced what is known as the professionalisation of clerical work. These clerical workers may move up the ranks of the organisation in which they are employed and are expected to use a broad range of skills. Positions such as this are exemplified by the Personal Assistant and Executive Assistant role to high ranking management.

Another way to consider clerical work is to look at it conceptually on a continuum. The lowest level clerical workers are those who have the most routinised and boring jobs where they experience the highest degree of monitoring and surveillance versus the highest level clerical workers who work autonomously as secretaries or personal assistants. Back office or elementary clerical jobs are those which are mostly likely to move off-shore to developing countries.

Figure 1 The clerical work continuum



There is also the issue of accountability which impacts upon the nature of the work. Although personal assistants are organisational employees, their first loyalty is to their boss rather than the organisation. In contrast, the traditional secretary-boss relationship has been eliminated among general clerical workers and administrative staff. The management of these workers is impersonal and fragmented and may be conducted via intermediary supervisors where interaction is kept to a minimum (Kleeh-Tolley, 1996:30).

The ubiquitous nature of clerical work means it is difficult to say with any certainty even one task that all workers perform (Pringle, 1988:2). As a starting point we need to accept that skill levels attached to this type of work are largely shaped by perceptions of clerical work being a feminised occupation. The essential question is how to define the notion of skill in relation to clerical work when there is a perception within the community, workplaces and organisational culture that clerical work is unskilled because it draws upon women's natural feminine qualities.

Women workers tend to belittle the work they do by describing their skills as something they have acquired through socialisation rather than as learned skills (Probert and Wilson, 1993: 10). Tacit skills such as interpersonal skills, patience and commonsense are largely overlooked in organisations (Webster, 1996: 447).¹ When women minimise their skills by using terms such as 'just' or 'only' they do so not because they think the work they do is unimportant, but rather they are reflecting a view widely held in the workplace and society at large that they as workers are undervalued (Poynton, 1993: 91). The

¹ Chapter six explores the notion of tacit skill in relation to the respondents in this study.

undervaluing of women's skills has been deliberately used by employers to avoid paying them what they are really worth. To recognise that most clerical workers are already multi-skilled would mean that they would have to be paid more for their skills (Probert, 1992: 448).

Further, clerical skills are undermined because they are seen as an extension of domestic labour used in the home. Tasks such as flower arranging, buying and organising food for functions and making tea and coffee are some of the domestic duties that clerical workers perform. In this context clerical work is seen as job which is an extension of their feminine talent rather than a skill (Pringle, 1988).

Job descriptions often do not fully reflect and accurately describe the complexity and variety of tasks performed by clerical workers from both lower level and higher level positions. Some clerical work has been deskilled, but other types of work have not (Acker, 1989: 103). In essence, clerical work and clerical workers are not homogenous, they come from a diverse range of backgrounds and social experience. Some may work in clerical work all their lives, while others may use it as a stepping stone to move into other types of work (Lockwood, 1989: 228).

Deskilling and proletarianisation of clerical work

The deskilling and proletarian debates offer another way in which to understand how clerical work has been systematically undermined. As a feminised occupation the diminution of skill in relation to some tasks and the and lack of recognition of other skills have served to maintains low levels of status, pay and poor promotion opportunities. In doing so, women have provided a cheap source of labour in a burgeoning service sector.

Harry Braverman's seminal work published in 1974 titled *Labor and Monopoly Capital* was one of the first to scrutinise the skill level of white-collar workers. Although Braverman's work offers some poorly substantiated arguments, it

provides a good starting point to discuss the nature of white-collar work (Lockwood, 1989: 221). Braverman used Marxist concepts such as the division of labour to explain that the process of deskilling was a necessary feature of the capitalist labour process. He discussed the use of scientific management techniques employed by modern corporations to streamline work and to maximise output and production. According to Braverman, under the auspices of managerial control clerical work had been transformed "...from a personal activity into the work of a mass of people" (Braverman, 1974: 301). In the past the office was a site of mental labour, but with the rationalisation of work functions it had been transformed into a site of manual labour where workers specialised knowledge was ignored and they were restricted to simple and repetitive tasks (Braverman, 1974: 298-315). This deskilling process resulted in clerical workers (particularly women) congregating in the lower ranks of the labour market in dead-end jobs with no scope for promotion. Managerial and professional staff, on the other hand, tended to be recruited on the basis of qualification rather than through seniority acquired by knowledge and on-the-job experience (Crompton and Reid, 1982: 170).

Another outcome of deskilling was that workers were easier to control and were more vulnerable to low wages (Greenbaum, 1995:60). Just like blue-collar workers on the assembly line where their production output could be monitored, the technology offered by the word processor contributed to the deskilling of workers. They enabled supervisors to monitor the work output of employees in terms of how long employees spent at machines and the number of key strokes entered (Thompson, 1983: 80; van Acker, 1990: 1; Williams, 1992: 20). In essence clerical workers had undergone a process of proletarianisation and formed the hub of a growing 'white-collar proletariat'.

Critics of Braverman's labour analysis have noted that he did not take into consideration worker resistance. There is an underlying assumption that workers unwittingly succumbed to management control and that management alone had a monopoly over knowledge and production processes (Barker and Downing, 1980: 73; Davies and Rosser, 1986:95; Wood, 1989: 10-11).

Given that the majority of clerical workers were women, Braverman's analysis does not offer a feminist perspective of the labour process. It was assumed that women's position in the family allowed them to be treated as a reserve army of labour (McDowell and Pringle, 1992: 155). He did not differentiate between the experience of male and female workers, or discuss gender relations, subordination or power within the modern office. Further, he fails to provide any discussion of the nature of skill in relation to women's work (Webster, 1996: 113). The feminisation and mechanisation of clerical work were inextricably linked, a fact which Braverman fails to acknowledge. Women were and still are the most subordinate group of workers who undertake the routinised and mechanised jobs within an office (Lowe, 1987: 140).

Clerical work is an occupation where workers perform a diversity of functions. Braverman assumes that clerical work is homogenous and routinised and fails to take into account the breadth of office tasks. The typing pool best exemplifies how tasks had become routinised and mechanised, but this did not constitute the totality of clerical work (Lowe, 1987: 56, 140, Pringle, 1988: 202).

Greenbaum argues that although the 1970s was a period where management tried to routinise office work, they essentially failed for two reasons. Firstly, management found it difficult to define the skill involved in office work; for example, the skill required to compose a letter, and secondly, they did not understand that workers had a "wide range of tacit and behind-the-scenes knowledge". Moreover, there was no way to adequately measure whether routinised work functions such as the typing pool and data entry clerks were more effective in terms of the quality and quantity of output (Greenbaum, 1995:64). Other critics argued that Braverman's work did not offer a subjective account of the labour process. Rather, most of his arguments were based on describing capitalist production from an objective stand point where human agency has little or no input into how organisations function (Spencer, 2000: 222).

Building on Braverman's work and Marxist concepts of class and the reserve army of labour, the proletarianisation thesis provides another perspective through which to analyse the notion of skill, deskilling, and the impact of technology on clerical work. Proletarianisation has been defined as "...a process which generates proletarians – a class which not only lives by the sale of its labour but also does not exercise control in respect of capitalist functions – in short, is hired simply as labour and is itself controlled and directed accordingly" (Crompton and Jones, 1982: 127-28). Essentially, the proletarianisation thesis had been based upon historical wage trends and changes in the labour process (Lowe, 1987: 141). Authors such as Crompton and Jones (1982: 126-127) and Glenn and Feldberg (1979: 52, 71) describe in great detail how clerical workers as part of the proletarianisation process have become deskilled and where they fitted into the class structure. Clerical work as an occupation had been downgraded and was akin to manual labour in terms of social status, class identity and consciousness. Where white-collar work was once the preserve of the middle class, the proletarianisation of clerical work was similar to manual work in terms of its routinisation and less favourable conditions of employment. In general, female clerical workers were more likely to be proletarianised because firstly, they were confined to the lowest clerical grades and secondly, they were less likely to be promoted because of breaks in employment due to child rearing and lack of post-secondary qualifications (Crompton and Jones, 1984: 40, 126).

A counter argument to the proletarianisation thesis contends that it is inaccurate to automatically align clerical workers to blue-collar workers because their conditions of employment are akin to factory work. There is a perception that clerical workers have a middle class view of the world because they have the opportunity for improved job prospects, occupational mobility and lifestyle differences (Lowe, 1987: 141). As noted above, the mobility of male clerks into managerial positions was dependent upon female clerks having no occupational mobility and occupying the low levels in the workplace (Crompton and Jones, 1984). Another way of assessing the proletarianisation thesis is to look at the clerical workers' individual class background and then make an assessment as to whether they have moved up or down the social

ladder. For example, women from working class backgrounds may view clerical work as a step up from a shop or factory job while women from well educated middle class backgrounds may view routinised clerical work as a loss of status. Further, it is inaccurate to solely define a clerical worker's class based upon her occupational status. Class is tied up with her partner's occupation and status, whether her income is primary or secondary to her partner's, familial class and status, educational background and so on (Pringle, 1988: 194).

The function of feminisation provides another compelling argument for the decline in the status of clerical work which is not recognised by the proletarianisation thesis (Attewell cited in Probert, 1992: 445; Lowe, 1987). As mentioned previously, up until the early part of the nineteenth century, clerical work was regarded as a craft-like skill where literacy, numeracy and knowledge of office routines were limited to middle and upper class men. As mass education made these skills more common, the social definition of skilled work changed dramatically. It is the excess supply in clerical labour markets rather than any change in the labour process that lowers the status of clerical employment, and it is the supply of women which is central to this excess. The rapid influx and oversupply of cheap female labour not only significantly reduced average wages, but also compounded occupational sex typing by confining women to a narrow range of routinised and mechanised employment opportunities. Further, the lack of parity in relation to wages across different industry sectors, organisations and occupational sub-groups makes it difficult to make concrete assumptions about the proletarianisation thesis based on wages alone (Lowe, 1987: 142-143; Probert, 1992: 445). Another criticism of the proletarianisation thesis is that it does not adequately distinguish between the different categories of clerical workers (Pringle, 1988:202). As we have seen above, clerical work varies significantly from one job to the next and no one job is exactly the same as another.

In summary, white-collar proletarianisation and Marxist analysis of clerical work provides a limited framework in which to study clerical work and its associated skills. It has tended to take a macro perspective where the primary focus has

been on management's control of labour processes under capitalism which shape workers in terms of not only their day to day work tasks, their conditions of employment, but their whole level of consciousness in terms of class and status. There has been very little conceptual analysis of power and resistance, the acquisition of knowledge by clerical staff and how they actively shape their own working lives.

Patriarchy, workplace culture and the gendering of organisations

As noted above, gender ideology and women's family role play an important part in determining their relationship to the labour market. Another element which impacts upon women's labour force participation is the inter-relationship between workplace culture and patriarchy and the way it perpetuates gendered organisations. Organisational culture is a spurious term and is often difficult to define. We know that it reinforces occupational segregation, lack of skill recognition in relation to the jobs women perform and maintains male control over women (Acker, 1989). But what are its constituent elements?

In the past feminists argued that dual systems theory provided the best way to understand women's disadvantaged position in the labour market (Hartmann, 1979). This theory focussed on the way in which capitalism and patriarchy collude to exclude women from participating on an equal basis to men (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990:17). Bradley et al (2000: 24, 85-86) argue that dual systems theory is problematic because it holds a universalistic and static view of gendered power relations. Further, it presents social relationships in a way that does not consider heterogeneity in terms of the incorporation and understanding of marginal or minority groups. It also does not take into account variations in local conditions.

A more accurate way of studying how organisations are gendered is through everyday interactions within workplaces. Bradley (1999:34-35) defines nine ways in which power within organisational culture defines and maintains discourses of masculinity and femininity.

1. *Economic power* refers to the way men have controlled economic resources, property, income, earnings and other rewards from work. There is an expectation that men will have the highest earnings and be the major breadwinners
2. *Positional power* relates to the historical precedence around men holding positions of authority in the workplace. These include positions such as employer, manager, supervisor or trade union leader.
3. *Technical power* refers to the monopoly of technical skills and expertise by men to legitimate their dominance at work. The work performed by men is defined as skilled and has been used to justify gender segregation and pay differentials between men and women.
4. *Physical power* refers to physical strength in the workplace. In the past this gave men an advantage over women in manual occupations. This physical power is no longer necessarily in many occupations but can be exerted in terms of domination through threat of violence, such as domestic violence, workplace harassment and bullying.
5. *Symbolic power* is akin to hegemonic power where men impose their own definitions, meanings, values and rules to validate their positions of power. Historically men have defined all facets of work through “manipulation of the textual presentation of employment relations, both through work and image” (p.34).
6. *Collective power* as the name suggests involves the ability to mobilise and organise groups to achieve common goals. These include trade unions, pressure groups and networks. Male domination in trade unions and the “old boys” network which actively excludes women are well documented.
7. *Personal power* refers to the way people use their interpersonal skills or tacit skills to deal with people. Women tend to use this type of power to counteract the influenced men and women in the workplace. It is also a strategy women may use in the family situation.
8. *Sexual power* which manifests itself as sexual harassment is used by men in the workplace to control women. Sexuality in the workplace can

be used by both men and women for self advancement or to intimidate or exclude others.

9. *Domestic power* refers to the control of household goods, income and the use of domestic skills to keep the household running smoothly (Bradley, 1999:34-35).

By breaking down the aspects of power and how men exert control over women in the workplace we have a better understanding of why clerical work has been systematically undermined and undervalued by organisations. Further, it helps us to understand how gendered organisations are maintained. Clearly these types of power can be used in combination or isolation to gain effective control over women but how might they be utilised in the workplace? At the workplace men remain the primary definers. Men continue to occupy the upper echelons of organisations. They actively define gendered texts which are instrumental in relation to rules and procedures, formal job definitions and organisational roles. This includes not only the way in which people relate to one another both formally and informally, but also on shared assumptions, values and ideas (Mills, 2002; Wajcman, 1996: 262, 274). Moreover, elements of symbolic power within organisations ensure that certain jobs are linked with one gender or another. For example, it is difficult to imagine a man performing some type of clerical work because it involves performing wifely or motherly duties and reminding men what needs to be done (Probert and Wilson, 1993:12).

In relation to sexual power it has been argued that the marginal status of women in organisations is due to them being the subjects of masculine sexual desire (Adkins, 1995; McDowell, 1997; Pringle, 1988). Western sexuality is based on gendered power relations where men are dominant over women. Male socialisation leads men to sexualise and objectify women and this is crucial in perpetuating women's exclusion from spheres of power and influence within organisations. The focus on sexuality also makes explicit the heterosexual nature of workplace relations (William, 1992: 46). Both overt and subtle recruitment practices, training opportunities, performance appraisals and promotion opportunities ensure that workers conform to organisational

procedures and conduct (McDowell, 1997: 25-31). A good example of such practices is the way in which men and women dress. Men wear neutral clothes generally in neutral colours which consist of a jacket, shirt, pants and tie. For women the question “what shall I wear to the office today?” can be a minefield. First they must choose between skirts, pants or dresses. They must weigh up the length of the skirt, the cut of the shirt and the colour of the outfit. Whatever a woman wears to work will draw attention (Butler, 1988:25;Tannen, 1995: 112). It can also define her role and perceived level of credibility within the organisation. Sexual power not only places stipulations on physical appearances but also how women conduct themselves at an interpersonal and professional level.

In relation to defining skill or technical power, women from lower levels within the organisation are actively excluded from training. There is an assumption that it is not worth investing in on-the-job training because women will withdraw from the labour market to have children. Even though it is acceptable and desirable for women to work part-time, research evidence suggests that working part-time is incompatible with being taken seriously and being seen as a committed worker (Probert, 1996:41)

Another reason for excluding women from training is to prevent them from seeking promotion and higher levels of remuneration. Since levels of pay are directly related to skill, if skills levels have been improved it means that employers will have to pay more for them (O'Donnell, 1984:10, 160).

The low wages received by women clerical workers are reinforced by the influences of economic power which support the primacy of the male breadwinner. Positional power is where women are excluded from the ranks of management and collective power is where women in clerical work have little or no coverage from trade unions particularly those who work on a part-time or casual basis in small business. Research evidence suggests that women with family responsibilities are less career oriented and are more willing to accept jobs with limited occupational mobility, they may trade higher wages for flexible

or shorter hours and they are less likely to be responsive to unions (Baran, 1988:702).

A good example of the way in which all aspects of power impact upon organisational culture is perhaps best summed up by Joan Acker (1989) who conducted a study on comparable worth in the US during the 1980s. During this period comparable worth was seen as the best strategy to try and raise the wages of women in low status jobs. The study clearly delineated between women in female dominated jobs such as clerical work and tried to obtain wage parity with male oriented jobs. Comparable worth aimed to alter the relative value of women's work in comparison to men's work by breaking down assumptions that men are more skilled than women and are therefore worth more.

Acker found when comparing clerical jobs with blue collar jobs, male workers and management placed a lower value on the complexity of work involved in clerical work and the knowledge and problem solving ability needed to perform the job. Further, they were sceptical about the level of tacit skill needed to maintain harmonious work relations and ensure a smooth flow of work. The definition of skill associated with a specific job was heavily influenced by the position's grade rather than the level of skill required to perform the job. The men in the study could not differentiate between the different levels and types of office work. The filing clerk's job was no different to the secretaries. In terms of union involvement, Acker found in her study that the union did not support a complete adherence to the process or principle of comparable worth because it risked losing active members who were mostly higher paid male workers. Essentially the policies that would have helped most women in the organisation were compromised because they undercut some men (p.195). Finally, comparable worth schemes posed a challenge to the family wage for men. The idea that men should be paid more than women because they are the primary breadwinners was supported by the union and male subjects in the study.

The enduring appeal of clerical work

It is clear from the research presented in this chapter that clerical work does not offer the best conditions of employment in terms of pay and promotion. Yet it continues to have an enduring appeal among women across their life cycle. It is the contention of this thesis that adaptive women who want to combine work and family are more likely to accept jobs such as clerical work because it provides them with the necessary flexibility.

A qualitative study conducted by Ivy Kennelly in the US (2002) compares the work motivations and experience of women who work in furniture sales and clerical workers. These two occupations were chosen because they have similar educational requirements, application processes and levels of pay. Interviews were conducted with 75 respondents, 26 worked in furniture sales and 49 worked as secretaries. Kennelly wanted to test the theoretical debate within feminist circles in relation to sameness and difference among women. In particular she was interested in finding out how women negotiate the system of gender and end up inadvertently reinforcing traditional gender categories by devaluing other women. She also wanted to examine how one group of women in a particular occupation perceived the skill, ability and level of drive with another group in a different occupation. What is interesting about this study is the differing perceptions each group of women have about clerical work. The furniture sales people felt that their job afforded them with the opportunity to work autonomously to sell their products. They believed that clerical workers were underachievers with no respect or status who lacked the motivation and autonomy they desired.

In contrast, the clerical workers in the study were very happy with their jobs. Just under two-third of respondents had children. They felt that their jobs provided them with autonomy and gave them a sense of importance because they were contributing to their workplace. They also felt that they had many opportunities to grow and learn new skills. The respondents in this study thought that women were best suited to clerical work because they were more detail oriented than men. In general, they were happy with their conditions of

employment and did not feel oppressed or exploited. The study highlighted how women of all ages from those in their early twenties to women in their fifties and sixties enjoyed clerical work. Some women in the study did have a negative experience of clerical work. They cited monotonous and boring work and poor treatment by bosses. African American women were more likely to have bad workplace experiences which suggests that ethnicity plays a significant role in shaping a person's experience at work. Further, those who were better educated found themselves stuck in a white-collar ghetto and were discontented with their jobs. Kennelly argues that "even when women pit themselves against other women they are doing gender. They restructure the category of woman based on their own experience and act on the new definition, which puts the system of gender in continuous flux" (p.611).

Gillian Pascall, Susan Parker and Julia Evetts (2000) conducted a qualitative study in the UK looking at women in banking careers. They interviewed 20 women in management and 20 women from the clerical ranks. All of the women in this study were full-time workers. The authors were interested in finding out how these women approached their careers in the light of current or impending family responsibilities. Their results indicated that women in banking tend to choose incremental career paths rather than fast tracking into management positions. Many of the respondents said that management positions did not appeal to them because it was expected that they work long hours with little or no opportunity for a social life outside work.

Respondents among the clerical ranks clearly prioritised their family over a career and had curtailed their career ambitions to meet their family's needs. Some clerical workers "looked up at the management hierarchy with horror at the damage it would do to the rest of their lives" (p.69). Once women had children, they avoided making big career moves and opted for small incremental steps in order to progress their career within the banking structure. By taking small steps, women were able to assess the impact on their personal and family lives. The authors note that the long hours culture within banks which required managers to work more than 52 hours per week largely benefited men by making it more difficult for women to enter the managerial

ranks. This paper not only highlights the exclusionary practices employed by men to minimise competition from women for management positions, but it also highlights how women actively choose career paths which fit into their family responsibilities without compromising their commitment to their paid employment.

Janet Walsh (1999) undertook an empirical study of part-time female bank workers in Australia. A randomly stratified sample of 1182 part-time bank workers from city, suburban and country bank branches in Queensland formed the basis of this study. The vast majority of part-time bank workers were located in lower level clerical positions without any career paths. Walsh found that the most common reason among survey respondents for working part-time was to spend more time with dependent children. Many of the women worked part-time not out of financial necessity but for the social contact and because they had no interest in full-time work. Reasons such as this support the notion that these women were secondary income earners. Even among women whose children were older or no longer dependent there was still a preference to work part-time. Walsh believes this is due to enduring expectations around their participation in domestic roles. There were a small number of women in the study who would have liked full-time work. These women tended to be better educated and primary income or equal income earners. Walsh concludes that a woman's life cycle and past work histories have the greatest influence on shaping her attachment to the labour market.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how clerical work has developed as an occupation which is suitable for adaptive women who wish to combine both work and family. As noted above, a woman's attachment to the labour market is largely determined by family circumstances. The more responsibility she has at home caring for children or elderly relatives the less likely she is to participate in paid employment. As a consequence, adaptive women prefer part-time or casual jobs. Clerical work provides women (particularly in urban areas) with the

opportunity to secure flexible employment in a wide range of locations and industries.

On the downside clerical work is a feminised occupation which is generally low paid and low in status. Some clerical positions are highly routinised and boring while others provide a degree of autonomy and challenge. The studies cited in this chapter have highlighted that women's contribution within organisations and occupational segregation rests partly on an assessment of their objective skills. Ideological processes within organisations confirm that what men do is seen as being skilled while what women do is unskilled simply because it is performed by women. Gender affects not only the kinds of jobs people do, but also the kinds of rewards which accrue to the type of paid employment in question. In subsequent chapters I will demonstrate that the specific job and the individual organisation in which the worker is employed determines to a large extent the nature of the work and their conditions of employment.

The aim of this thesis is to try and explain why women are drawn to clerical work over their life cycle and the implications this has on their ability to strike an enterprise bargain. Even though clerical work is generally low paid and low in status women are still willing to perform this type of work as secondary income earners. It would appear that women are actively choosing this type of work and are happy to trade-off their conditions of employment for flexible work arrangements that allows them to balance work and family life.

The next chapter will explore the industrial weakness of clerical workers in Australia. It will look at the impetus behind labour market deregulation and how clerical workers are likely to fare under enterprise bargaining.

Chapter 2

Industrial weakness of women clerical workers in Australia

Introduction

This chapter will explore the industrial weakness of clerical workers in Australia. Historically, clerical workers who are mostly women, have been under represented by the union movement. Evidence would suggest that women are not necessarily averse to union participation, but rather exclusionary practices adopted by unions which are largely run by men have openly supported the interests of the male breadwinner. The lack of support by unions towards clerical workers is however, only part of the equation. As noted in chapter one, clerical workers have tended to align themselves with management which means that they are unlikely to take militant industrial action or place any undue demands upon their boss to improve their conditions of employment.

This chapter will look at how Australia has moved towards labour market deregulation, where wages and conditions of employment are no longer determined by a centralised award system. Under a deregulated labour market wages and conditions of employment are now determined in the workplace as either an Enterprise Based Collective Agreement or an Individual Employment Contracts. Under this new system, work and family discourses will now be decided within the enterprise bargaining arena. This chapter will explore how women clerical workers are likely to fare under enterprise bargaining and what this means for adaptive women who desire flexibility in order to juggle work and family.

The Australian labour market before enterprise bargaining

Before the Australian labour market moved inexorably towards a system of enterprise bargaining, wages and conditions of employment were determined by awards. The contents of awards were based on either consensually negotiated or arbitrated decisions and were legally binding (Bray and Waring, 1998: 63- 71). A strong centralised wages system was built on the male model of employment which even now, is still embedded within the Australian labour market and welfare state (Nolan, 2003:73).

From its inception, the Australian Arbitration system was bound up with power/knowledge discourses which defined men as workers, primary breadwinners, providers and wage earners who were responsible for financially supporting the family (Williams, 1992:200). This notion was supported by all of the main stakeholders within the industrial relations system, including employers, unions, the courts, the arbitration system and government. All of these players reinforced male privilege in the Australian labour market and within the centralised wage-fixing system (Thomson and Pocock, 1997:67).

The primacy of the male breadwinner was established by Justice Higgins from as early as 1907 when he handed down the Harvester Judgment. This judgment ensured that the family wage should remain the preserve of men. It was based on the assumption that women would not be providing for a family and it therefore arbitrated that female wages should be lower (Franzway, 2001: 24, 44, Murphy, 2002:61). This Judgment introduced the Basic Wage (Carney, 1988) and enshrined the belief in law that the Australian economy owed every male worker an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. The Basic Wage was intended to provide 'frugal comfort' for an unskilled worker and his family. After 1908, almost every award excluded or restricted women's access. From its inception the arbitration court helped to perpetuate the gender division of

labour. As a result, women were confined to a small number of occupations and industries (Williams, 1992: 63-64).

