Revisiting Work Life Balance (WLB) and Work Performance:
A Research Note

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ABSTRACT: Work-life balance (WLB) is an important area of human resource management which is receiving increasing global attention from policy makers, organizations, management, employees and their representatives. This research note aims to explore current definitions of WLB, as well as related constructs such as job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and commitment. We explore their likely impact on work performance from a cross cultural viewpoint. We draw attention to the fact, that while much research into WLB has been conducted in Western economies, there is still a paucity of research into workers experience and outcomes of WLB in Eastern societies that needs to be addressed, especially in comparison to WLB for workers in Western nations.

Keywords: Work Life Balance (WLB); Job Satisfaction; Work Commitment; Employee Performance.

INTRODUCTION

WLB has been noted as an important area of human resource management and is receiving increasing attention from policy makers, organisations, management, employees and their representatives globally. The current interest in work–life balance (WLB) stems from the perception that excessive workplace demands can have negative consequences for other important life spheres such as family and leisure (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). This is of particular concern because today’s managers and professionals are not only working longer hours than previous generations, they are also experiencing a “sting of reality,” with work demands increasingly spilling into and overshadowing their family and personal life (MacInnis, 2005). In the US, for example, recent studies have highlighted the phenomenon of “extreme jobs” characterised by gruelling working hours, unpredictable workflows, a fast work pace with tight deadlines, work-related events being conducted outside of business hours, and an expectation of staff to provide 24/7 availability to clients (Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Hochschild, 1997). Such workplace expectations can take a heavy toll on the employees involved.

While we are interested in WLB in a broader sense, many researchers have used a more specific focus on work–family balance (WFB) for their investigations (e.g. Lyness & Kropf, 2005; Wierda-Boer et al., 2008). Research on the work-family interface has increased dramatically in the past two decades (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). In these studies, there is recognition of respondents’ felt need to balance and integrate family needs and career requirements (Sturges & Guest, 2004). The changing social structures arising out of dual career couples, single parent families, an increasing number of
parents with dependent care responsibilities for children, and ageing parents, have all contributed to the need for increased research in the area of WLB. In these studies, although “life” outside of work is recognised to include multiple life domains that may interact to one another, work and family are considered the two most important domains in a person’s life, making the study of WFB entirely relevant to the understanding of WLB. The purpose of this manuscript is to review current definitions and understandings around WLB, including related constructs such as job satisfaction, life satisfaction, work commitment, and WFB. Further we aim to show that there is a need for WLB researchers to turn their focus towards cross cultural comparisons between Eastern, developing, and Western, developed nations in a bid to enhance understanding, especially for employees in non-Western cultural contexts.

DEFINITIONS

*Work Life Balance (WLB)*

We begin by attempting to clarify the meanings and understandings around WLB, including drawing attention to how they may vary, between individuals, organisations and countries. Over recent years the popular press has given increased attention to issues surrounding WLB. The term WLB (and its synonyms) is sometimes used as a noun (when, for example, one is encouraged to achieve a WLB). At other times the term is used as a verb (as one might undertake to balance work and family demands), or as an adjective (as in having a balanced work life). Mostly though, the term WLB is used when there is a felt need, by an individual or an organisation, for a worker to cut back on their work time to spend more time with their family.

It is thought to be an individual’s best interest to live a “balanced” life (Kofodimos, 1993), that is suggestive of the need to “balance” time spent respectively between the responsibilities, choices surrounding, and time spent with work, and family. Despite the presumed virtue of achieving a WLB, the concept itself has not undergone extensive scrutiny. Most of the major reviews of work–family relations either do not mention WFB (Greenhaus et al., 2003) or mention balance but do not explicitly define or measure the concept. Empirical studies that have discussed the balance between work and
family roles generally do not distinguish balance from other relevant or similar concepts in the work–family literature (e.g., Nielsen, Carlson, & Lankau, 2001; Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001; Sumer & Knight, 2001; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). In fact, even when systematic definitions of balance are proposed (see Clark, 2000; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001; Kirchmeyer, 2000; Kofodimos, 1990, 1993; Marks et al., 2001; Marks & MacDiarmid, 1996), the definitions proffered are not entirely consistent with one another, and often result in suboptimal research outcomes, including offering unhelpful measures of what WFB might or might not be.

