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Work/Life Balance

You Can't Get There From Here

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In this article, I contend that the well-intentioned discourse of work/life balance in the popular and scholarly press actually may undermine women's and men's attempts to live fulfilling lives. Drawing on feminist and critical perspectives, as well as my own efforts to find "balance" in a two-career family with two children under the age of 4, I illustrate (a) how the work/life discourse reflects the individualism, achievement orientation, and instrumental rationality that is fundamental to modern bureaucratic thought and action and (b) how such discourse may further entrench people in the work/life imbalance that they are trying to escape.

In the past decade, an increasing number of scholarly and popular press articles and books has been promoting the importance of work/life balance. Indeed, Douglas Hall (1990) in *Organizational Dynamics* states that the "work/family balance is fast becoming *the* hot career issue of the new decade" (p. 5). Similarly, in the article "The Young Exec as Superdad," *Fortune* (Leinster & Brody, 1988) claims that "balance is

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fast becoming a buzzword among baby-boomers, all the more haunting for its elusiveness" (p. 233). Despite its elusiveness, North American organizational scholars and practitioners seem determined to identify what the work/life balance is (or should be), applaud its benefits for individuals and organizations, and offer individual and organizational prescriptions for achieving balance.

In this article, I suggest that the well-intentioned efforts of organizational researchers and practitioners to promote work/life balance may simultaneously undermine men's and women's ability to live fulfilling and productive lives. The premise of this article is that much of the discourse of work/life balance in the scholarly and popular business press is built on a language and logic that are based in traditional models of bureaucratic organizations, and thus the discourse is likely to perpetuate—and perhaps further entrench—many of the problems it promises to alleviate. In short, the same kind of thinking that got us into this predicament is not going to get us out of it.

Before I turn to the analysis, I want to make three important points. First, I am personally appreciative of the scholars and practitioners who, in their efforts to promote work/life balance, have brought many important issues to the forefront of organizational research and practice. It would be foolish and ungrateful to suggest otherwise. I personally have benefited significantly from their efforts, albeit not without applying a critical eye influenced by feminist and critical perspectives. Second, I write this article as someone who first read the literature on work/life balance as a way to find "balance" in my own life. I was looking for help, not for an opportunity to write an academic paper such as this. Thus the perspective I bring to this article is as much guided by personal interest and experience as by academic interest. Third, my objective in this article is not to provide a systematic analysis of any particular research effort but rather to illustrate how a critical perspective on work/life balance may enrich and revitalize our discourse and perhaps our lives as well.

This article draws on two sources to illustrate my concerns with the discourse of work/life balance: personal reflection and critical theory. I chose to integrate my personal reflections on work/life balance because, as noted earlier, the original idea for this article was motivated out of my own efforts to make sense of and manage my life as a 40-something tenure track assistant professor in a dual-career marriage with two children under the age of 4. I chose to apply a critical perspective to the work/life balance discourse because critical theory encourages us to examine and question the taken-for-granted, unchallenged goals and assumptions that guide the production and dissemination of managerial knowledge and practice (Calas & Smircich, 1989; Caproni & Arias, in press; Martin & Knopoff, in press). Critical theory motivates us to ask questions such as the following: What is the current version of reality promoted by the discourse on work/life balance? Whose ends are served and not served by this version of reality? Are there alternative discourses that may better serve individuals, communities, organizations, and society?

The rest of this article is divided into three sections. In the first section, I describe my own efforts—many of them frustrating—to find "balance" in my life. I suspect that my efforts and my frustrations will be familiar to many others who have been desperately seeking balance in their lives. In the second section, I illustrate how a critical perspective on work/life balance enables us to challenge some of the taken-for-granted

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assumptions and ways of thinking that pervade our thinking about work/life balance. In the third section, I suggest alternative assumptions, language, and ways of thinking that may be more likely to assist us in our efforts to live full lives.

MY LIFE: ON EFFICIENCY, VALUES CLARIFICATION, AND PROZAC

On efficiency. When I first decided I needed to balance my life, I began by becoming more efficient. I read Steven Covey's (1989) national best-seller and adopted *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.* Taking his advice, I tried to get myself beyond the daily "important and urgent" tasks that take up so much time so that I could focus on the longer-term "important and nonurgent" tasks. This was difficult, however, because the categories of important and urgent are problematic, particularly if one has a rich and varied life that must be lived in real time. Who and what becomes either unimportant or nonurgent? And how does it feel to the people in our lives (or who used to be in our lives) who know quite well when we don't return their calls or spend time with them that they have become categorized as unimportant or nonurgent?