The machinery of arbitration left a problematic legacy for women. Not only did it entrench occupational segregation by creating men's jobs and women's jobs it also enshrined structural inequalities and practices which had a significant impact on women's working lives. For example, women were denied access to overtime payments, overawards and high paying jobs. Further, many awards did not recognise or provide part-time work nor make any provision for family friendly work practices because it was presumed that women were supported by men. Many men and women supported the family wage because it meant high household incomes. However, for those women who were single with dependents, low levels of pay often meant hardship and poverty (Thomson and Pocock, 1997:70-71, 75-76). Although the trade union movement fought for such things as the eight hour day, these gains were often made at the expense of subordinate groups such as women and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (Williams, 1992: 29).

Although industrial awards provided a mechanism for passing on the wins of the strong (men), it did protect minimum wages and conditions of employment for all workers (Hammond and Harbridge, 1995: 373; Pocock, 1997:9; Thomson, and Pocock, 1997: 70). Despite the flaws within the arbitration and centralised wage fixing system, this system's greatest strengths were to minimise the wage gap between male and female wages and ensure greater transparency of wages and conditions for people in the same occupation but in different industries and sectors (van Barneveld and Waring, 2002:108). The Arbitration system also provided women, particularly those who were low paid and low skilled, with greater protection than enterprise bargaining especially where there was the possibility of exclusion (Rubery and Fagan, 1995:12).

The reasons for moving to enterprise bargaining

The desire for greater flexibility for both employers and employees was the main impetus behind labour market deregulation. From the employee

perspective, governments from all sides of Australian politics argued that enterprise bargaining would be good for women in particular because it allowed them to negotiate flexible conditions of employment to achieve a balance between work and home (Thomson and Pocock, 1997:68). From the employer perspective the move to enterprise bargaining was promoted by employer groups such as the Business Council of Australia who argued that allowing workers to negotiate directly with their employers at the work place would create a flexible workplace without the rigidities imposed by the centralised award system (Macdonald et al, 2001: 1).

From the employers' perspective the concept of flexibility also offered tangible solutions to changing job structures, rapid technological innovation, changing product demand and heightened global competition (Rosenfeld, 2001:105). Labour market deregulation was seen to provide employers with the opportunity to gain three types of flexibility. The first was functional flexibility which incorporated new management techniques with innovative production methods to create flexible specialisation. This type of flexibility enabled the upskilling and multiskilling of a small number of staff to meet a broad range of tasks. Under this plan staff would be able to adapt to new technologies and work practices more quickly. The second was numerical flexibility which allowed employers to control the number of employees and the hours worked to meet fluctuations in the market. Only the requisite number of people were employed at any one time to meet a firm's needs. This meant that employers used a combination of casual, part-time and contract labour to meet the ebbs and flows of the workplace. The final type of flexibility was wage flexibility which enabled employers to adjust pay levels in line with market forces. Rates of pay were dependent upon and determined by efficiency gains, performance and levels of productivity (Hall and Fruin, 1994:79, Crompton, 2002: 544).

There is no doubt that flexible employment has enabled women to combine paid work with their caring responsibilities (Crompton, 2002:544). However, this has come at a cost. Job security and employment stability is problematic for women who work on a part-time and casual basis. Further, employment within the secondary labour market means that women are more likely to be

offered less in terms of employment related benefits, they are more vulnerable to being made redundant and having their pay and hours of employment reduced (Hall and Fruin, 1994:80).

The legislative shift from compulsory conciliation and arbitration to enterprise bargaining

Enterprise bargaining was first introduced by the federal Labor government (1983 to 1996) as part of the Prices and Incomes Accord in 1986 and gathered momentum with the promise of better outcomes for both employers and employees (Macdonald et al, 2001:1). There was a gradual shift, firstly in the direction of award restructuring and then more significantly towards bargaining at the enterprise level rather than through awards.

Initially wage increases were tied to improvements in productivity, efficiency and flexibility through award restructuring. This process was called the Restructuring and Efficiency Principle (1987) followed by the Structural Efficiency Principle (1988). From 1991 the Enterprise Bargaining Principle paved the way for wage increases to be attached to productivity improvements at the level of the individual workplace. Award restructuring was introduced in response to employers' complaints about the over-complex and cumbersome award system. This process effectively reduced the number of awards, simplified job classification structures and ensured a degree of parity in relation to levels of pay, job classification and the required level of skill and training (Thomson and Pocock, 1997:79-80, Hall, R. 1999).

Substantial changes made as a result of the *Industrial Relations Reform Act* which took effect in March 1994 heralded a significant shift in labour market philosophy. It provided a comprehensive system of workplace bargaining in the federal jurisdiction (Charlesworth, 1997:101). The award system would no longer define common standards and rules, its role would be to act as a 'safety net'. This was the first time that the 'no disadvantage test' was applied. It ensured that no worker would be worse off moving from an award to either a

workplace agreement or individual contract (Hall, R 1999). Although the introduction of formalised enterprise bargaining proclaimed an important change in the industrial relations system, awards continued to play a role in the determination of pay and conditions for many employees until the mid 1990s (Morehead et al, 1995:14-15).

In March 1996 there was a change of Federal Government with the Coalition Liberal and National Parties coming to power. The Coalition's election platform was to radically reform Australia's industrial relations system. By January 1997 the *Workplace Relations Act* superseded the Accord and Labor's *Industrial Relations Act*. The Coalition government argued that no worker would be worse off and that a 'no disadvantage test' overseen by the Office of the Employment Advocate would be applied to all workers. The government promoted flexibility and individual choice whilst actively denigrating the unions and the compulsory arbitration system (Macdonald et al, 2001: 2). The Prime Minister assured the voting public that awards would act as a safety net and that no worker would have less money in their pay packet. The Industrial Relations Commission would still be available to act as the umpire in order to mediate, maintain stability and to resolve industrial disputes (Bray and Waring, 1998:77, Wiseman, 1998).

The government believed that the best way to negotiate pay and conditions was to allow the employer and employee to strike a mutually agreeable deal through enterprise bargaining. Where this was not possible or feasible, the role of awards was to provide a safety net of fair and enforceable minimum wages and conditions of employment. Awards were radically simplified from the beginning of January 1997 to 20 allowable matters (see Appendix two). Any provisions within awards that had not been simplified by 30 June 1998, were ruled 'non-allowable' and ceased to have effect. The intention, according to the government, was not to erode workers' existing entitlements but rather to provide an incentive for workers to move to enterprise based agreements. The *Workplace Relations Act* also specified minimum employee entitlements (see Appendix two).

Collective bargaining among white-collar organisations started gathering momentum around the time the *Workplace Relations Act* was introduced. Large white-collar institutions such as universities, telecommunication companies, airlines and public utilities, which were previously covered by Federal Awards, made the decisive shift to Enterprise Based Agreements. During this period four distinct bargaining streams emerged:

1. the award safety net stream,
2. the union negotiated certified agreement stream,
3. the non-union certified agreement stream, and
4. the individual contract stream (Hall, R. 1999:4).

In 1989 85 per cent of employees were covered by federal or state awards. In 1990 that number had reduced to 80 per cent being covered by awards. In 1996 the Australian workforce was split into three groups. One third were covered by awards only, one third were covered by enterprise agreements and one third were covered by individual contracts. In 2003, 42 per cent of Australians had their pay set by an individual agreement, 37 per cent by a collective agreement and 21 per cent by an award rate only (ABS Employee Earnings and Hours Australia, May 2000, Cat. No. 6306.0, cited in Macdonald et al, 2001).

Much has been written about the *Workplace Relations Act* and its impact upon workers generally, but more specifically its effect on women workers. As noted above, one of the essential assertions of the Act is that women workers will be better off in terms of achieving flexible work arrangements (Charlesworth, 1997: 113). The Prime Minister John Howard strongly believes that women now more than ever have the opportunity to achieve flexible family friendly conditions of employment. Mr. Howard cites evidence which suggests that as a direct result of the *Workplace Relations Act* nearly 80 per cent of workplaces

would have at least one family friendly policy or the provision of flexible working hours.¹

Critics of the Act believe that instead of creating greater flexibility for women, the move to enterprise bargaining has the potential to erode their entitlements and position within the labour market. In a submission to a Senate inquiry which looked at the possible impact of the *Workplace Relations Act*, the National Pay Equity Coalition argued that:

The proposed system is not de-regulation, but re-regulation in the interests of employers. It is cloaked in rhetoric about choice and freedom for women. Under the proposed bill women will be less able to access their rights, less able to protect their existing entitlements and less able to improve their labour market position (cited in Thomson and Pocock, 1997: 89).

Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) are the centrepiece and one of the most controversial aspects of the *Workplace Relations Act*. AWAs are essentially workplace contracts made between individuals and their employer. Some of them are registered with the Office of the Employment Advocate while others are not. Van Barneveld and Waring (2002:114) argue that AWAs serve to not only dismantle collective bargaining in the workplace, but they also marginalise the inclusion of trade unions and “return the employment relationship to the free market in which employers inevitably dominate”.

The Victorian experience

While the shift to enterprise bargaining was being undertaken incrementally in the Federal arena, radical industrial reform had already been introduced by the Victorian Coalition government. Victorian workers were in a unique position to

¹ From an article in the *Age Newspaper*, 4th August, 2003 based upon an edited version of the Prime Minister's article in the latest issue of *Options*, a policy journal published by the federal Liberal MP Christopher Pyne.)

the rest of Australia because they had moved to a deregulated labour market before any other state in Australia. The Kennett government introduced the Employee Relations Act in March 1993 which encouraged workers and employees to move away from the award system to enterprise bargaining. The award system with its in-built safety net was still favoured by most Victorian workers, but had been rendered impotent by the new legislation. At the end of 1994 an escape hatch was devised by the Federal Labor government which allowed Victorians on state awards to move to the federal award system. Some 400,000 Victoria workers took this option.

With the introduction of the *Workplace Relations Act* in 1996, Victoria's *Employee Relations Act* became defunct as the government transferred its industrial relations to the federal jurisdiction. During this time the establishment of pay and conditions was in a state of flux as organisations made the move from awards to either enterprise based agreements or individual contracts. For example, workers in the same organisation could have their conditions determined by either an award if they were long-term employees or an individual contract if they had just joined the company. The first interviews for this study were conducted during 1996 when the award system was being dismantled at the Federal level and organisations were moving to enterprise based agreements. During the second interviews in 1998, there had been a more decisive shift to enterprise bargaining as the changes introduced by the *Workplace Relations Act* had become more widespread and commonplace (see chapter eight for a discussion of the research findings on how respondents in this study had their conditions of employment determined).

Methods of setting pay

Under enterprise bargaining there are various ways of establishing pay and conditions of employment. As noted above, awards are still in place for about one-fifth of all workers. The most common way of setting pay and employment conditions is either through an individual contract or a collective agreement

which has been negotiated at the enterprise level. Unions may or may not be involved in negotiating collective agreements.

Generally speaking employees working in small business are more likely to work under individual contracts. MacDonald et al (2001:8) found in their study that two-thirds of employees working in small business (firms which employ less than 20 people) worked under individual agreements. In contrast, those working in large organisations (employing over 1000 people), 83 per cent were on collective agreements. It would appear that the larger the organisation the more likely it is to have a collective agreement in place.

In relation to the negotiation of collective agreements, Bennett (1994:194) argues that male workers within organisations are more likely to occupy strategic positions on enterprise committees. As a result, women often find themselves excluded from negotiations around the content of enterprise agreements because they work part-time or are peripheral to the main business. For example, clerical workers in a manufacturing firm may not be included in enterprise negotiations. Charlesworth (1997, 109) found in her study that part-time workers were more likely to have little or no say in relation to their conditions of employment. This left many of them feeling alienated and inadequately represented. For those women workers who were involved in enterprise negotiations many found the experience to be empowering. The reality is that for many women in low status feminised jobs such as clerical work there is little if any negotiation in relation to their pay and conditions of employment. For new employees in particular, they are faced with a 'take-it-or-leave-it' deal, where they either take the job or look for something else which suits their needs (p110).

Another method of establishing pay and conditions which rejects union involvement and any form of external influence is the Human Resources Management (HRM) Method. According to Bray et al (2001:22) this method has allowed companies to become more strategic in their management of employees. Further, there is an argument which suggests that the rise of HRM

has seen a greater focus on individualising work and the mechanisms used to regulate work (McGrath-Champ, 2003:46).

Bradley et al (2000: 149:154) argue that the HRM Method represents a significant shift from the collectivist philosophy offered by trade unions and traditional industrial relations. In contrast, it offers a “unitarist” and “individualist” means of negotiation where the onus is upon the individual employee to settle their terms of employment directly with management. Advocates of the HRM method believe that it affords workers and management with a win-win situation where the two can negotiate directly (Macdonald et al, 2001). It is assumed that the relationship between employees and management is harmonious where both parties share common goals and share a more consultative relationship with one another (Bradley et al, 2000, Bray et al, 2001:25).

Critics of the HRM method believe that it significantly undermines the more traditional forms of union representation and collectivism. There is some evidence to suggest that this style of bargaining has contributed towards a widening of the gap between skilled and non-skilled workers and men and women. Baird et al (2002:17) argue that the use of HRM in bargaining and establishing conditions of work will institutionalise women as second class citizens. Essentially, individual bargaining supported by HRM is likely to increase managerial prerogative due to the unequal bargaining power of disadvantaged groups within the labour market such as the low-skilled and women who are less capable of bargaining on their own behalf (van Barneveld and Arsovska, 2001:105). In this context it will be increasingly difficult for women to negotiate conditions of employment which are family friendly and suit their needs.

The lack of transparency surrounding individual contracts is also an issue of concern for workers. Most individual contracts usually have a secrecy clause which disallows employees from comparing their pay and conditions of employment with others. The rationale for this from the employers' perspective is to protect the competitiveness of the firm (Bennett, 1994:205). Such

stipulations around the individual contracts make it difficult for employees to assess if they are being paid adequately and how their conditions of employment compare with other workers doing the same or similar jobs. Rubery and Fagan (1995:23) believe that the lack of openness within enterprise bargain arrangements will make it more difficult to monitor discrimination. Further, arrangements like this work for the benefit of employers because it increases their control over pay structures and reduces their compliance for the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

Van Barneveld and Waring (2002: 111) cite evidence that AWAs established using the HRM approach tend to be driven by cost minimisation and maximisation of flexible hours leading to increased work intensification. Very few AWAs contained family friendly provisions such as family leave provisions, or access to training. Their analysis of 196 AWAs within three separate banking institutions suggests that women appeared to have reduced access to family friendly work arrangements whilst open-ended hours provisions severely curtailed employees from achieving a work and family balance (p112).

Family friendly practices in workplaces - theory versus reality

In theory family friendly work practices are designed to enable employees to obtain a balance between their paid employment and their private lives. This means being able to earn enough money to be financially secure, acquiring a level of satisfaction from the work performed and pursuing a career which meets personal expectations (Russell and Bowman, 2000). But how widespread are family friendly practices such as the flexibility to establish regular and predictable hours of work which suit family needs, flexible leave provisions, job sharing, flexitime arrangements and extended career breaks? And how achievable are they for women clerical workers?

Many of the studies which look at family friendly initiatives are based on large companies who are more likely to have family friendly policies in place. There

are very few studies which look at these initiatives in small businesses, where flexibility is less likely to be achieved.

Research on family friendly work practices in Australia is mostly empirical and based on the Agreements and Monitor Database (ADAM) compiled by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) based at the University of Sydney. ADAM enables researchers to analyse the contents of enterprise agreements (McGrath-Champ, 2003:47). Although ADAM does not code for gender, researchers have found that the best proxy for gender is industry feminisation (Hall, R.:1999). ADAM contains information on the wages and conditions of employment in over 8,000 Federal and State Collective (enterprise) agreements and nearly 900 Federal AWAs. (Van Barneveld and Arsovska, 2001:89). It also collects information on union and non-union certified agreements. In terms of its limitations it contains a non-random sample of AWAs rather than the entire population. Secondly, ACIRRT is only provided with the first AWA approved for each employer and any subsequent drafts or changes to an AWA are not included in the dataset. The limitations of ADAM also make it difficult to differentiate not only between gender but specific occupations within industries. For example, there might be high numbers of females in the finance, property or business service sector, but ADAM does not differentiate between a woman working as an elementary clerk for an insurance company versus a female manager in the same company. All ADAM can hope to do is to identify possible trends for women generally.

An empirical study conducted by Gillian Whitehouse (2001) used ADAM to ascertain the provision of family friendly measures within Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). The type of family friendly initiatives Whitehouse was interested in included:

- paid parental leave
- childcare provisions
- permanent part-time work with predictable hours
- job sharing

- career breaks
- flexible hours under the employees control
- work from home
- extended leave options

Again, Whitehouse does not differentiate between occupations, but she does provide an indication of the types of trends within AWAs one might expect in terms of companies offering family friendly work practices. Whitehouse believes that AWAs are poorly placed to resist several recent developments which work against individuals achieving a work/family balance. These include long hours, work intensification and casualisation. She believes that AWAs entrench gender segregation within the labour market because they fail to take into account skill recognition. During the bargaining process there is the potential for women to trade off wage increases to achieve work/family balance. Further, as a trade-off to accommodate greater levels of flexibility, employers may demand that workers be available over a greater spread of hours outside the standard working week to counteract flexibility measures.

Based on her analysis of collective agreements and AWAs from ADAM, Whitehouse concludes there is an uneven spread of workplace friendly measures. She argues that the inclusion of work/family measures is largely dependent upon the industry and sector of the firm. Her analysis shows that where work/family provisions are prevalent, there is more likely to be lower wage increases and at least one counter productive hours measure. For example, the employer may have the discretion to alter hours of work with short notice. Whitehouse concludes that the evidence from ADAM suggests that “the combination of high wage increases, positive flexibilities and specific work/family provisions therefore appears rare” (p.110).

As noted in chapter one, there are very few studies in recent times which look at conditions of employment for clerical workers. One study which looked at staff turnover and absenteeism among Call Centre Operators was conducted by Hallis (2002), a privately owned Human Resources firm. This study was conducted to update managers and operators on employee turnover and to

establish a benchmark for absenteeism in Call Centres. This study was based on a survey of 116 Contact Centres (Call Centres) in urban and regional areas of Australia. In total these centres employed 25,250 staff, with 60 per cent of staff being female and 40 per cent male.

The survey was interested in ascertaining why absenteeism through sick leave was becoming more and more evident among Call Centre staff. During 2001/2002 the average Call Centre employee used 8.74 days sick leave. The authors found that the more sick leave employees were entitled to, the more they tended to use. Further, the study discovered that sick leave was not necessarily used for illness, but rather it was seen as an accessible pool of paid leave to be used for other purposes. The survey was divided into two parts. The first was the collection of quantitative data from Call Centre Operators detailing employee turnover and sick leave usage. A second survey was distributed to nearly 1,700 Call Centre staff asking them to discuss their attitudes to and use of sick leave.

The Hallis survey found that Call Centre employees used every means at their disposal to create the flexibility they needed. Permanent part-time employees were most likely to use their sick leave allocation and were most likely to use it for purposes other than illness. Although the data is not analysed by gender, it was available by age. Those with the highest leave usage were aged between 30 to 39 years, the primary child rearing years. Data from the second survey indicated that Call Centre employees used their sick leave to care for sick family members or to cover school holidays. During school holidays this study found that the frequency of sick leave usage increased by between 27 to 35 per cent. The study found where organisations offered a Rostered Day Off (RDO), the use of sick leave was significantly less. The findings of the second survey identified several flexible family friendly arrangements which were offered by a number of Call Centres. They were regarded by Call Centre operators as being beneficial to them as well as having a significant impact on minimising absenteeism and turnover. These included:

- Varying start and finish times at work;
- Permanent part-time employment;
- Access to paid family leave;
- Ready access to holiday leave;
- The ability to make up time later;
- Ready access to leave without pay;
- Other arrangements.

What is interesting about the recommendations put forward in the Hallis report is not the incorporation of family friendly flexible leave arrangements within workplace agreements. Rather, the recommendations were directed at placating the target audience who were Call Centre managers. The recommendations were focussed on strategic management initiatives aimed to heighten employees' interest in the workplace. The rationale was that if employees were happier and had more interesting work they would be less inclined to use their sick leave. Hallis recommended things like job enrichment, training, team building, improved recruitment practices such as checking people's reliability prior to being hired and performance management of staff who use high levels of sick leave to name a few. The authors of this study fail to acknowledge that employees have a private life that entails juggling family and that this is the primary reason why women in particular with family responsibilities use their sick leave.

Another empirical study conducted by Gray and Tudball (2002, 2003) was based on data from the *Australian Workplace and Industrial Relations Survey* 1995. The aim of this survey was to test the availability of specific family friendly work arrangements. These arrangements included:

- control over start and finish times;
- access to a telephone for family reasons;
- availability of permanent part-time employment;
- type of leave used for the care of sick family members.

Gray and Tudball aimed to provide a balanced argument in relation to the provision of these work arrangements. From the employers' perspective they were mindful of the need to weigh up the costs and benefits of making these practices available to employees. Employers may be more willing to provide workers with flexible work initiatives if there was no impact on their profits and if it increased the productivity of workers and reduced turnover levels. For example, workers wanting family friendly conditions have been willing to trade off wages for access to leave.

The authors of this study found that the size of the workplace had a direct impact upon the ability to offer family friendly conditions. They found that the larger the workplace the more likely they were to offer family friendly initiatives. They also found distinct differences between employees within the same workplace. Indeed, the authors were surprised to find that variations between employees was greater within the same workplace than between different workplaces. The authors conclude that employers are most likely to offer family friendly work practices to employees where they have invested high levels of training and other resources and those employees with high skill levels. These would include professionals, managers and administrators. These occupational groups were also much more likely than other occupations to have control over start and finish times, and access to a telephone for family reasons. In contrast, employees with the lowest levels of education, job tenure and organisation provided training were least likely to have access to family friendly work practices. The authors argue that employees with the greatest bargaining power were those that had highly sought after skills which were in short supply. One can extrapolate from these findings that clerical workers which are commonplace in all industries and sectors may therefore not be given the same level of flexibility in enterprising bargaining as professionals and managers within the same organisation.

Baird et al (2002) undertook an empirical study looking at the availability of maternity leave in enterprise agreements. The authors used ADAM and data from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to look at the availability of maternity leave in enterprise agreements. Although maternity

leave was the specific focus of this study one can make broad generalisations about the availability of family friendly practices more generally. The authors of this study argue that the best predictor of family friendly practices is organisational size and management practices. This study had similar findings to Gray and Tudball because it found that the availability of paid maternity leave was most likely when the training and replacements costs were high or where there were a significant number of employees of child bearing age. The authors believe that one of the best indicators of how a woman might fare in the enterprise bargaining arena is education and occupational status. This means that women who are low or semi-skilled, work on a casual or part-time basis, or belong to a ethnic minority group are more likely to be excluded from achieving work/family balance via enterprise bargaining. The authors conclude that enterprise bargaining will ultimately lead to greater inequalities within the labour market.

There is very little in the way of qualitative studies which look at the way in which family friendly policies or the lack of them, impact on the everyday lives of women workers. Those that are available are on select organisations with sympathetic family friendly policies or on select case studies based in larger organisations.

Sara Charlesworth (1999) looked at women workers in the banking industry and their access to family friendly conditions of employment. Although this is not a sociological analysis per se, it does contextualise the choices women make in the light of practices employed by patriarchal banking cultures. Much of her research is based on how grievances are articulated and resolved in the banking industry within the industrial relations and sex discrimination jurisdictions. The evidence she cites are from hearings within the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) and cases which have come before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC). Although she does not talk about women in specific occupations within the banking sector, she does note that women make up more than 60 per cent of the banking workforce. Many of these women are located in part-time, clerical jobs within the retail branch network rather than in senior management where

women are evident in small numbers. Even though women are the majority of workers in banks, the masculine culture essentially remains unchanged and is “symbolic of the male power of the private sector” (p.14).

Charleworth notes that union membership within the banking industry is relatively high with women more likely to be union members than men. Many of the cases she researched had been supported by the Finance Sector Union.

In her study, Charleworth found that the notion of equal opportunity employment for women in banks was “carefully weighted against any disadvantage to the organisation and the men working in it.”(p.23) She found that in order for women to get on in the bank they must emulate the “ideal” worker who is someone with a continuous employment history and is able to work long hours in order build a career through promotion. Equality of opportunity in this context therefore entitles women to expect the same treatment rather than make any allowance for difference. Where outcomes are unequal the banking industry tends to blame this on women’s personal choices.

Charlesworth cites a case where a particular bank presented paid maternity leave in an enterprise agreement as a condition of employment which was available to everyone. This family friendly initiative became a divisive issue among some staff members who felt that it discriminated against those people who would not access maternity leave. It was seen as offering “unequal treatment” (p.19). Examples such as this demonstrate how equal opportunity in the workplace is construed as offering identical treatment despite the differing needs of female workers.

Although banks adhere to the concept of equal employment opportunity, Charlesworth found that this did not necessarily comply with the intent of the legislation (which includes the *Sex Discrimination Act*, 1984, *Affirmative Action Act*, 1986, *Workplace Relations Act*, 1996) (Charlesworth, 1999:15). Equal opportunity legislation prohibits discrimination of women on the basis of pregnancy or potential pregnancy and those with family responsibilities in the

workplace. Between 1987 and 1997 Charlesworth identified a total of 74 complaints lodged under the *Sex Discrimination Act* against banks. The three main grounds for these complaints were sex discrimination, sexual harassment and pregnancy or family responsibility. The nature of these complaints were made on the ground of “motherhood”. They included access to maternity leave, treatment while pregnant, access to redundancy and returning to work in a comparable position after maternity leave. According to Charlesworth, women returning from maternity leave are the most vulnerable workers in the banking system. Women bank workers often find that their full-time job has turned into two part-time positions, that their “comparable” position is located in another branch which is no longer close to home or that their hours of work have changed.

