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Social Science Information 2002; 41; 255

DOI: 10.1177/0539018402041002005

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David E. Guest

Perspectives on the study of work-life balance

***Abstract.** This article reviews aspects of contemporary theory and research on work-life balance. It starts by exploring why work-life balance has become an important topic for research and policy in some countries and after outlining traditional perspectives examines the concept of balance and its implications for the study of the relation between work and the rest of life. A model outlining the causes, nature and consequences of a more or less acceptable work-life balance is presented and recent research is cited to illustrate the various dimensions. Finally, the topic is linked to the field of work and organizational psychology and a number of theoretical and conceptual issues of relevance to research in Europe are raised.*

***Key words.** Family – Home – Work – Work and organizational psychology – Work-life balance – Work-life interference*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to explain why work-life balance is a topic of contemporary interest, to explore the meaning of "balance" in the context of the study of work-life balance, to present a framework within which some of the key conceptual and empirical issues can

This article is a revised version of a communication presented at a symposium on "Work-life balance" organized at the annual meeting of the European Network of Work and Organizational Psychologists (ENOP), which was held in Paris under the auspices of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme on 29–31 March 2001.

I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Neil Conway and Philip Dewe of the Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck College on an initial draft of this article and the subsequent helpful feedback from a number of ENOP colleagues.

Social Science Information © 2002 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), 41(2), pp. 255–279.

0539-0184[200206]41:2;255–279;023564

be explored and finally, within this framework, to review selective research. Underpinning these aims is a concern to open up debates about how work and organizational psychologists can best contribute to this topic and how far it requires a wider disciplinary perspective than they might typically adopt. There is already an extensive and rapidly growing body of research on the subject and the article is not intended as a comprehensive review of the literature.

Why the interest?

Work–life balance has always been a concern of those interested in the quality of working life and its relation to broader quality of life. In the early days of the industrial revolution in Europe (and today in some parts of the developing world) a primary concern was with the impact of child labour. In times of recession and again today in parts of Europe, the concern is with lack of employment and its consequences, graphically illustrated in the early work by Jahoda (1992) at Marienthal and studied in many contexts up to the present day. Yet work–life balance has come to the fore in contemporary debates largely because in affluent societies the excessive demands of work are perceived to present a distinctive issue that needs to be addressed.

It is only some 25 years ago that pundits were warning that advances in technology would lead to the threat of mass unemployment – or the promise of a life of increased leisure for most in western (post-)industrial society. So what has changed? It is possible to identify a set of factors that have brought the issue of work–life balance to the forefront of policy debates. These are familiar but are briefly summarized, since an assessment of their significance will have a bearing on the questions that are worth researching and on judgements about the policy agendas that require attention. Three broad sets of overlapping influences can be identified, those concerned with developments at work that might be seen as causing the problem of work–life imbalance, those relating to life outside work that might be viewed as consequences of work–life imbalance and those concerning individuals and their lives outside work that give rise to the need to address the challenge of work–life balance as a contemporary policy issue.

The pressures of work, for those in work, have been intensifying in recent decades. Factors such as the advances in information technology and information load, the need for speed of response, the importance attached to quality of customer service and its implications for constant availability and the pace of change with its resultant upheavals and adjustments all demand our time and can be sources of pressure. The evidence from the UK, which has the longest working hours in Europe, shows that while the average number of hours worked has been steady for the past 20 years, the proportion working more than 48 hours has increased in the past decade. Also, people report an increase in the intensity of work. Comparative figures for Europe show that the *rise* in intensity in the 1990s was greatest in the UK, closely followed by Ireland, France, Italy and the Netherlands. At the other extreme West (but not East) Germany reported almost no increase in the intensity of work. Intensity was measured through subjective responses to questions about the proportion of time spent working at very high speeds and to tight deadlines. As a result, so the argument goes, the demands of work begin to dominate life and a sense of work-life imbalance ensues.

In the community, there is growing concern that the quality of home and community life is deteriorating. There are various explanations for this associated with affluence, the growth of single-parent families, the privatization of family life and the lack of local resources and facilities. In western industrial society we live in an unparalleled era in that a higher proportion of women from all social classes are engaged in paid employment than ever before. In addition, the pressures and demands of work, reflected in longer hours, more exhaustion and the growth of evening and week-end work, leave less scope for "quality" family time. The consequences include increases in juvenile crime, more drug abuse, a reduction in concern for community and in community participation and less willingness to take responsibility for care of elderly relatives and for the disadvantaged. While steps to redress these concerns transcend work and employment, it is nevertheless argued that the demands of work contribute to a reduced participation in non-work activities resulting in an imbalance.

The third area concerns the attitudes and values of people in work. The issue of work-life balance has been stimulated by writers advocating the arrival of Generation X (Tulgan, 1996), a cohort of

workers who give greater priority to seeking a balance between work and the rest of life. More generally, there is a view, widely promoted by some management writers but not strongly supported by sound empirical evidence, that workers are less willing to display unlimited commitment to the organization. One reason offered for this is the changing nature of the psychological contract at work; turbulence in organizations has made it less feasible to offer secure progressive careers and therefore to justify why workers should be committed. The conflict between the demands of work and the decline of work as a central life interest results in an imbalance between work and the rest of life.

