Work-Life Balance: Towards an Integrated Conceptual Framework

Ms Barbara Haddon*

Faculty of Business, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia
Email: bhaddon@usc.edu.au

Professor Andrew Hede

Faculty of Business, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia
Email: ahede@usc.edu.au

Dr John Whiteoak

Faculty of Business, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia
Email: whiteoak@usc.edu.au
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ABSTRACT

The main aim of the current paper is to explore how personal and environmental characteristics might collectively contribute to the dynamics of work-life balance. A conceptualization is proposed that integrates relevant theoretical frameworks to advance an overall model. The proposed conceptualization and model merge and extend ideas from ecological systems theory, positive psychology and resources-and-demands theory. Consideration is given to the contributing factors (work and non-work ‘demands’ and ‘resources’), indicators (levels of ‘conflict’ and ‘facilitation’), measures (‘equilibrium’, ‘control’ and ‘synchrony’) and consequences (general health and well-being, satisfaction and performance) of work-life balance. A range of limitations identified in the current research theory and methodology will be discussed, providing insights into gaps in our knowledge.

Keywords: systems theory; organisational culture; work performance
The idea of work-life balance has generated much interest in the academic, applied and popular press (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007; Lewis & Cooper 2005). Reviews of the work-life field and the work-family research agenda outline how research has evolved against a backdrop of ongoing social and workplace change (Abbott & De Cieri, 2008; Cooper & Jackson 1997; Harrington 2007; Lewis & Cooper 1999). Global, national and local changes continue to affect both work and personal life and their interaction: there are more women in the paid workforce; technology has led to the blurring of the work-life boundaries enabling employees to work anytime and anywhere, thus contributing to the issue of excessive work hours; organizations are outsourcing tasks and the approach of ‘doing more with less’, together with an increase in part-time, casual and non-permanent work has led to job insecurity and increasing workload expectations of employees (Allis & O’Driscoll 2008; Blyton, Blundon, Reed & Dastmalchian 2006; Harrington 2007; Lewis & Cooper 1999; Lewis & Cooper 2005; Lewis, Gambles & Rapoport, 2007; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti & Crouter 2000).

In addition, the growing diversity of family structures represented in the workforce – dual-earner couples, single parents, blended families and employees with responsibility for child-care and eldercare (“the sandwiched-generation”) – has heightened the relevance of balancing work and family roles for a substantial segment of employed men and women (Neal & Hammer 2007). These developments have greatly increased the complexities of the interface between work and family (Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002).

The nature of the interface between the workplace and the family is the keystone of the work-life balance construct. The work-family interface is an area of immense importance, personally, professionally and socially as increasing numbers of families attempt to juggle work and family commitments (Heraty, Morley & Cleveland 2008; Pocock 2003). Some suggest that work-life balance is one of the primary social challenges of our era (Halpern 2005).

The different perspectives from which work-life issues have been studied have enriched the field and provided valuable insights into some facets of the relationship between work and life outside of work
(Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002). The literature is, however, complex on several accounts. Firstly, theory is uncertain and underdeveloped. Secondly, there are many concepts which are often loosely defined and many of the relationships between them are not well understood. Thirdly, empirical efforts are variable and the implications, particularly for organisations, are often unclear (Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002). This situation has lead to calls for increased methodological sophistication, a move toward providing more precise conceptual definitions and constructs and the development of new, more inclusive theoretical models that reflect the changing landscape of the workplace, individuals and families in the 21st century (Barnett & Hyde 2001; Kalliath & Brough 2008; Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002; Poelmans, Kalliath & Brough 2008).

The intention of this paper is to contribute to and advance the conceptual understanding of the work-life balance construct by placing it within a broader theoretical framework. The main aim is to explore how personal and environmental characteristics might collectively contribute to the dynamics of work-life balance. A conceptualization is proposed that integrates relevant theoretical frameworks to advance an overall model.

