THE BORDERS BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE AS PROBLEMATIC

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(...) in modern societies no boundary seems quite as important, yet quite as porous and ambiguous, as the one between private and public (Alan Wolfe 1997: 187-188).

Introduction

The demands made upon the workforce today are often overwhelming and interfering with activities and duties in private life. This is my main focus and concern in this paper. I am arguing that there is a need to distinguish more clearly between public and private life, due to different reasons, which I shall go further into in the following.

In many ways the borderlines between the two spheres have become blurred in today’s society. Such a development may be welcome, and in accordance with the way many people, especially women, think about their own lives. Though, someone has to be the losing part if there is shortage of time and demands from all quarters. Today’s work organisations often demand almost total commitment from their members. This development may be harmful for families and private life. However, people may also find great pleasure in their work, but the pressure they feel, due to the different responsibilities, may be too great.

Mingling private and work relations seems to be quite common in different work organisations. This is another aspect of a blurred relationship between public and private life, which I want to go further into. There are reasons to believe that this is an escalating phenomenon, connected to changes in work organisations and other developments in our society. I am especially interested in what kinds of problem such a development may represent.

Feminists have been critical to the private/public dichotomy and I will go further into that in the following. But before taking a more thorough look at the abovementioned issues, the distinction between public and private needs some amplification and clarification.

The Private/Public Distinction as Ambiguous and Protean

The private/public distinction is an old one, dated back to classical antiquity, and related to other social divisions and dichotomies made in science, trying to understand real life (cf. Baker 1999, Prokhovnik 1999, Weintraub 1997). It is often seen as one of the “grand dichotomies” of Western thought, subsuming a wide range of other important distinctions (Weintraub 1997).

Weintraub points out that the distinction may have different meanings, both in theory and practice, and he differentiate between four broad fields of discourse where public and private play important roles,
but have different notions. In short, these may be described as follows: 1) the liberal-economistic model, which sees the public/private distinction first and foremost as the distinction between state administration and the market economy; 2) the civic perspective, in which the public realm is seen in terms of political community and citizenship, often associated with the public sphere, and analytically distinct from both the market and the administrative state; 3) an anthropological or social history approach where the public realm is seen as a sphere of fluid and polymorphous sociability, distinct from both the structures of formal organisation and the private domains of intimacy and domesticity – accordingly, this frame seeks to analyse cultural and dramatic conventions behind happenings and events; 4) the feministic perspective, seen as a tendency to conceive of the distinction between private and public in terms of the distinction between the family and the larger economy and the political order – from this viewpoint the market economy often becomes the paradigmatic public realm.

In addition to these four approaches, there is another one, which can be named “private life perspective”, although it is not a separate framework in Weintraub’s categorization. From this point of view, private life is first and foremost personal relationships, related to intimacy, domesticity and privacy (Kielland 2001, Weintraub 1997). The public contrast is either that of sociability or the larger society with its impersonal and formal institutions and instrumental relations. This perspective may be of special relevance when it comes to the more typical post-modern issues related to the rights of the individuals, for instance to be in control of their own identity and body. The usefulness of this approach is obvious when discussing the exposure of individuals’ private lives in media. The health and care sector is seen as a special risky area where people are exposed to invasive behaviour, without being able to defend themselves (Etzioni 1999, Kielland 2001). However, whenever private life is invaded, this perspective may be relevant.

As pointed out by Weintraub (1997), no single or dichotomous model of the public/private distinction is capable to capture the institutional and cultural complexity of modern societies. Different forms, variants and dimensions are needed to understand complicated social issues as they present themselves in real life. Furthermore, perspectives are overlapping, thus making a more complete picture together with others than each one can do alone.

Perspectives like those presented above, may be helpful in understanding the real world, but they may also contribute to shaping reality. However, approaches have to change with a developing world. For instance, modern technology and changes in the organisation of work and families may complicate the old comprehension of the two different spheres. Furthermore, what is public and what is private is always subject to discussion and negotiation.