Much of the general analysis about the causes and consequences of work–life imbalance is speculative and based on limited convincing evidence. We need to learn more in particular about the consequences of imbalance on family and community and on changing values among younger workers. It is also notable that debates about work–life balance often occur without any clear and consistent definition of what we mean by work–life balance, a point we return to below.

Traditional perspectives on work–life balance

Zedeck and Mosier (1990) and more recently O’Driscoll (1996) note that there are typically five main models used to explain the relationship between work and life outside work. The *segmentation* model hypothesizes that work and non-work are two distinct domains of life that are lived quite separately and have no influence on each other. This appears to be offered as a theoretical possibility rather than a model with empirical support. In contrast, a *spillover* model hypothesizes that one world can influence the other in either a positive or a negative way. There is, of course, ample research to support this but as a proposition it is specified in such a general way as to have little value. We therefore need more detailed propositions about the nature, causes and consequences of spillover. The third model is a *compensation* model which proposes that what may be lacking in one sphere, in terms of demands or satisfactions, can be made up in the other. For example, work may be routine and undemanding but this is compensated for by a major role in local community activities outside work. A fourth model is an *instrumental* model whereby activities in one sphere facilitate success in the

other. The traditional example is the instrumental worker who will seek to maximize earnings, even at the price of undertaking a routine job and working long hours, to allow the purchase of a home or a car for a young family. The final model is a *conflict* model, which proposes that with high levels of demand in all spheres of life, some difficult choices have to be made and some conflicts and possibly some significant overload on an individual occur.

Recently interest has been focused in particular on the conflict model, especially in dual-career families, although research on the spillover and compensation models continues to be widely reported. What these types of model cannot so easily address is what constitutes a balance between work and the rest of life. We shall return to explore the nature of “balance” in more detail. At this stage we will just note that it may be helpful to distinguish between objective and subjective indicators, to recognize that any objective indicators such as working hours are themselves reflections of subjective social values and to note that any use of subjective indicators may benefit from some kind of stakeholder analysis. In other words, what may seem like balance to one individual may not do so to his or her partner or boss.

The five models listed above are essentially descriptive models. To be of value they need to incorporate an analysis of their causes and consequences. Research will also benefit from a richer array of frameworks for the analysis of the boundary between work and the rest of life. One recent approach that might help to illuminate this is what has been termed *border theory* (Clark, 2000). It argues that people are daily border-crossers as they move between home and work. This opens up a rich vein of analysis of the nature of borders, their permeability, the ease with which they can be managed or moved and so on. Interesting questions are raised about the existence of borders for those who work from home, either in the traditional sense of farmers and those with family hotels and restaurants or in the more contemporary sense of those who use new technology to work from home rather than the traditional office. For example, are borders desirable and if so under what circumstances? There are also potentially interesting parallels with the notion of the boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and the European Union Futures Project notion of a *mosaic society* in which the boundaries between work and leisure become increasingly blurred. In terms of any analysis of work-life *balance*, the analysis of borders can help to illuminate how far individuals are in control of

issues determining balance. It also allows for analysis of physical and psychological controls. While a heavy emphasis in the recent literature suggests that technology and competition have resulted in more intensive and extensive work, any analysis needs to accommodate human agency. Border theory begins to permit this. In other words, it opens up scope for the social construction or cognitive distortion of boundaries to create a defensible subjective sense of balance.

Models of work–life balance can also be enriched by the psychology of individual differences. For example, there has been some research on “workaholics” who are characterized as those who choose to work long hours even when they may not need to do so. Furthermore, they tend to do so at the expense of other activities. In a review of some of the literature on workaholics, Peiperl and Jones (2000) note how it was initially viewed as a disease akin to alcoholism (Baylin, 1977) but that research by Machlowitz (1980) suggested that it was more properly viewed as a form of extreme work involvement. More recently, Scott et al. (1997) have linked it to three relatively stable personality types, *the achievement-oriented*, *the perfectionist* and *the compulsive-dependent*. Peiperl and Jones distinguish workaholics, who choose to work long hours and perceive some rewards from doing so, from *overworkers* who may also work long hours but who have little choice in the matter and who do not believe that the returns they receive justify the long hours. This stream of research needs considerable development but it highlights the importance of taking into account individual differences in any attempt to establish what we mean by balance.

One issue for discussion is how far the traditional models are sufficient for the study of work–life balance and in particular how far they can sensibly be used as a basis for comparative research on work–life balance in different countries.

So what is work–life balance?

The way in which we study the relationship between work and the rest of life depends partly on our choice of language. Much of the literature is concerned with work–life conflict or work–life interference and understandably focuses attention on sources of conflict and interference. By using the concept of work–life balance, different and potentially more challenging issues about defining and

establishing the conditions for balance and their link to psychological well-being are posed.