Charlesworth (1999) also highlights how the legal system and its (male) officials fail to understand how women's disadvantaged position within banking organisations is systemic. A ruling by Deputy President Maher from the AIRC found the comparable positions offered by the banks to be “reasonably fair” in terms of salary and classification and dismissed the application (p.17). Charlesworth argues that the definition of comparable position is narrowly defined because it does not take into account conditions of employment which are important to women trying to achieve a work/family balance such as loss of shift loadings and access to flexible hours (p.17).

The evidence from the empirical studies above provides an indication of how we might expect women clerical workers to fare under enterprise bargaining. One could conclude from these studies that clerical workers are less likely to achieve work/family balance through enterprise bargaining because firstly, it is a common occupation with no particular or specialised skills. Secondly, it is not a job where there are labour shortages because there are usually numerous people available to do the same job. Thirdly, there needs to be support from management to endorse family friendly initiatives. The Hallis survey indicates that although some Call Centres offered family friendly initiatives, this was not necessarily widespread. In a globalised context where competition is fierce, labour costs need to be kept to a minimum to ensure the

continuity of the business and profit margins. For some Call Centres family friendly work practices may have been deemed too costly. It is quite clear from the studies mentioned above that employees in larger organisations might have a better chance of acquiring work/family initiatives, while such gains for those working in small organisations may be problematic. In order to obtain a work/family balance evidence suggests that women may have to trade off pay increases for flexible working time arrangements (Charlesworth, 1997: 104).

How women clerical workers are likely to fare under enterprise bargaining

This section will look at how women clerical workers are likely to fare under enterprise bargaining. Again, much of the available evidence does not relate to clerical workers specifically, but to women more generally.

New Zealand's radical move to a deregulated labour market occurred five years before Australia. Studies undertaken on the New Zealand *Employment Contracts Act 1991* provide an indication of the sorts of experiences which Australian women may face under enterprise bargaining. Hammond and Harbridge (1993, 1995) found that the labour market under the Employment Contracts Act disadvantaged many women workers because men were more likely to receive higher wages, paid overtime, productivity based payments and penalty rates than women. Essentially women did not achieve the flexibility they desired, instead they were expected to work longer hours during non-standard working periods. Enterprise negotiations did not resolve sexist notions of skill and tended to reinforce the gender division of labour. However, from a positive perspective women were able to negotiate better leave entitlements than men.

Boreham et al (1995) argue that enterprise bargaining in Australia can deliver wage increases and improved conditions of employment for women workers, but only if women workers become involved in the process and are confident and articulate about their needs. Tully (1992) counters this argument by saying that some women, particularly those from non-English speaking

backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, women with disabilities and those with limited formal education may be disadvantaged during the enterprise bargaining process. This may be due to a lack of confidence, a dislike of confrontation and issues around acceptable behaviour where women are expected to be less aggressive and assertive. Bennett (1994: 202) believes it is too simple to teach women negotiation skills or to encourage them to have confidence in their abilities. She argues that such actions are unlikely to overcome deeply entrenched views within organisational culture and the wider labour market which undervalue the contribution of women workers in low paid and low skilled jobs like clerical work.

As noted above, enterprise bargaining favours workers with market power in terms of having specialised skills. Where this is not available workers who can collectively bargain are more likely to fare better under enterprise bargaining. Because women in clerical work are generally poorly unionised and work in small and/or industrially powerless workplaces they are less likely to achieve the most optimal outcomes through the enterprise bargaining process (Hall and Fruin, 1994:81). For clerical workers working in small to medium sized businesses their ability to bargain may be compromised because of their close relationship with the owners. There may be an implicit trust in the integrity and knowledge of owners that they will do the right thing by them (Tully, 1992).

Clerical workers who work part-time or those working in male-dominated industries such as an engineering firm or manufacturing are more likely to be excluded from the negotiation table (Charlesworth, 1997: 103; Thomson and Pocock , 1997:84). Even when clerical workers are given a forum within the enterprise bargaining arena, they may be disadvantaged because of a lack of recognition of the level of skill they bring to their job. Clerical workers themselves may not regard themselves as being skilled let alone being multi-skilled . They may also have difficulties linking their work to productivity levels because the clerical workforce is seldom seen as integral to productivity (Hall and Fruin, 1994:122; Tully, 1992). Generally speaking clerks are one of the most frequently excluded groups even in unionised workplaces. The weak presence of women at the bargaining table means that many of the much

touted advantages of enterprise bargaining for women clerical workers may never be realised (Thomson and Pocock, 1997: 84).

Hall and Fruin's (1994) study based on the examination of the twenty largest enterprise agreements registered in September 1993 within the Federal jurisdiction was one of the first to closely examine the impact of enterprise bargaining on women in Australia. The authors found that the agreements in industries dominated by women had the following characteristics:

- less participation/representation in bargaining,
- lower pay and later increases,
- increased management controlled time and job flexibility,
- reduced employment access, security and conditions,
- systemic bias in productivity and performance measures/rewards,
- lower access to new classifications and training,
- Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) agenda marginalised.

The authors conclude that the difficulty women in enterprise bargaining face is an extension of their already disadvantaged position within the labour market. The inability to build strong organisational ties because of competing interests with work and home and the fact that women are more likely to work on a part-time, casual or temporary basis means that women may be significantly disadvantaged within the negotiation stakes. The authors warn where the assessment of skill and productivity is decentralised, the more likely it is that pay and conditions will be further eroded over time (Hall and Fruin, 1994: 121-122). Finally, where there are no stringent controls in place to monitor the outcomes of enterprise bargaining women's labour market position will be weakened (Bennett, 1994:202).

Trade unions and women clerical workers

Union membership varies greatly among women according to their age, where they live, and where they are employed. Older women are more likely to be

unionised than younger ones. Union membership is stronger in urban areas when compared to rural areas. Unionisation is lowest among women who work part-time and in female dominated occupations while it is at its highest in the public sector rather than the private sector and in industries and occupations which employ relatively few women (O'Donnell and Hall, 1988:37-38).

As a feminised occupation how widespread is union membership among clerical workers? Clerical workers employed in the private sector and/or small businesses tend to work in either poorly unionised or non-unionised establishments. Casual and part-time employment and moving between jobs are also factors which militate against union membership (Bradley, 1999:166). As noted in chapter one, clerical workers are less likely to join unions because of their affinity and alignment with management. If the clerical worker is employed in a small family business, they may even be friends with the owners. Bearfield (2003a) cites findings from her analysis of the Australian Quality of Working Life Survey. This study was an empirical study based on a nationwide telephone survey conducted in November 2002 of 1,032 employees aged 15 years or older about their attitudes to unions. The survey was commissioned by the Labor Council of NSW. Bearfield found that intermediate clerical, sales and service workers were less sceptical and were more likely to trust senior management in the workplace than professional workers. The details of this survey, particularly in relation to perceptions of union membership among clerical workers, will be discussed a little later.

Generally speaking, the Australian union movement has been antagonistic rather than beneficial to women workers and has helped to maintain gender segregation, the sex-typing of jobs and pay differentials between men and women. Male privilege within the industrial relations system in Australia has been dependent upon the complicity of male union officials, employers and the arbitration system. Setting the agenda for change has often been at the expense of women's interests with much of the focus being on wages and income, enhanced by the provision of overtime and overaward payments (Williams, 1992).

The longest and most significant struggle for women workers was for equal pay. This battle exemplifies how the union movement failed to support women in their campaign for equal pay for equal work. The momentum for the Equal Pay campaign was driven not by unions who had staunchly endorsed the family wage, but rather from women's organisations and the incumbent Labor government (Pocock, 1996: 15). For many years employers had exploited low rates of pay for women until pressure from feminised unions and the Arbitration Commission forced a change (Thomson and Pocock, 1997:75). Unions had problems overcoming the concept of the family wage which essentially barred women from most areas of work because their primary responsibility was seen as being married and bearing children. Further, the union movement found it difficult to reconcile the tensions between women on the one hand wanting flexible work arrangements to meet family responsibilities and union policies on the other hand where these sorts of arrangements were seen as a threat to negotiated work practices (Hakim, 2000: 71; Heiler et al, 1999: 101; Henry and Franzway, 1993:133; O'Donnell, 1984: 58).

The trade union movement is imbued with sexual politics. It has a history of being dominated by men culturally and hierarchically (Franzway, 1997:128-129). Much of its focus has been geared towards the protection of traditional male work patterns and full-time work rather than female workers' interests and responsibility (Baxter et al 1990: 100). A major source of angst for the trade union movement has been the increase in part-time jobs often at the expense of full-time work. There is a perception within sections of the union movement that part-time work will erode the conditions of employment associated with full-time jobs. Thomson and Pocock (1997:85) argue that these sorts of gender biases have perpetuated inequality by lowering women's pay, limiting their employment possibilities, and segmenting the labour market.

Another way that the union movement has undermined the full inclusion of women is in relation to perceptions of skill associated with women's paid employment. Phillipa Hall (1999) wrote about the findings from the NSW Pay Equity Inquiry conducted in 1998. One of the main aims of this Inquiry was to

ascertain why women's work is undervalued and the impact this has on levels of remuneration and pay equality. The Inquiry found that women's work was related to the inadequate recognition of women's level of experience, skill and training acquired both formally and informally. Gender segmentation and skill differentiations between women's occupations have had a direct impact on what women earn. In Australia, women's average weekly earnings remain significantly less than men's (Henry and Franzway, 1993: 131). Essentially men have been more successful in defining critical competencies and what constitutes skill. The union movement with the support of the Arbitration system has actively fought to improve working class men's wages at the expense of women by undermining women's level of skill. The official line was that women did not have the necessary skills and abilities to be paid at the same level as men and were seen as second class citizens (Franzway, 2001:44-45).

Award Restructuring of clerks award

The restructuring of the now defunct Victorian Commercial Clerks Award in 1992 provides a good example of how the unions and official quasi government bodies like the defunct Victorian Industrial Relations Commission systematically undermined the critical competencies and skill involved in clerical work. The decision in this case exemplified how commonly held assumptions and stereotypes about clerical work were instrumental in the final outcome.

The restructuring of the Clerks Award was one of five test cases to be taken on by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in the Victorian Industrial Relations Commission. Before the mid 1990s most clerks were employed under state awards where there were generally specified minimum rates of pay. Award restructuring not only aimed to recognise different skill levels, but also identified career paths and provided recognition for accredited training. In theory it aimed to differentiate between keyboard and other types of clerical work, and clerical and higher status administrative work, thereby giving women

access to a wide range of higher status and better paid jobs. The whole process was resisted strongly by employers. They realised that by acknowledging that clerical workers were already multi-skilled they would have to pay them more. This view was supported by Deputy President Marsh (a former head of the Victorian Trades Hall) who reduced the number of grades in the new Clerical and Administrative Employee's Award from seven to six concurring with employers that there was not sufficient variation in the skills used to support a seventh grade. Deleting the seventh grade essentially extinguished any career path for senior clerical workers.

Outcomes like this further reinforce the historical reason why women's work is consistently undervalued, and that is to avoid paying them more (Henry and Franzway, 1993: 135; Pocock, 1995:111; Probert, 1992; Probert and Wilson, 1993: 17). They also illustrate that the assessment of skill has little to do with the work under consideration. Rather it is indicative of the level of "employee strength and organisation in pushing their claims against employers" (O'Donnell, 1984: 19). In contrast, from a positive perspective the restructuring of the Clerks Award did mean that clerical workers won greater recognition of their diverse skills and in some case they won significant award pay increases (Thomson and Pocock, 1997:81).

As noted above, the centralised award system provided women with a high degree of protection. The shift to enterprise bargaining could seriously jeopardise some of the gains made via award restructuring for clerical workers because employers are not obliged to use skill-based classifications detailed in awards as a framework for establishing pay and conditions. This means that employers can discriminate against clerical workers by under recognising their skills, critical competencies, levels of training or accredited prior learning and therefore avoid paying them what they are worth (Cutcher, 2001:80; Hall and Fruin, 1994:83).

Great expectations – how unions can assist clerical workers

According to Pocock (1997:9, 23) there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that unions are good for women, particularly those who are powerless in low skilled and low paid jobs. However, the organising and recruiting of women is problematic because of the nature of women's employment. Unions have had their greatest success within large blue-collar firms among male full-time workers. In contrast, women tend to be located in smaller workplaces, scattered across a wide geographical area, making it difficult to visit a large number of workers when there may only be two or three members at each workplace. Given the decline in overall union numbers, recruitment comes down to an issue of financial resources. Many unions prefer to focus their energies looking after a few larger workplaces employing thousands of people rather than a large number of small workplaces employing significantly less workers (McManus, 1997: 33-34).

Masculinist discourses applied within unions means that unions still have an image problem among women. Even though the current (2004) head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is a woman, many of the reports within the media revolve around militant antics taken by white, blue-collar, male union leaders. This sort of mainstream reporting makes unions look sexist and it perpetuates the notion that they are for men not women. Despite this, unions still provide an accessible source of protection in the workplace. Most women workers who join unions do so because it is the only form of protection available to them.

Most unions have taken some of this negative imagery on board and now have strategies to promote gender and equality and greater female participation including women's officers, women's committees, training courses targeted at women and policies on sexual harassment. McManus (1997:27) who has worked for a NSW white-collar union believes that there are three challenges which face Australian unions in their quest to organise and recruit more

women. These are how to service unions members, issues of identification and the nature of women's jobs. Many workers look at union membership as a type of insurance policy. When something goes wrong they can ring up the union and seek assistance. Within this model unions act like legal firms, where they give advice and negotiate with the employer. McManus believes that this sort of servicing culture encourages inactivity and passivity among its members because there is a reliance upon external union officials instead of shop stewards or delegates in the workplace. Further, she believes that this sort of servicing culture can replicate traditional power relations between men and women in society (p.30-32).

Building on McManus's arguments, Bearfield (2003a) found that about forty per cent of employees who join unions do so for a safety net. Respondents in this study believed that union membership would provide them with a level of security and protect their rights as employees. In contrast, non-membership of a union did not necessarily mean that respondents in the survey were ideologically opposed to unions, but rather it reflected a level of indifference or apathy in relation to joining a union.

Bearfield found that employees working in organisations with fewer than 100 employees tended to be less positive about unions than those working in large organisations with more than 1,000 employees. Generally speaking, more highly qualified employees tended to hold positive views about unions. In contrast, employees with lower or no formal qualifications were more likely to hold negative views of unions. Bearfield (2003a) found that advanced clerical and service workers (e.g. secretaries, personal assistants and bookkeepers) were less likely to agree that Australia would be better off without unions and that unions do not look after their members, yet they were much less likely than other groups of workers to say they would rather be in a union. In another survey Peetz (1998:722) found that unionism among white-collar workers was lowest among managers and advanced clerical and service workers. Findings such as these confirm the tendency for these sorts of employees to align themselves with management.

Bearfield found that there were two main reasons why respondents did not join a union. The first was that respondents felt they did not need a union because they could manage on their own. This was the case for those working in small workplaces where they felt they could approach the boss directly. The second reason was that a number of respondents felt it was not worth joining a union because they were employed either part-time or casually or did not work enough hours. Others said that there was no relevant union to cover their job or no union presence in the workplace. Industry sector appeared to have some bearing on the reasons for not joining a union. For example, employees in property and business services and the finance and insurance sector which are the largest employers of clerical workers were more likely to question the relevance of becoming a union member and were heavily influenced by the lack of union representation in the workplace (Tully, 1992:13).

Rose (2002) conducted a study on union commitment within a Banking Service Call Centre in Britain. Call Centres are one of the most rapidly growing global industries in a wide range of sectors, employing large numbers of clerical workers to work in telesales, customer service, collections and account management. The rationale for this study was identified by the Trades Union Congress in Britain which identified the following issues within some Call Centres: bullying, the setting of impossible sales target, not getting wages on time and a hostility towards trade union representation. Rose worked on the assumption that Call Centre employees were unlikely to display high levels of organisational and union commitment.

Rose describes how Call Centres are akin to white-collar sweatshops where the labour process is highly proletarianised, routinised, feminised and deskilled. Union membership among Call Centres tends to be higher in larger centres than smaller ones, it is higher in the public sector than in the private sector workplaces and older workplaces were more likely to unionised. In terms of establishing conditions of employment, Rose described how the Call Centres which were the focus of this study reconciled the rhetoric between using the HRM method which essentially excluded the collective bargaining

rights of employees versus the promotion of a partnership which brought about employee commitment and empowerment.

Rose's survey was based on a bank operated Call Centre in Liverpool. It found that absences due to sickness and turnover levels were high. Staff at the centre had a negative perception of their jobs stating that their work was highly pressurised, intensive and monotonous and where reaching established targets was their main objective. Others talked about the constant monitoring and surveillance and the lack of discretion or autonomy in relation to their work. Respondents in this study were essentially ambivalent about union involvement and commitment. Those who were involved in the union were disappointed with the way the union had handled a number of grievances. Rose concludes that trade unions need to refine their recruitments strategies and deal with grievances within Call Centres more effectively.

Although this study was conducted in Britain, Rose acknowledges that similar issues have been experienced in Australia. He states that the Australian Services Union has launched a recruitment campaign with the view of emphasising employers' control over employees, pressurised work environments and an absence of career prospects (Rose, 2002:41).

Rose's study epitomises how industries like Call Centres are directly affected by the vagaries of the globalised economy and how this impacts directly on their workforce. It also highlights in the extreme case the attitudes of clerical workers to the union involvement. Even when conditions of employment are far from ideal, the casualised, part-time nature of working in a Call Centre means that employees are still apathetic about unions. In a sense, Call Centre work provides a "disposable" job which does not require any specialist skills. It is a job which offers flexibility and convenience which appeals to students and women with family responsibilities. The downside is that their conditions of employment are unlikely to improve, the workers have no power or leverage to determine their conditions of employment, there is no career path and the only way out is to find employment elsewhere, thus accounting for the high turnover levels.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the industrial weakness of clerical workers in Australia. It has detailed how Australia has progressively moved to a deregulated labour market where the position of unions has declined significantly since the introduction of the *Workplace Relations Act* which aimed to weaken unions by undermining the membership base through the abolition of compulsory union membership or closed shop workplaces (Bray et al, 2001:16). The Act also made it easier for employers to resist union involvement by encouraging decollectivised employment relations as exemplified by the HRM method of setting pay and conditions of employment (Lee and Peetz, 1998:19). Decentralisation is strongly associated with gender inequality, wage dispersion and the weak bargaining power of disadvantaged groups such as women clerical workers (Hammond and Harbridge, 1995: 373).

Generally speaking, women clerical workers tend not to be union members because they work on a part-time or casual basis in small and privately owned businesses. The likelihood of them striking a good enterprise deal with high wages and flexible conditions of employment within these circumstances is remote. Under enterprise bargaining women clerical workers are often forced to accept jobs under 'take-it-or-leave-it' terms.

Women will continue to do badly in the enterprise bargaining arena not because they cannot negotiate the bargaining minefield, but rather because they lack any substantial leverage or power. Without an independent umpire (the AIRC) to monitor employers, organisations are able to allow unfettered management prerogative to reign. As has been argued throughout this thesis the dual role of paid employees and unpaid homemakers means that women choose part-time or casual employment to fit in with their domestic responsibilities. This means that their links to the labour market are tenuous and more liable to exploitation.

Enterprise bargaining has been touted as the panacea for creating flexibility for women workers, particularly those adaptive women wanting to acquire a work/family balance. Yet the gap between the rhetoric of flexibility and the reality is large. The flexibility within enterprise bargaining is usually “employer-driven “ and “employer-defined” (Charlesworth, 1997:104). Women want predictable and regular hours preferably during weekdays. It would appear that the trade-off for such flexibility is for employers to extend working times. The anticipated negative effects of enterprise bargaining will mean that there will be significant pay differentials based on gender, lower access to agreements for women, their under-representation in bargaining and greater flexibility in work time arrangements which will suit the employer rather than women’s interests.

The effectiveness of women clerical workers in the enterprise bargaining arena is largely dependent upon the type of occupations in which they are employed, the size of the firm, the organisational culture of their workplace and whether it is a public or private sector organisation. Workers with sought after skills have greater leverage and bargaining power than women clerical workers who have generalist skills that are in plentiful supply. As noted in chapter one, clerical work is not a homogenous occupation. There are no Australian studies which differentiate and compare the terms and conditions of elementary, intermediate and advanced clerical workers. The findings of this study detailed in chapter seven provide some indication as to whether job classification and content has any impact on the outcomes of enterprise bargaining.

It is the contention of this thesis that women clerical workers’ lack of bargaining power and the continuing failure to recognise the skills and productivity contributions they make to an organisation may not be easily removed and may even increase over time. The information in this chapter provides a context in which to understand and analyse the experience of the forty female clerical workers who participated in this study. The research findings detailed in chapters five to seven provide some insights into the choices and constraints confronting women clerical workers in this study in relation to determining their conditions of employment. It looks at how their conditions of

employment were determined, the criteria upon which they chose their jobs, opportunities for advancement and how their productivity and input into the overall workings of their employing organisation were perceived by not only management but also by themselves.

The next chapter will explore the theoretical implications of clerical workers as adaptive women and what this means in terms of them striving to achieve a work/family balance.

Chapter 3

Preference Theory: an explanatory framework to understand the work/family motivations of clerical workers

Introduction

From the evidence presented in chapter one and two, it is clear clerical work does not offer the best conditions of employment in terms of pay and conditions and career advancement. Yet it continues to have an enduring appeal among some women across their life cycle. Women's attachment to the labour market is largely shaped by their family circumstances. The more responsibility a woman has at home caring for dependent children, disabled or elderly family members, the less likely she is to participate in paid employment. It is the contention of this thesis that adaptive women who want to combine work and family are more likely to accept jobs such as clerical work because it provides them with the necessary flexibility which allows them to achieve a balance between their paid work and family life.

Building on the previous two chapters, this chapter will provide an explanatory framework with which to understand the work/family motivations of clerical workers. Generally speaking, most clerical workers are adaptive women who at some time in their lives will choose to combine both paid employment and unpaid work. This chapter will look at the characteristics of adaptive women and how they are compatible with the nature of clerical work.

For most women, motherhood is an important aspect of their identity and is a positive experience. Since the 1950s women's attitudes to the role of mothers has been significantly challenged. There is no longer an expectation that motherhood automatically equates with the role of full-time homemaker. However, one should not underestimate the influence of gender ideology which dictates that women should prioritise caring for children over paid

employment. Attitudes about what children need and how mothers fulfil these needs have remained remarkably static up until the present time. The great majority of mothers with young children still believe that they should be at home with their children at least during the preschool years. In contrast, some women actively choose a different path where work is central to their identity and where they are able to become “self-actualisers of risk society” (Probert: 2001:12). Indeed, women’s preferences are diverse, and the level of priority they give to their domestic responsibilities versus paid work is influenced by a wide variety of factors.

This chapter will provide a detailed discussion on Hakim’s preference theory and how it provides the most suitable framework in which to understand the work/family choices clerical workers make. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section outlines Hakim’s works with particular attention to preference theory and how it relates to clerical workers. The second section will look at the criticisms levelled at Hakim’s work. Despite these criticisms, it is the contention of this thesis that Hakim’s preference theory still provides a useful framework in which to understand the work and lifestyle choices clerical workers make. The third section provides an alternative way of using preference theory with the inclusion of additional theoretical precepts. It is the intention of this thesis to create a more inclusive theoretical paradigm with which to understand the choices and constraints faced by female clerical workers in their employment decisions.

Hakim’s previous work

Catherine Hakim has strongly argued that many women want to have a family and the opportunity and choice to stay at home to care for their children. It is her contention that not all women want to be career focussed, but rather some women would prefer to stay at home on a permanent basis to raise a family, while others choose to mix part-time paid employment with family responsibilities.

From a personal perspective, Hakim is married and made the choice ten years ago not to have children. She is work-centred, but having been brought up in a large family appreciates the importance and value of family life (Radio National, 2003, *The Age*; 2003).

Hakim's most controversial article was published in 1991 and was titled "Grateful Slaves and Self Made Women". Before this time she had written about occupational segregation (1979) and homeworking in Britain (1988). In her 1991 article she argued that most women are not grateful slaves (part-time workers) who are downtrodden and who blithely accept without question their roles as secondary earners in low paid, low skilled and low status jobs. Rather, women are self-made because they make a conscious choice to have a "marriage career" rather than a career which ascribes them with a high status and high paying rewards. If given the option, most women will choose part-time and casual labour in order to meet their family and domestic needs.

In 1995 Hakim wrote "Five Feminist Myths about Women's Employment". In this article women were described as being less committed to the labour market than men because of competing interests between work and family. Based on these five feminist myths an argument was built which suggested that occupational segregation had evolved to provide separate jobs and occupations for women wanting to follow a marriage career. These jobs were contingent upon most women being less committed to paid employment and where family life is given primacy over labour force participation.

One year later, in 1996, Hakim published *Key Issues in Women's Work*. This study was based on empirical research using cross-national data mainly from the US and Western Europe which built arguments around women having heterogenous work preferences. Another central theme of this book was that most women reinforce the sexual division of labour by ascribing to marriage and a family rather than a full-time continuous career. Hakim concluded that these women use their own agency to consciously choose qualitatively different life courses to suit their needs.