**SHIFTING PARADIGMS**

Recent times have seen a paradigm shift in the behavioral sciences from pathology to health. For example, the positive psychology movement led by Seligman (2000; 2008) has shifted the emphasis away from what is wrong with people, to what is right; focusing on strengths, not weaknesses. In the area of organizational behavior, Luthans (2002; 2007; 2008) has made a case for positive psychology to be applied to this field, defining positive organizational behavior as ‘the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace’ (2002: 59).

A parallel paradigm shift has taken place in the work-life field where the research has been criticized for viewing work and family largely as conflicting role responsibilities (Werber & Walter 2002). The ‘conflict’ perspective has dominated the research on work-family dynamics for the past twenty-five years (Greenhaus & Parasuraman 1999). According to this perspective the responsibilities and role
demands of work and family are assumed to be mutually incompatible – the pressures arising from one role interfere with participation in the other role. This perspective stems from role theory and the scarcity hypothesis (Sieber 1974) which assumes that time and energy are fixed and individuals who participate in multiple roles inevitably experience conflict between the roles.

The abovementioned criticism recognises the limited research on the positive connections between work and family and an overemphasis on work-family conflict and its negative consequences (Greenhaus & Powell 2006). There is now a growing body of research to suggest that work and family can positively influence one another and that participation in multiple roles can be stimulating and enhance the well-being of individuals – referred to as the expansion-enhancement hypothesis (Barnett & Baruch 1985; Barnett & Hyde 2001; Greenhaus & Powell 2006; Marks 1977). Recent reviews of the literature have suggested greater recognition of the benefits of multiple roles leading to a call for a more integrated approach that recognizes the positive effects of combining work and non-work roles (Barnett 1998; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brinley, 2005; Frone 2003; Greenhaus & Powell 2006; Kirchmeyer, 1992).

The conceptualization of work-life balance put forward in this paper takes these shifting paradigms into account, suggesting that personal and contextual characteristics can act as enablers (resources) or barriers (demands) to balancing our work and non-work lives, which is then reflected in the degree to which ‘conflict’ and ‘facilitation’ are experienced by individuals.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE CONSTRUCT

In Kalliath & Brough’s (2008) review of the meaning of the balance construct, they concluded that the elusiveness of a formal definition of work-life balance, together with the lack of a direct well developed measure of the construct, constrains our ability to investigate the phenomenon fully. A number of researchers appear to concur with this conclusion. Lewis et al. (2003) have gone so far as to say that the limitations of the language and terminology used to frame the issues in the literature is
one of the sticking points holding back better ways to integrate paid work with the rest of life. Ways of conceptualizing the issues have changed from ‘work-family’ and ‘family-friendly’ to ‘work-life’ and ‘work-life balance’. However, the term ‘work-life balance’ remains problematic (Lewis et al. 2003). Reiter’s (2007) paper entitled “Work Life Balance: What DO You Mean?” reflects the current status of the definition of work-life balance – despite widespread academic and applied interest, the construct is inconsistently defined, creating confusion in the literature (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007; Voydanoff 2005). Definitions are many and varied with almost every relevant published journal article containing a different meaning of what work-life balance represents (Reiter 2007). In addition, sometimes the term is used as a noun (when one is encouraged to achieve balance), other times it is used as a verb (to balance work and family demands) or as an adjective (as in a balanced life) (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw 2003). There is also the implication that work is not part of life or that work and the rest of life are mutually exclusive (Lewis et al. 2003).

The use of the word ‘balance’ has also caused problems, since balance suggests an equal investment in both the work and non-work spheres and the notion that when something is given to work (e.g., time and energy) it is seen as taking away from the home and vice versa. With regard to work and family, Halpern & Murphy (2005) have commented that they are not a “zero-sum game” and suggest that “It is time to change the metaphor” (2005: 3). As a result, more current thinking frames the issues in terms of “work-personal life integration” as a “working terminology to capture the synergies and connections between the different parts of life and the ways in which they feed into each other” (Lewis et al. 2003: 829). Others have suggested using the words ‘harmony’ and ‘harmonization’ instead of ‘balance’ to indicate the aim of relating work and personal life domains in positive or harmonious ways (Hill et al. 2007; Lewis & Cooper 2005; Poelmans et al 2008). Nevertheless, it appears that the ‘work-life balance’ terminology continues to be most recognised and utilised across the board.