Work–life balance is a form of metaphor; but a metaphor of what? In the English language “balance” is a complex word with a variety of meanings. As a noun, a balance is a set of scales, a weighing apparatus; it is also the regulating gear in clocks. If we use the scales, then balance occurs when there is “an equal distribution of weight or amount” (Oxford English Dictionary); but this presents problems for work–life balance since both sides may be very heavy or very light. Furthermore, the type of work–life balance sought by many may not imply equal weight on both sides. However, balance also has a physical and psychological meaning as “stability of body or mind”, so that suicide is sometimes officially recorded as taking one’s life “while the balance of the mind was disturbed”. This version of the metaphor, whether it applies to body or mind, is somewhat more appropriate since it implies the possibility of both external verification and human agency. Put another way, we can observe when someone has lost their balance; and we know that in given circumstances some people have better balance than others and may perceive that they have better balance. This gives rise to the need to recognize that balance can have both an objective and subjective meaning and measurement, that it will vary according to circumstances and that it will also vary across individuals.

In the English language, balance is also a verb; as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, “to off-set or compare; to equal or neutralise, to bring or come into equilibrium”. The use of the verb implies human agency; we can take steps to manage balance. In all this there is an implicit normative assumption that balance is good. We therefore refer to the balance of power and the notion of a balance-sheet. On the other hand, a positive balance of trade or balance of payments, in other words an imbalance, can be something that may be valued. If we apply this to work–life balance, then when might some form of imbalance be viewed as positive, or is the idea of a positive imbalance a contradiction in terms? This brief analysis of the meaning of balance is sufficient to highlight both the richness of the metaphor and the dangers in the loose use of metaphor.

The problems in analysing work–life balance only begin with the concept of balance. We also need to consider *work* and *life*. Work can be initially defined as paid employment. But this soon breaks down when we begin to take into account extra unpaid hours, the

time taken to travel to and from work and the more intractable problems of farmers, hoteliers and others who work from home and where the border between home and work is very porous. Part of the interest in the subject arises from the view that the scope for increased work from home, facilitated by new technology, has helped to blur the border between home and work. At the very least, the definition of work in the analysis of work–life balance is problematic.

The same can be said for *life* or *non-work*. The term *work–life balance* is in itself a misnomer and serves simply as a convenient shorthand for work and the rest of life. If we look at the sphere outside work, then work and organizational (hereafter W/O) psychologists need to recognize the complexities that cloud the analysis. Much of the research, some of which is illustrated later in this article, has been concerned with the spillover of work into family life. However, family life is only one aspect of life outside work. Leisure analysts draw a distinction between free time and leisure time. Others have explored committed time and free time. W/O psychologists and others have examined the amount of time outside and away from formal work that is spent on work-related activities. In other words, there are many ways in which we can study and conceptualize life outside work and many studies of work–life balance are conveniently and perhaps inevitably imprecise in specifying what they mean. (In defence of this, it might be argued that in many studies the focus is on the subjective experience of imbalance and on subjective attributions of causes and therefore imposing a definition would be unhelpfully restrictive.)

In much of the debate about work–life balance, there is a loose use of language. Ideally, we should define work and life carefully. On the other hand, it is partly the blurring of the distinctions and the borders between them that has stimulated interest in the topic. In simple terms, “work” is normally conceived of in this context as including paid employment while “life” includes activities outside work. An important part of the policy debate has concerned the importance of family-friendly policies while leaving unclearly specified what is meant by the family. Indeed, Rothausen (1999) has presented a detailed analysis of how the concept of “family” has been operationalized by W/O psychologists and other work-focused researchers and offers five different models. In the absence of an agreed definition she suggests that a “realistic definition of family would include all others who meet certain needs or functions

formerly thought to be met by the family; this is a functional, or effective, rather than a 'traditional' or legal definition of family" (1999: 820).

Life outside work also includes free time. This is normally thought of as time when there are no commitments determined by others. It can be distinguished from leisure, which is normally considered to be the pursuit of specific activity. There is an extensive literature on the nature and consequences of leisure activity and the implications for mental health and well-being of filling free time with leisure activities rather than passive behaviour (see, for example, Haworth, 1997). Many of these points will be familiar to those who have worked in this field, but they highlight the importance of careful conceptualization of terms that fall outside the conventional domain of W/O psychology.

Utopian writers and commentators have sought to address the complexity of definition and boundary by setting out what they believe to be an appropriate balance. These utopias can serve as both theoretical propositions and templates and sometimes as indicators of a distinctive type of normative value system in society. Well-known examples are provided by Marx, Freud and Huxley. More recently observers of contemporary society such as Handy (1994) and Pahl (1995) in the UK and American sociologist Wuthnow (1996) have argued that societal cohesion depends on the re-discovery of a more appropriate balance between the competing demands that individuals face. By implication, all believe that work has become too dominant.