Several researchers have argued that there is a need for an analytical tool or concept, representing a realm between the private and the public (cf. Kielland 2001, Wolfe 1997). The renewed interest in the work of Hanna Arendt (1958), “The Human Condition”, where she made distinctions between the public, the private and the social, may indicate such a need. As suggested by Kielland, Arendt’s way of thematizing “the social” might be fruitful.

Although several of the abovementioned perspectives are useful in my elaboration of thought, I assume that the feministic and the private life approach are the most dominating.

**Feminist Critique of the Public/Private Distinction**

Feminists have often been critical to the sharp distinction between public and private life, seeing it as an analytical dichotomy primarily created by men to correspond with their own views of reality (cf. Nicholson 1999, Pateman 1984). Furthermore, dichotomies are met by critical voices from post-modern quarters. As mentioned above, viewed as a grand theory it is associated with other dichotomies such as reason/emotion, man/woman and masculine/feminine (cf. Prokhovnik 1999). Still, in a changing society this categorising has a great influence on institutions and structures and the way people think and behave.
The relationship between the public and the private spheres has been central on the feministic agenda, both in literature and in practical work to changing or improving women’s lives. A clear-cut division between spheres, which meant separated worlds and different responsibilities for men and women, was not in accordance with a feministic scenario of a society where women and men were equals and the two sexes had equal opportunities to develop their abilities and capacities.

The female position as subordinate to the male position in the society has always been the concern of feminist researchers and activists. While asserting and claiming women’s rights in the public sphere, they also focused and criticised the traditional male role as a breadwinner, and called attention to the necessity of women and men to share duties and responsibilities in both spheres. They pointed to the interrelation between the spheres and the importance of considering them together, not as separated parts with different statuses and responsibilities (cf. Baker 1999, Wolfe 1997). In doing this, they called attention to society’s responsibility for work and duties involving care, especially for children and elderly people, which traditionally had been seen as women’s work and taken care of in the family. The slogan from the seventies, “the personal is the political”, summarises much of this approach.

As many feminist researchers have pointed out, the distinction between private and public is a social and political construction, which has an ideological function, contributing to the subordinate position of women (cf. for example Baker 1999, Fraser 1999). The borderlines are changeable and varying in different historical and cultural contexts. The construction of the borders is considered to be a political act, which involves the exercise of political power (Baker 1999). That means women have to position themselves to become successful agents and participants in this work.

Although the distinction between public and private has been subject to much critique from feminists, there is no consistent wish to dissolving the categories altogether (Baker 1999). Most feminists realise the necessity of maintaining a distinction between the spheres. As Baker points out, feminists have long since been aware of the danger in “women going public”, because the outcome could be women’s adoption of the dominant values of the public world and suppression of the traditional female social world. According to Baker, it is important to hold on to a distinction, but women have to engage actively in its construction. The social dialogue must be central in this process. Baker emphasises that the dialogue must facilitate and contribute to a process of social change, thus moving beyond the confines of traditional cultural gendering.

However, there is always a risk to be criticised when engaging in public debates, and women may be accused for being personal or private in such situations. Thus, showing feelings and drawing on personal experiences are often used to exemplify such improper behaviour. Though, in their way of reacting in the public realm, women contribute to changing opinions about what is appropriate. Such changes may not be welcome in all quarters, and critical voices are raised to what may be called the “feminising of the society”. The critics are concerned about what they regard as blurred borders between public and private spheres, especially what is seen as the dispersing of feminine values to the public sphere.

Though, in the next passage the attention is directed to the tendency of working life to dominate private life.

The Relationship between Occupational Work and Private Life

To have time for activities in both spheres has been a matter of importance for feminists and other women (and some men) for many years. Central issues in the following are connected to changes in work organisations and the meaning of work. Some of the alterations may imply less time for family life. Consequences of strong demands on efficiency and economising are not presented separately, but are often pointed out and taken into account in the discussion.
**Occupational Work and Commitment**

Knowledge production and/or service are the most important objectives in most of today’s work organisations. To live up to expectations in these organisations, the workers often find it difficult to delimit themselves whether the demands come from external sources in the environment or from within themselves. They learn that giving of their utmost, may promote their own career. However, many have a strong work commitment and are highly motivated to carry on professional activities, which in turn may stimulate and promote further development. They may take a genuine interest in their work and experience it as challenging, fulfilling many of their aspirations and needs.