Many of the ideas from these earlier works formed the basis for preference theory which is detailed in her book titled *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century* (2000). Preference theory has been based on empirical evidence using cross-national comparisons to explain women's lifestyle preferences as well as their work and family patterns. From a theoretical perspective it integrates economic and sociological theory to describe women's relationship to paid and unpaid work (Hakim, 2000:192).

What is preference theory?

Preference theory provides a comprehensive framework in which to understand the position of female clerical workers in the labour market and how this impinges upon their ability to effectively engage in workplace bargaining. Feminist writers in the past have tended to focus on the experience of professional women, while preference theory is pertinent to all women whatever their occupational status. The central argument within preference theory posits that women make choices about their involvement in the labour market based on lifestyle preferences and family responsibilities.

One of the key precepts of preference theory is the notion that we live in what Hakim terms a "new scenario" (Hakim, 2000:7). The new scenario is defined by five major events which started at the end of the twentieth century. The first is the contraceptive revolution which meant that women now have access to reliable forms of contraception. As a result, women are no longer slaves to their biology, but can choose whether to have a family or not. The second is the equal opportunities revolution which enshrined in legislation that women have equal access to education, occupations and careers in the labour market. The third has been the relative decline in manufacturing in most advanced economies and the increase in service work and white-collar occupations which are more appealing to women. The fourth, with the deregulation of the labour market, has been an increase in part-time and casual employment which appeals to women who prefer to be secondary income earners. Part-time jobs provide variable hours, non-standard work arrangements such as

temporary work, fixed-term contracts, agency temporary workers, subcontracting, homework and self employment. The fifth and final event within the new scenario has been the shift away from traditionalism to individualism where the onus is now upon individuals to determine their own attitudes, values and personal lifestyle preferences (Hakim, 2000:7).

It could be argued that all of the factors which make up the new scenario are present in a modern society like Australia. Although there is some contention surrounding the success of equal employment opportunity legislation in the workplace and other public realms, it is not within the scope of this thesis to evaluate its merits.

All five events within the new scenario are key elements of advanced modern societies. The research for *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century* (2000) is mainly based upon data from Britain and the United States which were transformed in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Wealthy modern societies like Britain and the USA have “liberal societies and *laissez-faire* economies, and relatively unregulated labour markets which provide the least restrictive environments for the emergence of new social patterns and innovations in the organisation of employment” (Hakim, 2000: 17-18). As a result, the consequences of the new scenario are more evident in these two countries because they have been in place longer.

Within this book Hakim draws upon a broad range of research from other prosperous modern societies in Western Europe. She provides some cursory reference to Asian countries like Japan and Singapore. There are a few brief and minor mentions of Australia in some of the data. It is worth noting that the completion of the new scenario has not necessarily occurred in all Western countries. The role of governments in facilitating or impeding changes which constitute the new scenario is essential. To highlight this point, in Spain, for example, the contraceptive revolution, equal opportunities revolution and creation of jobs for secondary earners (there are virtually no part-time jobs in Spain) have not been fully implemented (Hakim, 2003b).

According to Hakim, the new scenario is more likely to have benefited women born after 1960. From an employment perspective it has meant that younger women have made gains from the equal opportunities revolution and the expansion of white-collar jobs. Although women born before 1960 still derive some benefits from the new scenario, economic and social conditions were more likely to influence their employment decisions rather than intentions, plans, preferences, attitudes and values (Hakim, 2003b: 159-60). Older women grew up with the idea that they could not make lifestyle choices. It is only in late modernity where personal choice and autonomy are seen as essential and desirable that women have been free to express and choose their own identity, values, personality and lifestyle (Hakim, 2003b: 8).

Another key element of preference theory is the notion of heterogeneity where “one size fit all” policies and world views do not meet the needs of all women (Hakim, 2000: 175). Heterogeneity in the context of preference theory moves beyond post-modern feminist concepts of diversity such as cultural variations due to ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. As a predictive measure of women’s lifestyle choice, preference theory transcends cultural variations because it is applicable to all women no matter what their ethnic, religious, or class background may be. Such a view is consistent with the concept of reflexive modernity where the focal point of people’s decision making accords with their private lives and personal identity rather than being a result of public or political pressure (Hakim, 2003b:257).

Preference theory draws upon some of the essential features of reflexive modernity. According to Hakim,

preference theory was developed independently of theories of reflexive modernity and the reflexive project of the self, but it is consonant with this other perspective. Preference theory can be seen as an empirically based statement of the choices women and men actually make in late modernity (Hakim, 2000: 13).

According to Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) one of the essential features of reflexive modernity is the notion of individualisation and how individuals have had to create their own self-identity in late modernity. Reflexivity refers to the process whereby individuals shape their own biographical narratives, or in other words, a 'do-it-yourself' biography. The way in which individuals produce, stage and piece together their own biographies is instrumental in the way in which industrial society has been transformed from the 'old' to the 'new' (Beck, 1995: 13, Giddens, 1991). In late modernity, people have more options in regard to lifestyle preferences and these choices have become increasingly important in defining self-identity and daily activity as a way of reconciling the pluralism and diversity of choices available to them (Giddens, 1991:5). Reflexive biographies are an integral part of family life. Women can choose a combination of lifestyles across their life cycle from being career focussed to home-centred or combination of both.

In essence, reflexive modernisation describes the changing relationship between social structures and social agents. When individuals become less constrained by structures they become more individualised. This process is reflexive because it describes a process whereby individuals free themselves from tradition and structural constraints (Beck, 1992:2-3). In other words, individuals no longer derive meaning and security from traditional supports and institutions such as the family, marriage, sex roles and class consciousness. They must now rely on their own resources to anticipate and endure risks and then develop strategies to deal with these dangers either biographically or politically (Beck, 1992: 76, 87). This tendency towards individualisation does not necessarily occur in a void but is reflected in the collective experiences of society.

The notion of agency and women's lifestyle choices are key features of preference theory. According to Hakim human agency has a more significant impact upon women's choices than patterns of economic activity or sex-role stereotyping. In other words, the choices women make are self-made (Hakim, 1991). Essentially, the choices women make are in response to risk society where they can no longer rely on traditional supports and networks to map

their life course. Whether a woman chooses the role of wife and mother or career woman, the decision involves women as actors actively weighing up the pros and cons even when these decisions appear paradoxical. For example, many women have equal access to education, yet a significant number continue to choose husbands and occupations which reinforce and maintain traditional roles.

Another key precept of preference theory is Hakim's ideal types which describe how women's work and lifestyle preferences fall into three broad categories. These three lifestyle preferences cut across social classes, income groups and educational levels, as well as cultural variations including political opinion, religious groups and other ideological positions (Hakim, 2003:257). The three types are work-centred, home-centred and adaptive women (see table 3.1 below).

These three ideal types are, as Hakim acknowledges, a "simplification of reality" (2000: 190). Generally speaking, specific case studies such as the findings in this research (see chapters five to seven) can elucidate more clearly the intricate aspects of everyday life in relation to adaptive women whose priorities may shift over time. Later in this chapter I will introduce four new sub-categories of the adaptive typology which better reflect women's work and lifestyle experience across their life cycle.

It is important to note that Hakim believes preference theory which, incorporates the new scenario, has a limited shelf life of about fifty years. After this time, change will have occurred so rapidly as to render it obsolete (Hakim, 2000).

Table 3.1 Hakim's typology relating to women's lifestyle preferences in the twenty-first century.

Home-centred	Adaptive	Work-centred
Approximately 10 to 20 per cent of women are home-centred	Approximately 60 to 70 per cent of women fall into the adaptive category	Between 10 to 30 per cent of women are work-centred
Family life and children are the main priorities throughout life.	This group is most diverse and includes women who want to combine work and family, plus drifters and unplanned careers.	Childless women are concentrated here. Main priority in life is employment or equivalent activities in the public arena: politics, sport, art etc.
Prefer not to work.	Want to work, but <i>not</i> totally committed to work career.	Committed to work or equivalent activities.
Qualifications obtained for intellectual dowry.	Qualifications obtained with the intention of working.	Large investment in qualifications/ training for employment or other activities.
Responsive to social and family policy.	Very responsive to all policies.	Responsive to employment policies.

Source: Hakim (2000:6)

In contrast to women, men have relatively homogenous work and lifestyle preferences. Hakim identifies three ideal types for men, family-centred, work-centred and adaptive. Generally, speaking approximately 60 per cent of men are work-centred, 30 per cent are adaptive and 10 per cent are family-centred. Family-centred men prefer not engaged in competitive activities within the public domain because their children and family are the main priority throughout their life. Adaptive men have similar work and lifestyle motivations to adaptive women. They want to combine both work and family but are not totally committed to a work career. Work is the main priority and focus of work-centred men. This group is most likely to heavily invest in qualifications and training to enhance their job prospects (Hakim, 2000:255).

The intention of this thesis is not to compare the work and lifestyle aspirations of men and women. Nor is it to include a detailed analysis of home-centred or work-centred women, these two types will be briefly outlined in the next section below. The main focus of this thesis will be on the adaptive category because it encapsulates the work and lifestyle preferences of the respondents in this study.

Home-centred women

Home-centred women give priority to children and family life and accept the sexual division of labour at home. Some home-centred women may never have a paid job, while others may work full-time in a professional job up until the time they marry and become a full-time mother. Home-centred women may acquire a good education and qualifications as a means of accessing marriage markets. Hakim argues that “women with educational qualifications bring an ‘intellectual dowry’ to marriage, enabling wives to be an intellectual partner and equal to their husband as well as helping to educate their own children”.

In terms of social status, a marriage career can offer women the opportunity for upward mobility, rather than women forging their own heightened status through education and a career. Home-centred women generally prefer not to return to the workforce and may only do so to support her family in the event of becoming a widow, divorced or if her partner is unable to work because of ill health or another reason. A woman can still be home centred even if she works full-time, but has the desire at some point in her life to marry and become a full-time mother (Hakim, 2000: 159-63, 192).

Hakim notes in her latest study (2003) that home-centred women are an important minority group because they represent a larger proportion of women than those who identify themselves as being work-centred. Hakim states

this is worth underlining, if only because the emphasis in media reports and policy analyses tends to be on the publicly visible group of high achievers who are work-centred. Only rarely do government reports acknowledge that the vast majority of women, are not career-oriented and that many prefer not to do paid work at all (2003b:85).

Work-centred women

Work-centred women are more likely to work in managerial and professional occupations, but can be found throughout the occupational structure (Hakim, 2003b: 105). They tend to have higher grade jobs and higher earnings because they expend more time and effort in training. This group of women are similar to men because they are more likely to undertake courses and invest their own money in gaining qualifications. The attainment of qualifications does not automatically mean a woman will be career focussed. However, qualifications provide women with the opportunity to undertake paid employment which is more financially and personally rewarding.

Some work-centred women may be voluntarily childless, while others may have children. For those with children motherhood does not determine their identity but rather, work is their principal activity in life. Childcare is usually outsourced to others. Like men, work-centred women tend to have continuous work histories rarely taking career breaks (Hakim, 2000: 164-65, 250).

Characteristics of adaptive women

The following summarises the defining characteristics of adaptive women as described by Hakim in her most recent works (Hakim, 2000, 2003b) Table 3.1 indicates that the majority of women within wealthy modern societies display characteristics consonant with the adaptive typology. These women are not necessarily confined to women working part-time in low status jobs like clerical work; they are also found among those working full-time in higher grade professional and managerial occupations. Adaptive women prefer to combine paid employment with family life without favouring one over the other. Women are still regarded as being adaptive even

if they do not marry, or marry late in life, they may work throughout life, and thus appear, in behaviour, to be work-centred women. However,

they differ from work-centred women in not being committed to a career from the start (Hakim, 2000: 166).

Adaptive women are represented in a broad range of occupations, but are more likely to be found in occupations that have been regarded as 'feminine' such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work because these jobs allow women the opportunity to transfer to part-time work after having children (Hakim, 2000:39)

Another characteristic of many adaptive women is their ad hoc attachment to the labour market. They actively choose to work part-time and move in and out of the labour market at different stages in their lives in order to accommodate family needs. They may not actively seek paid employment, but may take a job if it is offered to them. Similarly, their approach to education and training may be one of ambivalence. They might take up a course if it is offered to them or if it is easy to access, but they could be reluctant to pursue it if it interferes with family life. Some adaptive women are well educated which gives them access to elite marriage markets. Hakim believes that marriage markets are just as important as the labour market for women to achieve a higher socio-economic status and upward mobility (Hakim, 2000:192-95).

The plans of adaptive women are largely determined by their husbands. For example, if the woman marries into a higher economic bracket her reasons for returning to the labour market and the speed with which she does this after having a child may be not be driven by financial considerations, but rather self-expression, personal achievement and social contact. In contrast, a woman who marries someone from a low income bracket may have to return to the labour market very quickly as a matter of financial imperative in order to provide the necessary income so the family can survive. Even though a woman has to return to work as a matter of financial necessity, her work preference is still shaped by her desire to put her family first. Adaptive women are most likely to stay married or cohabit because their preferred lifestyle is dependent upon their partner being the primary breadwinner or, at the very least, in regular employment (Hakim, 2000:116).

Hakim argues that one of the defining features of adaptive women is their role as secondary earners. The role of secondary earners is intrinsically tied to gender ideology where the primary role of women is in the home and as dependents of male partners who provide them with financial support. The income from secondary earners is usually supplementary or secondary to a larger source of income which may include a full-time breadwinner, or in the case of sole parents, state welfare benefits or child maintenance. A secondary earner is not defined by how much she earns nor the use of these earnings. When women marry they experience a mind shift where they move from seeing themselves as primary earners when single to being secondary earners when married. Adaptive women who are secondary earners consciously choose occupations and jobs which are compatible with family life. These include jobs which lend themselves to intermittent or part-time work, and are usually “feminine” occupations such as clerical work, which tolerate discontinuous employment and where high labour turnover is tolerated. Secondary earners often choose jobs which are close to home or even forgo earnings in favour of voluntary work, educational courses or other activities. Secondary earners include students, older workers nearing retirement and married women (Hakim, 2003: 6, Hakim, 2000: 70-71,101).

In terms of policy development, adaptive women are responsive to any policies which favour both paid employment and the option of staying at home. Adaptive women benefit from fiscal policies and schemes which recognise and reward women who choose to stay at home and rear their children as well as equal employment policies in the workplace which are important to work-centred women. Subsidised childcare, part-time jobs and long career breaks of between five and ten years are of particular interest to adaptive women (Hakim, 2000: 236, 250). Generally speaking, adaptive mothers still choose to give equal or greater priority to their children and families particularly when they are young. It is not surprising that conflict arises when trying to weigh up the needs and expectations of the workplace versus the family. According to Hakim (2000:276) “The conflict is one of allegiance, personal identity and normative priorities, not simply a practical problem of daily time management”.

Clerical work: an adaptive woman's job of choice

The academic research on clerical work I have discussed in chapter one is consistent with the adaptive typology and a number of parallels can be drawn. Here, I will briefly summarise some of the main findings from chapter one which conform to clerical workers being adaptive women.

Many women undertake clerical work prior to getting married and having a family and their labour market participation is largely shaped by their domestic responsibilities. Among some of the clerical workers in this study (see chapter 5) there was an expectation that they would follow a marriage career rather than one in the labour market. Many women are socialised through their personal and family networks and the education system to aspire to feminised occupations such as clerical work because it will enable them to combine work and family. Clerical work provides the ideal job for women wanting to balance work/family life over their life cycle because it lends itself to flexible and part-time work. It is readily accessible, and with a few basic skills most women can secure a clerical job. Although clerical work offers jobs which are often low in status and pay with little or no scope for promotion it still has broad appeal among women. The low wages received by clerical workers reinforce the primacy of the male breadwinner, yet many women clerical workers are happy to be secondary income earners because it enables them to achieve a work/family balance.

Let us now turn to specific elements of the adaptive type and how they relate to why women select clerical work. One of the key features of adaptive women is that they change their work preferences and priorities over their life cycle. They are often torn between the competing attractions of family life and paid employment. Adaptive women who are mothers would prefer to give priority to children over paid work while their children are young. They are also distinctive because they are unwilling to choose one single life focus and therefore are generally unwilling to choose between work or family.

Many adaptive women tend to gravitate towards occupations which are most compatible with their lifestyle preference. Female dominated occupations such as clerical work have the following attributes:

- the highest incidence of part-time work,
- the lowest incidence of unsocial hours,
- the lowest level of trade union membership,
- the ability to tolerate high turnover levels (Hakim, 1995: 450)

Essentially, clerical work provides women with a job rather than a career. Clerical work is perfect for women who are single and want to work full-time before they are married or partnered. Those women who are hindered by family responsibilities can easily access clerical work because it is available on a part-time basis. Women can usually secure a clerical job even after extended breaks or periods out of the labour market because clerical work tolerates intermittent employment. Chapter one discussed how many women clerical workers returning to the labour market after having a child may be penalised. For example, women working in senior clerical roles, such as personal and executive assistants may be unable to continue in these positions because they are unable to work the requisite long hours when their children are young. Consequently, if these women want a part-time clerical job they usually have to take a demotion. However, these women may return to similar roles at a later time. Women with dependent children tend to choose elementary and intermediate clerical jobs (see chapter one and Appendix one for definitions) because they are less demanding in terms of level of responsibility and the part-time workload is less likely to encroach on family time. This demonstrates that clerical work is adaptable over the life cycle. The study by Davies and Rosser (1986) found that when women clerical workers no longer had dependent children they were ready for more challenging work.

Despite the fact that women now have access to education and training, with opportunities to take up professional and managerial jobs, women still choose jobs like clerical work which allow them to choose a life centred around home

and family. Although work-centred women are more likely to be well educated, education is not necessarily predictive of whether a woman will automatically become career oriented. The reason is that not all women with qualifications seek a career, as distinct from a reasonably interesting or well paid job (Hakim, 2000:96, 185). Even among many tertiary qualified clerical workers there is some evidence to suggest that lifestyle preferences rather than qualifications are the strongest determinant of their job selection and their employment patterns (Hakim, 2003b:120, Pringle, 1988:20).

Clerical work is an ideal occupation for women who are secondary income earners. There is some evidence to suggest that secondary earners tend to be concentrated in low grade white-collar jobs (Hakim, 2003b:120). This type of lifestyle preference is dependent upon a male breadwinner who is in regular employment. Essentially their earnings from employment are supplementary or secondary to a larger source of income. However, one should not underestimate the financial contribution made by secondary earners particularly among low income households where they make a significant contribution to the family budget. Clerical work enables women who are secondary earners to work on an intermittent and part-time basis in a job which is close to home. Secondary earners may take full-time clerical jobs which are relatively low paid but provide compensating advantages such as convenient hours, an agreeable work environment, and pleasant social relations (see chapters 5 and 7). These advantages mean that they derive a high level of satisfaction from the workplace and are able to combine work and family.

We need to keep in mind that the adaptive typology is a simplification of reality. Its purpose is to enable us to analyse the work and lifestyle preferences of the majority of women in modern western societies who fall into the adaptive category. The adaptive typology can discern work trends and family patterns but it cannot predict outcomes among individual women with complete certainty because of extraneous social and environmental variables. The way in which women exercise and act on their agency is a core principle of preference theory. In relation to job selection Hakim (2000:39) argues that there is an overriding sense that many adaptive women consciously choose

occupations such as clerical work because it suits their family needs even though the new scenario has afforded women more choice than ever. Equal access to education, and the choice of a wide range of occupations and professionals has not thwarted the popularity of clerical work. In other words, it would appear that work centrality is not determined by jobs and earnings, but rather gender ideology and personal identities outside the labour market which impact upon women's choices (Hakim, 2003b:104). Women actively choose between being work-centred, home-centred or a combination of both. They can choose between financial self-reliance, complete financial dependence or being a secondary income earner.

We cannot say with unequivocal certainty that clerical workers are all adaptive women or will follow the same work and lifestyle course. However, there are many similarities between the way in which clerical work has developed as a feminised occupation to suit women across their life cycles. Finally, the nature of clerical work lends itself to the adaptive typology.

Criticisms of Hakim's work

Hakim has her critics particularly among feminists and academics who are advocating for paid maternity leave and policies which promote a more inclusive labour market for women where work is the primary focus of their lives. The most scathing rebuttals of Hakim's work are in relation to the influence of agency versus macrostructural issues and how they determine women's work and family orientations. Although preference theory is an ideal tool to help understand why women choose particular jobs, it offers very little in the way of analysis as to what happens to women once they are in the workplace and the external influences which present constant challenges to the choices they make.

Critics argue that preference theory is too simplistic, relying upon three broad typologies to classify women and their work preferences. Pocock (2003:32) believes that "typing people" overlooks the "true dynamic nature" of people's

lives. She argues that work orientations should be understood in terms of being “a series of labour/care transitions rather than static personal types”.

Hakim has addressed concerns raised by her critics and has endeavoured to refine her arguments in her more recent works. For example, Proctor and Padfield (1999) were critical of two earlier typologies employed by Hakim to explain the heterogeneity of women: ‘family oriented’ and ‘career oriented’. She loosely defined a third category called ‘drifters’ which was an early form of nomenclature to describe women in the adaptive category. It referred to women having unplanned careers because they could not decide on being either career-centred or home-centred; they wanted to have a combination of both. Proctor and Padfield’s study aimed to ascertain the differences in the work orientations of single childless women and partnered women who had recently become mothers. They found the two typologies employed by Hakim to be unsatisfactory because these women wanted the opportunity to combine work and family in their lives. By redefining the adaptive typology Hakim has more accurately described the heterogeneous work orientations of women.

This next section will provide an overview of the critiques of Hakim’s theory. It will discuss the legitimacy of the concerns raised by other feminist academics and scholars and how these may or may not impinge upon the validity and reliability of preference theory to predict women’s work and lifestyle choices.

Determination of women’s work preferences: structural factors versus agency

A number of feminist scholars have views which are contrary to those found in Hakim’s preference theory. Much of Hakim’s work is based on the notion of agency where women actively choose a different life course which suits their needs.

Although Hakim does not entirely negate the issue of structure in her arguments, she strongly believes that sociological research needs to shift its emphasis from structural factors which have been the predominant focus of

research during the twentieth century, towards values and preferences which influence behaviour in the “new scenario” in modern society in the last half of the twentieth and twenty-first century (Hakim, 2000: 278). She states:

Choices are not made in a vacuum. Social and economic factors still matter, and will produce national variations in employment patterns and lifestyle choices. In addition, the choices people make are moulded by an unpredictable circus of events: economic recessions and booms, wars, changes of government, as well as events in private lives, individual ability, accidents or ill health, ‘disastrous’ marriages and ‘brilliant’ marriages (Hakim, 2003a:7).

Although Hakim has been accused of referring to women’s labour market behaviour as being “excessively voluntaristic” (Fagan 2001:242), Hakim is still convinced that the conscious exercise of choice rather than structural forces have a greater impact upon women’s attachment to the labour market. To illustrate this point Hakim describes how a woman from a low income family can work full-time to improve the quality of life for her family, but her work preference may be to stay at home full-time. Essentially, it is the woman’s work and lifestyle preference which determines whether she is work-centred, home-centred or adaptive. Hakim believes that preferences and values are therefore more important determinants of behaviour than macro structural factors within modern societies where post-materialist values have emerged. (Hakim, 2000:81, 2003b: 125, 128). This point is illustrated by the following quote:

Preferences do not predict outcomes with complete certainty because of the innumerable intervening factors in the social, political and economic environment. But in the prosperous modern societies that permit a much greater variety of lifestyle choices than in the past, preferences become a much more important determinant of outcomes (Hakim, 2000: 169).

Critics of Hakim argue that by focussing primarily on the importance of agency at the expense of social structure she has adopted a post-feminist discourse which gives little if any significant recognition to the importance of social structure in defining why women choose family over work (Crompton and Harris, 1998, 1999; Fagan, 2001; Ginn *et al*, 1996; Proctor and Padfield, 1999). Proctor and Padfield (1999: 158-59) argue that by recognising the strong interplay between structure and agency we can determine women's work preferences in the context of persistent gender inequalities. Without knowing the circumstances in which women exercise their agency we cannot accurately gauge how their work preferences at a particular time and place have been determined (Ginn *et al*, 1996). Crompton and Harris (1998:130) believe that there is no doubt that human agency and individual choice do play an integral part in shaping lifestyle preferences. However, will alone does not define the lives of many women. To regard work or lifestyle preferences as being shaped solely by the presence or absence of family responsibility is "universalistic and monocausal". Work orientations are dependent upon more than just preferences and choice. Fagan (2001:242) believes that work orientations are formed by stages of the life cycle, workplace attitudes and behaviour, experiences in education and the labour market. Although less tangible the influence of gender ideology and the male breadwinner model of family life also have a significant impact. The choices women make may therefore be constrained by structural factors which are outside their sphere of influence and control (Charlesworth, 1999).

Crompton and Harris (1998:123) argue there are a number of structural factors which impact upon a woman's work orientations. These include the stage of her life cycle, workplace attitudes and behaviour, occupational status and the national context in which she lives. These findings have been based on qualitative research undertaken by the two authors on two occupations: medicine and banking which are in the process of becoming feminised. Their study has been conducted in several European countries. The study was particularly aimed at finding out how women select the occupation which suits them. They found that women doctors were more likely than the women bankers to make career choices which enabled them to combine work and

family. For example, general practice offered women doctors the opportunity to work regular hours and provides part-time work. In contrast, women in management positions within the banking sector tended to make career decisions later. Women in banking found it difficult to achieve family friendly work arrangements and tended to have fewer children. All the women in this study were committed to their employment. Those who had children tended to have short career breaks before returning to paid employment. The doctors were more likely to take up part-time work while their children were young. The bankers had difficulty achieving this sort of flexibility because their workplaces demanded that they be available to work long hours and deal with daily crises.