I began to conduct meetings standing up, setting a 20-minute limit unless the meeting was critical or unless I was truly enjoying myself (despite my rule of attending to the important and urgent—enjoyment did not fit into these categories). I learned how to delegate more, which was a great move for which I have no regrets. I also learned to handle each piece of mail only once, which was another great move. I began reading my work mail once a week and, with the exception of the Sunday local paper, canceled all magazine and newspaper subscriptions delivered to my home. I started getting up at 5:00 in the morning so I could get 2 hours of work done before the children woke up (except they caught on and now get up as early as 6:00 a.m.). I cut my hair very, very short so that I wouldn't have to comb it, never mind blow-dry it, thus saving at least 10 minutes a day for a total of 70 minutes a week. Despite my newfound zest and talent for efficiency, I realized I was going too far when I decided to only wear slip-on shoes so that I could easily put them on as I walked out the door without making extra time-wasting movements such as bending down and tying laces.

All these time-saving techniques definitely made me more efficient, but I learned that my efficiency had some unintended negative consequences. I became very effective at keeping people who were not absolutely central to my important work tasks or immediate family and friends at bay. In my efforts to take control of my life, I minimized the serendipity from which new friendships and little miracles occur. As Kofodimos (1993) warned, as efficiency became a central value in my work life, it had a tendency to spill over to other parts of my life for which efficiency added no value and instead was problematic. This became obvious during the few months in which human factor engineering became a central theme in our home. By canceling my magazine and newspaper subscriptions, I started to lose touch with what is happening in the world, which had the unfortunate consequence of making me less concerned about what is happening in the world. I became worried that my increased focus and effi-

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ciency were making me more narrow and less able to see through perspectives not provided by my increasingly cloistered world.

On values. Following the advice of Kofodimos (1993, p. 94), I also tried to identify and list my dearest values and "key life priorities." Unfortunately, like my exercise in efficiency, my exercise in values clarification and prioritization was also problematic. I realized that, like many other people, I have a great many values and key life priorities that are interdependent and do not lend themselves to prioritization, trade-offs, or, said another way, being placed in a hierarchy of importance. Consider, for example, my commitments to my children and my work. As a researcher, writer, and teacher whose work focuses on understanding and promoting a multicultural workforce and society, I feel that my commitments to my work and to my children are not inseparable because such work benefits all children, including my own. Given that there is not an overabundance of people working in the area of promoting cultural diversity in the fields of management and organization, and given that our society has a long way to go in promoting multicultural awareness and acceptance (and, some would argue, is regressing in this area), I feel that the time I take away from my work also takes me away from improving the world in which my children live. Furthermore, given that my children are girls, I am also concerned that taking time off from work reinforces negative stereotypes of women being less committed to their work, less dependable, and thus higher-risk hires and second-class organizational members. Certainly perpetuating such stereotypes is of no benefit to my children or anyone else's children. Indeed, the more important my children are to me, the more important my work becomes. My point with this example is that, as with most people, my values do not fall into clean dichotomies that lend themselves to trade-offs or prioritization.

On Prozac. About 6 months ago, a man I know, who I believe is more together than most people, went to get his yearly physical. When the well-respected physician asked him how he was doing, he told her that he was feeling overwhelmed and somewhat depressed by the competing demands of his work and family, the increasing workload at the office, and the escalating hours he was expected to work. He could no longer take his 2 weeks of vacation without making up the time. In essence, his vacation became a debt to be repaid, a reshifting of time owed to the company rather than time the company owed him for his 50 weeks of labor. He was also growing worried about his lack of physical exercise. After listening to him for 20 minutes, in response to his concerns, the physician gave him a prescription for Prozac. There was no discussion about changing his life and no referral to anyone who might be able to help him rethink his life and his responses to it. The physician's strategy was to dull his concerns, make him happier about his existing situation, and speed up his pace so that he would be better able to keep up with the escalating demands in his life. In short, the physician's message was "don't worry, be happy"—and faster.

The Prozac episode made me seriously reconsider my efforts to balance my life. I suspected that trying harder, smarter, and faster to balance my life (e.g., learn more time-saving techniques, work harder on my hierarchy of values, make more trade-offs, find a few extra hours in the day) may have been contributing to the problem rather

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than solving it. Indeed, I considered that I might have been trying to solve the wrong problem. Perhaps the problem—and thus the fix—was not in me but in the conceptualization of work/life balance. I considered that such a balance may not be an achievable or even a desirable goal. I realized that the emphasis on work/life balance may be another individualistic, achievement-oriented model based in modern bureaucratic organizational thought, setting us up to strive for one more thing that we cannot achieve and, in doing so, keeping us too focused, busy, and tired to explore the consequences of our thinking and actions. I decided to look more carefully and critically at the assumptions that underlie the discourse of work/life balance and consider that these assumptions may be a significant source of the problem. This thought was truly liberating.