Furthermore, in many occupations the workers make valuable contributions to the shaping of the work. Thus, the personal working out or the performance may be very important in many occupations and branches, which means that qualities like initiative, creativity and commitment may be highly valued.

Some people may find it difficult to discriminate between work and leisure because they are highly committed to what they are doing as professionals and may not experience this blurred relationship as a problem. They love their work and devote their time and energy to activities which are extremely rewarding and give them joyful experiences in return. However, there is a possibility of becoming dependent on these experiences, developing a kind of addiction. Thus it might be like being caught in a “honey trap”, as Sørensen (1999) puts it; as soon as you have tasted the sweetness, you need to have more and more. Then there is a grave danger to cross the borderlines to another condition, that of a workaholic, which is even worse.

Although involvement and the amount of time spent on job-related tasks may vary, many people work long hours, often together with colleagues, customers or clients. The relationships they have at work, may have so many good qualities and be so rewarding that in some ways they make up for poor social relations in the private sphere. What many researchers are concerned about, is that the family could be the losing part in this struggle for time and attention (cf. Brandth & Kvande 2003, Hochschild 1997, Sørhaug 1996). Thus, occupational work and colleagues may take over some of the functions usually reserved for the private sphere, especially the family.

**Greedy Work Organisations**

Whether the reason is a strong work commitment, career ambitions or both, over-time work is a well-known phenomenon in many organisations (cf. Brandth & Kvande 2003). Furthermore, in today’s society occupational work is not limited to a physical organisation. By use of modern technology people can stay at home or elsewhere, doing work for their company or institution. Thus, they are more or less independent of time and space for fulfilling their work obligations. The old comprehension of two different spheres becomes more complicated under these circumstances. Additionally, when much occupational work is mental as well as emotional, it may be even more difficult to delimit oneself when at home or elsewhere in the spare time.

Although modern technology also gives freedom to stay at home and yet fulfil the obligations as a member of the labour force whilst taking care of other duties in the private sphere, it makes workers more vulnerable to invasive behaviour from outside. The freedom it gives, is a double-edged sword, like the positive and negative connotations of working flexible hours. When such words as flexibility is used, it may not be to the better for workers who, on the contrary, experience problems with defending themselves against greedy and invasive behaviour from work organisations. This involves “the time question”, which is a source of conflict and an unresolved problem in many families.

The demands made upon the workforce may result in shortage of time and problems in fulfilling obligations in the private sphere. Individuals and families are exposed to a strict time regime, with little or no room for surplus activities. According to Hochschild (1997), what is happening to many people today is that ”work becomes home and home becomes work.” Family life is characterised by
time shortage and parents struggle to organise daily life, leaving no time or energy for surplus activities. The work at home is often considered more like a burden and carried out under the pressure of necessity. Unfortunately, this situation is detrimental to the more time-consuming relational work. As Hochschild (1997: 246) points out, it is not news “(…) that many men have found a haven at work. (…) The news (…) is that growing numbers of working women are leery of spending more time at home, as well.” In her research she found that women could feel torn, guilty and stressed out by long hours at work, but they were ambivalent about shortening their working time. Although Hochschild is referring to American conditions with long working hours, the tendency in other Western societies is probably much the same.

**Emotional and Relational Work**

As mentioned above, many of the jobs in modern society are in fields where it is important to give service and get involved with other people as customers or clients. Women are often in such positions, which means a lot of emotional work in various situations. Although the circumstances are not private, much of the work has great similarities with activities in the private sphere. However, there are important differences between professional and private relations, especially when it comes to the meaning of the relationship and the degree of closeness in the two different settings or spheres. Furthermore, feelings have to be controlled and managed in appropriate ways in professional work; in performing the roles and duties there are probably more often discrepancies between what is regarded as the correct behaviour and the real emotions of the conductors. Thus, the appearance and conducted behaviour may be a role-play with little or no authentic feelings. The workers learn how to repress emotions and needs which are not appropriate, whilst showing off their best to the customers or clients.