Although the study by Crompton and Harris (1998) is not about clerical workers it does emphasise the way in which adaptive women consciously choose their own work-life biographies as well as the sorts of structural constraints which influence their decisions. The women in this study were highly educated and held professional/managerial occupations, but not all were work-centred; a considerable number displayed behaviour consistent with characteristics typical to adaptive women. The process of weighing up their attachment to employment versus family life involved a complex process of assessing the pros and cons of each. Some women chose a career with the specific intention of combining work and family, while others did not. The bankers went into employment with no clear intentions of what their future family status might be. This study also draws attention to how women's attachment to the labour market is altered according to the different stages of their life cycle.

What does this mean for clerical workers? In chapters one and two we saw how structural factors, such as the welfare state, fiscal policies, the industrial relations scene, male breadwinner ethos and masculine cultural practices embedded within organisations can have a significant impact upon the nature of clerical work and experience of women clerks in the workplace. Women with family responsibilities are often forced into part-time work because their men folk have to work very long hours (Fagan, 2001:241). It is untenable for two parents to work very long hours as this may compromise family and

domestic responsibilities. Even though clerical work may not provide the most optimal conditions of employment it does allow women to access a paid job on a part-time basis. The choice of job available to clerical workers is largely affected by structural factors such as the availability of work, the number and spread of hours offered and the availability of childcare. If the woman lives in an area where there is no childcare or no suitable part-time jobs she is unlikely to secure employment.

Job commitment and part-time workers

Work commitment among women who are employed on a part-time basis is an area where Hakim's work has come under a good deal of scrutiny. Hakim believes that women's lack of commitment to their paid employment is due to three main factors. Firstly, women are less committed to the workplace because they see themselves first and foremost as wives and mothers. Secondly, women are happy to accept low paid and low status jobs because they see themselves as secondary earners. Thirdly, women are less committed to the labour market than men which is reflected in their higher levels of turnover.

Hakim (2003b:55) argues that there is a strong link between work commitment, level of education and occupational grade. She believes work commitment is always highest in professional and managerial occupations where skill development requires years of education and/or on-the-job training. In contrast, work commitment is always lowest among female part-time workers in routine jobs and unskilled occupations. In terms of work commitment over the life cycle, it is always highest among young people starting their careers who are eager to prove themselves in the workplace, but declines steadily over the life cycle. It is at its lowest among people of retirement age.

According to Hakim the commitment of a part-time worker is not equal to the commitment of a full-time worker. Qualitative differences between the work orientations of full-timers and part-timers are not reflected in the simple measure of non-financial work commitment. It is lowest among female part-

timers and unskilled occupations particularly where the work is routinised and lacks autonomy. Work commitment among women is shaped by gender ideology particularly when the role of breadwinner falls to men (2003b:55-58). Part-timer workers are attracted to “feminine” jobs which offer little in the way of career paths and where work is seen as a source of income and social activity (Hakim, 1996:106-107).

A number of authors (Crompton and Harris, 1998, 1999; Fagan, 2001; Ginn et al, 1996; Walsh, 1999; Warren and Walters, 1999) have questioned Hakim’s notion that women with families are not highly committed to their careers. They believe that women can have a family and be committed to their job. For example, it is not necessarily the case that a woman who works part-time is more committed to her family than work, and that she has little interest in good wages, promotion and workplace politics. Instead of making blanket statements, there is a counter argument which states that women can be equally committed to their jobs and personal life without having to compromise both. The level of commitment by employees can be attributed to inappropriate job choice, the type of low quality jobs women undertake and the weak bargaining position they have with employers particularly when they try to accommodate family responsibilities (Walsh, 1999). Further, Pocock (2003:160) argues that the transition between full-time and part-time work and vice versa is fraught and poorly managed. Many full-time jobs do not lend themselves to part-time hours and there is a reluctance on the part of organisations to undertake workplace innovation to accommodate the needs of part-time workers.

According to her critics many of Hakim’s conclusions have been drawn from statistical data where participant intent has been assumed rather than fully explored. In most of her work she fails to adequately discuss the emotional toll that women must deal with carrying the double load of employment and unpaid labour in the home. This includes the emotional stress and physical exhaustion of having to juggle both work and family roles (Bradley et al, 2000). As a consequence of this “time bind” (Hochschild, 1997) women choose jobs by weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of working full-time. This

includes juggling the demands of family with full-time work on the one hand, or on the other hand, working part-time, changing jobs, taking a demotion or leaving the labour market altogether. While not all women choose the latter options “most women are tainted by the expectation that they will” (Pocock, 2003: 149, see also Charlesworth, 1999:20).

Another area which is seen as being neglected by Hakim is the relationship between high labour market turnover and a perceived lack of commitment among women workers with family responsibilities. Transience in paid employment may not indicate a lack of commitment on the part of women, but rather is a response to an inflexible labour market which has difficulty accommodating women with family responsibilities. There is some evidence to suggest that for both sexes having a preschool child marks a decline in employment commitment, but once the youngest child is at school the average employment commitment for employed mothers and fathers is almost identical (Fagan, 2001: 249). When children are at school, there is an opportunity for women to increase their hours of paid employment. Changing jobs may be the only course of action to acquire preferred hours of employment. Another example may relate to the desire to seek new challenges in paid employment. In relation to clerical work, given the lack of promotion opportunities, many women are forced to find a job elsewhere. Valli (1986:193) argues that boredom and dissatisfaction at work translates to three types of behaviour: low production standards, demands for change, or quitting the job. From a financial perspective, if a woman's partner loses his job, she may be forced to return to the workforce full-time and this may require getting another job with full-time hours. All of these are valid reasons for changing jobs or leaving paid employment and bear little or no relevance to work commitment. Hakim fails to appreciate that choice in employment is not freely available to all, and that non-standard forms of employment are used as weapons against workers (Bradley et al 2000:69).

There are many factors which impinge upon worker satisfaction among women who work part-time. Generally speaking, part-time workers are more satisfied than full-time workers (Wolcott and Glezer, 1995). However, this may not

apply to all part-time women. Research indicates that employment commitment among part-timers is highest among those who have professional jobs and lowest among those in the least satisfactory jobs, particularly among those who are overqualified for their job (Fagan, 2001:249, Kennelly, 2002). Fagan (2001) argues that part-time work is not a unitary concept but rather there are three major considerations which impact upon its status. The first is the huge variation in the quality and content of part-time work. The second is the different motivations in seeking and accepting part-time employment and the third, the motivation and commitment to work part-time is subject to change over the life cycle.

According to Walsh (1999) the reasons for working part-time are many and varied. These may include financial considerations, being a secondary income earner, having enough time to manage family life and as a way of reintegrating into the labour market. Part-time work is ideal when returning to the labour market after the birth of a child or exiting the labour market before retirement. The negative aspect of part-time work is that women can become confined and restricted to part-time work because of limited opportunities, particularly among older employees, to transfer to full-time and/or higher status jobs. Job satisfaction is greatest among part-time workers when their working arrangements are consistent with their preferences (Wolcott and Glezer, 1995).

In relation to clerical work, it is not surprising that those working at low levels of clerical work have lower levels of commitment which is reflected in high turnover levels. Many clerical workers particularly those in intermediate and advanced jobs, work for not only monetary reasons but derive intrinsic rewards such as fulfilment, satisfaction from doing a job well and social interaction with work colleagues. As noted in chapter one, Pascall et al (2000:70-71) in their study on women in banks, debunk the notion that women clerical workers are less committed to their careers. Women in their study did not have clear long-term goals, but this did not mean that they left their career to chance. These women took an incremental approach to career development. Most did not want to put all their eggs into one basket, that is, to be either career or family

oriented. As a result, most women took advantage of training opportunities which were offered to them by the bank to ensure that they could access higher positions when the time was right for them. The authors concluded the actions taken by female clerical workers constituted a rational response to the circumstances presented in their workplace. Further, it allowed them to circumvent the masculine model of career development which involves fast-tracking into management (p72).

Charlesworth's (1999) study provides a good example of how clerical workers in the banking sector fare under the new scenario. It also offers an insight into how women who make up the vast majority of part-time and low skill clerical positions are viewed by management as being less committed workers because of their current or impending family responsibilities. Charlesworth found that there was a widespread perception among senior management that women employees who worked in the low levels of the organisation or out in the branches were less committed to their jobs. This view was shaped by a strongly held belief that these women were more transient, that they were not interested in working long hours and that they did not adopt a masculine approach to career advancement and promotion. She found that gender segregation within the banking sector was largely attributed to women's current or potential family responsibilities. Having children was seen as a private decision made by individuals who should ultimately bear the responsibility of raising their progeny and should not be singled out for special treatment. Essentially, women's commitment to their family was seen as being incompatible to their commitment to work.

This study provides a good insight into how the interplay between structure and agency shapes women's choices. Charlesworth found that the choices women in banking make to achieve a work/family balance are essentially made within a hostile workplace which consigns them to part-time jobs with less security and opportunities for promotion. On the one hand, the women bankers in this study were largely adaptive women who consciously chose their job because it suited their family needs. The bank benefits because they are able to fill the multitude of low paid and part-time positions. On the other

hand, these women are seen as expendable and are peripheral to the real business of banking and as a result are confined to white-collar ghettos. In summary, Charlesworth argues that “the motherhood appellation underscores a deep ambivalence to women in the industry, both masking and justifying entrenched and gendered occupational segregation” (1999:12).

Occupational segregation

Occupation segregation is another area where Hakim comes under criticism. Hakim argues that in modern societies, occupational segregation is not based on sex or gender, but rather reflects the diverse lifestyle preferences made by women. People tend to gravitate towards occupations which suit their lifestyle. She believes, occupational segregation has been developed to provide separate jobs for women so that they can accommodate their family needs (Hakim, 1995:450). For example, married women who are secondary income earners choose occupations which are compatible with their family responsibilities because they can be done intermittently or on a part-time basis. Feminised occupations like clerical work and teaching appeal to women because they are family friendly. Clerical work is offered on a part-time or casual basis with few or no penalties for taking a career break. Secondary income earners also have different expectations from the workplace (Hakim, 2003b:163-64).

Hakim’s view on occupational segregation has been heavily criticised because it runs counter to feminist demands for greater equality for women both at work and at home (Bradley et al, 2000: 54) Crompton and Harris (1998:121) believe that Hakim’s account of occupational segregation does not take into account the lack of power and resources ascribed to groups like clerical workers in the labour market. The authors also cite studies which indicate that people tend to have a realistic view of the type of jobs which are available to them and will gravitate to these forms of employment. However, they believe that occupational segregation cannot be explained as simply being a result of women’s choices alone. In their words they claim that “preferences may shape

choices, but they do not, contrary to Hakim's assertion, determine them" (p.131).

Occupational segregation is also symptomatic of labour market deregulation where diminished levels of regulation mean that those jobs within the peripheral labour market which offer casual, part-time and non-standard employment can lead to polarisation of the labour market. Within clerical work, elementary clerical positions such as those in call centres and casual temporary employment offer transient employment which is low paid, low in status and with little scope for advancement. These sorts of jobs reinforce occupational segregation and further marginalise women workers (Crompton and Harris, 1998:132).

In trying to explain the persistence of occupational segregation and gender inequality, Ginn et al (1996:171) believe Hakim puts too much emphasis on women being "Grateful Slaves". They believe that cultural norms in the workplace and gender ideology hold more sway in shaping women's attachment to the labour market than their personal attitudes and orientations.

Webster (1996:13) argues that the occupational position of women needs to be understood in the context of women's employment experience more broadly. Women's relationship to their families is only one variable which determines their occupation. Consideration should also be given to the state and its policies for example Equal Opportunity Legislation, industrial relations, the education system, the provision of training, and the impact of social discourses operating within the workplace. Gender ideology is also a primary determinant of occupational choice. As we saw in chapter one, occupations such as clerical work are synonymous with women workers and are seen as being an eminently suitable job for women at different stages of their life.

In summary, the main criticisms levelled at Hakim refer to her emphasis on agency without giving adequate consideration to structural factors and how they impinge upon the choices and constraints faced by women. Other areas where her work is criticised is in relation to work commitment and occupational

segregation. These two issues are directly related to structural factors and inequalities within the labour market which impact upon the workplace experience of many women with family responsibilities. Finally, there is a perception that Hakim's typology is too simplistic and that it fails to capture subtle but significant differences in the views and behaviours of women.

Work orientations of Australian women

This next section will explore how a number of Australian academics have looked at the how the work orientations of Australian women have been determined. It will also explore how these views fit with Hakim's preference theory.

Australia as an advanced modern society has completed the "new scenario". The findings from the studies discussed below indicate that the work and lifestyle preferences of Australian women are similar to those found in Western Europe and the US.

Anne Manne (2001) is an advocate of Hakim's preference theory and believes that it is particularly relevant in the Australian context. She is critical of feminist academics who are overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of work centred women who decide on behalf of other women what constitutes "the good life" (p15). She agrees with Hakim that no one universal approach to family policy is possible because of the divergent views and interests among women. She believes that Australian policy makers need to reconcile the different choices women make whether it is to home-centred, work-centred or a combination of both and develop family policy which meets the needs of each different group.

Declining fertility rates in Australia and the relationship of women to the labour market has been of major concern to a number of academics in recent times. Peter McDonald (2000) presents arguments which are contrary to Hakim. His argument is consistent with a number of feminist scholars who believe that the way to improve women's equality is through equal access to the labour market.

They claim that women's work preferences are derived from their attachment to the labour market. Women are now more like men, where work has become the main focus of their lives. Access to higher education and better paid jobs means that women are delaying child-bearing because they will have to forfeit their careers. McDonald believes that the male breadwinner model is defunct among young women who no longer aspire to being supported by a man. Similarly, young men are averse to supporting a dependent wife. He believes these views are widely held by 25 to 34 year olds (the primary child-bearing years) and as a result have placed pressure on fertility levels in Australia.

As a solution to this problem McDonald (2001) believes that there needs to be a paradigm shift which allows women to combine work and motherhood. At the heart of this paradigm shift is increased access to subsidised childcare. With the support of government initiatives and the media McDonald believes that gender equity can infiltrate major institutions such as family services and industrial relations policies. He believes that changes to women's status need to be reformed within the family context via socialisation where couples work on creating equality at the instigation of women. The presumption is that each subsequent generation will have more gender equality than the last.

These arguments run counter to Hakim, who believes that it is not simply a matter of eradicating the male breadwinner model which is integral to the work choices made by adaptive and home-centred women. Further, McDonald assumes that women have a homogenous preference to return to full-time work after having a family. His unilateral approach to addressing the work/family conundrum does not take into account the heterogenous work and lifestyle preferences among women and the fact that most women do not aspire to being like men. Having policies which meet the needs of work-centred women such as subsidised childcare and paid maternity leave, excludes home-centred women and assists those adaptive women willing to return to the labour market soon after having a child. Further, adaptive women who work as secondary income earners want the flexibility to move in and out of the labour market over their life cycle. Not all women want to be equal income earners within the labour market.

Anne Summers' (2003) book titled *The End of Equality: Work, babies and women's choices in 21st Century Australia* was based on a series of focus groups conducted in Sydney, Melbourne, Bathurst, Brisbane and Townsville during November, 2001. The women who participated in the focus groups were from a broad range of backgrounds and ages.

In this book Summers argues that Australian women do not have any real choice in their lives because they are still battling for recognition in the workplace, equal pay and the right to return to work after having children. In contrast to McDonald, who offers strategies to address Australia's declining fertility rate, Summers believes that the pendulum has swung too far the other way where "equality has been usurped by a new doctrine" which she calls "the breeding creed" (p.7). According to Summers the "breeding creed" is a powerful new ideology which defines women first and foremost as mothers. Under this creed women are meant to forsake their ambition of a career in favour of motherhood. Summers (2003:10) argues

Instead of fostering a society where women can be mothers and be employed – and thus have an identity, not to mention an income, that is separate from their maternal status – the breeding creed seeks to limit women's options and, ultimately to curtail their freedom of choice.

In her view the philosophy of procreation has been strongly supported and pushed by the federal Coalition government lead by the Prime Minister John Howard. Since the late 1990s the federal government has strategically used fiscal policy to steer women with children out of the workforce into full-time motherhood by imposing financial penalties on women who continue to work. The intention being to make it financially attractive for women to become full-time mothers and therefore encourage more women to have children (Summers, 2003:8).

Summers (p148) describes how two-income families suffer punitive effective marginal tax rates on family assistance. When women return to the labour

market they lose government support for both childcare benefits and family tax benefits. Professor Patricia Apps from the University of Sydney believes that current family tax policies in Australia create severe disincentives for secondary income earners (cited in Summers, 2003:149). From a financial perspective women need to weigh up whether it is worth returning to work part-time when they may earn little more than what they receive in the family tax benefit, after tax and childcare costs are taken into account. For example, a woman may work part-time three days a week in a clerical job. Once she pays for her childcare costs, and taking into account the loss of family tax benefit she would receive if she was not working, she may only be taking home a negligible amount of pay each week.

Summers found that the women from the focus groups wanted the choice to combine work and family. To achieve this they said they needed the opportunity to work part-time, to have a reasonable level of flexibility in the workplace and access to affordable childcare (p.63). Summers believes that in the current climate women are forced to choose between having children or a good job. She finds it incongruous that most of the major companies in Australia who are run by men are “so far removed from the daily realities of their own staff and customers” (p.190).

Summers is critical of Hakim’s work because she believes she supports stay-at-home mothers (p.239). It is not clear how she came to this conclusion given that Hakim is a work-centred academic who has always argued that blanket “one-size fits all” policies are inappropriate because they do not represent the heterogeneity of women.

Mariah Evans and Jonathon Kelly’s (2002) study on public attitudes to maternal employment does not address the issue of work preferences among women per se, but rather it was interested in gauging public attitudes on women who combine work and family. The survey findings tend to lean favourably towards the adaptive role for women. This research was based on a module of questions in the International Social Science Survey Australia (Isssa) on moral feelings concerning women’s employment at different life

cycle stages. This nationwide survey had been conducted every few years since 1984 and had responses from over 15,000 respondents on many questions. The IsssA was based on a random sample of the population taken from the electoral role. This module has been used in other International Social Survey Programs in other countries and provides comparable international data.

The authors concluded that Australians in this survey generally endorse a full-time home-making role for women. The study also found that respondents believe it is more acceptable for women to work as secondary income earners even when they are being supported by a male who is the primary breadwinner. There was a strongly held belief that a woman should devote almost all her time to her family particularly when they are young. Those most in favour of this proposal were young women aged under 40 years of age. Older women and men were less likely to agree with this statement.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about whether it was possible for women to work full-time and adequately attend to their family needs as a good wife and mother. Although younger women supported the notion that they should spend time with their children when they were young, they were more positive about successfully combining paid work and mothering than older women and men. Respondents conceded that it would be difficult to combine successful mothering with substantial work commitments. Two thirds of survey respondents felt that among mothers of preschoolers, full-time homemaking was the most preferred option. Just under one third felt that part-time work would be appropriate at this stage of the life cycle. Only four per cent said that full-time employment would be ideal.

Full-time jobs for newly married women was almost unanimously endorsed. The most widely held ideal for mothers of school aged children was part-time employment. The balance of opinion tended to tip in favour of full-time employment for women after their children had left home. There was a widely held view that a wife should leave the labour market once her husband had retired. Eighty one per cent of women were positive about the possibility of

staying at home with their children while they were young and not seeking paid employment. This finding supports the notion of extended career breaks. The main tenor of the survey findings indicates that respondents were most in favour of women participating in the labour market when they were young (single or newly weds) or middle aged (empty nesters). However, they were less likely to endorse women's labour market participation when they had young dependent children.

Evans and Kelly (2002) found that attitudes to maternal employment had remained fairly stable over the last two decades. The majority of women felt that having a full-time career would harm their family life. As a concession, women felt that by reducing their commitment to a career they would not compromise their family life. In summary, survey respondents felt that it was best for young children to stay at home with their mothers.

Belinda Probert and John Murphy (2001) provide a critical overview of the Evans and Kelly study and are particularly scathing about the methodology they used. The authors believe that the conclusions drawn by Evans and Kelly are questionable because they are based on a single question. In their opinion, to adequately gauge people's attitudes requires further testing for consistency. The wording of questions are open to interpretation and the use of triple barrelled questions (for example, that mothers should work full-time, that mothers should work part-time, or that mothers should not work at all) are deeply flawed (p.28). Probert and Murphy argue that "preferences like norms are constructed within society's gender culture which is shaped by both cultural attitudes and historical policies, institutions and constraints" (p.28). In their view a single attitude question could not possibly capture or enable researchers to draw conclusions about norms and preferences.

Probert and Murphy (2001) describe a research project they conducted which looked at the way men and women felt about family roles and work experiences in the 1950s and 1990s. The study was based on focus group interviews with 42 people and individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with another 168 people. Half the interviewees were men and women who

had young children in 1956 and the others were men and women who had young children in 1996. Respondents came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and experiences. They were invited to talk about how they balanced work and family life. The authors believe that the answers the mothers in this study gave could not be neatly summarised into percentages indicating those who would have preferred to stay at home, work part-time or work full-time. The findings indicated a complexity in trends and “overlapping narratives”.

This study also compared the expectation of mothers in the 1950s and those of women today. During the 1950s it was expected that women should follow a marriage career and be home-centred. These women had limited educational opportunities and divorce was rare. In contrast, today’s mothers said that there was a social expectation that they should return to paid employment while their children were still young. The reasons for young women returning to work varied enormously; they included an interest in maintaining a career, financial necessity and social contact. These young women also had quite varied views about how young children should be cared for, and what constitutes good mothering. These findings certainly conform with Hakim’s theory that women born after 1960 have more choices and that many women prefer to combine work and family rather than one or the other.

The authors conclude that mothers with young children had to determine their own work preferences by weighing up the pros and cons of paid employment versus the care of young children. On the one hand, mothers had to reconcile staying at home with their children which is seen as socially acceptable. On the other hand, they may have desired or be compelled for economic reasons to return to the workforce to help pay off the mortgage or to ensure a suitable standard of living for her family. As Probert and Murphy quite eloquently demonstrate within their study, it is not simply a matter of asking mothers a single question on what they would like to do in relation to work and family. The answers are multifaceted and varied which reflects the heterogeneity of women. To accurately gauge women’s work preferences a wide frame of

reference needs to be employed which takes into account not only attitudinal but also structural and institutional factors.

This section has provided an overview of how Australian women combine work and family within the “new scenario”. Although methodologies varied in the above studies, there is a consistent theme which conforms to the adaptive profile, that is, most women want the flexibility to move in and out of the labour market over their life cycle. The research findings also demonstrate how structural constraints such as fiscal policies may impact upon women’s choice to combine work and family. Many of the critics of Hakim’s preference theory are British based and use British research data to support their claims. By exploring issues which relate specifically to Australia we are able to have a better understanding of what shapes women’s work and lifestyle preferences. There would appear to be very little variation between the UK and Australia in relation to this matter. This supports the claim that preference theory can be broadly applied to most modern societies.

Hakim’s Typology refined

As discussed earlier Hakim identifies three ideal types (work-centred, adaptive and home-centred) which describe the work and family orientations of women. Although ideal types are a simplification of reality they can provide a template in which to assist the analysis of data collected from case studies such as this. The use of ideal types can also provide a broad method of analysing descriptive data that enables the researcher to sort and pattern match particular characteristics of respondents into designated categories (De Vaus, 2001:266).

If we apply Hakim’s typology, the adaptive ideal type represents between 60 to 70 percent of women in wealthy modern societies. This constitutes large numbers of women and may not adequately reflect the diversity within this group. In order to represent the heterogeneity of women across their life cycle, I have broken down the adaptive category into four sub-categories. These

categories are pre-reproductive, women in family mode, pre-retirees and drifters.

The pre-reproductive category includes women who are yet to have children, but plan to in the future. Women in family mode currently have dependent children, while pre-retirees as the name suggests are close to retiring age and are in the final phase of their working lives. Many of these women have grown up children that are no longer dependent. The fourth category refers to women who are drifters. This is a separate category which classifies those women who do not fit into mainstream employment and whose employment histories and individual circumstances mean that they often have a peripheral and tenuous attachment to the labour market. In all categories there are women who for one reason or another may choose not to have children. What defines these women as adaptive is that paid employment is not the central focus of their lives.

This next section is based on my analysis of interviews with clerical workers and will provide an overview of the main characteristics which relate to each new adaptive sub-category. In chapter five I will draw on specific interview material to reveal the diversity and differences between each sub-category.

Pre-reproductive

As the name suggests, pre-reproductives do not have any children or dependent family members. Although these women do not have children they probably will at a future time. For those who opt not to have a family, work is not the primary focus of their lives. Those who are single can be classified as primary earners, while those who have partners are generally secondary earners.

Women in the pre-reproductive category are likely to have the greatest choice and most satisfying jobs in terms of level of responsibility and autonomy. These include senior secretarial positions such as personal or executive assistant to high level management. Pre-reproductives tend to work full-time

and travel to the central business district or inner city areas for work. There is an expectation that those in senior clerical positions work long hours. Pre-reproductives have very little flexibility in regard to choosing their hours of work. Most are expected to work at least the core hours, between 9.00am to 5.00pm. Many work very long hours to ensure coverage for their bosses. This means they start early and work until late. This group of adaptive women are most likely to conform to the concept of the “ideal worker” because they are (in the short-term at least) unhindered by family responsibilities.