THE DISCOURSE ON WORK/LIFE BALANCE FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Critical theorists en[courage] us to read between the lines of our discourse and to question both what is there and not there. In particular, critical theorists raise concerns and ask questions that make the existence and consequences of organizational and social power relations visible. For example, do secretaries have as much flexibility as managers? Why does women's caretaking work in the home not contribute to their retirement security, thus making them more dependent on men and men's decisions for the rest of their lives as a reward for their efforts? Why does the work/life balance literature not encourage individuals to worry about *other* people's children and families, but only their own? Why is it that men who are married to women who work outside the home, controlling for a variety of factors such as education, organizational tenure, work experience, and industry differences, earn less than men who have spouses who do not work outside the home (Landau & Arthur, 1992; Pfeffer & Ross, 1982; Schneer & Reitman, 1993; Stroh & Brett, 1996)?

Critical theorists also question taken-for-granted dichotomies, expose contradictions, and resist oversimplifications. They consider how power relations are sustained through such discursive practices. Martin and Knopoff (in press) explain that dichotomies "exaggerate sources of dissimilarity, deny similarities and ambiguities, and omit all that does not fit. Furthermore, one half of a dichotomy is usually devalued. The devalued half is often associated with women" (p. 7). It is not a stretch of the imagination to consider that a root cause of the work/balance tension is that caretaking work in one's own home—typically done by women—is undervalued and unpaid, and until this fundamental issue is resolved most other attempts that try to resolve work/life tensions are likely to be superficial solutions at best.

Finally, critical theorists remind us that although we cannot escape categorizations, we are responsible for considering the consequences of our categorizations—and the language and logic that support them—and to consider creating categorizations and ways of thinking that have the most benefit for the most people. In the following discussion, I will present some of the taken-for-granted, yet problematic, assumptions embedded in the discourse of work/life balance; illustrate how these assumptions may

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undermine men's and women's efforts to enhance the quality of their lives; and suggest alternative discourses that may indeed have the most benefit for the most people.

WORK/LIFE BALANCE: WHY YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

The language of work/life balance is surprisingly similar to that used to describe and create bureaucratic organizations. For example, in her book *Balancing Act: How Managers Can Integrate Successful Careers and Fulfilling Personal Lives*, Kofodimos (1993, pp. 88-105) suggests that the reader develop a "vision" with a "strong and clear focus," move toward that vision with an "action plan" and a set of "concrete strategies" based on identifiable "central life priorities," and "eliminate or limit . . . the activities that do not move you toward your vision." Statements such as these are equally at home in the boardroom of a *Fortune* 100 company or in any MBA strategy classroom and reflect the individualism, goal focus, achievement orientation, and instrumental rationality devoid of emotion that is fundamental to modern bureaucratic thought and action. Is this really the language we want to use to guide our personal lives?

The problems with a systematic, goal-oriented approach to life. I have many concerns about using the language and logic of rational instrumentality in our efforts to craft our lives. In his book *Living Without a Goal*, Ogilvy (1995) articulates well one of my concerns. He states that "a life enslaved to a single Goal [e.g., balance], no matter how noble, becomes a mechanism rather than an organism, a business plan rather than a biography, a tool rather than a gift" (p. 405). He suggests that "living without a goal" provides a "sense of life lived in real time" (p. 4) and that "an alternative to an instrumental rationality that insists on seeing all action as a means toward some end or goal . . . is a more affective sensitivity less intent on manipulating the world than on appreciating it" (p. 12). Although I do not think those who research and promote work/life balance advocate balance as an overriding life goal, nor do I advocate absolute goal-lessness, I do want to suggest that the overriding rationality and goal focus of much of the literature on work/life balance may lead us down the same path we are trying to get off, directing us to overplan our lives at the expense of living our lives.

My other concern is that a strategic, goal-oriented approach to life assumes that people have a great deal of choice and control over their lives, despite the fact that life is rich with unpredictability, problems are often too big to control, and we are sometimes incapable of and not interested in doing more and better. Furthermore, life is dynamic rather than static, so our best-laid plans are often out of date long before they are implemented. Joys and sorrows we never predicted enter our lives without warning, and the blessings we have today may be gone tomorrow. Such turns of event do not lend themselves to planning. A strategic orientation to life underestimates the degree to which life is, and probably should be, deeply emotional, haphazard, and uncontrollable. Balance, perhaps thankfully, may be beyond our reach.