Greenhaus et al (2003) suggest that if empirical research on balance is to contribute to understanding work–family dynamics, further development of the construct is essential. The approach taken in the
current paper is in line with this suggestion in its attempt to ‘capture’ relevant aspects of the work-life balance construct.

**An Alternative Conceptualization of Work-Life Balance**

Different definitions of work-life balance each have a value perspective that determines what factors will be seen as relevant to achieving balance (Reiter 2007). According to Forsyth’s (1980) taxonomy of ethical ideologies, there are four classifications categorizing the ethical positions of individuals: situationists, absolutists, subjectivists and exceptionists. Reiter (2007) argues that definitions of work-life balance reflecting a situationalist perspective are the most valuable because they will involve making optimum choices for individuals. Definitions framed from a situationalist position focus on a “fitting” definition of balance for a person depending on his or her personal contexts. The situationalist perspective offers an opportunity to explore what factors contribute to the attainment of work-life balance because the focus is on the individual relative to his or her circumstances. Situationals would argue that work-life balance is not an end in itself, but a perception; it is a state that gives rise to satisfactions that are of value to the individual and his or her stakeholders (Reiter 2007).

Broadly speaking, the current approach to conceptualizing work-life balance falls within the situationalist perspective because it recognizes the contribution of and complex interplay between the characteristics of the environment and the individual and evaluates balance within the context for that individual. This approach also addresses the criticism that research has usually taken place at one level of analysis, either at the individual, family, organisational or societal level (Guest 2001). Parasuraman and Greenhaus (2002) note the disproportional emphasis on environmental and situational characteristics and the relative neglect of individual differences and psychological characteristics as contributing factors. They suggest the need to incorporate relevant environmental and individual variables within a single study, in order to broaden our understanding of the complex work-life phenomenon (Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002). The current approach has taken up this call with the inclusion of environmental demands and resource characteristics from the work and non-work
domains, together with personal characteristics, such as personality traits, coping style and strategies, considering them as collectively contributing to the overall dynamics of work-life balance.

Taking all of the above into consideration, work-life balance is herein conceptualized as the broad assessment that individual and environmental resources are sufficient to meet demands, evidenced by reduced ‘conflict’ and greater ‘facilitation’, such that integration is perceived between work and personal life domains resulting in positive general health, well-being, satisfaction and work performance outcomes.

Whilst still bound by the limitations of the language and terminology used to frame the issues, as previously mentioned, the main difference between the proposed conceptualization and others is in its integrated approach. The proposed conceptualization parallels and expands on previous handling of the work-life balance concept because it takes into account the antecedents of work-life balance (individual and environmental work and non-work demand and resource characteristics), aspects of the work-family interface (reflected in the degree of ‘conflict’ and ‘facilitation’ present), the individual’s perception of work-life balance (through a validated work-life balance measure) and the personal and organisational consequences of balance (such as general health, well-being, satisfaction and performance).

**BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

The conceptualization of work-life balance presented above is depicted as a model in Figure 1. The following discussion ‘unpacks’ the components of this conceptualization and builds the model, providing a framework for clarifying the constructs, their theoretical rationale, proposed relationships, linking mechanisms, measurement issues and empirical support. It is suggested that, whilst not claiming to have all the answers, this model moves beyond earlier work by integrating several useful components that appear in other models, but are not found together in the same model such as those of Hill (2005), Voydanoff (2002) and Wayne et al. (2007).
Aspects of the Work-Family Interface – Conflict and Facilitation

The term ‘work-family interface’ covers a variety of concepts that have been used to describe the intersection of the two domains (Westman & Piotrkowski 1999). The conceptual model proposed in this paper is grounded in ecological systems theory which allows for a broad, unifying theoretical perspective in which workplaces and families can be considered (Westman & Piotrkowski 1999). This theory posits that the work and family micro-systems interact and influence one another through permeable boundaries to create the work-family meso-system (Bronfenbrenner 1986). This relationship is seen as bi-directional – work affects family and family affects work. The ecological perspective theorizes that work, family and individual characteristics interact in ways that may be facilitative and conflictive (Hill 2005).

Frone (2003) suggested that a comprehensive understanding of the work-family interface should include both components of ‘facilitation’ and ‘conflict’. He defined facilitation as “the extent to which participation at work (home) is made easier by virtue of the experiences, skills and opportunities gained or developed at home (work)” (2003: 145). This perspective is in line with the view that attitudes, emotions, skills and behaviours established in one domain follow or ‘spillover’ into the other (Edwards & Rothbard 2000). Positive spillover or ‘facilitation’ occurs when engagement in work and family roles contribute positively to and benefit each other.

Conflict is the most widely discussed concept within the work-family interface literature (Curbow, McDonnell, Spratt, Griffin & Agnew 2003). Work-family conflict is typically defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which the demands of work and family roles are incompatible in some respect so that meeting the demands in one domain makes it difficult to meet the demands in the other domain. Negative spillover or ‘conflict’ occurs when participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985).

Frone (2003) further suggested a four-fold taxonomy of work-family balance as a potential conceptual lens through which to examine work and family. This taxonomy allows for two directions of influence between work and family (work to family and family to work) as well as two types of effect.
(conflict and facilitation), resulting in work-family conflict, family-work conflict, work-family facilitation and family-work facilitation.

Evidence for the discriminant validity of Frone’s (2003) taxonomy has been found by Aryee et al. (2005). In addition, facilitation and conflict have been found to be orthogonal rather than opposite constructs (van Steenbergen, Ellemers & Mooijaart 2007; Wayne, Musisca & Fleeson 2004). That is, whilst they co-exist each dimension has distinct determinants and consequences (Edwards & Rothbard 2000; Grzywacz & Marks 2000; Voydanoff 2005).

In so far as the current model is concerned, Frone’s (2003) taxonomy has been included to ensure that the positive and negative effects of combining work and non-work roles are taken into account, in support of a positive psychology approach. However, this paper takes the view that measures of conflict and facilitation are not measures of work-life balance. Rather, conflict and facilitation are useful for understanding the effects of the demands and resources associated with the work-family domains, serving as useful indicators of work-life balance – low levels of conflict and high levels of facilitation are expected to be associated with work-life balance (Frone 2003; Grzywacz & Carlson 2007; Voydanoff 2004). The hypothesised relationships between resources and facilitation and demands and conflict are described below.

**Environmental and Personal Demand and Resource Characteristics**

The stance taken in the current paper concurs with O’Driscoll, Brough and Kalliath (2006) who suggest that “A first step in the process of achieving balance is to examine stressors (which cause conflict) and resources (which may result in facilitation)” (2006: 137).

Using a resources-and-demands theoretical framework (Valcour 2007; Voydanoff 2004), resources are defined as structural or psychological assets that may be used to help performance, reduce demands or generate additional resources. Work and family resources are associated with work-to-family and family-to-work facilitation (Voydanoff 2004) and are associated with less work-family conflict (Hill 2005).
Work-related resources that have been linked with lower work-family conflict are job autonomy (the extent to which employees are able to decide how they do their job) (Clark 2001; Grzywacz & Marks 2000) and time autonomy (the extent to which employees have discretion over their work schedule) (Clark 2001). Family-supportive benefits and policies, such as flexible work schedules and telecommuting, help employees manage work and family (Voydanoff 2005). But what appears to be more important than specific benefits is how supportive the work environment is towards work-life balance, including supportive co-workers, supervisors and culture (Thompson, Poelmans, Allen & Andreassi 2007; Wayne et al. 2007). Employees who work in organizations with supportive work-family cultures report lower levels of work-family conflict (Allen 2001). According to Wayne et al. (2007) a supportive work-family culture is likely to influence facilitation and relates to performance, satisfaction and well-being in the family domain.