Less specific than WFB, is the term “work-life balance” (WLB) which was first coined over 20 years ago in reaction to a trend in the 1970s and 1980s when men and women began prioritising work and career goals ahead of family, friends, community affairs, and leisure activities. However, despite frequent attention in the scholarly literature, the meaning of WLB has remained elusive because the concept has not been formally defined and different scholars conceptualise notions of “balance” in different ways. After reviewing a variety of perspectives on WLB (e.g., low work–family conflict, versus equal involvement in the work and personal domains), Greenhaus and Allen (2011) concluded that employees experience WLB when they felt effective and satisfied when operating in those parts of their lives that were salient to them. What becomes very clear when reviewing the literature is the range, breadth and depth of the many definitions of WLB which, ultimately, will have a confounding effect on associated research outcomes. In order to reduce such a problem, we suggest the following definitions of our own for use in this research area, and to clarify understanding in this paper:

- **Work Life Balance (WLB):** a subjective experience of equilibrium between the demands that workplace-related and personal life-related issues pose on an individual.

- **Work-Life Conflict (WLC):** a subjective experience of imbalance between the demands that workplace-related and personal life-related issues pose on an individual.

WLB and WLC have been considered to represent the two end points of a single continuum. When thought of in this way, thoughts of WLB and WLC refer to the demands, and associated trade-offs, that every individual has to make to meet responsibilities, demands, and expectations in the multiple life domains. Consideration of the two constructs as representing two ends of a continuum of lived...
experience, suggests one end portraying the “balance” of WLB and the other end representing the “imbalance” or conflict that may be experienced during WLC. Such a representation is an easy way to depict and understand the subjective lived experience of WLB and WLC respectively, as representing opposing ends of levels of comfort for an individual living their life, that shift as one makes trade-offs (usually in terms of time spent on one life are versus the other) and moves from a place of complete “balance” (WLB) to a place of complete “conflict” (WLC) between the domains of home and work. This perspective shows an individual moving from a state of complete balance (represented by the achievement of WLB) through to a state of varying degrees of imbalance as one progresses along the continuum, through to a state of conflict, rather than just imbalance (and represented by the individual experiencing WLC). WLC, under these circumstances, would be defined as ‘a form of inter role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and life domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (life) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the life (work) role’ (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985:77).

Much of the research on the work–life interface has focused on the construct of WLC. This research has described conflict experienced by an individual that arises from simultaneous pressures from the work and life domains that are incompatible in some respect. Because of this incompatibility, participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The dominance of the conflict perspective in the WLB literature is rooted in scarcity theory, which assumes that the personal resources of time, energy, and attention are finite, and that the devotion of greater resources to one role necessitates the devotion of lesser resources to other roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974). Individuals who participate in both work and family roles are likely to experience conflict when these roles due to their limited amounts of time, energy and attention to devote to these respective roles. Past research also confirms that with the increase in working hours, employees tend to experience higher work demands (Zhang & Liu, 2011) which contribute further to WLC by exacerbating the lack of balance being experienced, even increasing the presence of conflict between work demands and demands from one’ personal life, both highly likely to result in negative consequences for individual employees and organisations.
Looking at WLC from this perspective also takes one much closer to the concept of role conflict, which also tends to be studied in a work context, and is a term used to describe inter-role conflict that can emerge when multiple work roles create conflicting demands on an individual, such that the individual feels they are unable to adequately fulfil either one or both of the roles at any time (Coverman, 1989). In a similar vein, the concept of role overload or role strain also occurs when the conflicting demands of various roles are so great that they inhibit an individual's ability to fulfil the roles they are responsible for adequately (e.g., Goode, 1960; Guelzow, Bird & Koball, 1991; Komarovsky, 1976; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Seen in this way, role overload or role strain are also constructs that describe a type of role conflict that is also specifically related to the total time and energy that is needed by an individual to fulfil the role demands that are placed upon them, a feeling of conflict or imbalance which may be experienced by that person, even when the role demands are otherwise compatible, simply because the individual does not have sufficient time and energy to fulfil them all.