In the face of these challenges, we need to find ways of operationalizing and measuring work-life balance. An initial relatively narrow definition might take the form of "sufficient time to meet commitments at both home and work". This seeks to integrate objective and subjective definitions but cannot easily accommodate those who are under-utilized at both home and work. We may therefore seek to separate the subjective and objective definitions, thereby raising the empirical question of how they are related. A subjective definition then simply becomes "a perceived balance between work and the rest of life". This subjective balance can come in a variety of guises. For some the preference may be to spend long hours at work, perhaps because of career stage, perhaps because of a limited life outside work. For others, the opposite may apply and balance is perceived to exist where some work takes place but it is subordinated to the demands of home. Imbalance can also occur because of an

absence of work. Subjective perceptions of balance are central to any analysis of this issue. However, evidence about the consequences of certain patterns of behaviour, such as very long hours at work, has led to legislative and social attempts to define balance more objectively. These definitions risk conflating outcomes of balance with the measure of balance; for example, Clark (2000) defines balance as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict”. In practice, therefore, definitions have focused on time and role enactment. European legislation defines 48 working hours a week as an appropriate maximum and reviews of the literature on working hours and health (Sparks et al., 1997) provide some indication that when people work much beyond these hours, their health and performance can begin to deteriorate. The “objective” definition implied by this is that those who regularly work more than 48 hours a week will have an imbalance between work and rest of life. Various time studies have explored the amount of “uncommitted” time available after work and family obligations have been dealt with. Another popular approach is to explore the roles of partners at work and more particularly at home to determine whether the “new man” is contributing to a range of household chores (all the evidence suggests not) or whether women still come home to what Hochschild (Hochschild and Machung, 1989) has termed “the second shift”. Not surprisingly, much of the work by W/O psychologists and others combines subjective and objective measures of balance.

Discussion of this topic needs to give some attention to ways of defining and operationalizing balance. Does it make sense to adopt “objective” indicators? It might be useful to consider whether in practice it is easier to define balance by its absence. In other words, people are more likely to be subjectively aware of their state when there is imbalance. If so, the study of conflict and interference between work and home might provide a useful starting-point in the study of work–life balance.

Towards a model for the analysis of work–life balance

The preceding discussion confirms that we need to separate the nature, causes and consequences of a more or less positive work–life balance as a basis for developing a research agenda and indeed for analysing what we already know. As already noted, much of

TABLE 1
Nature, causes and consequences of work-life balance

<i>Determinants</i>	<i>Nature of the balance</i>	<i>Consequences/impact</i>
Organizational factors	Subjective indicators	
Demands of work	Balance – emphasis	Work satisfaction
Culture of work	equally on home and work	Life satisfaction
		Mental health/well-being
Demands of home	Balance – home central	Stress/illness
Culture of home	Balance – work central	
		Behaviour/performance at work
Individual factors	Spillover and/or	
Work orientation	interference of work	Behaviour/performance at home
Personality	to home	
Energy	Spillover and/or	
Personal control and coping	interference of home to work	Impact on others at work
Gender		Impact on others at home
Age	Objective indicators	
Life and career stage	Hours of work	
	“Free” time	
	Family roles	

the research starts from a concern with spillover or conflict between work and the rest of life and has focused in particular on women in demanding jobs or on dual-career families. Whatever the focus, a preliminary model is useful to identify the independent, intermediate and outcome variables that can usefully be incorporated in any analysis and research. A preliminary starting-point as a basis for discussion is set out in Table 1.

The model is designed to incorporate the main issues that need to be addressed in the analysis of work-life balance. They are presented from a W/O psychology perspective to take account of the individual level of analysis, and while the model addresses aspects of organizational context, it does not directly deal with national policy and legislation that can help to determine working hours, rights to time off work when home demands change and a range of related issues. The term *home* is used in the model as a shorthand for life outside work.

The determinants of work-life balance are located in the work and home contexts. At work, the demands of work may be either too low or too high; and what is termed the culture of work reflects

the organizational culture and may support balance through appropriate policies and practices, such as occasional time off work and flexible hours, or may strictly limit these. Alternatively, it may demand and expect long and irregular hours and be intolerant of taking time off to deal with family emergencies. The demands of home refer to the commitments and obligations outside work. These may exist in the family, in the community or through choice of leisure activities. In the family, the demands, for example for someone who is young and single, may be very low while for those with dependent children or elderly parents, they may be very high. In Table 1, what is termed the “culture of home” refers to the expectations of those in the home environment about commitments and obligations. This can include the allocation of family duties, such as child care, care of elderly relatives and cooking, and judgements about whether these should be undertaken by family members or contracted out.

Individual factors affecting perceptions of work–life balance include orientation to work and in particular the extent to which work (or home) is a central life interest and aspects of personality including need for achievement and propensity for work involvement. Energy levels are often ignored but in the context of high demand need to be taken explicitly into account. They may be linked to issues of personal control, including locus of control and capacity for coping with pressures of competing demands. Finally, gender will often be a factor, with higher demands placed on women in the home, while age, life-stage and career-stage issues will influence willingness to tolerate certain kinds of demand at work and at home. Although they are not explicitly included in the framework, W/O psychologists may wish to incorporate social information processing, cognitive resource and dissonance theories to help to explain why some people perceive imbalance while others do not.