Pre-reproductives are not particularly career-oriented in terms of seeking promotion. There is an expectation among pre-reproductives that they will have a family at some future time and will therefore need to find a part-time job either within the same organisation or at another workplace. Pre-reproductives may be saddled with the expectation that to achieve a family friendly job with part-time hours will probably involve a demotion into a lower level clerical position.

Women in family mode

Women in family mode currently have dependent children. Some women are secondary earners, while others are primary earners. Earning status is largely dependent upon the presence or absence of a partner. Sole parents are typically primary earners, while those with a partner are generally secondary earners. In relation to secondary earners, if the partner is in a low paid non-professional job, their need to work may be shaped by financial necessity. In contrast, women who have partners in highly paid jobs may decide to seek employment for social and personal reasons.

Women in family mode usually find jobs to suit their family needs. Jobs are deliberately chosen on the basis of enabling the clerical worker to balance work and family needs. These jobs may be full-time or part-time. The defining features of these jobs are the flexible hours and conditions of employment, and being close to home. Jobs are assessed and chosen as a complete package.

There would appear to be limited scope for negotiation among women in family mode once they are in a position of paid employment.

Career breaks among women in family mode are usually short, typically less than five years in duration. However, women in family mode born before 1960 with older dependent children are more likely to have an extended career break of more than five years.

Women in family mode tend to have partners who support their integration into the labour market. The ideal family model among women in family mode is closely aligned to the compromise model.¹

Pre-retirees

Many pre-retirees have children, but they are no longer dependent. Pre-retirees are born before 1960. As a result, they had limited choices available to them in the workplace and there were social expectations around suitable roles which meant that these women followed a marriage career early on in their lives. These women had long periods (ten years or more) out of paid employment raising their families. Pre-retirees are more likely to be penalised for not having continuous work experience in the labour market. They are also more likely to occupy clerical positions where there is little prospect for promotion.

Pre-retirees are less committed to the labour market in terms of seeking promotion but they are highly committed to their jobs and perform them to a high standard. They prefer to work in part-time jobs close to home. They want the flexibility to move in and out of the labour market in order to take extended leave to meet their family needs. Paid employment for pre-retirees may be a secondary source of income. The exception is single, divorced or widowed

¹ Hakim identifies three family models. The first is the egalitarian model, where the two partners have an equally demanding jobs and where housework and childcare is shared equally among them. The second is the compromise model where the wife has a less demanding job than her partner. She does the bulk of the housework and childcare. The third model is the role-segregated model where only the husband has a job and the wife runs the home (Hakim, 2003b: 37).

pre-retirees who find themselves as primary earners. For most pre-retirees, the main objective of work is to provide them with social fulfilment and sense of personal achievement. Pre-retirees, because of their life experience and maturity, are more likely to be assertive in the workplace and as a result may experience both overt and subliminal forms of rebuke by management for their outspokenness.

Drifters

Drifters can be described as clerical workers who have unplanned careers and are on the margins of the labour market. Drifters usually work in very part-time or casual jobs of less than twenty hours per week. These jobs tend to be in the peripheral labour market. Some may be fortunate enough to have permanent part-time jobs while others are casually employed with no job security. Drifters tend to be younger women in their twenties and thirties. They are mostly single. Their motivations to work are ideological which narrows their work opportunities significantly. For example, some drifters chose to work in not for profit, public or community sector organisations. These respondents are more likely to have a disability of some kind which limits their job opportunities. Work is not the primary focus of each of these women's lives, but neither is family.

These women are usually primary earners who live on incomes well below the poverty line. Those with partners are secondary earners whose income is important for household survival.

Conclusion: the new way forward

Hakim offers a post-modern understanding of how women choose their work and lifestyle preferences. By defining the "new scenario" she moves away from the industrial society model and is able to detail how women in the twenty first century make their choices.

The basic tenet of preference theory states that not all women have the same work and lifestyle preferences. Some women want to be home-centred, while others want to work full-time and devote their lives to their careers. However, the vast majority of women want the opportunity to combine work and family as secondary income earners. Preference theory provides a useful framework in which to understand clerical work. As one of the most feminised occupations in the labour market it has specifically evolved to meet the needs of women workers. Clerical work as opposed to managerial and professional work tolerates broken careers and is a “mother friendly” job. It is ideal for women wanting to juggle work and family because it fits into their life cycle. This ranges from women who are single and unencumbered with a family, who can work full-time, to those raising children, up until retirement age where part-time work is seen as more appealing.

The main area of contention with preference theory is in relation to the interplay between agency and structure. Hakim places most of her emphasis on the ways in which women consciously choose and make decisions about their work and lifestyle preferences. Although there are times when a woman’s work and lifestyle choices are based on individual preference and taste, invariably these choices are shaped to some degree by circumstances and events beyond their control. In this context external structural factors should be given due consideration when determining outcomes.

Where this thesis diverges from Hakim is that it examines how women make choices in the light of these structural constraints. In relation to the labour market women’s choices often have a domino affect. Each choice a woman makes is intrinsically linked to the next choice. For example, a woman may have a work and lifestyle preference to combine work and family, but this choice is going to be constrained by the availability of jobs, financial necessity, stipulations around paid employment like flexible hours and a workplace close to home. If there is limited job choice or if she is competing with a large field of other qualified clerical workers she is unlikely to be in the best position to negotiate conditions of employment. Negotiations will be further jeopardised by her family status which means she is vulnerable to exploitation and

accepting positions that reinforce the low paid and low status nature of clerical work.

Preferences are only one aspect of the total experience which impact upon the lifestyle choice of women. Many of the restrictions and obstacles women face are the embodiment of a patriarchal culture which supports the notion that men are the primary breadwinners and women are secondary earners. Cultural institutions such as schools, workplaces, the labour market, industrial law and family structures represent dominant values and norms. Essentially they define the context in which women make choices. Ultimately women are confined to making choices within these parameters which determine suitable roles for women, mothers and workers.

Although preference theory reflects the heterogeneity of women to some extent, it does not describe in any detail how social class or ethnicity and their inherent cultural values determine the lifestyle decisions women make. The male breadwinner model may pervade the Australian psyche but job security is no longer a guarantee for men or women over their lifetime (Pusey, 2003: 91). As a result the choice of living on one income or having a secondary salary may not be an option because of the vagaries of the labour market. Practically speaking, women's work and lifestyle preferences do not transcend the impact of external structural variants which ultimately hold more sway in determining their links to paid employment.

If preference theory is adjusted to incorporate structural constraints it provides a comprehensive way to ascertain the work and lifestyle preferences of clerical workers. Clerical workers from those in elementary to advanced clerical jobs have work preferences which closely resemble the adaptive typology. We have seen that clerical workers often follow a marriage career rather than a job career. Women aspire to and gravitate to feminised occupations like clerical work which offers flexible employment because it provides them an opportunity to combine work and family. Clerical work allows adaptive women to earn a secondary income. Most women can access clerical work with a few skills,

particularly within the “new scenario” which has seen a burgeoning white-collar sector.

Where Hakim is weak is that she does not explore in any detail what happens to women once they are in the workplace and how this might affect their links to the labour market. The initial motivation and the degree of attachment to the labour market may be shaped in the first instance by their preference to combine work and family. However, one should not overlook the impact of the workplace to shape their experience on the job. Many of Hakim’s critics argue that she fails to acknowledge how structural issues embedded within masculine organisational culture determine how women clerical workers and their contributions are assessed.

Women clerical workers are not necessarily less committed to the labour market, nor do they consciously choose occupational segregation. These are brought about by structural and institutional factors which undervalue the work they perform and the skills they bring to their jobs. However, women clerical workers are penalised for making the choice to work part-time in order to accommodate their family needs. There are very few workplaces which recognise that women have a “caring life and motherhood” (Pocock, 2003: 100). Although flexible employment is increasingly seen as a possible ‘win-win’ as far as balancing employment and family (Crompton, 2002:546), the provision of family friendly policies such as paid leave, shorter hours and help with childcare are seen as being costly particularly within highly competitive deregulated markets. Further, part-time workers are seen by organisations as being less committed and less productive. They are often overlooked for further training and career advancement. When establishing pay and conditions all of these variables work against women striking the best enterprise deal. We saw in chapter two that historically clerical workers have low levels of unionisation and are not renowned for their militancy. Although women clerical workers may ardently strive for improved pay and conditions, they are, however, willing to trade these off in lieu of flexible hours because it enables them to achieve a work/family balance. Their secondary earners status also means that they may be more willing to accept lower pay and

conditions of employment. Essentially, women clerical workers do make choices, albeit constrained ones as they strive to achieve the best fit between competing objectives.

In conclusion, the combination of preference theory with the inclusion of broader social structural factors such as organisational culture, government policies and the legal system, family structure and gender ideology can provide a more accurate way in which to assess the labour force participation of not only clerical workers, but women more generally. Chapters five to seven describe the findings from the research on forty clerical workers conducted as part of this thesis. These chapters will build on Hakim's preference theory by exploring in detail not only how women clerical workers use their agency to determine their links with the labour market but how structural factors also have significant role to play in shaping their work and lifestyle preferences. Chapter five will explore how the respondents in this study fit the adaptive typology and why they chose clerical work in the context of gender ideology and current fiscal policies. It will discuss how these women reconcile their commitment to their families versus paid employment. Chapter six will detail the experience of these women clerical workers at the workplace and how they view themselves as workers in the context of largely patriarchal organisational cultures. Chapter seven will explore how women clerical workers fair in the enterprising bargaining arena in the light of occupational segregation, the nature of clerical work and their current or impending family commitments.

Before moving on to examine the results of my research the next chapter will explain how this research was conducted and information collected and collated on the lifestyle preferences of forty clerical workers.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Introduction

The research questions being asked in this thesis have evolved significantly over the period of my endeavour. This has been in response not only to the research data I have gathered but also my own life experiences. However, fundamental elements of the theoretical paradigm I adopted have essentially stayed the same.

This chapter will present a detailed overview of the methodology used to collect data about forty female clerical workers and their motivations to undertake paid work in the light of current or future family responsibilities. It will also explore why a case study approach was chosen to study clerical workers including the advantages and limitations of this approach.

Developing the theoretical framework

My interest in focussing specifically on clerical workers came about because I had been employed in many different jobs which spanned the clerical continuum (see chapter one, figure one for definition) after completing my Bachelors Degree and while studying for my Masters Degree. I felt that my first hand knowledge working in this occupation could enhance my understanding of the experiences of the respondents in this study.

The study of these forty clerical workers has been a 'reflexive' experience where my approach has been constantly reworked and refined. Initially, I was interested in focussing on how these women fared in the workplace in relation to enterprise bargaining and the establishment of their pay and conditions of

employment. The issue of family life, although important, was originally not the main emphasis of my research.

This changed when I had two children of my own and I started to appreciate how difficult it was to combine family life with paid employment. It became apparent through my own experience and personal networks that women from a variety of backgrounds wanted the opportunity to undertake part-time work while their children were young. Fiscal policies, the logistics of securing part-time work close to home and organising childcare were all factors which heavily influenced my friends' and acquaintances' decision to return to the labour market. It was also during this time that I read Catherine Hakim's work which struck a personal chord with me. I was impressed that she was one of the first academics to acknowledge that not all women want to have a continuous and full-time career and that work preferences do in fact change over the life cycle.

When I first began this research I felt that a socialist feminist perspective offered a valid way of explaining women's labour market experience. It offered a plausible explanation of how gender inequality was created by the interaction of patriarchy and capitalism (Hartmann, 1979, Walby, 1986, 1990). It provided valid reasons why occupational segregation persists and why women are consigned to low status and low paid jobs. However, the socialist feminist paradigm did not adequately take into account the heterogeneity of women and the way in which individuals employ their agency to shape their social world. Post-modern feminism provided an alternative because it offered a way of studying how cultural discourses impact upon biographical narratives (van Vucht Tijssen, 1990, Williams, 1992). The concept of "theoretical pluralism" (Crompton, 1999:7) has been a constant theme from the beginning of this research. It has appealed to me because it enables an understanding of the social world from both a macro and micro perspective.

Having read Hakim's preference theory, I believed it offered the most plausible way to explain how women use their agency to determine their work and lifestyle preferences. However, as stated in the previous chapter, this theory

does not give adequate attention to the importance of structural factors and how they constrain the choices women make. One of the benefits of the socialist feminist perspective is it provides an insight into the way in which ideological and political hegemony emanating from social institutions influences personal and social experiences. The most powerful discourses within the community have firm institutional locations which are found in the workplace, politics, social policy, education, the media and elsewhere (Pringle and Watson, 1992:64). Without understanding how these social structures influence women's agency we are unable to accurately ascertain the context in which women exercise their choice.

By refining my theoretical perspective and research questions I believe I have adopted a more holistic perspective on why women choose clerical work in the first instance, secondly how structural constraints influence their decision to undertake paid employment and thirdly how family commitments (current or future) coupled with broader structural and cultural issues impact upon women clerical workers' ability to achieve optimal outcomes in the enterprise bargaining forum.

Research design

The research design most appropriate for the theoretical paradigm I have adopted is the case study approach. According to De Vaus (2001) case studies are ideal for research designs which have a small number of cases with a large number of variables. Methodologically speaking the aim of case studies is to test a theory in a "real life situation" (p.223). Case study design must have a theoretical dimension because it enables the researcher to test a series of propositions within everyday life. Case studies are not ahistorical and must be located within a given time and space in order to understand specific events and causal explanations (p.227). As discussed in chapter three, the "new scenario" which occurred in the last two decades of the twentieth century provides a historical context and framework in which to research the work and lifestyle choices of the clerical workers in this study.

The advantage of adopting a case study approach is that it provides a framework which enables the researcher to piece together and understand how events on many levels unfold and are related to one another. The case study method affords itself to “theoretical pluralism” because it aims to determine not only the social and structural context in which events occur but also the meanings and actions attributed to participants. Case studies also lend themselves to a broad range of data collection methods and analysis (De Vaus, 2001:231-236).

A small sample of forty respondents will not be large enough to make broad and sweeping generalisations about the wider population, but by adopting a case study approach I was able to test a theoretical proposition. In the context of this study I was able to firstly, test the extent to which the decision to undertake clerical work is a reflection of respondents’ agency and secondly, to what extent their choices are constrained by structure.

To ascertain whether a theoretical proposition is supported or not, we should expect to see the behaviour of respondents within a case study conforming to anticipated outcomes. The more consistency between the theory and actual real life events, the more confident we should be about the veracity of the conclusions which can be drawn from the research (De Vaus, 2001:238). Further, if a case study was to be replicated under comparable circumstances, a good theoretical proposition would yield similar results and again support the veracity of the claims being made.

Crompton and Sanderson (1990: 21) argue that case study research should not be solely assessed on its “typicality” but instead, “on the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events in question”. The holistic approach required by case studies facilitates thinking which adopts theoretical and logical processes to determine causal explanations. Case studies are therefore analytical rather than illustrative if they are embedded in an appropriate theoretical framework. Essentially, their effectiveness rests upon their capacity to explain, rather than their typicality.

Case studies are not without their problems. De Vaus (2001:83) warns of the self-fulfilling prophecy where a researcher's values and expectations distort the way in which he or she collects and interprets information. There may be a danger that the researcher reads into the data what he or she wishes to see (Black and Smith, 1999:267). Remaining aware of this danger, and maintaining a reflexive stance about my own experiences has, I believe, avoided the distortion of my analysis.

The research questions

Using a case study approach the aim of this thesis is to research a select group of clerical workers to test the central claims of Hakim's preference theory (as outlined in chapter three) in the context of structural constraints. It is the contention of this thesis that this theoretical paradigm can assist our understanding of how these female clerical workers determine their work and life style choices.

As noted above, the theoretical paradigm adopted in this thesis, which incorporates both the notion of agency and social structure, has not altered markedly over the course of the research. However, the research questions have been refined and redefined. When I first started this thesis the industrial relations scene within Victoria and Australia was volatile and in a state of continual change. There was no doubt that the deregulation of the labour market would ultimately lead to a situation where conditions of employment for most workers would be determined at the enterprise level. My main research questions during the mid 1990s were around how the shift to enterprise bargaining would impact upon clerical workers who traditionally have a weak bargaining position within the workplace.

My current emphasis has taken a more inclusive approach. On the one hand, clerical work has developed as a feminised occupation with a history of being low in status and low paid. On the other hand it is an ideal occupation for

women wanting to combine work and family across their life cycle. How these two phenomena impact upon women clerical workers ability to negotiate enterprise agreements has been the main emphasis of this thesis.

This next section will detail the research questions which relate to each specific data chapter. In chapter five I am interested in finding out why clerical work had an enduring appeal among respondents across their life cycle when women now more than any time in the past have access to more educational and occupational opportunities. Some of the questions I wish to address are to what extent:

- do female clerical workers display choice in terms of their work and family arrangements?
- are preferences fixed and to what extent do they change over the life course?
- is the decision to undertake clerical work a reflection of their agency?
- are the choices these women make constrained by structure?
- is preference type fixed or variable over the life course?

The data from chapter six titled “Tacit Skills” is based on the premise that we need to have clear assessment of how the skill level of female clerical workers is perceived by not only themselves but by the organisation in which they are employed. If women undervalue their work or if the organisation where they are employed undervalues their contributions in terms of output, comparable worth and the firm’s overall productivity, they are unlikely to strike a good enterprise bargain.

The final data chapter (chapter seven) will discuss how the conditions of employment among the forty clerical workers in this study were determined. It will look at the barriers respondents faced both personally and professionally, the power dynamics between respondents and their bosses, the impact of organisational culture in pre-determining the outcomes of enterprise bargaining

agreements and how much leverage clerical workers have in the workplace to strike a work/family balance.

Method of data collection

This research adopted a qualitative approach to collect information about the forty respondents. In-depth interviews were conducted with respondents with the aim of eliciting detailed information about their work histories, how they managed work in relation to their personal lives, interactions with work colleagues and management, how their conditions of employment were established, future work plans as well as general biographical information. I wanted to understand how these women as gendered subjects actively interpreted their identities in relation to their working lives. Having worked as a clerical worker in the past also gave me some insight into the nature of clerical work and its associated work roles.

Crompton and Sanderson (1990:20) argue that case studies are often regarded as qualitative, in contrast to the quantitative research methods associated with, for example large-scale survey work. According to Denzin and Lincoln, (1994:1-2) qualitative research methods enables researchers to understand the interactive processes which people use in their own settings and environments to shape their personal histories, biographies, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. Qualitative researchers also ask respondents to share their stories which results in a personal interaction developing between the researcher and the researched (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994: 422).

The sample

When I first commenced this research, I had anticipated a sample of approximately 50 respondents. However, the sample size was limited by the difficulty of acquiring respondents. Initially I was hoping to get volunteers to come forth and participate. This is known as volunteer sampling which is

particularly useful when potential participants are dispersed throughout the community or hard to contact directly (Liamputtong Rice and Ezzy, 1999: 46). I undertook extensive mail-outs to a variety of organisations. This included advertisements being placed in newsletters requesting help, flyers being put on noticeboards of childcare centres as well as other organisations with the view to recruiting volunteer respondents. The following sources of recruitment were used:

- Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) newsletter *Alive and WEL*
- Association of Professional Secretaries Newsletter
- A flyer with covering letter sent to 80 childcare centres across the south eastern (Dandenong, Frankston, Springvale, Moorabbin, Bentleigh), inner eastern (Hawthorn, Kew) outer eastern (Ringwood, Box Hill, Blackburn) and eastern suburbs (Chadstone, Ashburton, Waverley).
- A flyer with a covering letter was sent to the Australian Services Union (which represents clerical workers in the private and public sector) and an acquaintance who worked at another white-collar union placed a flyer on their noticeboard.
- Word of mouth from other respondents recommending friends
- Work colleagues and friends recommending friends and work colleagues
- Networking at conferences
- Jobwatch

Only three respondents self-selected and volunteered to be part of the study. They responded to advertisements in the WEL newsletter, the Association of Professional Secretaries Newsletter and a white-collar union noticeboard. I did not have any calls from childcare centres. Most of the respondents were via word-of-mouth in a method known as snowball sampling where initial respondents were asked to suggest other people who may be willing to participate in the research (Liamputtong Rice and Ezzy, 1999:45).

In total 40 respondents were interviewed for this study, 35 of them were via word-of-mouth where friends, work colleagues and other participants recommended women who were willing to participate in the study. One big advantage of using this method of gaining a sample was being introduced to nearly all the respondents prior to interview. This introduction was not in a formal sense, but rather as a form of recommendation. I was seen as a bona fide post-graduate student who was undertaking valuable research and needed to speak with women who worked as clerical workers. Respondents were not shocked or surprised when they received my phone call, in fact they were expecting me to call. Some were flattered that I considered their views and work experience important enough to be included in my research. In all cases I was granted an interview without any problems because I was perceived as being less of a threat than if I had cold called these women requesting a face-to-face interview. The final two respondents were recruited from Jobwatch files. These two were cold called from the list of available names. Many of those I called from the Jobwatch list had either moved, were not home when I called or did not wish to speak with me for fear of reprisal from their previous employers and in case it jeopardised their unfair dismissal claims.

Face-to-face interviews

In-depth face-to-face interviews were chosen as the favoured method of collecting data because it enabled me to gain a better insight into the working lives of clerical workers. The face-to-face nature of the interview meant that I was able to gauge body language, observe the respondent's interpersonal skills, language presentation and general demeanor. It also provided the scope to ask further questions if the need arose and offer information on industrial or work related matters to participants if requested.

A mixture of structured and semi-structured questions was utilised (see Appendix three). At the beginning of the interview respondents were asked to complete an "informed consent" form (see Appendix four) which specified the

details of the project and clearly stated that the respondent could withdraw from the interview at any time. They were then asked to complete a demographic profile of themselves which included general information about their age, current salary, household income, ethnic background and residential postcode. Finally, respondents completed a small structured questionnaire about their current job. The aim of this mini-questionnaire was twofold; firstly, to act as an ice-breaker and secondly, to gauge what participants perceived to be the most important aspects of their work.

A semi-structured interview format provided the basis for the in-depth interview with each participant. Some questions required yes or no responses, while others called for detailed description and explanation. All respondents were asked the same open-ended questions and these gave them a great deal of freedom in relation to how they responded. However, when the need arose, I would ask for further clarification on a particular point if I was unsure or felt that the issue needed to be explored in greater depth.

This format was chosen to allow me to acquire comparable data. I felt that a semi-structured format would allow me to utilise the time I had with each participant more fully by ensuring that I did not forget to ask any pertinent questions or cover important issues which may have been the case with an unstructured interview format. Further, I asked specific questions which were designed to elicit how respondents felt about their work in terms of the duties performed and their role in the organisation. I wanted to ascertain whether this perception was shaped by the organisational culture in which they worked or whether it was a self perception created by the broader social milieu relating to gender roles and women's place in the labour market.

As a final point, I felt that a semi-structured format enhanced the flow of information between the two parties because the interview flowed more like a conversation with questions that were deliberately designed to be easily understood and were unambiguous in their intention and meaning.

With the exception of two areas of enquiry, participants were asked identical questions. The first was in relation to whether the participant's conditions of employment were determined by either a collective agreement, individual contract or award. The second referred to specific questions relating to family responsibilities and variations depended on whether the respondent had children, were planning to have children or, in the case of those with grown up children, were asked to respond retrospectively on their experiences of juggling work and family life.

The questionnaire was piloted to five participants prior to commencing the case study. This gave me the opportunity to refine the questionnaire's structure and format and to make any changes to any ambiguously worded questions. Feedback from participants noted that the questionnaire was non-invasive, flowed well and the amount of time required was not too demanding (average time of interview 38 minutes).

The interview location

When I first made contact with potential respondents, I explained in detail who I was and about the research I was conducting. I also briefly described the sorts of questions I would be asking and assured them that I would not be posing questions which were of an intimate or intrusive nature. I then asked the respondent when they would be available to meet for an interview and said that I would be happy to meet them at a location which was convenient to them. Most respondents (23) were happy for me to meet them at their homes after hours on either a week night or on the weekend. I met ten respondents at their place of work, usually at lunch time or in a tea break, five at a coffee shop, one in a park and another at a university where she was studying.

The location of the interview did affect the flow of information between the respondent and researcher. I found those who were interviewed at home to be more relaxed and they were able to speak in an honest and forthright way. Those who were interviewed at work were not quite as relaxed because they felt pressured with time constraints, wanting to return to work after their

designated breaks. Most interviews at the respondents' workplace were conducted in privacy behind closed doors in either a spare meeting room, lunchroom or in the boss's offices when he was absent. Nevertheless, the prying eyes of bosses and other colleagues were an issue for some participants. In some cases participants were still expected to tend to work matters while the interview was being conducted, like answering telephones and attending to any queries from colleagues. Pringle (1988) had a similar experience when she interviewed secretaries for her book *Secretaries Talk*. She found that secretaries insisted on doing interviews in their lunchtime or in their own time so as not to disturb the office. Not only did she find organising a private space to do the interview difficult, but interviews were frequently interrupted by people or phone calls (Pringle: 1988: 30).

Coffee shops, the park and the university provided a neutral ground on which to meet respondents. However, the coffee shops tended to be a bit noisy and distracting particularly when ordering and eating refreshments. The participants often found it difficult to eat and talk at the same time. In one instance, I organised to meet a participant at a coffee shop close to her work. She felt by meeting there it would allow her to speak openly about her work situation. She did not reckon on her boss coming to the same coffee shop for lunch on that day. This situation was very awkward for both researcher and participant as we were forced to move outside to the court yard area out of earshot from her boss.

The first interview

Establishing a good rapport with respondents from the outset was paramount. I presented myself in a professional and non-threatening manner and tried to reassure the participants that I would not be asking them questions which were too personal or intimate in nature. I also said that if they wished to stop the interview at any time or if they did not choose to answer any questions they could do so. It was my view that if the respondent felt empowered during the interview, they were more likely to answer honestly and complete the interview.