In other words, feelings are commercialised and compromised; consequently, there is a danger that workers may have difficulties with getting grip of what they really feel. This problem is dispersing to private life and is reported by researchers who are concerned about the health consequences of this kind of work, both psychological and physical (cf. Forseth 1995, Grimsmo et al. 1992, Hochschild 1983, Sørensen 1999). However, the holders of such jobs very often take a genuine interest in their work and find it very rewarding as they like to be involved with people, being helpful, giving care and comfort when needed. But there is always a risk of being exhausted, due to different reasons. There is a grave danger of getting health problems if there is emotional dissonance or inauthentic feelings in the relationship (cf. Sørensen 1999). To have opportunities to develop relations with customers or clients over some time, seem to increase job-satisfaction and role-internalisation.

However, feelings of shortcomings are not unusual, especially when workers have to meet requirements which seem to be incompatible with the nature of work or professional activities they carry on. Assumingly, this happens in many of today’s work organisations where values like effectiveness and flexibility seem to be the most important. The situation is familiar in the health and social sector where economising and strong demands on efficiency seem to come first, to the detriment of values and activities central to the profession (cf. Solberg 2000). At the same time there are also strong demands on quality. The result is a conflict of interests, and gaps between what is expected and what is possible to achieve. Since women often invest much of themselves in their work and hence may have difficulty in taking more detached roles, the disappointment and dissatisfaction with such a situation may be all the more. There are also reasons to believe that women will have stronger feelings about being defeated, taking it more personally, and blame themselves more than men would do.

Workers may have problems with delimiting themselves when involvement is an important quality in their occupation. This may also apply to having difficulties with distinguishing between what is professional and what is private when in the professional position, because of the similarities between activities and work in the two spheres. Furthermore, due to stronger demands on efficiency and increased pressure on the workforce, the responsibility of coming up with satisfactory quality of the professional work may become more individualised. That means many workers will go out of their way and do the best they can, much more than could be expected, to meet the needs of their clients,
thus trying to make up for the worse or poor conditions. However, as the working conditions are getting worse, the result may be exhausted workers, some burnt-out cases and workers on sick leave. Problems with recruitment may easily occur under such circumstances.

**Mingling Different Relations in Work Organisations**

To make friends with colleagues is a common phenomenon in different work organisations (cf. Slagsvold & Lange 2003). However, the closeness in such friendly relationships or friendships may vary. When spending much time and long hours at work, people come to know each other from different angles. Thus, work relationships may grow into more intimate friendship, also displayed and developed in the private sphere. Cooperation with colleagues is a necessity at the workplace and may promote development of other relationships, like friendship. Competition, which is another aspect of the working environment, is considered to hamper cooperative behaviour and friendly relations. However, colleagues may be both competitors and collaborators, depending on the subject and issue at stake, and still be friends. Usually competition and rivalry are contemporary phenomenon to cooperation in work organisations. For instance, if there are disagreements and competition between individuals or groups, there will also be collaboration between people, sharing mutual interests and values. Accordingly, strong friendship may develop in a climate where there is much rivalry, although antagonistic and hostile feelings may be the more dominating.

There are reasons to believe that mingling private relations with work relations is an escalating phenomenon, which cannot be seen independent of changes and developments in work organisations pointed out earlier in this presentation. Furthermore, the tendency to building down hierarchies, cooperating together in teams and projects on more equal terms, points in the same direction. Though, working on short term in groups may as well have the opposite effect, which means more fleeting and superficial relationships (cf. Sennett 1998).

However, when colleagues come to play such an important role in individuals lives, being close persons in their network, private relations included, one must take into account changes in family structure and in the society as a whole. The work organisation may happen to be one of the most important places to meet people and to get acquaintances and friends in a society where former networks and communities are breaking up.

Despite being common and in many ways very useful, the situation is also problematic when work relations and private relations are mingled, especially if colleagues have developed intimate friendship. Work organisations are based on a rationality and logic different from that which is expected in private relationships. Although it is possible, theoretically, to distinguish between work relations and friendships, this may be difficult or impossible in real life where roles and relationships can be very intertwined and mingled (Solberg 1995, 2000). Maybe these more problematic aspects are not realised until conflicts arise, leaving no doubt about their relevance to the core of the matter; for instance when there are conflicts of interest between individuals or groups with differing kinds of relationship to their superiors or other persons in power positions.