At the heart of the model, the nature of work–life balance can be defined subjectively or objectively. The “objective” indicators include hours of work and hours of uncommitted or free time outside work and other activities in the home and elsewhere. Family roles refer to the allocation of responsibilities in the home and possibly in the wider community. The “subjective” indicators refer to the states of balance and imbalance. Balance can be reported where equal weight is given to both work and home activities and they do not appear to be in any serious conflict. However, balance

may also be reported when home or work dominates by choice. Spillover occurs when there is significant intrusion or interference of one sphere of life in the other. This will often but not always lead to perceived interference or conflict. It should be noted that objective and subjective indicators will not always align. An external view that a 55-hour working week reflects imbalance may not be shared by the person who prefers a balance between home and work in which work receives priority.

The outcomes of work-life balance are potentially numerous. Again they can be related to personal satisfaction and well-being at work, at home and in life as a whole, to somewhat more objective indicators of behaviour and performance at work and at home and to impact on others including work colleagues and family and friends. Each of these could be developed in some detail and at present serve to illustrate the richness of the potential research agenda.

The model presented here reflects a fairly traditional framework for the analysis of work-life balance. It is intended primarily to highlight some of the main dimensions and variables that might need to be considered in any empirical analysis. One issue that arises is therefore whether there are any important items that should be added to or removed from this framework.

Evidence of work-life balance/imbalance

In the field of organization and work psychology, research agendas tend to be influenced by societal and organizational perceptions of pressing issues. At present, the growth of interest in work-life balance reflects a perception that this is an issue that merits investigation. In making this assertion, a stakeholder analysis is important. It is possible that those in work do not perceive a problem but that school teachers, aware that children are not being encouraged by busy parents to complete homework, do believe that the problem exists. So too may welfare workers, aware of the growth of alcohol and drug abuse as a way of coping with the pressures of demands at home and at work. It is with these important provisos that we can begin to explore some of the empirical evidence. The review that follows is inevitably selective and illustrative. It provides some indication of recent work in this field, including some largely descriptive material from the UK to provide a flavour of the nature and extent

of concerns in the European country with the longest hours of work in Europe.

The model in Table 1 suggests that we should consider both subjective and objective indicators. At the same time, it is reasonable to believe that the two may be inter-related. Standard surveys can shed some light on the issue. For example the annual UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) survey of the psychological contract and the state of the employment relationship, which questions a random sample of 1000 people in the working population (Guest and Conway, 1998, 2000) asked in both 1998 and 2000 whether people felt they had the right balance between work and life outside work. The responses in the two years show that 73 and 74 percent respectively said they had the right balance. In other words, “only” about a quarter of those in work say they have the wrong balance. The survey excludes the unemployed and the self-employed, so the level of imbalance in the population as a whole may be somewhat greater. As a check, it was established that among those who reported the wrong balance, 9 out of 10 said that it was work that dominated. As expected, there was a strong correlation between working longer hours and a reported imbalance between work and the rest of life.

Probing in more detail, in the 2000 survey 13 percent said that the demands of work prevented them from meeting important commitments at home and in other activities outside work “a great deal of the time”, while 27 percent said it happened “some of the time”. For the rest it happened “not very often” (31 percent) or “not at all” (30 percent). Finally, asked when they have to choose whether work or home wins, 43 percent said work tends to win, 32 percent said life outside work tends to win and the remaining 24 percent said it was about equal. One implication of this research is that some people might acknowledge that there is a degree of conflict and interference between work and the rest of life yet they may still be reasonably satisfied with the balance they achieve. From surveys of this kind we can gauge the extent to which workers believe they have a problem of work–life balance. These survey data suggest that the problem is less severe than some of the more alarmist accounts, usually focusing more on experience of work–life conflict, might lead us to believe. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the “problem” is most serious among those in well-paid management positions who might normally be expected to have high levels of control over their work, including their working-hours. This raises

the issue of whether they fit into the category of workaholics, a point we return to below.

Work-based surveys, even if, as in this case, they are conducted in the home, can pick up imbalance biased towards too much work; they are much less able to pick up the bias towards home, in other words, those who would like to get out of the home but feel committed, often as a result of dependents, to spending more time in the home than they would wish. More generally, studies show a correlation but not an overwhelmingly strong correlation between working-hours and perceptions of imbalance. This raises questions about how far we should take objective criteria such as hours as indicators of subjective experience and also how far we can rely on subjective accounts as valid indicators of balance without some corroborating evidence from others, such as partners and work colleagues.

