Flexible Work and Disciplined Selves:

Telework, Gender and Discourses of Subjectivity


Nicola Lesley José de Freitas Armstrong

1997
"I just say to myself ‘well darn it, you’ve set something up that is still going after six years and that isn’t in an overdraft situation, so even if you haven’t drawn a heap out of it, it’s still kept its head above water’. And I provide jobs for three-and-a-half people. Have quite a lot of fun. And probably in terms in my feeling of self-worth. And the kids even, they’re probably quite chuffed”

“I always had visions of rock-crushing convicts, where there was nobody after you but a rock wall and the rocks that had to be crushed … I had a good client who worked for himself and he used to say “we’re on the pit-face Nora”. There is just nobody else after you, is there?”

Nora Jolly, teleworker.

“I’d go and tell her, the kids are in bed (and) they want a kiss tonight, but I’d quite often go back out to the (garage) office a half-an-hour later to tell her that they had gone to sleep already, and then she would then come inside the house to kiss them while they slept, because she felt guilty. I used to feel cross about it, I used to think ‘gosh, it doesn’t take two minutes to go in there and give them a kiss goodnight’, and I used to know she’d be cross with herself five minutes later because she hadn’t done it when they were awake. It’s just this damned intrusion of all the bloody work. Do we need this work? What’s it for?”

Nathan Jolly, Nora’s partner.
Abstract

Home-based work employing information and communications technologies (telework) is held up in contemporary academic literatures, policy formulations and the popular media as the cure to a panoply of contemporary problems, particularly the difficulties of combining caring responsibilities and careers. This thesis takes up the question of how teleworkers talk about and practise home-based business. It pivots on the exploration of the simultaneity of parenting, partnering and paid work for home-based business people. The ‘teleworking tales’ of eleven home-based entrepreneurs form the heart of the thesis, as they discuss their negotiation of ‘home’ and ‘work’ where the usual temporal and spatial boundaries between these arenas are removed. While previous studies assume that telework is ‘family-friendly’, most do not investigate the perspectives of other family members on the effect of home-based business on their households and relationships. This thesis speaks into this silence in the literature by contextualising telework within family relations, including as participants the partners, children and child care workers of the eleven home-based businesswomen and men, interviewing thirty people in all.

Three strands of analysis regarding discourses of the organisation, domesticity and entrepreneurship were pursued in relation to these ‘teleworking tales’. It was found that these ‘tales’ were told differently by teleworking women and men, the women focusing on the untenable nature of continued organisational employment as women and mothers, while the men established home-based businesses because of declining employment security and redundancy. In the midst of these constituting relations, the discursive injunction to be a ‘fit worker’ and a ‘good parent’ had different implications for the women and men; where as the women negotiated home-based entrepreneurship through domesticity, the men navigated their way around domesticity in order to maintain a singular focus on their businesses.

The effect of the cross-cutting axes of domesticity and entrepreneurship significantly curtailed the opportunity for teleworking to represent a new crafting of the relationship between ‘home’ and ‘work’ as teleworkers negotiated the simultaneous demands their families and businesses made upon them. It was also the case that home-based businesses were a source of pleasure and of productive forms of power which encouraged home-based entrepreneurs to watch over and discipline themselves. The research unfolds as both a warning and a promise with regard to the ‘choice’ to telework, in terms of what is ‘chosen’ and how that is ‘controlled’. It is particularly a contribution to current debates regarding the complex patterning of gendered and familial practices which continually fragment the freedoms promised by the discourse of entrepreneurship.
Writing a thesis of this size and scope has been a considerable task and one I would not have completed without the support of a number of key people and institutions.

Let me begin by thanking the participants without which there would be no thesis. The time these women, men and children gave me, and the candour and engagement during our contact over a three year period, provided the life blood of this research. To them my deepest thanks.

To my supervisors, Associate Professor Robyn Munford, Dr Martin Tolich and Professor Julie Boddy my sincerest thanks for their encouragement, insight and the many hours of time they gave me. My thanks especially to Robyn, who made time for me always, was persistently optimistic about the research and who taught me much about commitment, balance and managing a busy life with panache; to you especially Robyn, my enduring thanks and respect.

I also wish to warmly acknowledge the tireless and cheerful work of Heather Hodgetts, the typist who worked with me night after night on the manuscript, while her partner Eveline honed her already considerable skills in computer card games on a nearby machine. I simply would not have finished this thesis in time without your support, interest and energy Heather, this thesis feels as much the result of your commitment as mine.

Special thanks also go to my best friend and stalwart supporter Wendy Parker, who managed her daughters and household in order to come to my rescue at the oddest of hours with computing and editorial skills, food, flowers and the succour of her warm heart. Thanks Wenz, you will always have my 'friend-of-the-century' nomination for this.

Many other friends have provided gentle hugs, strong coffee and cheers from the sidelines. I'd especially like to acknowledge Marian Court, Karen Johnston, Allanah Ryan, Lynne James, Christine Cheyne, Ann Brooks, Catherine Bray and Sue Webb for their persistent love and support. Catherine Casey has been a significant believer in my work and indeed my
life over our long friendship and particularly revived me near the end with her sage counsel and unflinching support. Warmest thanks also to Kirsten Forsyth who flatted with me throughout the thesis, saw me seldom as I became increasingly allergic to working at home, and ran my household during the last months as the intensity of the process increased and my own ‘discipline’ far outweighed my ‘flexibility’. Thanks for your forbearance, support and rivetingly strong gins.

Thanks also to the individuals who have given me feedback with regard the work over the years. In Aotearoa/New Zealand; Karen Nairn, Rosemary Du Plessis, Vivienne Elizabeth, Delle Small, Geoff Fougere, Alison Loveridge and Terry Austrin, have been especially significant to the work as it unfolded. In Europe, Ewa Gunnarsson and Ursula Huws have provided the kind of scholarly discussion that I found extremely hard to come by in the field of home-based work in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Thanks especially to Ewa for the splendid ‘Gender and Teleworking’ conference in Stockholm in 1997, which was an enormously stimulating and pleasurable experience not least of which was because of Ewa’s generous engagement with this research and myself as a scholar.

Massey University have also been more than generous over time in supporting the research including funding from the Massey University Research Fund, leave form the University to complete the interviews in the form of a Massey University Research Award for Academic Women, and the sound advice of the Massy University Human Ethics Committee. My sincere thanks. My Department have been generous and understanding, especially in terms of casual teaching assistance in the last months of the work, my thanks especially to Brian Ponter in this regard.

Thanks also to Gillian McIlraith for the home-based proof-reading work she did to perfect the final manuscript, and for her intelligent engagement with the ideas of the thesis above and beyond the call of grammar.

My thanks also to my family in Christchurch and especially to my father Les Armstrong who has taught me much about fathering and nurturing and who has been an interested and patient spectator on the process and final product of this research. Thanks daddy-o.

Last but not least thanks to my partner Richard for his daily encouragement, patience, generosity and most importantly, love. I hope you can benefit from what I’ve learnt about balance and attending to relationships from this research, and that together we find a suitable and enlivening balance of career and family.
Finally, this thesis is dedicated and my mother Elsie Louisa José de Freitas Armstrong, who died in 1990 at the beginning of this research. Her strength and love gave me the impetus to embark on an academic career when such a pathway appeared unlikely and although she did not always agree with my lifestyle or my feminism, she did always support this liminal journey of the self and the quest to craft a full and vivid life at 'home' and at 'work'. Thank-you.
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