Work–life balance: A review of the meaning of the balance construct

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ABSTRACT

Although the term work–family/life balance is widely employed, an agreed definition of this term has proved elusive. Instead, an array of definitions and measures populate the literature. The variety of work–life definitions and measures provide limited value for both the theoretical advancement of the construct and for practical human resource (HR) interventions. In this article, we review six conceptualisations of work–life balance found in the literature: (1) multiple roles; (2) equity across multiple roles; (3) satisfaction between multiple roles; (4) fulfilment of role salience between multiple roles; (5) a relationship between conflict and facilitation; and (6) perceived control between multiple roles. Based on our review of this research we identify the two primary features of the work–life balance definitions and propose a new definition of this construct.

In the past 15 years, there has been increasing interest in work–family balance in the popular press and in scholarly journals. This increase in interest is in part driven by concerns that unbalanced work–family relationships can result in reduced health and performance outcomes for individuals, families and organisations. It is however interesting to note that while the term 'work–family balance' is widely adopted a *formal definition* of this term remains elusive. Although a number of conceptualisations of work–family balance occur within the literature, there is as yet no direct well developed measure of the construct, which constrains our ability to investigate the phenomenon fully. For instance, without a direct measure of work–family balance, it is difficult to investigate the impact of 'family-friendly' policies on key individual and organisational outcome variables. We also acknowledge a recent shift in terminology used to refer to this phenomenon, with many organisations using the term 'work–*life* balance' so as to include employees who are not parents but who desire balance for non-work activities such as sports, study, and travel. In this paper, we therefore use the term 'work–life balance' to refer to all activities in the work and non-work domains. The paper examines six common conceptualisations of work–life balance and identifies the prime features that appear to best encapsulate the construct of work–life balance.

Measurement and applied perspective

Organisational researchers have relied on a set of widely accepted criteria for evaluating the measurement efficacy of a construct. Schwab (1980)

has recommended the following criteria be used for demonstrating construct validity for example:

(a) *content validity*, which is the degree to which a measure's items are a proper sample of the theoretical content domain of the construct (Schriesheim, Powers, Scandura, Gardiner & Lankau 1993);

(b) *dimensionality* of the measure established through confirmatory factor analysis (Bollen 1989; Marsh 1995);

(c) *convergent and divergent validity* to demonstrate that a scale captures a phenomenon that is distinct from what is assessed by other measures (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994);

(d) *internal consistency*, the extent to which items included in the measure are correlated to one another (Nunnally 1978); and

(e) *measurement invariance*, the extent to which the factor structure of a measure is invariant across samples (Bagozzi & Yi 1988; Bollen 1989; Marsh 1995).

From a research perspective, a well developed measure of work–life balance will therefore need to furnish empirical information on various criteria that demonstrate its construct validity. From an applied perspective, the utility of a measure of work–life balance could be examined by the value of the information provided to organisational decision-makers to implement work–life balance policies. Our review of the literature on work–family balance construct shows that there is no widely accepted definition of the construct nor operationalisation of the construct that meet widely accepted criteria for construct validity.

In recent years, many organisations have implemented family-friendly polices and programs with the objective of improving employee experiences of work–life balance. In the absence of a well developed measure of work–family balance, assessing impact of such interventions empirically becomes problematic. Researchers have noted that unless such interventions actually directly impact the work-cultures of these organisations, these polices remain mere slogans

(eg philosophical statements) devoid of any 'ground reality' (Bailyn 1997). An effective measure of work–life balance should therefore enable organisational decision-makers (eg CEOs, HR managers) to assess the impact of such policies on employee perceptions of balance. An effective measure could also provide inter-organisational comparisons of the levels of perceived work–life balance which would be useful information to organisational stakeholders.

Definitions of work–family/life balance

Surprisingly, the literature does not contain one clear definition or measure of work–life balance that has demonstrated acceptable construct validity on the criteria discussed above. Instead, an array of definitions and measures populate the literature. We suggest that this variety of work–life definitions and measures provide limited value for both the theoretical advancement of the construct and for practical human resource (HR) interventions. We provide here a brief review of the more common work–life balance definitions, with the intention of highlighting this variety and stimulating discussions towards a consensus.

(1) Work–life balance defined as multiple roles

The view that work–life balance is drawn from an individual's multiple life roles derives from the early recognition that non-work (family or personal) demands may carry over into the working day and adversely influence individual health and performance at work. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) demonstrated that this multiple demand 'carry over' is bidirectional: home-to-work and work-to-home. Positive as well as negative carry over is now accepted, with recent research identifying the bidirectional constructs of work–family *facilitation* and *enhancement*, as well as conflict. Greenhaus and colleagues have recently defined work–family balance broadly as multiple role conflict thus: 'Work–family balance reflects an individual's orientation across

different life roles, an inter-role phenomenon' (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw 2003: 511).

(2) Work–life balance defined as equity across multiple roles

Greenhaus and colleagues also explored the multiple roles definition of work–life balance further with a focus on equality of time or satisfaction across an individual's multiple life roles. Work–family balance was therefore defined as: 'the extent to which an individual is engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work role and family role ... We propose three components of work family–balance: time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance' (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw 2003: 513).