Determinants of work-life balance

The model in Table 1 points to a variety of determinants of work-life balance. An indication of the range of influences can be found in the more detailed analysis of the UK CIPD surveys cited earlier. A regression analysis reveals that an imbalance was more likely to be reported, as we might expect, by those working longer hours. It was also more likely to be reported by those in managerial positions and on a higher income; by women rather than men and by those with dependent children; and by multiple-job holders. On the positive side, those who reported that they worked in an organization with a friendly climate, where more human resource practices are in place and where they have more scope for direct participation and autonomy, reported less imbalance. From a policy perspective, it is interesting to note that the presence of family-friendly practices was not associated with a reported work-life balance. This implies that they were either ineffectively implemented or, as seems more likely from the evidence, that they may have lessened but not eliminated the problem.

In the UK, Green (2001), among others, has shown that intensification of work has reached a point where there is very little slack in the working-day. Typical examples include the jobs of those working in call centres where incoming calls are placed in a queue and where there is a pre-determined response time and pattern. The annual

CIPD surveys have identified that one of the areas where workers believe the organization is least likely to keep its promises concerns the demands on their time. In the same surveys, subjective reports of effort show, typically, that about 30 percent say “I am working as hard as I can and could not imagine being able to work any harder”. A further 45 percent say “I am working very hard” and most of the rest say “I am working quite hard”. Invariably, less than 5 percent will admit to “not working particularly hard”. In other words, people are feeling the pressure.

We have already noted, from the CIPD surveys, that those who report a friendly climate report a better work–life balance. Clark (2000) has dissected the concept of “family-friendly” to distinguish practices associated with temporal flexibility, which give workers some control over when they work, operational flexibility, which give control through autonomy over the content of work, and supportive supervision, which allows for rules to be flexible in the case of family crises, illness and so on. Her research with an American sample found that somewhat contrary to expectations operational flexibility but not temporal flexibility was associated with better reported work–life balance. Supportive supervision did not improve balance but increased organizational citizenship behaviour. These findings are in line with our UK surveys, which suggest that autonomy and direct participation are important and that family-friendly practices have less impact than we might expect. In terms of border theory, the family-friendly practices do not succeed in making the boundaries more permeable.

There is something of a puzzle about why family-friendly policies and practices do not appear to improve work–life balance to the extent we might expect. Perry-Smith and Blum (2000) report a US study on “bundles” of family-friendly practices and corporate performance. They find, in line with other research on human resource management (HRM), that isolated family-friendly practices will have little impact but that a comprehensive bundle of practices is associated with superior ratings of corporate performance. While their focus is on corporate performance, there may be similar implications for their impact on employees. One interpretation of the presence of a bundle of practices is that they have become embedded in the organizational culture whereas isolated practices operate on the margin. This would reinforce the importance of considering organizational culture/climate as a key unit of analysis in understanding work–life balance.

Research has concentrated on the demands of work rather than home. However, in this context some of the work of Hochschild (1997) is revealing in suggesting that the use of progressive human resource practices to generate commitment to work can risk making work almost too attractive. In contrast, the life of the American parent is increasingly programmed to meet a series of time-based obligations to transport children, meet specific needs and set aside “quality” time. With these demands made in the home, work, particularly where the social and physical environment is attractive and levels of autonomy and scope for development are high, can appear particularly appealing.

An ambitious study by Kossek et al. (2001), building on some of Kossek’s earlier work, has examined the influence of both work and family climate on aspects of work–life balance and related outcomes. In fact it serves as a fairly comprehensive test of the model presented in Table 1. The core focus is on what they term “caregiving” decisions, in other words, decisions about care of children and elderly family members. The key issues are where they should be cared for and by whom. It is hypothesized that work and family climates, and specifically the climates of sharing and sacrifice, will influence the consequences of the decisions for work–life balance and for work and family performance and for well-being. The results confirm that the climate of sharing in the home and at work has a positive impact on performance and well-being. Indeed, caring for an elderly relative in the home where there is a climate that does not support sharing has a particularly negative association with performance at home and at work and on well-being. The climate of sacrifice has much less influence than the climate for sharing. This study therefore manages to incorporate climates at work and at home, a range of individual differences including differences in caregiving decisions, work–life balance and conflict and a set of organizational, family and individual outcomes.

Reference has already been made to some of the research on individual factors. There has been comparative work on orientations to work and the extent to which work is a central life interest. The Meaning of Work Team (1987) asked the lottery question in a number of countries – would you still work if you won enough money never to need to work again? A positive answer is taken as an indication that work is a central life interest. Responses suggested that most people would continue to work; the proportion saying they would ranged from 93 percent in Japan to 69 percent in the

UK. When this question was repeated in the late 1990s in the UK, 61 percent said they would continue to do some sort of work. Evidence from those who have won the lottery indicates that over half do in practice continue to work. Another way of exploring work as a central life interest is to ask a more direct question. In the UK, a recent survey of 2000 workers, mainly from the public sector, showed that 14 percent said they were more committed to work than to life outside work, 25 percent were more committed to life outside work and the remainder, a little over 60 percent, said they were equally committed to both. A rather higher proportion, almost 20 percent, of those in the private sector said they were more committed to work.