A number of researchers have found that family support is significantly and negatively associated with conflict at the work-family interface (Byron 2005; Ford, Heinen & Langkamer 2007). Aryee et al. (2005) and Grzywacz and Marks (2000) found that family support was significantly related to family-work facilitation.

Demands have been defined as structural or psychological claims associated with role requirements, expectations and norms to which individuals must respond or adapt by exerting physical or mental effort. Work and family demands are generally related to work-to-family and family-to-work conflict (Voydanoff 2004). Work-related demands that have been linked with work-family conflict include long working hours and working extra hours without notice; job insecurity and work pressure (Voydanoff 2004). The number and age of dependants at home; both parents working and combining household/family tasks with paid employment are non-work related factors that contribute to levels of conflict (Dex & Bond 2005).

Whilst many researchers suggest that structural factors within work and non-work domains are of primary importance, recognition of the contribution of personal characteristics and individual differences is taking place (Wayne et al. 2004). Researchers have suggested that personality be given
greater consideration in understanding how an individual views and experiences work and family roles as the individual creates his or her own experience (Wayne et al. 2004). Personality may influence the perceptions of work and family role requirements and individuals with different personality types may perceive situations as conflictive or facilitative or may differ in the magnitude of their perceptions (Friede & Ryan 2005; Smillie, Yeo, Furnham & Jackson, 2006). For example, Wayne et al. (2004) found that the traits of conscientiousness and agreeableness related to work-family facilitation but not to work-family conflict.

In addition, research has shown that, even if conflict is a likely consequence of engaging in work and family roles, it is how people cope with conflict that determines their personal outcomes (Beutell & Greenhaus 1982). Personality may influence the strategies selected to approach the work-family interface (Friede & Ryan 2005; Witt & Carlson 2006). The current model has therefore included coping style and strategies as a moderating variable.

**Perceptions of Work-Life Balance**

As noted previously, developing and validating a measure of work-life balance is a critical element for advancing research in this arena (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007). Most studies of work-life and work-family balance use a single-item measure (Voydanoff 2005). Whilst these measures provide useful global assessments, the primary concern is whether a single item captures the complexity of the work-life domains (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007). The measure recommended for use in the current model is the comprehensive, multi-item scale developed by Joplin, Shaffer, Lau and Francesco (2003). This measure has been identified by Voydanoff (2005) as compatible and relevant to the demands-and-resources approach presented in this paper because it assesses individual’s abilities to perform activities in both the work and non-work domains effectively.

Joplin et al.’s (2003) scale includes sub-scales measuring the following i) equilibrium - focus on maintaining priorities and harmony (e.g., I feel fulfilled in all aspects of my life); ii) control - focus on organising and scheduling life activities (e.g., I manage all aspects of my life effectively) and iii) synchrony - focus on multi-tasking and the ability to conduct multiple roles in a complementary
fashion (e.g., my personal life and my work life are complementary). It is suggested in the current paper that this measure best reflects an individual’s perception of integration across the work and personal life domains.

In addition, what makes Joplin et al.’s (2003) measure worthy of inclusion is the unique use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to develop and establish its psychometric properties. The authors drew on perspectives from many different life situations and diverse work-family structures, using data from three international locations to ensure generalisability of the measure (Joplin et al. 2003).