Additional Constructs: Job, Life and Personal Satisfaction

To fully understand the complexity and nature of WLB and WLC, one also needs to consider additional, related constructs that are generally studied independently of, or in complementarily with, WLB, even though they refer to highly similar phenomena. Although conceptually distinct from WLB and WLC, and often conceptualised as being an outcome of WLB and/or WLC, the concepts of job satisfaction (JS) and life satisfaction (LS) are also highly relevant to the understanding of WLB. Locke (1969) defined JS as the extent to which the expectations that an individual holds for a job match the outcomes one actually receives from the job. JS can also be characterised as an attitude concerning the extent to which people like or dislike their jobs (Spector, 1997) and is formed as a result of employees' perception of how well their job provides those things that are viewed as important to them. JS is also described as a positive emotional response to a job situation resulting from attaining what the employee wants and values from that job (Olsen, 1993). More recent work suggests that JS is a complex affective response towards various facets of one’s job, such as job content and career prospects (Bonache, 2005). According to Skulli, Theodossiou and Vasileiou (2008), individuals make a judgement about their overall job satisfaction, evaluating it as a whole.
They argue that such a determination would include feelings related to the characteristics of the job including (but not limited to): job tasks; working conditions; levels of earnings; risk of job loss; and, future opportunities for promotion.

Researchers have stressed that employees are increasingly demanding WLB initiatives in their firms, being another determinant of JS. This would be as a result of the increasing prevalence of dual career couples, family or dependent responsibilities or desires to spend more time with friends or enjoying leisure activities (Lavoie, 2004). Companies that implement WLB practices expect to have employees who are more satisfied within their organisations, with research confirming a positive relationship between the existence of WLB practices and employees’ JS (Crede et al., 2007). Theoretical examples also support such a premise and include: social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Blau, 1964); the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960); perceived organisational support (POS) (Rhoadres & Eisenberger, 2002); and, the presence of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989). In these theories, individuals who perceive that their firms are taking care of their well-being (e.g. through formal or informal support for WLB) are argued to experience positive feelings towards the source of that beneficial treatment, their employer, and thus increase their satisfaction.

Life satisfaction (LS) is another construct of relevance to a discussion of WLB. Diener’s (1984) definition of life satisfaction was based on a “... cognitive evaluation of one’s life” (p. 550). Similarly, Shin and Johnson’s (1978) definition of life satisfaction followed “a global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his [or her] chosen criteria”(p. 478). Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008) more recently contend that “individuals who are satisfied with their work will—by definition—be enjoying a greater chunk of their lives than people who can’t stand their jobs” (p. 69).

Because of the large amounts of time individuals tend to spend at work, high levels of JS tend to reinforce an individual’s personal satisfaction (PS), thereby also resulting in a greater level of LS overall (Brooks, 2008). Many researchers have confirmed that individual perceptions of JS served as a predictor of work performance (e.g., Cropanzano, James, & Konovsky, 1993; Cropanzano & Wright,
1999; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Lucas & Diener, 2003; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000, 2004). Further, Brown and Duan (2007) suggest that research on LS and its correlates (i.e., WLC and coping) are also “important concepts in understanding the psychological functioning of professional men and women” (p. 271). WLB is a complex construct, deserving of attention towards its many facets and interrelating components.

The positive relationship between higher perceived levels of WLB (or lower levels of WLC) and higher levels of JS is just one aspect of the more global construct of LS that is also useful to consider when thinking of WLB. From the initial monolithic conceptions of LS as a one-dimensional construct, the added value of adopting a multidimensional conception of LS in multiple life-domains is increasingly being recognised, making the acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of LS a being a natural construct to also consider in the study of WLB. In fact, it could be argued that the achievement of LS in a specific domain (of home or work) could be conceptualised as an indicator that WLB has been successfully achieved.

**Commitment**

Commitment as a construct is conceptually distinct from issues of WLB and WLC and is often conceptualised as being an outcome of WLB and/or WLC. However, employees’ levels of commitment in the workplace also reflect their willingness to get involved in the work area. Given the scarcity of their personal resources (such as time, energy and attention), the level of commitment an individual has towards one life area may be naturally accompanied by lesser investments in other areas. On the one hand, high commitment in the workplace may preclude an employee from investing in the personal or familial domains, so decreasing their WLB and potentially placing them in a position of experiencing greater WLC. On the other hand, being forced to invest resources in a life domain that one is not enjoying or committed to, and then this leaving that individual less time for investment in areas in which one wants to be involved may also decrease WLB, and further exacerbate WLC.
Early research on employees’ commitments in the workplace typically focused on their commitment to the organisation itself. Allen and Meyer’s (1990) and Meyer & Allen (1991) seminal model described organisational commitment as being an employees’ involvement in, and identification with, the associated organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). They distinguished three distinct mindsets of commitment that can have differential implications for an individual’s behaviour: (a) affective commitment, which reflects a desire or a willingness for that person to be involved; (b) normative commitment, which reflects a perceived moral imperative, or pressure, to be involved; and, (c) continuance commitment, which reflects a feeling of obligation to be involved due either to the elevated costs of ceasing this involvement, or a lack of any viable alternative.