Evidence of the relation between orientations to work and career and life-stage comes from a longitudinal study of graduates in large organizations (Sturges et al., 2000). This reveals that at the point of entry into their organizational career, the issue of work–life balance is seen as very important and they are eager not to get sucked in to a long hours work pattern. As their careers advance, they work longer hours and become more dissatisfied with their work–life balance. They rationalize this by arguing that it is only temporary and that once the current assignment is completed, they will get back into a better balance. In other words, the belief in their ability to control their working lives remains central to their capacity to cope with and tolerate the long hours.

Finally, in considering individual factors, we can return briefly to the concept of “workaholics”, or those with exceptionally high work involvement. As noted above, Peiperl and Jones (2000) distinguish workaholics, who work long hours at high effort levels and who believe that they receive fair rewards for this, from overworkers who also work long and hard but are dissatisfied with the rewards. Their sample is made up of MBA students and their concern is with returns such as salary and career progression, so they may not be typical. However, they claim that workaholics appear to display more of a collectivist orientation and may be part of an organizational culture that supports long hours, high effort and high reward. In other words, they move away from personality towards explanations at the level of organizational culture for their behaviour and its consequences.

In a separate study, another CIPD survey (CIPD, 1999) but this time of over 800 people working more than 48 hours a week, about a third admitted to being addicted to their work. They also

reported higher levels of work satisfaction and satisfaction with other aspects of their life than those working long hours who did not admit to addiction to work. It appears that those who work long hours may fall into various types and we need to distinguish those with high levels of work involvement from those who feel an internally driven compulsion to work without high work involvement and those who are compelled by external circumstances to work for long hours. As a postscript, a recent follow-up study of this same sample found that partners of those working long hours and reporting high levels of satisfaction with family, health and other aspects of life provide a rather less positive picture of the consequences. By implication, if we are interested in accounts of the impact of varying means of achieving work-life balance, we need to seek independent corroboration of the consequences for behaviour and performance.

This section has dealt briefly with both descriptive and more complex research on determinants of work-life balance and their link to work-life balance indicators. It has implied that we need to take account of a range of factors at both the individual and organizational level as well as factors in the family and possibly the wider community. In particular, issues of social support, reflected in the organizational and family climate, need to be incorporated into the analysis. The research raises issues about how far W/O psychologists should stray beyond their familiar territory. There is certainly a strong implication that to understand work behaviour in relation to work-life balance, we need to explore aspects of family life.

Consequences of work-life balance

There has been a much larger body of research on the consequences of forms of work-life imbalance and in particular various manifestations of work spillover and conflict. This has already been touched on in previous sections. In his review of the subject area, O'Driscoll (1996) identifies research on work and life satisfaction, on well-being, mental health and physical health and on individual performance in organizations. This reflects a set of traditional outcomes of interest to W/O psychologists. Recent research has increasingly recognized the complexity of the issues and the study by Kossek and colleagues cited earlier is just one illustration of this.

Most of the research assumes that conflict is caused primarily by the demands of work but increasing attention is being given to the consequences of high demands in life outside work. More sophisticated research typically starts from a particular model of the family. For example, there is a large body of research on women's careers that explores the consequences of various types of family commitment. Similarly, there is extensive research on dual-career families. Such studies usually take into account the demands and rewards in both the workplace and the home.

A fairly typical example can be found in the work of Mauno and Kinnunen (1999) who report a Finnish study of 215 dual-earning couples in which they explored the impact of a range of work stressors on marital satisfaction. One of the stressors was work–family conflict. Using structural equation modelling, they found that most of the stressors spilled over into marital satisfaction via job exhaustion and its impact on psychosomatic health. Work–family conflict and time pressure had a stronger effect than other stressors such as leader relations and job insecurity. However, this affected each partner independently and did not spill over into the marital satisfaction of the other partner. In other words, the woman partner may have experienced work–family conflict; this had an impact on exhaustion and health which in turn had a negative impact on her marital satisfaction, but despite this work spillover the study detected no marital spillover from the satisfaction of one partner to the other.

Another typical example is the research of Vinokur et al. (1999) who examined the impact of work and family stressors and conflicts on the mental health and functioning of women in the US Air Force. This goes a step further than the Finnish study by incorporating family as well as work stressors in the analysis. The study builds on and partly replicates an earlier community study by Frone et al. (1992). The findings are complex. Using structural equation modelling again, they find that marital and parental family roles had a different effect. They also found that high involvement in family and or work affected the outcome. Both job and marital distress and family–work conflict had adverse effects on mental health. High involvement in job and family had a beneficial impact on distress but a negative impact on work–family conflict.