When I first met each participant I introduced myself and made small talk about the weather and the like. Prior to commencing the interview I asked the participant to complete the consent form where they firstly consented to be interviewed and secondly, consented to have the interview audio taped and any quotes anonymously included in the thesis.

Only on a couple of occasions did a respondent state they did not want to elaborate on a particular question for personal reasons. These were around sensitive issues such as sexual harassment that may have occurred in previous workplaces. In general, most questions were answered without a problem.

Once the interview started my aim was to ensure that the respondent felt as relaxed and comfortable as possible. They were not rushed and able to speak freely about their workplace experience. Although the interview was based on a semi-structured questionnaire, most flowed like a conversation where I did the listening and the respondent did most of the talking. A few did not flow as well. These tended to be with younger respondents in their early twenties who were less expansive than the older respondents. Many gave short one or two sentence answers to the questions, while older respondents had a tendency to provide very long and detailed responses. It could be argued older respondents have greater levels of experience and confidence to draw upon than younger respondents. This was certainly evident during the interview situation.

As mentioned above the average length of interviews was 38 minutes. The longest interview went for 87 minutes. This woman was at home on sick leave with a broken leg and welcomed the diversion of a post-graduate student wanting to know about her workplace and work life. The shortest interview was 21 minutes. This interview was held in a coffee shop during the respondent's lunch break, where the participant was conscious of the time and wanting to return to the office within her allocated break. The following table details how contact was made with the respondent, where the interview took place and the duration of the interview.

Table 4.1 How respondents were sourced, place of interview and length of interview.

Pseudonym	Source if recruitment	Place of interview	Length of interview
Anita	Temp at researcher's place of paid employment	Workplace	43 minutes
Amy	WEL newsletter	Home	35 minutes
Belinda	Personal contact	Home	23 minutes
Barbara	Personal contact	Workplace	31 minutes
Brenda	Personal contact	Home	37 minutes
Bronwyn	Australian Services Union conference	Home	87 minutes
Christine	Personal contact	Workplace	34 minutes
Catherine	Personal contact	Home	26 minutes
Cheryl	Personal contact	Workplace	41 minutes
Cindy	Personal contact	Workplace	26 minutes
Clare	Personal contact	Coffee Shop	65 minutes
Dawn	Personal contact	Coffee Shop	21 minutes
Dominique	Jobwatch	Home	56 minutes
Elaine	Personal contact	Home	75 minutes
Eleanor	Professional secretaries newsletter	Workplace	42 minutes
Fay	Personal contact	Home	27 minutes
Fiona	Personal contact	Home	45 minutes
Gina	Personal contact	Home	36 minutes
Heather	Personal contact	Home	23 minutes
Ingrid	Personal contact	Home	31 minutes
Isobel	Personal contact	Home	39 minutes
Lucy	Personal contact	Home	53 minutes
Mary	Personal contact	Workplace	22 minutes
Monica	Personal contact	Park	35 minutes
Miriam	Personal contact	Home	22 minutes
Melissa	Personal contact	Workplace	33 minutes
Meredith	Personal contact	Workplace	40 minutes
Meryl	Personal contact	Home	27 minutes
Pam	Union Noticeboard	Home	68 minutes
Paula	Personal contact	Home	39 minutes
Penny	Personal contact	Coffee shop	44 minutes
Rachel	Personal contact	Coffee shop	32 minutes
Sally	Personal contact	University	37 minutes
Sarah	Personal contact	Home	35 minutes
Selina	Personal contact	Workplace	32 minutes
Samantha	Jobwatch	Home	37 minutes
Tracey	Personal contact	Home	27 minutes
Tamara	Personal contact	Home	45 minutes
Vera	Personal contact	Coffee shop	30 minutes
Winona	Personal contact	Home	34 minutes

Second round interviews

Although it was never the intention of this research to be a longitudinal study, it was suggested by my supervisor that I undertake second round interviews. Some 18 months after the first interviews were completed, I contacted respondents for a second interview. The aim of these interviews was to collect some longitudinal data to see whether their work circumstances had changed. I was interested in ascertaining how transient respondents were in terms of moving from one job to another, the level of ambition in relation to seeking promotion opportunities and whether personal and family commitments had impinged upon their working lives. Again these interviews were based upon a semi-structured interview format. The questionnaire (see Appendix three) was modified to ascertain how the respondent's work situation had changed over the past 18 months. However, many of the questions relating to conditions of employment and those eliciting details about specific duties and tasks undertaken by the respondent remained the same as the first interview. These interviews were conducted over the telephone and were generally much shorter, taking less than 20 minutes to complete. Respondents were asked the following questions:

- If the respondent was still employed in the same job;
- If the job content had changed;
- If the respondent was employed in a different organisation;
- Variations in terms of hours, duties, conditions of employment and pay;
- Whether the respondent in a different job regarded the change as a promotion;
- Current family commitments;
- To ascertain whether the respondent had had any breaks from the paid workforce over the past 18 months and the reasons;
- Future employment plans.

These interviews were transcribed in a mixture of longhand and shorthand over the telephone.

Again, I rang the respondent prior to the interview with the intent to arrange a convenient time to speak with them. Most people appreciated not being put on the spot and were happy to speak with me at a mutually pre-arranged time. Some were happy to speak with me there and then.

I successfully completed 24 second round interviews. I was unable to speak with 16 respondents for various reasons. The most common reason was that the respondent was no longer at the original contact telephone number, which was the case for nine respondents. I left several messages on the answering machines of four respondents, but they did not return my calls. I tried calling them at various times of the day and on weekends, but they were not available. Two respondents were too ill and unavailable to interview and one respondent had retired from paid employment and declined to comment any further.

The data used in this thesis will primarily drawn from the first interviews. These interviews provided a rich source of data which illustrates women's work and lifestyle preferences. The second interviews were used to monitor any changes to the life circumstances of respondents. As they are an incomplete data set, reference will be made to them only where they are relevant.

Analysis and handling of data

The transcripts of the interviews with respondents were analysed by reading and re-reading to identify trends in the data. Although computer software for qualitative analysis like the NUDIST computer package was available, I felt that I could draw out the themes by immersing myself in the interview material rather than having a computer program steering the thesis direction. Further, I felt that I could best determine trends in the material by becoming familiar with respondents views on particular issues.

The quantitative data derived from the mini-questionnaire and the semi-structured questionnaire and was collated using SPSS and Microsoft Access. This included data on postcodes where respondents lived, salary levels, age of respondents, ethnicity, number of hours worked, how their conditions of employment were determined, and whether they were members of a union.

The names of respondents in this research have been changed and pseudonyms adopted to protect the real identity of participants. Specific details of each participant's circumstances were also changed in minor ways to protect the identity of respondents.

One of the outcomes of the data analysis was the refining of Hakim's adaptive typology. I identified four sub-categories which included pre-reproductive women, women in family mode, pre-retirees and drifters (see chapter three).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed how I have used the case study approach to research forty women clerical workers. This approach was deemed the most suitable because it enables the study of a small number of cases with large numbers of variables. Further, the case study approach was seen as being the most compatible with the theoretical paradigm I have used in this research.

I am confident that if this study were to be repeated I would get a very similar response from the clerical workers interviewed. Anecdotally I have checked the veracity of my claims with a broad range of friends and acquaintances who work as clerical workers. Many of the findings in this study not only concur with their experiences, but they also fit with the theoretical propositions at the core of this thesis.

The next chapter will look why clerical work has an enduring appeal among the respondents in this study over their life cycle. It will also discuss why women choose clerical work and how these choices are constrained by social-structural factors beyond their control.

Chapter 5

Work/family motivations among clerical workers: A case study

Introduction

Chapter five will build on the previous chapters and explore the work/family motivations of forty female clerical workers. These clerical workers will be used as a general case study to try and understand whether their work and lifestyle choices conform to Hakim's preference theory. We saw in chapter three that adaptive women display a number of key characteristics; for example, paid work is not the central focus in adaptive women's lives and they may not actively seek employment but may accept a job if it is offered to them. They also prefer to be secondary income earners who are supported by a primary source of income and those with family responsibilities tend to have a preference for part-time and flexible employment in order to achieve a work/family balance. This chapter will discuss how respondents in this study correspond to the range of traits associated with the adaptive typology.

The degree to which respondents use their agency to determine their work and family choices, as well as how structural constraints such as the availability of childcare, fiscal policies, gender ideology, the education system, and the availability of flexible and part-time employment impact upon their decisions will also be explored. A discussion will ensue around whether women's choices change over their life cycle. Where applicable the data from this chapter will be organised so a comparison can be made between respondents who fall into each adaptive type sub-category. As discussed in chapter three, in order to capture women's experience across their life cycle four new sub-categories were introduced. These include pre-reproductives who are single or partnered women who do not have family responsibilities, women in family mode who have dependent children, pre-retirees who are close to retirement

age and drifters who tend to work in casualised employment in the peripheral labour market.

Much of the discussion in this chapter will be based around how women weigh up the pros and cons of combining work and family life in the light of structural constraints such as the lack of part-time and flexible employment, the lack of childcare and the lack of career paths and promotion opportunities within organisations. As discussed in chapter three, preference theory is largely focussed on explaining how women use their agency to determine their work and lifestyle choices. Without looking at the context in which women utilise their agency we have an incomplete picture.

Data will be presented from women in family mode who were in the midst of juggling work and family; pre-retirees who were in the final phases of their working lives and pre-reproductive respondents who were generally full-time workers but had not yet experienced parenthood. Among those respondents who had expressed a desire to have children in the future, a discussion will be based around a series of hypothetical questions which asked them to detail what they would expect from an employer when they start a family and how having a family might impact upon their paid work. Pre-retirees were asked to reflect on how they accommodated their families into their paid work when their children were dependent.

Education and job choice

A tertiary qualification is not an essential prerequisite for clerical work. Yet seven respondents in this study had completed a tertiary degree and six were undertaking tertiary study at the time of the first interview. Although these thirteen respondents were well educated they still chose clerical work. The table below details the level of education achieved by respondents in this study. Most of the pre-retirees and older women born before 1960 had not completed their secondary education. A large number of the pre-reproductive women and women in family mode had completed post-secondary training in

secretarial or business studies. Four pre-reproductive women had left secondary school and gone straight into a job. These women had no formal training or qualifications but had acquired their experience on-the-job.

Research evidence suggests that a Bachelor's degree will not necessarily guarantee a professional job. Greenbaum (1995:13) estimates that in the United States between 30 to 40 per cent of college graduates are taking jobs that do not require a degree. There has certainly been a trend in Australia in recent years for more people to attend tertiary institutions after secondary school. The evidence from this study indicates that younger women in particular are more likely to be tertiary educated than older women where such opportunities were either limited and difficult to access.

Table 5.1 Education levels by adaptive sub-category

Adaptive Sub-category	Did not complete secondary education *	Completed secondary education	Post secondary certificate or diploma	Some completed tertiary units	Tertiary degree	Total
Pre-reproductive	Meryl, Fay, Paula 3	Rachel, Gina, Fiona, Vera (all on the job training) 4	Cindy, Belinda, Melissa, Samantha, Sarah, Selina, Penny 7	Catherine, Lucy, Isobel 3	Amy, Meredith 2	19
Family mode	Dawn, Tracey, Heather 3		Barbara, Dominique, Winona 4	Eleanor 1	Sally, Elaine, Christine 3	10
Pre-retirees	Miriam, Brenda, Cheryl, Pam, 4		Anita 1	Bronwyn 1		6
Drifters	Monica 1		Mary 1	Clare 1	Tamara, Ingrid 2	5

* one woman completed a business course but did not finish her secondary education

For many women clerical work is a life long occupation, while for others, particularly those with tertiary qualifications it may be stepping stone to careers in other areas. Amy, Catherine, Tamara, Isobel, and Sally all expressed a desire to move out of clerical work and into professional work. However, this

route was not necessarily straightforward and there were no guarantees of moving up the career ladder. As Pringle (1988: 159) found in her study “the woman arts graduate who is unable to move on is still a common phenomenon among graduates.” Even though these respondents aspired to move elsewhere, there were a number of structural factors which may have impeded their access to higher paying and higher status jobs. These included lack of experience, availability of jobs, lack of career paths, lack of skill recognition and an inability for some jobs to absorb career breaks and flexible hours. Perceptions about the role of clerical workers, even among those in advanced clerical positions, may mean that an employer had little regard for the level of experience an incumbent brought to a job. As a result, a tertiary qualified clerical worker may be underutilised in her work place and overlooked for promotion.

This was certainly the experience of Tamara, Amy and Sally. Tamara had just finished an honours degree. While she was studying she supported herself by working as a temporary office worker. She had applied for a number of professional positions in her chosen field but had no success in securing an interview. She was in a catch-22 situation where she needed to have the professional experience to break into her preferred area of employment but had not been given a break to get that experience. At the time of the second interview Tamara was still working as a low level clerical worker through an employment agency. She was patently aware that by staying in clerical work the likelihood of securing professional employment was diminishing over time. As a primary earner dependent upon the income generated by clerical work, Tamara was forced to persist with this line of employment. Similarly, Ingrid was studying and working at a call centre to support herself and once her studies were finished she had hoped to move into professional employment.

Amy and Sally would have liked to move into professional work but were trapped in the white-collar ghetto of clerical work. Both of them were tertiary educated, had worked in clerical jobs for years and had experienced no other type of employment. They had returned to study as mature aged students to complete their degrees. Sally worked in a job where there were no

opportunities for advancement. To achieve a promotion would mean securing work elsewhere. Sally persevered with clerical work because it allowed her to combine paid employment with raising her child. Amy worked in a large multinational manufacturing company. She felt angry that she was overlooked for promotion on a number of occasions. New graduates in the graduate trainee scheme were given preferential treatment over her. The fact that she had worked in the organisation for a number of years and had an extensive knowledge of its workings appeared to go largely unrecognised by management.

A number of respondents were completing tertiary courses. Eleanor, a recent migrant to Australia, was hoping to improve her employment prospects by getting a higher paying job with her qualifications. Similarly, Catherine and Isobel hoped to move into professional work with their tertiary qualifications. At the time of the second interview Isobel had moved from an administrative assistant position into a training development officer position. Bronwyn and Clare were undertaking tertiary courses with the aim of self-improvement rather than any career motivation. All of these women had had difficulty getting their skill levels recognised at their workplaces and were largely confined to performing their designated duties.

In contrast, Christine, Elaine and Meredith, who were all tertiary educated, consciously chose clerical work because it fitted in with their work and lifestyle preference. Before Christine and Elaine had children they had worked as primary school teachers. Upon returning to the labour market they chose clerical work because it offered greater flexibility enabling them to fit their paid work around their family life. For Meredith, who had a degree in administrative studies, clerical work was her first job choice.

The findings in this study indicate that employment choices among clerical workers with tertiary qualifications were shaped to a large extent by external factors beyond their control. Consequently, a number of respondents found themselves working in positions akin to white-collar ghettos. These respondents had little or no prospect of getting a promotion nor could they

move into other areas of employment because they lacked relevant experience. It would appear, the longer they stayed in a clerical position, the more difficult it was for them to move out.

The tertiary qualified clerical workers in this study were found right across the clerical spectrum (see figure one the clerical continuum in chapter one). As a call centre operator Ingrid worked as an elementary clerical worker, Tamara, Clare and Eleanor worked in intermediate clerical positions, while the others worked in advanced clerical jobs (see Appendix one for definitions of elementary, intermediate and advanced clerical work). Generally speaking, it could be argued that the employers of respondents who had completed degrees did not fully utilise their skill levels. They were all still confined to their prescribed clerical jobs with little room for initiative and advancement. As discussed in chapter three, there is a perception among some employers that clerical workers are transient, have a lack commitment to their job, are not interested in promotion and there is an expectation that they will leave to have a family sooner rather than later. As a result, many female clerical workers may not be given the opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of their skills and abilities.

Hakim argues that education is not necessarily a reliable indicator of a woman's work and lifestyle preference. Being highly educated does not necessarily mean a woman will automatically be work-centred, nor does it guarantee high paying job opportunities for career advancement (Hakim, 2000:96). Clerical work can provide an entry level for many young tertiary educated women. Some of these young women may start their working lives in a low level clerical position with the view of moving into professional work. The combination of structural factors such as the availability of professional work combined with the choice not to pursue a career means that many young women are either forced to stay in clerical work or they may choose to move in and out of clerical work over their life cycle to accommodate their family needs.

Clerical work has always been seen as a respectable and desirable occupation for young women. Many young women fall into clerical work because it is easy

to access and provides a ready source of income for school leavers. Fiona, a woman in her late twenties without any tertiary qualifications, said that she chose secretarial work because she got high marks in office skills at school:

“In school secretarial studies was always my strength, I got As in typing and organisation but in my other subjects I always struggled with the Ds and the Cs. That is why I chose it because it was my strength, not necessarily because I really wanted to do it. I just followed what my strengths were.” (Fiona).

Cindy, Vera, Sarah and Gina chose clerical work because they did not undertake tertiary training. All had completed year 12 and found clerical work was readily accessible and provided them with an opportunity to enter the labour market and earn money.

“I chose clerical work out of laziness. I never did any tertiary education even though I got the marks to do it. That limits what I can do now. So basically clerical work provided me with the best of a bad lot of choices that I could do.” (Cindy)

Ingrid chose her job as a telemarketer because she had hated her previous waitressing job. It was a question of finding a job which was better than the last one she had.

Most of the women in this study who did not have tertiary qualifications had chosen clerical work for similar reasons: it provided them with a job and an entry into the labour market. Among the older respondents and pre-retirees clerical work had provided them with the opportunity to undertake paid employment across their life cycle. There was no discernible difference between the employment experience of those who had tertiary qualifications when compared with those who did not. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

A job or a career?

According to Hakim adaptive women tend to be opportunists without any definite or fixed ideas about the course of their paid employment. A familiar theme to many respondents in this research was the accidental or chance nature of securing employment. Sixteen respondents did not actively seek out their jobs through obvious channels such as the newspaper or through an employment agency. Word-of-mouth through friends or relatives, and being at the right place at the right time were very common. Generally speaking, clerical workers tend to choose a job rather than a career. A job provides women with an avenue to earn money, social contact and self fulfilment. A career may incorporate all of these factors, but where a career differs from a job is in relation to having a longer term view of the future where promotion and advancement are important. Many of the respondents did not choose a job on the basis of it providing them with the challenges which would enhance their skills and future work opportunities. Rather, job selection tended to be more ad hoc. If the respondent felt they could perform the duties then they would apply for the job. If the job was offered and/or if it was conveniently located close to home they applied. If the job offer coincided with their need for a change in employment they took it while it was available.

Organisational culture supports the masculine model of career development where full-time employment, upward mobility and advancement are seen as highly desirable and the normative route for employee progress. Women clerical workers who have extended career breaks to have their families are unable to conform to this model and are therefore penalised. There is some evidence to suggest that lengthy periods of time out of the labour market to raise children or care for other family members may diminish human capital and employability (Probert and Murphy 2001: 31). However, many of the skills women acquire in non-paid or voluntary activities may still be transferable to clerical jobs and therefore do not represent a decline in human capital terms (Cox and Leonard, 1991:39). The issue for women who have had extended career breaks is having these skills acknowledged.

The jobs available to pre-retirees were more limited than those available to the younger women in this study. As discussed in chapters one and three, it was more difficult for women born before 1960 to access tertiary education and it was not socially acceptable for women to forfeit a marriage career over an employment career. Further, the lack of continuous work experience among pre-retirees meant that they had less choice in the job market and were largely confined to clerical jobs with little prospect for advancement. Both Cheryl and Bronwyn expressed a desire to undertake tertiary studies when they were younger but social circumstances precluded them from pursuing their dreams. Bronwyn, for example, said that she would have liked to have been a lawyer.

Miriam was not interested in pursuing a career with promotion opportunities. She had become dissatisfied with a previous position and had sought a new job. A friend of hers who had worked at the same company recommended the job. The hours were part-time and her friend seemed to enjoy the position so she accepted. Brenda, a pre-retiree, had run a very successful catering business for a number of years and sold it for a handsome profit. In her early working life she had been employed as a clerical worker and decided to pursue clerical work again in the last few years prior to retirement:

“After I got out of the business which I ran for three years and sold, I had six months off. I knew that I had to go back to work because I did fairly well in the business but I certainly had to keep myself . I just looked at the newspapers and it was the first job that cropped up and of course because I had been on campus before I knew the computer system, I was just in. I was supervisor there for just short of six years.”
(Brenda).

For many of the women in family mode, the selection of their job was based not only on what was available at the time they were job hunting, but the flexibility it could offer them to meet their family needs. The proximity to home was also a factor although not necessarily stated as such during the

interviews. Winona chose her job because it enabled her to work during schools hours. Tracey chose her temporary office job because it provided her with the flexibility to take time off over school holidays. The hours were also critical for Dominique when she selected her job as office manager:

“I chose that job for two reasons. One, the extra wage that I was getting and the other thing was because the hours were from 6.00am until 2.00pm, it sort of gave me the opportunity in the afternoon to spend more time with my youngest daughter and being able to pick her up from school. ” (Dominique)

Barbara, Elaine and Heather did not actively seek their jobs, but heard about them via word-of mouth. Heather’s main concern was to find part-time work. One day while attending the hairdresser she was discussing her predicament and they offered her a job:

“I have always been in the hairdressing industry and after having my little boy, a part-time job arose for me and I grabbed it. It is something that I know and I like doing. I found out about the job by being a client and they mentioned it to me.” (Heather).

Heather was the only respondent with dependent children who job shared. Her co-worker was employed for about 30 hours per week while Heather worked 24 hours per week.

Barbara had just started looking for a full-time job when a friend suggested she put in an application:

“It actually chose me. I fell into it and I was going to start to look for a full-time job this came up and I just rocked up and they said okay we'll take you. So I didn't really choose it, it sort of chose me. It was basically good timing.” (Barbara).

The pre-reproductive group were most likely to commute to the central business district for work. Like the women in family mode and the pre-retirees, many of the pre-reproductive respondents fell into their jobs rather than actively searching for them. A number of respondents including Paula, Rachel and Meryl had been working as a temporary office workers in their place of employment and were offered permanent positions.

Gina found out about her job through family members where clerical work was seen as a highly desirable job to pursue after leaving school and before settling down to have a family:

“The company where I work is sort of like family, both my sister-in-laws work there. I gave them my CV and they said come in for an interview.”
(Gina).

Isobel was quite ambitious to do well at work and chose a large multinational company where there was scope for career advancement. Amy deliberately chose a job which suited her skills and offered her the opportunity for a career path. The irony is that she found it difficult to get a promotion both within the company and elsewhere because she did not have the necessary experience.

“I chose this job because it probably suited the skills that I had at the time and my background. I am trying to break into another field now, but it is hard if you don't have the background you can't get into it.”
(Amy).

In relation to career choice, what is interesting about all the respondents in this study, regardless of their family status, only five (Selina, Meryl, Dominique, Vera, Meredith) out of the forty respondents chose clerical work when asked “if you could choose any job what would it be and why?”. In response to this question, most respondents became quite animated and spoke about occupations such as hospitality, interior design, acting, community work or flight attendant, to name a few. Others simply did not know what they would like to do, which they saw as a problem. For example, Christine just wanted “a

job, any job". Amy said "I haven't got a clue, and that is the trouble", while, Catherine could not quite nail what it was she wanted to do:

"It would probably be something that I could do at home. Something that was creative, that I could be flexible in hours. I suppose that still brought in money because I would need to pay the mortgage. Something of interest that I like doing. I mean I like what I am doing now, but it would also be nice to do something that you really want to do." (Catherine).

Like many respondents Clare was not passionate about clerical work and saw it "as pretty much bread and butter stuff".

As has become clear, many respondents have a pragmatic approach to clerical work. It provided them with a job rather than a career. Further, clerical work afforded them with the opportunity to earn money rather than being a lifelong pursuit. Finally, the findings from this study suggest that paid employment may not have been the primary focus of these women's lives, but rather a means to an end.

Reasons for undertaking paid employment

One of the defining features of Hakim's adaptive typology is the secondary earner status. As secondary earners women not only reinforce traditional roles but follow the trajectory of the marriage career. Most of the women in this study were secondary income earners and consciously chose clerical work because it enabled them to achieve a balance between work and family life. Their secondary earner role was dependent upon the presence of a male breadwinner. However, for those fourteen respondents who were single and/or sole parents they were the primary income earners. Twenty six women were secondary income earners who earned less than their partners. Included in this category were two young women who lived at home with their parents. These respondents have been classified as secondary earners because they

were on low incomes and received parental support in the form of accommodation and/or other financial support.

The majority of women in this study said that they worked for financial reasons as well as job satisfaction. Women in family mode who were sole parents were more likely to state that financial considerations necessitated their participation in the labour market. Similarly, women in family mode whose partners did not earn enough to sustain the family said they were required to work in order to survive. Divorced pre-retirees worked as a matter of financial necessity. They were working to secure their financial position in retirement. All of these women chose clerical work because it enabled them to access the labour market at a level which suited their needs. For example, Heather was a sole parent who had worked in sales in the past, and had limited office and computer training. The interpersonal skills she acquired while working as a sales representative were transferred to a receptionist job at a hairdressers. She did not want to work full-time while her son was young and chose her job because it allowed her to work part-time. The job she was undertaking during the time of this study was not her first choice, but it was the best on offer given her financial circumstances which necessitated her earning a living, coupled with her responsibilities as a sole parent.