(3) Work–life balance defined as satisfaction between multiple roles

Other researchers have primarily focused on the importance of individual *satisfaction* with multiple roles. Kirchmeyer (2000) defined work–life balance as: 'achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains and to do so requires personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment to be well distributed across domains' (Kirchmeyer 2000: 80). Clark (2000) also focused on individual satisfaction within the description of 'work/family border theory' and defined work–life balance as: 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict' (Clark 2000: 751).

(4) Work–life balance defined as a fulfilment of role salience between multiple roles

The focus upon individual satisfaction also overlaps with the recognition that individuals perceive their multiple roles as varying in importance (or salience) to them. This point of view recognises for example, that the salience of roles is also not a static evaluation but may change over time with various common life changes (eg work promotion, new baby, sick spouse/parents etc). Greenhaus and Allen (in press) for example, defined work–life balance as 'the extent to which an individual's effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are compatible with the individuals' life role priorities at a given point in time' (p. 10). Similarly, in their meta-review Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, and Brinley (2005:184) suggested that work–life balance research should focus on: 'whether one's expectations about work and family roles are met or not'.

(5) Work–life balance defined as a relationship between conflict and facilitation

Researchers have also focused on the psychological constructs that compose work–life balance, noticeably conflict and facilitation. Thus work–life balance has been defined as an absence of conflict and a presence of facilitation: 'low levels of inter-role conflict and high levels of inter-role facilitation represent work–family balance' (Frone 2003: 145). This definition can also be tested through the assessment of the four bidirectional conflict and facilitation constructs: 'Balance is a combined measure whereby work–family conflict was subtracted from work–family facilitation, and family–work conflict was subtracted from family–work facilitation' (Grzywacz & Bass 2003: 257).

(6) Work–life balance defined as perceived control between multiple roles

Finally, although less supported within the literature, work–life balance has also been construed as the degree of autonomy an individual perceive themselves to have over their multiple role demands: 'Work–life balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work' (Fleetwood 2007: 351). Presumably, work–life balance could also be a result of individual autonomy over the roles most *salient* to the individual. Thus if an individual could reduce his/her work hours to spend time with their new child for example, this could be perceived as effective work–life balance.

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Progressing a work–life balance consensus

It is clear from this brief review that there has been limited systematic effort to develop one clear definition or one specific measure of work–life balance. However, we believe there is a clear necessity to move towards a consensus of the exact meaning of work–life balance. We suggest that such a specific definition and measure of work–life balance would serve as a critical outcome variable to validate current theoretical models describing the relationships between common antecedents, moderators, and outcome variables of work–life balance. A specific measure of work–life balance could also be employed to compare the levels of perceived balance among sub-units within an organisation or for comparisons of levels of balance between organisations. In our view an effective measure of work–life balance should be based on a simple definition that asks employees to rate their current perceptions of balance. Clearly, a systematic scale development effort would also be required to adequately validate such a measure.

The review of the literature also demonstrates that the full meaning of work–life balance is difficult to be captured with a simple overall measure. The six definitions of work–life balance reviewed here provide a basis for identifying the common threads of meaning. First, several definitions capture the notion of 'perceptions of good balance' as important to the core meaning of work–life balance. Thus framing questions specifically with the term 'balance' rather than 'conflict' or 'facilitation' for example, would provide improved validity (understanding) to the research sample (and to organisations) of what the questions are actually asking. The realisation that levels of work–life balance can change over time according to the salience of specific life events is also important to note. This would better acknowledge the continual readjustment to multiple demands that most employees juggle over their period of employment.

We therefore offer the following definition of work–life balance to integrate these two core meanings: *Work–life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities*. Thus we propose that any assessment of work–life balance should include individual preferences of current role salience (ie whether an individual actually prefers to spend more or less time in work and non-work activities). Our definition also acknowledges that effective balance also leads to positive growth and development within the work and/or non-work domains. Thus individual work/life priorities can voluntarily change to enable development in non-work activities (eg private study, new baby, extended travel) and/or growth at work (eg working harder to gain formal work recognition, or promotion). We believe that our definition of work–life balance now needs to be operationalised via measure development and validation across national and cross-national samples.

CONCLUSION

Although the term work–life balance is widely employed within the research, an agreed definition of this term is somewhat elusive. We reviewed six conceptualisations of work–life balance: (1) multiple roles; (2) equity across multiple roles; (3) satisfaction between multiple roles; (4) fulfilment of role salience between multiple roles; (5) a relationship between conflict and facilitation; and (6) perceived control between multiple roles.

Each conceptualisation has been explored with varying degrees of success within the research literature. Based on our review of work–life balance research, we identified the two primary features of the definitions and proposed a new definition of work–life balance. The actual value of our definition of the work–life balance construct now needs to be assessed via a systematic instrument development and validation process. Such an instrument is clearly necessary to validate the increasing number of theoretical research models which describe relationships between the antecedents, moderators/mediators, and consequences of work–life balance.

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Schriesheim CA, Powers KJ, Scandura TA, Gardiner CC and Lankau MJ (1993) Improving construct measurement in management research: Comments and quantitative approach for assessing the theoretical content adequacy of paper-and-pencil surve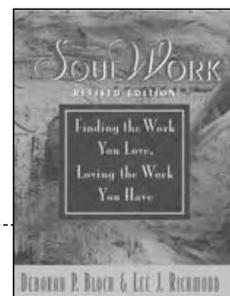y-type instruments. *Journal of Management* 19: 385–417.