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to return to the other form of work–life imbalance reflected in unemployment. There is an extensive body of research from Europe, North America and

Australia that demonstrates the negative consequences of unemployment on individual well-being and family functioning. There are two main types of model to explain this, which might be termed the deprivation model and the agency model. The deprivation model is particularly associated with the work of Jahoda (1982) and emphasizes the latent functions of work such as providing a time structure, external demands to perform and a role and status in society, all of which are largely lost among those experiencing unemployment. In contrast, an agency model (Fryer, 1986) gives much greater weight to individual interpretation and action rather than treating the experience of unemployment as standard and negative. Agency helps to shape expectations about the future and has been shown in quite carefully controlled experiments to be subject to change through cognitive intervention (Proudfoot et al., 1997). Whichever model we choose to adopt, and some sort of integration between models can be achieved, the evidence suggests that work-life imbalance reflected in too little work is at least as serious as, if not more serious than, imbalance caused by too much work. But in arriving at this judgement, much depends on the outcomes selected for study. Unemployment may have little impact on the organization but a considerable impact on unemployed workers and their families.

Discussion and conclusion

This brief overview has addressed the nature of work-life balance, considered why it is an issue of contemporary interest, outlined a simple framework within which it can be analysed and presented selected findings from recent research. All this raises a number of issues for W/O psychologists.

In much of the empirical and policy-oriented writing, too little consideration is given to the nature and operationalization of work-life balance. There is also uncertainty about the circumstances under which it becomes an issue for key stakeholders. In this context we should note that most of the research has concentrated on the reactions of individual workers to their circumstances when the concept implies that they are part of wider social systems where other stakeholders have legitimate concerns. There are unresolved issues about what constitutes a good work-life balance or even whether this is something that we should consider. Certainly this

needs to be seen in the context of wider societal values concerning, for example, family responsibilities. These values in turn might help us to decide whether we should be concerned with happy workaholics or leave them to work as many hours as they wish.

As noted at the outset, work–life balance is central to debates about quality of working-life and its relation to quality of life. In the 1960s and 1970s, Scandinavian countries took a lead in promoting this issue; indeed it is one illustration of W/O psychology coming of age with a solid base of empirical data about the benefits of promoting the quality of working-life that justified a call for policy and even legislative intervention. We can see some legacy of this in the European Social Chapter and it is interesting that Sweden chose to promote quality of working-life and flexibility during its presidency of the European Union. It raises the question of whether we have a solid body of social science knowledge about work–life balance that is sufficiently robust to feed into policy formulation and legislation. If we have, what are these policy implications and do they generalize across countries? A number of academic papers end by calling for an integrated, positive work–life balance policy. What does this mean in practice?

The research has been dominated by North American and North European academics. This reflects the fact that the contemporary debate is partly about affluence and its consequences. It is important to ask what the key issues concerning work–life balance are in East Europe and how high this topic is on research and policy agendas in East European countries. In promoting this topic, W/O psychologists need to be aware of the social construction of the debate. As social pressures grow to deal with work–life imbalance and as perceptions of a generational shift in attitudes harden, business organizations need to formulate a response. As Hochschild (1997) has noted, there is an inevitable temptation to use the promotion of work–life balance policies to enhance commitment to the organization. If the pressure to attract more women into work lessens, will the concern for work–life balance also diminish? A comparative analysis across European countries might help to shed some light on this issue.

In acknowledging that the analysis has not dealt adequately with comparative issues, there is a need to identify the key dimensions of a sound comparative analysis of work–life balance. It might be found by incorporating a policy dimension. To take this forward, we might consider the appropriate locus of intervention to improve

work-life balance. Is this the responsibility of the individual, the family, the employer, the community or the state? An individualist perspective, reflecting an American-dominated organizational perspective, might argue that the responsibility for finding an accommodation rests with the individual. The rhetoric of career self-management and Generation X would certainly support that. On the other hand, shortage of key categories of knowledge and professional workers is forcing companies to take initiatives to retain workers and these initiatives can often include steps to increase flexibility and improve work-life balance. At present within the European Union we have some Europe-wide legislation and additional national legislation. There may be cross-national differences in assumptions about the norms of family life (perhaps divorce rates provide one indicator) and about the obligations of employers. For example, if we look to some of the countries in the old Soviet bloc, then factories, often dominant in a particular community, had a major responsibility for organizing many aspects of life including welfare and family support. The collapse of the communist systems has led to a breakdown of this without, as yet, any obvious replacement.

A final issue that emerges in this as in most topics concerns methodology. The dominant method used in recent published papers is large-scale cross-sectional surveys, often combined with structural equation modelling. The hegemony of American journals probably makes this inevitable. Nevertheless, this is another topic that would appear to be particularly suited to the use of daily diaries, to the assembly of critical incidents, to group interviews using the family and work units and to various forms of participant and non-participant observation. There is undoubtedly much research of this sort that occurs, but it too rarely finds its way into W/O journals.

Most of the research confirms that a work-life imbalance has negative consequences for well-being and effective functioning. However, we can only gain a partial understanding of the effects by exploring work in isolation. If W/O psychologists are to engage in this important area, we need to broaden our conceptual frameworks to incorporate a fuller understanding of life outside work. Part of the analysis has drawn attention to the consideration of borders. By focusing on an issue such as work-life balance we are forced to consider our disciplinary borders and how close to the frontier we wish to work.

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