Even if life were predictable and significant life events announced their coming long before they arrived, it is highly unlikely that we, as human beings, would be capa-

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ble of the systematic, rational planning that the work/life literature advocates. We live our lives and work in social systems. Considerable psychoanalytic and social psychological research makes a compelling case that people are "inherently ambivalent about being members of ongoing groups and systems and seek to protect themselves from both isolation and engulfment by alternately pulling away from and moving toward their memberships" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Thus, regardless of whether the context is work, home, or any other social environment, people are inherently ambivalent about their goals, feelings, and choices. Ambivalence, engagement, and disengagement from any aspect of one's life are normal and perhaps advantageous responses to life and cannot, and perhaps should not, be eliminated.

"From Mommy Track to Daughter Track" (1990) in *Newsweek* describes this ambivalence well in its discussion of daughters and their desire to both continue their professions and care for their aging parents:

> Many married women, particularly those in low-paying jobs, find it cheaper to quit work and care for aging relatives themselves than to hire home health care. Professional women are less inclined to quit and more apt to hire help. Many are torn between the parents they cherish and the work they love. Just when many have gotten a long-awaited promotion, they find their parents in need of care. . . . Many see their efforts as a chance to repay the time and care their parents gave them—a chance to say, again, I love you, before it's too late. What they would like is more understanding at work, more support from the men in their lives, more community services to help them—and a little applause from a world that often turns too fast to take time out for love. (p. 52)

If balance is an unachievable goal—both because of the unpredictability of life and internal ambivalence toward social life—then framing balance as a desirable and possible goal is seriously problematic for at least two reasons. First, it advises us to try to achieve the unachievable, setting us up for continuous frustration at our own inability to achieve that which is beyond our reach. Second, because imbalance is framed "as a problem that primarily harms individual life quality and well-being" (Kofodimos, 1993, p. xvii), the emphasis on work/life balance, as well as the advice designed to help people achieve balance, may create yet another "idealized image" of ourselves (Kofodimos, 1993).

Kofodimos explains that an idealized image is

> a picture of a type of person that we want to be and feel we should be. . . . The image always incorporates a set of "shoulds": who we should be; how we should be; how we should feel; and what we should want. Furthermore, we seek to live up to this image, and our self-esteem depends on how closely we feel we are living up to it. The problem with this dynamic is that the idealized image does not match the range of dimensions of our real selves. (pp. 59-60)

Although Kofodimos counsels the reader to "be easy on yourself" and that "the objective is not to prescribe a new ideal image to live up to" (p. 105), by framing imbalance as a problem and balance as the desirable and achievable alternative, suggesting that "balance is an issue for every person who opens this book" (p. xviii), and presenting a systematic series of logical steps the reader can go through to resolve this imbalance, she nonetheless creates for the readers the expectation that they are significantly less than they could be if they only tried harder. I am sure this is not Kofodimos's

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intent, but one of the main contributions of critical theory is that it helps us see the unintended consequences of our good intentions.

The problems with an individual-level focus. The focus of the work/life literature is on helping individuals and their immediate families achieve balance in their lives. To the extent that the work/life discourse remains focused on the individual, power relations will remain beyond the scope of the discourse because understanding power dynamics requires a relational and structural, not individual, level of analysis. A power perspective on the work/life balance literature would ask questions such as: Who gets to define what work/life balance is? Who has access to available benefits, and who does not? (I was recently told by a secretary that although most of the faculty at my university took the day after July 4th off, resulting in a 4-day weekend, most of the secretarial staff were required to work.) Are those of us who have benefits that enable us to be more flexible with our lives willing to speak on behalf of those who do not have access to the same benefits or give some of these benefits away to those who may need them more?

The problems with having a passion for excellence. Although the language typically reserved for the work environment is now being used to try to help people "manage" their lives, the language of intimacy and spirituality is now being used in the service of promoting productivity and commitment at work. Managers, in particular, are supposed to feel "passionate" about their work and "lead with soul." One could argue that perhaps such language "crossovers" reflect a breakdown of the artificial and simplistic distinctions between "work" and "life." This may be true, but I have three concerns with this crossover of language from the private home environment to the public work environment.

My first concern is that we may be using the language of passion and spirituality at work to promote even greater commitment to our jobs, resulting in more time and energy spent away from home. Kofodimos's (1990, 1993) thoughtful and compelling discussion of the "spiraling cycle of imbalance" illustrates how passion with one's work can create a dynamic in which one becomes more committed to and competent at work at the expense of the ability to experience intimacy (or, one could argue, even passion) in one's home. Her argument is that as people continue to invest more time and energy into work, they begin to receive psychological and material rewards that encourage them to invest even more of themselves and their time into their work. However, time and energy are limited human resources, and as people take more time away from home, they become less competent with their home-based responsibilities and relationships, creating dissatisfaction and stress at home, which in turns makes the workplace a more attractive and less stressful place to be than home. This creates an even greater commitment to work and a concomitant avoidance of home and the intimacy typically associated with home—and the cycle escalates.