Albeit friendship among colleagues often contributes to good working relations and a cooperative climate, various groups and friendship constellations could have different and conflicting interests, not always to the good for the organisation and the working environment. There is also a danger that status and power in the organisation become too dependent on friendship constellations. Thus, to attach great significance to alliances based on friendship may be detrimental to the benefit of the organisation. Therefore, the importance of private relationships in work organisations should not be underestimated, whether the formal structure is more hierarchical or based on networks on more equal terms.

In the following I will point to some problems connected to the mingling of different relationships in work organisations when in a management position. By using a female work area as an example, I will
draw on my empirical research in the health and social sector where there are quite a few women in middle rank positions (Solberg 1995, 2000).

As managers in this sector, women belong to different social and cultural settings. This is reflected in the work organisations and could be experienced as dilemmas and conflicts related to different value systems and roles, often implying different or split loyalties. Female managers in middle rank positions may have strong feelings of belonging to the professional group and to workers on the ground level. They may be attached to colleagues they have learned to know and have cooperated with, and they may also feel a part of a social communality of women. If they have been in the organisation for a time, they probably have made friends with some of their colleagues and developed private relations with them. As friends and colleagues they meet in various situations and settings and come to know each other from different angles.

To have such relationships with colleagues may not be experienced as a problem when people are on the same level in the organisation, although there could be alliances and conflicts among the workers, due to different friendship constellations. The situation may be regarded as more problematic if managers have close friends among their subordinates. Then it becomes clearer that different roles or statuses imply different rules and relationships. Friends are supposed to be equals and women are often intimate in their friendships with other women. The organisational structure, which usually is a hierarchical one, means inequality between leader and subordinate. A difficult situation may occur at the workplace if managers are close friends with some of their subordinates because of essential differences between friendship and work relations. Mingling such relationships may have negative consequences in an environment which may consist of various groups and friendship constellations with differing kinds of relationship to the person in leadership position. There will probably be a lot of competition and rivalry among individuals and groups in order to get attention and be in favour with the manager, who is supposed to be powerful, able to fulfil their needs and give them desired rewards (cf. Sørhaug 1996).

I will conclude this passage by pointing out the strength and forcefulness of a working environment consisting of different or mingled relations. In a way it show itself as intermediate between public and private and an example of a third realm, as referred to earlier in this paper.

**Conclusion**

The demands made upon workers in today’s society call for a renewed public/private debate, with the distinction between spheres as one of the central issues. The need to revitalise this debate, is due to changes in both spheres. Occupational work may take so much time and energy that the result is an impoverished family life and poor relations in private life. Therefore, more distinct borders between spheres are needed to prevent this development. Though, public and private are not absolutes; the borderlines are continuously subject to negotiation and change. It is important that women play active roles when the relationship between private and public spheres is discussed, also when it comes to construction of borders.

Individualising the responsibility for the quality of occupational work seems to be a growing tendency and regarded as a consequence of the great importance attached to efficiency and economising in work organisations. This also indicates that the public/private distinction should be looked more into.

The tendency to making friends with colleagues also requires more attention when it comes to questions about what is public and what is private, especially as this mingling of relations seems to be a common and growing phenomenon in work organisations. To search for more distinct borders between private and work relations may be necessary if none of them should be compromised. Furthermore, there is also the work organisation and the working climate to take into account. It is important that those, whom it concerns, are able to reflect on this situation and the meaning of their relationships. However, this demands a kind of distance or detachment, which could be difficult to
obtain when being very involved. For that reason it is important to keep some distinction between roles and spheres. The need for distance or detachments in relationships should not be underestimated.

However, the last to point out, but not the least important, is the fact that relationships at the workplace may be seen as intermediate between public and private. Thus, the different relations among colleagues may represent a third realm of social life. As intermediate between public and private, it can resemble either in particular instances, but can also be equated with neither (cf. Wolfe 1997).

References


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