Although commitment theory has not been extended to non-work research foci, there is no reason not to do so, at least based on the theoretical perspectives presented. Previous work has presented commitment as a generic binding force that involves an employee and a specific focal area. Extending commitment research to the non-work domain would enable a window of opportunity to study WLB and WLC from a commitment (and different) perspective. If this were pursued, rather than simply focusing on, as previous researchers on WLB and WLC have done, on perceived satisfaction or on the perceived equilibrium or interference of one life domain (such as work) on another, a commitment perspective could also provide information about the relative commitment that a person might feel towards other, non-work and non-family life domains. Such an exploration might reveal whether such commitments to other life domains are wanted (affective), moral (normative), or unwanted but linked to a lack of choice. Such a possibility has never been systematically investigated. However, the specific mindset underlying each specific commitment foci is likely to play an important role in the outcomes of conflicts between commitments, such as is the case with WLB and WLC. Such an approach may also offer insights and challenges surrounding the resolution of such imbalances. For instance, affective commitments are likely to exert a greater influence than normative ones, and a conflict between an affective and a continuance commitment may be particularly difficult to resolve.
WLB AND THE PREDICTION OF WORK OUTCOMES

Employee performance is very important to employing organisations. It has been defined as included both job role task-performance (which includes activities falling directly within an employees’ job description and which are formally expected of them) and the contextual or extra-role performance activities (which include discretionary activities that are beyond the call of duty and which often contribute to the improvement of an organisation’s functioning relative to the broader psychological and social environment of an organization) (Bergman et al., 2008; Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2000). From an organisational standpoint, when employees are able to manage the balance of their work and family domains effectively, it is believed they will tend to perform better well in the work domain. That said, it is uncertain how much a lack of WLB policies impacts what happens at the employee level. Do these workplace policies really affect performance through improving an employees’ WLB? And, if they do, are employees’ personal levels of WLB really related to relevant work-outcomes and if so, through which mechanisms? Clearly, the conceptual confusion regarding the nature and definition of WLB at the employee level and related constructs does not help. Understanding these links is critical for organisations, which are increasingly being pressured to implement improved WLB policies. Employers need to know more about the mechanisms at play in order to be able to maximally support employees in achieving WLB (Eby et al., 2005). A better understanding of the processes and constructs of relevance to employees will help organisations further refine, through targeting critical elements, the relevant WLB procedures and policies available in their workplaces.

Research supports the notion that personal levels of WLB or WLC can indeed predict an employee’s levels of work performance (e.g., Eby et al., 2005). Furthermore, the effects of WLB and WLC seem to also be broader than what was previously thought. Research has shown that WLB and WLC are related to employees’ levels of: well-being; turnover intentions; sickness absences; job, family and community life satisfaction; work performance; organisational commitment; stress; burnout; fatigue; and anxiety (e.g., Bacharach et al., 1991; Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Bragger et al., 2005; Cooke & Rousseau, 1984; Coverman, 1989; Duxbury & Higgins, 2003a, 2003b; Eby et al., 2005; Guelzow et
al., 1991; Hacker & Doolen, 2003; Hassan, Dollard & Winefield, 2010; Khan et al., 1964; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996; Sieber, 1974). Clearly, where there is an imbalance between family and personal objectives, and work role demands, it will be disadvantageous for both employees and employers.

THE NEED FOR CROSS-CULTURAL WLB STUDIES

Much of the work–family and work–life research has been conducted in the Western countries, so it is unknown whether theories, models and findings are valid in other settings (Poelmans, 2003; Spector et al., 2004). Several authors have noted that most of the studies on work–family programmes and work–life conflict have been conducted in Western countries where such programmes are more widespread, and that there are still relatively few studies from emerging economies such as Asia and Africa (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Poster & Prasad, 2005). Due to trends stimulated by the globalization of business such as the increased use of expatriate employees and multicultural virtual teams, managing the work–family interface has become increasingly challenging for employees in both developed and developing nations (Ling & Powell, 2001). A nation’s culture can offer a “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9) and as being a phenomenon that offers “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that results from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted over generations” (House & Javidan, 2004, p. 15). As such, culture offers shared beliefs, attitudes, and norms, as well as boilerplates for social roles, and behaviours (Triandis, 1995, p. 4) for those influenced by it.