**Outcomes and Consequences**

The consequences of work-family conflict have been extensively documented, whilst there have been few empirical studies conducted on facilitation between work and family roles (O’Driscoll et al. 2006; Wayne et al. 2004), and less including both conflict and facilitation. Research provides consistent evidence that work-family conflict is associated with various negative work-related (e.g., job satisfaction and performance), non-work-related (e.g., life satisfaction) and stress-related (e.g., wellbeing) outcomes (Allen et al. 2000; Frone 2003; Greenhaus et al. 2001; Kossek & Ozeki 1998; Noor 2002; O’Driscoll et al. 2006).

Researchers looking at the effects of positive spillover between work and family have documented better physical and mental health, family and job satisfaction (Grzywacz & Bass 2003; Wayne et al. 2004). The current paper offers an alternative approach. Outcome measures are suggested in the model. However, rather than using measures of conflict as a ‘proxy’ for work-life balance as is often the case, by including a ‘real’ measure of work-life balance it is intended that outcomes such as satisfaction and wellbeing will be associated with an actual appraisal of work-life balance, rather than being linked to the presence or absence of conflict.
Linking Mechanisms

A suggested approach to linking the components of the model described above begins with considering primary antecedents in the personal and environmental domains (demands and resources) as having direct effects mapping onto measures of conflict and facilitation. Demands have been thought to cause conflict and resources to result in facilitation (O’Driscoll et al. 2006). These effects may be moderated by an individual’s coping style and strategies (Thompson et al. 2007). It is further suggested that the resultant unique combinations of conflict and facilitation may be pivotal to understanding perceptions of work-life balance and the consequences. Low levels of conflict and high levels of facilitation are likely to be associated with perceptions of work-life balance.

Concurring with Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) is the approach that work-life balance could be considered as a direct formative latent construct as it fits the criteria set out by Edwards & Bagozzi (2000). Specifically, conflict and facilitation precede and contribute to an individual’s appraisal of work-life balance; measures of work-life balance are distinct from measures of conflict and facilitation and changes in conflict and facilitation indicators will likely result in changes in work-life balance perceptions (Edwards & Bagozzi 2000). Outcomes and consequences of work-life balance are then considered, such as work performance, satisfaction and general health and well-being. Perceptions of balance are likely to be associated with positive reports of work performance, satisfaction, general health and well-being.

CONCLUSION

The current paper acknowledges the valuable insights into facets of the relationship between work and life outside of work provided by work-life researchers to date. Whilst not claiming to offer all of the answers, this paper has aimed at making a move towards providing an alternative conceptualization of work-life balance and the development of an applicable theoretical model. In the process, a range of limitations identified in the current research theory and methodology were explored. First, few studies have sought to directly model successful work-life balance (Clark 2001; Marks & MacDermid, 1996), mostly due to the previous over-emphasis on work-family conflict and its negative consequences
(Barnett 1998). This limitation has been addressed with the inclusion of both enablers (resources) and barriers (demands) to work-life balance. Demands have been thought to cause conflict and resources to result in facilitation (O’Driscoll, Brough & Kalliath 2006). Thus with the inclusion of environmental and individual demands and resources as antecedents to work-life balance and the constructs of ‘conflict’ and ‘facilitation’ as indicators of work-life balance, account has been taken of both negative and positive connections between the work and non-work domains.

Second, as previous research has usually taken place at only one level of analysis, either at the individual, family, organisation or societal level (Parasuaman & Greehaus 200), the current approach has included both environmental and personal variables to take account of the complex interplay of more than one level of contributing factors.

Finally, most studies of work-life balance have not used a ‘true’ measure of work-life balance, using the presence or absence of conflict as a ‘proxy’ measure (Hill 2005) or single item measures which may not capture the complexity of the work-life domains (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007). The conceptualization put forward in this paper has included a validated measure of life balance as an appropriate ‘true’ measure. In addition, measures of ‘conflict’ and ‘facilitation’ have been treated as pre-cursors to and indicators of work-life balance. This is a new and different approach.
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Figure 1: Work-life Balance – Proposed Integrated Conceptual Framework