My second concern is that encouraging managers to have passion and spirituality in their work (note that passion is typically associated with managers, not workers) may minimize their ability to see and resist the less appealing images of work—increasing work hours at the expense of one's health, family, and community; or living with the

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fear of being laid off and losing one's health care, life insurance, and future retirement income. Indeed, the contradictory images of work become apparent in the following image: We are supposed to be "passionate" about our work and at the same time "keep our nose to the grindstone." My third concern is that applying the language of passion, spirituality, and soul to our work and workplaces frames our jobs as an important reason for being, a source of great joy, and our spiritual duty. Although such language enhances our image of work and working, it also provides an impoverished view of passion and spirituality.

There are, of course, many other critiques of the work/life balance discourse. For example, the dichotomies of the work sphere/home sphere and the assumption of multiple "roles" that one enacts and juggles in one's life are worth reconsidering. I certainly have not done justice in this article to the many subtle and not so subtle ways in which the work/life discourse minimizes, and thus reinforces, existing organizational and social power dynamics. I also have not considered in this article the role that materialism and consumerism play in our escalating commitment to work and professional success. I have presented in this article the critiques that (a) have been most useful to me in understanding why my own efforts to find balance were unfulfilling and (b) have inspired my own attempts to create a new discourse to support my desire to live a more fulfilling and productive life.

My point in this article is that the researchers and practitioners who initiated and promoted the discussion of work/life balance have done us all a great service, but we should not be lulled into complacently thinking that we are still on the right path, redoubling our efforts and moving even faster in the same direction. Although I do not want to imply that none of the work/life literature has addressed the same concerns that I have in this article, I do want to suggest that more of us should be exploring these concerns more systematically and in more depth. Perhaps it is time we all slow down, take a deep breath, and carefully reconsider where we are going. Is balance—or its close cousin, juggling—really our goal?

LET'S NOT SETTLE FOR A BALANCED LIFE

Personally, the turning point in my own efforts to live a more fulfilling life came when I decided that I would not settle for balance or juggling. Not settling meant that I had to transcend the discourse of work/life balance, including the language that promoted predictability, control, individual achievement, hierarchy of values, constant movement toward goals, and compartmentalization of life. To transcend this language, I had to create for myself a new language that privileged tranquility over achievement, contribution over success, and choice over status. I gave up the notion that I should find passion in my work and instead looked to where I could make the greatest contribution for the most people and sought to keep passion in the home with my husband and children. Although I am not an advocate of finding passion in my work, I do believe work can be fun as well as productive. I accepted that unpredictability and lack of control were normal parts of living and could not—should not—be eliminated. In a tribute to

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goal-lessness, I learned to leave slack in my life—time that had no purpose—and I began to judge success by how I felt rather than what I did.

By identifying the values that were important to me and changing my life accordingly, I was in many ways following the advice promoted in the work/life balance literature. But there were important—and I believe critical—distinctions. Balance no longer was my goal; living a full life was. With the exception of many of the time-saving techniques I learned to relish and still depend on, I did not apply the logical-rational approach advocated in the work/life discourse. Rather, I replaced this approach with an aesthetic perspective, which Strati (1992) describes as a "feeling of beauty" (p. 568). I realized that beauty, not balance, is a very worthwhile guide to life. These simple changes in my assumptions and perspective made all the difference.

What of my deeply held commitment to promoting a workplace that encourages and rewards women's participation? Would spending more time with my children and pursuing a nontraditional approach to my career undermine my own efforts as well as those of other women? These are still difficult questions for me, but I am trying to be a role model for women and men by working fewer hours than the norm for someone in my profession (e.g., keeping most nights and weekends for nonwork activities), spending more treasured time with my family and friends, making truly significant and high-quality contributions with the hours I work (e.g., those that I feel have the most benefit for the most people), eliminating work that does not make significant or high-quality contributions, and getting paid very well for what I do. At the same time, I am spending a lot more time with my husband and children, and I am much more patient, relaxed, and engaged during the time I spend with them. I plan to use some of the extra time I have to see if I can find out why the secretaries had to work on July 5 when most of the faculty took the day off and see if together we can change the policies that require them to do so. It is too soon to tell if my approach will work in the long run, but I am definitely enjoying the journey.

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