Research using a variety of frameworks has shown that national cultural values are related to workplace behaviours, attitudes and other organisational outcomes (e.g., Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980a; Trompenaars, 1993; Schwartz, 1994; Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). However, the work–family literature has rarely acknowledged the important role of national culture on employee behaviours and performance. Eby et al.’s (2005) coding taxonomy based on content analysis of 190 Industrial and Organisational/Organisational Behaviour (IO/OB) work–family studies published over a 23-year period did not include cultural variables at all. In the cross-cultural OB
literature, Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou’s (2007) review of 93 studies published in management journals from 1996 to 2005 also identified that no studies had included culture as a predictor of WLB/WLC. Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson’s (2006) review of 180 studies published in business and psychology journals between 1980 and 2002 offered an exception. They incorporated Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) dimensions of national culture and confirmed at least some relations between dimensions of culture and WLB/WLC. But more work in this cross-cultural domain is indicated.

Examinations of macro-level cultural factors have also been shown to impact of WLB/WLC. Joplin et al. (2003) showed that macro factors such as economic, social, and technological factors explained part of the observed differences in organisational approaches to work and personal life in five countries (China, Mexico, Singapore and the United States). Such macro-environmental influences influence by impinging on the daily lives of individuals in ways that demand shifts in family and work structures. Economic factors are also often a major stressor confronted by individuals in their efforts to secure a comfortable home environment for family members. When economies are growing evenly, providing basic family needs is an easier task. On the other hand, the ‘conservation of resources’ (Hobfoll, 1989) perspective would suggest that rapid economic growth could lead to fewer resources for families because employees might be required to work additional hours to keep up with increased business demands. Further, as populations grow, more strain is put on a country’s resources and economic system to provide work and positive family conditions for a larger population.

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural research into WLB is warranted. We have been unable to locate any systematic cross-cultural WLB studies that compare the experience of the WLB of workers in a Western and Eastern nations. A suggestion for a useful comparative research context might be to focus on two countries with quite distinct national, international, socio-economic and cultural profiles. For example, to choose a Western nation, such as England, the United States of America (USA), Australia or New Zealand would be to select a country which is known to endorse and embrace more individualistic values (Hofstede, 1980). On the other hand, an Eastern country, such as Vietnam, China, India or Bangladesh, which are countries recognised as endorsing more collectivistic values (Hofstede, 1980),
would provide useful comparative starting points. Selection of countries for cross-cultural comparison from either of these individualist or collectivist pools would offer a comparison of countries that are respectively quite different in terms of macro and micro--level social-economic factors. Australia, for instance, is an economically favoured country with one of the highest standards of living worldwide. On the other hand, Bangladesh is considered to be a developing country with elevated rates of poverty and unemployment. We note that we have not been able to find any rigorous and systematic studies of WLB that have been conducted in the context of Bangladesh, that are exploratory, or systematic and quantitative, or empirical. Relevant works include the work of Talukder (2011) who conducted an empirical study in the service sector of Bangladesh but this was confined to a single firm with a small sample size (n=100). Recently, comparative research exploring WLB in Bangladesh and Australia has commenced (Talukder & Vickers, 2014; Talukder, 2013; Talukder, Vickers & Morin, 2013), but remains embryonic. Such cross-cultural, East-West comparative research could contribute by providing theoretical and practical explorations and implications of work-life balance affecting the performance of employees, especially highlight important differences between East and West. Most of the current and past research related to work-life paradigm have been confined to developed countries, and have largely ignored the context of developing nations.

Such research would be anticipated to identify and contrast the various constructs associated with WLB and would contribute to enhanced understanding of employee and organizational performances globally, both in Western developed, and Eastern, developing nations. Simultaneously, such research outcomes would enable employees around the world -- not just in Western nations -- to have a means to better understand and achieve an optimum balance between their work and family lives. This would contribute to the betterment of corporations and the societies globally, as the marketplace and work-world of individuals increasingly moves beyond national and cultural boundaries. Employees and supervisors who might have low levels of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, commitment and performance stemming from work-family conflicts may then find themselves with access to measures and approaches that would enhance their understanding and enable them to respond and redress the (im)balance in their lives.
REFERENCES