Women in pre-reproductive mode who were single and financially had to support themselves, were more likely to cite social or work satisfaction as their primary reason for work. This may be due in part to higher levels of satisfaction at the workplace. When adaptive women marry men who earn more than them there is some evidence that these women see themselves as secondary rather than primary earners (Hakim, 2000). Lucy, a secondary income earner, not only enjoyed the social aspect of work but liked the idea that she contributed to her household income:

“I complain about having to go to work, but I enjoy working, I enjoy the social aspect of it, being with other people, doing something, I guess I am contributing to the household income, I am not being kept.” (Lucy)

The “non-pecuniary value of work” (Hakim, 2003b:73) should not be underestimated. For many women who are secondary earners a job provides them with the opportunity to have social contact outside the home, as well as the ability to earn money and maintain their skills. Although Cheryl, a pre-retiree, worked full-time, she had always regarded herself as a secondary income earner. Cheryl’s main reasons for working were to provide her with personal challenges and fulfilment rather than making a significant contribution to her household income:

“Why do I work? I suppose originally you start for a bit of extra pin money and what have you. I am not one who could stay home for ever and a day. Now I suppose I would hate to be at home all the time, maybe if I had endless money it might be alright, I don't mind my own company. But I work for fulfilment, to be involved.” (Cheryl).

One of the reasons Eleanor worked was to ensure her family had a reasonable standard of living and the ability to afford a house and a car:

“I don't know, firstly you have to do something in life, after that you have to support your family, especially now because we have a little one. We want to have a good standard of living, may be a good car and a house and things like that. So professional satisfaction and after that financial part where you have to work to live.” (Eleanor).

Heather, a sole parent, worked for financial reasons, although if she had the choice she would rather stay home with her son. She was fortunate enough to secure part-time work to allow her to spend time with her son:

“When I was having my son, I didn't work. I am a sole parent, I didn't work for at least twelve months and then I went onto part-time work. I have to bring in an income. If I didn't have to work, I wouldn't work. I

would be on holidays or just stay at home and have a nice life. But I have to work to provide food and rent and everything else.” (Heather).

Among respondents in pre-reproductive mode the primary motivations to work were tied to cultural and normative considerations. Work was considered the most socially desirable and expedient way to spend time prior to marriage and a family. Fay described her reasons for work “because it is the done thing”. Cindy worked because she believed it kept her in circulation:

“I need to be doing something everyday and I need to be kept active, otherwise I would become fairly reclusive and just end up never getting out of bed, so I need to be kept continually active.” (Cindy).

Career choice over the life cycle

Working life for many women is made up of a series of transitions. The life cycle has a significant impact on the type of jobs women can choose. Changing jobs, accepting a demotion or seeking a promotion are dependent upon a clerical worker’s life circumstances. Generally speaking, the choices women make are largely shaped by structural constraints such as changes in familial relationships including divorce, separation, death, marriage, children, the availability of flexible and part-time employment, the availability of affordable childcare, the willingness of organisations to allow women to move from full-time work to part-time employment and back again, fiscal policies and so on.

Pre-retirees and older women (those born before 1960) with dependent children were more likely to have had extended career breaks after having children. These career breaks ranged in length from five to fifteen years. Younger women in family mode were more likely to take shorter career breaks of less than two years before returning to the labour market. Findings such as this support the contention that the “new scenario” has had an impact upon the

work and lifestyle choices women make. For pre-retirees it was not as easy or socially acceptable to combine work and family while their children were younger. In contrast, one could argue that it was more socially acceptable among younger women to return to work relatively quickly after having a child.

To gauge their future career and job expectations respondents were asked: "Where will you be in five years time" and "where will you be in ten years time?". These two questions were asked in both the first and second interview and were useful in determining how respondents perceived themselves in relation to work and family. The second interview enabled me to gauge how their family circumstances had changed and the impact this had on their working lives and ambitions for the future. Among the pre-reproductives their answers were largely around their plans to have a family and how this may or may not impede their paid employment. Among the pre-retirees and other older respondents this question revealed how and when they would complete their working lives. Women in family mode were also able to reflect how their working lives would change as their children became older and more independent.

The transition between full-time to part-time work can be fraught and hazardous for women in family mode. Most of the respondents in family mode took relatively short breaks of between three months and two years after childbirth before returning to paid employment. Even the sole parents took a short maternity break before returning to work. A number of the respondents in family mode upon returning to work were forced to take a demotion. Elaine and Christine were teachers and moved into clerical work after having their children because it suited their family needs. Most of the women in family mode were happy with their current work arrangements and did not envisage seeking a promotion in the near future.

Generally speaking, the women in family mode envisaged that they would be working in the same or a similar clerical job in the next five to ten years, because it suited their family life. Their work plans continued to be predicated on their secondary earner status. Sally was keen to seek a promotion and

Dominique wanted a higher paying job. In ten years time Dominique, Elaine and Dawn thought they would be retired. At the time of the second interview Christine had just had her second child. Although she had always enjoyed work, it had become less important to her. However, she felt that she would always have some links to the workforce throughout her life.

“I will always work at something. I couldn't become a housewife. It's bad enough with the kids at home now. I would always work for someone or I would go down the track of self-employment.” (Christine, second interview)

Elaine's life circumstances had changed dramatically between the first and the second interviews. She was no longer married and had become a primary breadwinner. Her previous work had been shaped by her secondary earner status and she had envisaged retirement in the light of her husband's career and superannuation. By the second interview work had become a financial imperative rather than an avenue of self-expression and social contact. Elaine's experience demonstrates how women's life situation can change dramatically and have a significant impact on their work and lifestyle choices. Elaine also found that having an interrupted career meant that she was penalised in the labour market.

“I have quite a different feeling about work as the sole provider. I don't have a fall back of a husband. I am it for me. Work was something I could leave, it is now essential to my existence. I am now two years older and I have moved into the age bracket where I am not a marketable commodity, I need to develop unique skills to make sure I am marketable. I am 45 years old and have been out of the workforce for many years, I don't have the legacy of a work history behind me. However, work has become more of a responsibility than it's ever been.” (Elaine, second interview).

All the pre-retirees had organised their working lives around their families. Most of them had taken extended periods out of the labour market when their

children were young and returned the labour market when they were older. Pam entered the labour market for the first time when her children were aged nine and eleven. Bronwyn gradually shifted to full-time work as her children became more independent. Cheryl was fortunate enough to secure part-time work during school hours when her children were young:

“For a lot of years I was part-time. When the children went to school I was able to work the school hours. I was lucky that way. I have done different jobs but always some form of clerical work because the hours suited.” (Cheryl)

Nearly all the pre-retirees said they would have refused a promotion when their children were younger if it had meant spending less time with their families. The exception was Miriam who said that she was never given that option. The duality between work and family life for pre-retirees has been an enduring reality for these respondents over their lifetimes. Not all the pre-retirees were “empty nesters”. Although many still had children who were no longer dependent they still impacted upon their working lives. It is clear that family life has been the most significant force in shaping the working lives of these respondents.

At the time of the first interview none of the pre-retirees was interested in seeking a promotion. In most cases there was nowhere for them to go. Cheryl's comments are indicative of how pre-retirees were starting to think about winding down their working lives:

“I suppose now at my stage it suits me at the moment I am very comfortable. If something happened tomorrow and they said well that's it I would find work. But I am getting to that stage it doesn't worry me.” (Cheryl)

Four pre-retirees felt that they would be in the same or a similar clerical job in five years time, but all but one felt that they would be retired in ten years time.

Bronwyn, who was working full-time, thought that she would probably make a gradual exit from the labour market by shifting her hours to part-time.

Women in pre-reproductive mode were more likely to have continuous full-time careers without taking a break. If they did take a break it was usually for travel or study. Among the pre-reproductives many of them envisaged that they would have a family within ten years time. Some of those who did not express a desire to have a family in the first interview, indicated in the second interview that having a family was an option they were seriously considering. Even among the six respondents who said that they did not intend to have children work was not the primary focus of their lives. None of them had ambitious career or work plans. Rachel was adamant that she was not interested in a family. She flippantly said that in five years time she might be on a tropical island with a drink in her hand. As it turned out, this comment was not far from reality: she is currently living in northern Queensland and being supported by her partner.

Most pre-reproductive women in this study were saddled with the expectation that upon having a family they would be required to move to part-time work and in the process take a demotion. Those pre-reproductive respondents who said they would like to have children in the future were asked a series of hypothetical questions relating to how their working lives would change after the birth of a child.

Most respondents expected to take maternity leave of between six to twelve months after having a family. When they returned to work they were all patently aware of how difficult it would be to juggle work and family. Respondents had a broad range of views on what they expected from their employer after the birth of a child. These included the provision of childcare, flexible hours of work, maternity leave, leave provisions to care for sick children, the ability to work from home, the opportunity to return to their place of work on a part-time basis and being able to return to the same job after a period of maternity leave.

Most respondents had realistic expectations of how a child would impact upon their work life. Most agreed that having a family would impair their work opportunities significantly because their employer would view them as being less committed to their jobs. Others were mindful of their huge workloads and long hours and how this would impact upon their family life. The move to part-time work or a significant reduction in full-time hours was seen as a way of reconciling this time bind.

Catherine, Fiona and Vera all worked upwards of fifty hours per week, and conceded that they could not maintain their current hours if they had a child. Catherine thought if she could reduce her hours she might be able to cope with the demands of a family and work. Fiona, a personal assistant, noted how her boss liked her to be on call, and believed he would not tolerate her coming in later in the morning and leaving early to pick up children:

“I think having a child would not work at all with my current job. My boss is very career minded and he works long hours and he likes me to be on call. He likes me to get in early, so he can start his day and he likes me to leave a bit later. I think if I had children it would be frustrating for a boss who is keen and motivated to do long hours. It would be frustrating because he wouldn't have an assistant there to help him stay back or to come in early or be flexible like he is, I think it just wouldn't work if I had children.” (Fiona).

Vera noted that her job as a personal assistant to the boss of a union did not allow the flexibility she would need to raise a family. In all likelihood she would have to find work elsewhere if she had a child, if she was unable to continuing working full-time:

“My workload is pretty heavy. I don't think I would be able to do the hours that I currently do. It would maybe put more pressure on me in the position that I am in due to not having flexibility. I would have to return to work full-time because if I wanted to keep doing what I am

doing now, there is no part-time about it, it has got to be a full-time position.” (Vera).

Sarah thought that part-time work would be the best option to ensure that her children were given adequate parental care and attention. However, she was unsure whether any part-time jobs existed which were challenging and fulfilling:

“Having a child would probably have a huge impact. I think part-time work would probably be the best when you have kids, like three days a week or everyday for half a day or something like that would be good. But then it would be hard because it would probably be a job that is not fulfilling, like just working...I don't know where. So it is a bit scary.” (Sarah).

Most respondents said they would stay in either the same or a similar job after they had a child. As noted above, most said they would not return straight away but would take some maternity leave before making the decision to return to work on a part-time or full-time basis. Five respondents (Cindy, Ingrid, Isobel, Catherine and Selina) said they would like to go back to work on a full-time basis but this would be dependent upon the type of job they were doing, the child, the availability of childcare, and a supportive partner. Isobel sums up the sentiments of these five respondents:

“I would hope it would be full-time. It would depend upon what I am doing at the time too. It might be that I am okay doing it part-time for a period of time as long my income was still substantial. I intend to share caring for the family with my husband, so if I take a period of time off work, he would do the same so we can share that responsibility. That is the ideal scenario I guess.” (Isobel).

Most respondents said that they would probably increase their hours of employment once their children had reached school age. This did not necessarily mean a return to full-time work, but referred to an increase in part-

time hours. Others indicated that when their children were starting school this might be a good time to return to full-time employment.

How did the hypothetical work plans of pre-reproductives come to fruition? The second interviews indicate that some of the pre-reproductive women had shifted into women in family mode. Meredith represents the archetypal adaptive clerical worker. Although she was working full-time in an advanced clerical position with the possibility for promotion, she did not know what she would be doing in five years time. She had hoped to secure a job closer to home. She was thinking about having a family, but was unsure when this would happen. During the second interview Meredith had changed jobs and had made a sideways move into a related field of employment. Meredith was conscious that work was not the main focus of her life and that she endeavoured to maintain a balance between her paid employment and family responsibilities. She was not ambitious in terms of attaining promotion and expressed a desire to move into part-time work in a job closer to home because it would allow her to spend more time at home.

“My new job is more stressful. I have been a bit negative where I shouldn't have been. I believe work isn't everything and there needs to be a focus on other parts of my life - I need to get a balance back. I would like to work part-time down the track. My husband works full-time - we don't seem to have the time to do fun things. I have no huge desire to go any further up the career ladder. May be sideways or down it if it was work I enjoyed doing. I would like to move closer to home.”
(Meredith, second interview).

Meredith did go onto to have a family; I saw her with her baby at an immunisation session I attended with my own child about two years after the second interview.

Lucy was in the early stages of pregnancy during the first interview, but did not divulge this information. At the time of the second interview she had a child and was embarking on her return to work on a part-time basis after twelve

months maternity leave. She viewed the return to work with some trepidation and was not sure how she would juggle work and family. She spoke about how her priorities had changed and how her family was the most important focus in her life. Having a career break at home for twelve months had been important to Lucy. Her case exemplifies how the divided loyalties between work and home can shift significantly with the birth of a child. She was no longer willing to work full-time or put in the extra hours as she had in the past.

“I have other priorities now. Family and home are more important now. In the past I was happy to work back and on weekends when needed. I am not happy to do that now. The last twelve months at home have been very important for my husband, son and I. Initially I was not happy with the people at work's attitude - they said they couldn't offer me part-time work. Since then they have restructured the department and they are able to give me a part-time position. I have given them five years of service and I was annoyed with the way they treated the situation. My child is my main priority rather than work. I am not sure how things will work when I go back. I'll wait and see.” (Lucy, second interview).

Lucy now has two children and continues to work part-time in the same organisation.

Belinda had one child at the time of the second interview and was expecting her second. She said that she would stay home until her children started school. Findings such as this support Hakim's view that adaptive women seek extended career breaks while their children are young and then return to the labour market at a later time on a part-time basis.

Isobel was career focussed during the first interview. She spoke about her tertiary studies and how she would achieve a promotion. During the second interview she had been promoted and moved out of clerical work. When asked what she would be doing in five years time, she had factored in children and part-time work.

The evidence from this study indicates that older women born before 1960 were more likely to take extended career breaks before returning to the labour market. This behaviour was largely shaped by what was deemed to be socially acceptable at the time. In contrast, younger women were more likely to take shorter breaks after having a family. This was borne out by the experience of women in family mode and it was certainly desirable among pre-reproductive women. Work trends across the life cycle, as indicated in this case study, suggest that work was the central focus of respondents' lives when they were single and/or childless. Once they had a family, work became less important. As their children grew and moved towards independence, work was again given a higher priority in their lives. In terms of attachment to the labour market this may mean a gradual shift to full-time work or staying in part-time work until retirement.

Evidence from this research supports Hakim's preference theory. The women in this study did use their agency to determine their work and lifestyle preference. Generally speaking, respondents had made a conscious choice to combine both work and family at some point in their lives and this decision would have an enduring impact across their life cycle. There is some evidence to suggest that women are being reflexive and actively shaping their own work-life biographies. By taking shorter breaks from paid employment, younger women are ensuring that their skills and human capital remain intact. In a sense these women's links to the labour market are not only driven by a desire to combine work and family but are a form of insurance to cover unforeseen circumstances which may suddenly change their secondary earner status to primary. Although a number of women would have preferred to combine work and family this choice was largely unavailable to them. Structural constraints such as changes in family circumstances, the availability of flexible and part-time employment, the inability to move to part-time work because their jobs could not be done in less hours were factors which shaped respondents job choice at the time of the first interview or would most certainly be a factor at a future time when and if they started a family.

Gender ideology and domestic responsibilities

The experience of respondents in this survey clearly indicates that there has been a social shift in the acceptability of women with family responsibilities combining paid employment and their domestic role. When comparing the experience of pre-retirees and women in family mode, the latter have benefited from the changes made in the “new scenario”. All the women in family mode with partners said that their partners supported the fact that they worked. Generally speaking, nearly all the respondents in this study did the bulk of the domestic tasks at home. However, the women in family mode were more likely to have supportive partners who helped out whereas pre-retirees were more likely to do all the household chores, work, and attend to the children when they were younger.

Pre-retirees came from a culture that required women to become selfless mothers who gave priority to their families. Anita said that her husband did not like her working and she believed this was one of the reasons why they were no longer together. Bronwyn said her husband felt neglected because she was working and studying and this left little time to spend with him on the weekends.

Pam’s experience reinforced the pervasiveness of the male breadwinner role and how in the past a woman’s primary role was to raise her children. Pam first entered the labour market in 1985 when her children were late primary school age. Prior to this time she had never had a paid job. Pam’s husband did not like her working and contributed very little in the way of assistance in relation to domestic tasks around the house. Pam describes the overwhelming feeling of having to work full-time, undertake all the chores at home and raise her two children. She now feels that her children missed out because she simply did not have enough “quality time” with them. Not only did Pam not receive any support from her husband, but her father did not want her to work. The following quote sums up the attitudes of her father who could not understand why she went to work after her husband had supported the family up until that time:

“My dad for instance didn't want me to work. It was a real manly thing in those days that a woman didn't work. It took me a while to really think about it, it does takes something from the man. It is saying to him, you can't manage even though you were able to support us for the first ten or so years” (Pam).

After Pam's marriage broke down there was an economic imperative for her to continue to work rather than being a secondary income earner.

Work preference and job commitment

Although women try and shape their paid employment around their family life, work often took priority. Many respondents had experienced a conflict of interest between work and family at some time during their working lives. Being asked to work late, work overtime, having to use their own sick leave to care for children, sending children to school when they were sick, being unable to attend school functions because of work commitments, having to work additional hours to cover for co-workers who were on leave all interfered with many of these respondents' home lives.

The findings of this study indicate that respondents were highly committed to their jobs in terms of completing the required tasks and duties. Those with flexible hours usually made up the time if they had to stay at home to look after sick children. Where their level of commitment may have been questionable was in relation to how long they planned to stay in their jobs.

Most respondents planned to stay in their jobs for between six months and two years. Fourteen respondents did not know how long they would be in a job. A few respondents who had been in their positions for many years said that they were prepared to stay in the job until they retired. Winona, a woman in family mode, said that she hoped to stay in her job forever because she enjoyed it so much. Similarly, Eleanor, who had a young baby, said her job suited her for

the moment, but hoped to find other work once she had finished her training. Ingrid, a telemarketer, said she would stay in her job “as long as she could hack it” or until she could find a better job.

Generally speaking, the clerical workers in this study had relatively high job turnovers. When comparing the four sub-categories, the women in pre-reproductive mode were most likely to say they would stay longer than two years. The other groups mostly identified staying in their job for less than two years. As discussed in earlier chapters, the length of time one stays in a job is dependent upon the life cycle. Having children impacts upon turnover rates because it means many women take extended career breaks, they move from part-time to full-time work and back again. Other unanticipated circumstances such as divorce, a partner’s death or unemployment may necessitate the move from secondary earner to primary earner status. All of these reasons may require a job change.

Job turnover and commitment are also linked to structural factors which shape women’s job choice. Nearly half the respondents said that there were no promotional opportunities within the organisation in which they were employed and if they wanted to move up the career ladder they would have to go elsewhere. Eight respondents said there were limited promotions. Essentially their desire to move up the career ladder was outweighed by structural constraints. Even though 32 respondents said they would be prepared to undertake further training to get a higher paid job the opportunity for promotion was severely limited. As noted in chapter one, clerical work has very few career options. Elaine, who worked in a large construction company, said that there were few promotion opportunities for clerical personnel.

“I think if you are an engineer and a professional person, there is probably a career path. But for administrative staff, I don't think there are any promotional possibilities. Realistically there is nowhere for me to go because it is a fairly fixed workplace.” (Elaine).

In contrast, Penny, who worked in a large telecommunications company, felt that there were ample opportunities for promotion.

Securing a promotion was not just about making the choice to move up the ladder or to undertake further training, it was also about the availability of jobs and the willingness of an organisation to accommodate the needs of the female clerical workers. The findings of this study indicate that promotional opportunities were linked to the size of the organisation. Those respondents working in large organisations were more likely to have access to career paths when compared to those working in small business who had no such avenue available to them. The ability to secure a promotion was also dependent upon how long the person had been in a position. In some jobs there was an expectation that the incumbent work in a particular position for a suitable length of time before applying for a promotion. A person's promotability within an workplace was also linked to how they fitted into the organisation's culture. For example, Bronwyn believed that she had been overlooked for promotion because of her union involvement. She had been labelled by management as a "trouble maker".

The labour market experience of drifters

The choices made by drifters were seriously curtailed because they tended to have a tenuous grip on the labour market with insecure jobs. Macro-structural factors related to the availability of jobs and equal employment opportunity, as well as perceptions of their abilities and compatibility with organisational culture, largely shaped their workplace experience.

All the drifters had some form of disability or some other problem which made their integration into the mainstream labour market difficult. A number had periods of unemployment during their working lives. Clare had lengthy episodes of unemployment during her early working career. She had also taken time off work with stress related illnesses. Monica was recovering from

repetitive strain injury. After being unemployed for four years she had been involved in a retraining and work reintegration program:

“I had severe repetitive strain injury and had been unemployed for four years. I have been in this job for just over twelve months. Prior to that I spent three and half years in rehabilitation, re-educating, retraining all over again. I had to do programs and courses to enhance my job prospects so I could be employed again.” (Monica).

Ingrid was completing an honours degree at university and was working as a telemarketer to support herself while she studied. Ingrid had an interrupted academic career because she suffered bouts of mental illness. Tamara had worked as a low level temporary office worker for many years. As she did not have any typing and word processing skills she was limited in the sorts of assignments she could accept.

Lastly, Mary had worked on a casual basis with a government department. Although proficient at her job, Mary understood that it would be difficult for her to secure employment elsewhere because of the way she looked. Mary dressed in an alternative style and had many body piercing on her face. She said that she had been overlooked when applying for jobs because of her appearance.

Interestingly, all the drifters hoped to be “working somewhere” in five years time. Only Tamara had expressed a desire to have a family at a future time. Even if these respondents could secure permanent and continuous employment it would not automatically mean that these women would become work-centred. They displayed the traits of adaptive women work where work was not the central focus in their lives. Among those who had partners, they were secondary income earners.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter indicate that work preferences for the respondents in this study changed over their life course and were heavily influenced by family responsibility. The four sub-categories of the adaptive typology which I have devised aptly describe what we might expect women to do and how their choices vary in each stage over their life cycle. They allow us to draw a clear distinction between women born before 1960 who had not benefited from the “new scenario” compared with the younger women in this study. The lack of educational opportunities for pre-retirees when they were younger meant that they had worked as clerical workers all their lives. These women were more likely to have had extended career breaks of several years, before returning to the labour market on a part-time basis. As these women did not have a continuous employment history, their career progression had been seriously curtailed. Older women were more likely to have partners who did not support their involvement in the labour market. The main reasons pre-retirees worked as they approach retirement were socially motivated.

In contrast, women born in the “new scenario” tended to work full-time when they were single or prior to having a family. Once they had a child most tended (or intended in the case of pre-reproductives) to have a short break of up to two years prior to returning to a part-time position with flexible hours. Most respondents expected to take a demotion when they made the transition between full-time employment to part-time work. Although gender ideology was still pervasive and influential, it would appear that it was more acceptable and desirable for these women to combine paid work and family as secondary income earners. Among the young women who had partners, all of them supported the fact that they worked.

The women in this study displayed traits which conformed to Hakim’s adaptive typology. Nearly all preferred to be secondary income earners, many had secured employment via ad hoc means rather than actively seeking employment, work was certainly not the central focus of their lives and most

had either aspired to work part-time after having a family or worked part-time while they had dependent children.

Generally speaking, the behaviour of respondents in this study corresponded to Hakim's preference theory because they largely used their agency to determine their work and lifestyle preferences. Where this was not possible, it was usually due to structural circumstances beyond their control. For example, in the case of sole parents and women who were divorced or widowed they may have had a preference to combine part-time work and family, but mitigating circumstances meant that they had to work full-time as primary earners. There were other instances where a number of respondents had to work full-time as a matter of financial necessity because their partner's income was insufficient to support the family. The findings in this study demonstrate that by taking into account the context in which women make their choices, we are better able to understand why women choose certain occupations, how they achieve a work/family balance through flexible employment and their level of attachment to the labour market in terms of commitment and secondary earner status.

The findings in this study also demonstrates that paid employment plays a significant role in shaping women's lives. Most respondents were committed to their jobs and tended to fit their family lives around their jobs, rather than the other way round. Turnover levels among respondents were reasonably high, but it would be erroneous to assume that this was due to a lack of commitment on their behalf. The nature of clerical work with its limited promotional opportunities, the difficulty returning to work in a comparable position on a part-time basis and the fact that women are constantly making adjustments to their paid employment to suit their family needs means that the movement in and out of clerical positions is reasonably dynamic.

There is no doubt that clerical work provides the ideal occupation for these adaptive women over their life cycle. From those women leaving school without post-secondary qualifications, to those women with tertiary qualifications who are unable to break into professional areas of employment,

clerical work provides women with a ready source of income. As we saw in chapter one it is available in a wide range of industries and sectors and has been developed as a feminised occupation to cater for the specific needs of adaptive women who want to combine work and family over their life cycle.

The next chapter will explore the nature of clerical work as a feminised occupation. It will discuss in detail the types of skills and abilities the respondents in this study brought to their jobs. It will also look at how the women in this study saw themselves within their designated roles and within the broader context of the organisation in which they were employed. The main impetus for the next chapter is to try and understand the workplace context in which clerical workers operate and how this may affect their ability to negotiate an enterprise bargain.