Work Life Balance: What DO You Mean? The Ethical Ideology Underpinning Appropriate Application

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Work Life Balance: What DO You Mean?

The Ethical Ideology Underpinning Appropriate Application

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This article categorizes definitions of work life balance (WLB) according to a framework of ethical ideologies. By understanding what perspective the definition of WLB is framed within, practitioners and academics will be better able to assess the suitability of that definition for a particular application. Although many current definitions are absolutist in nature, dictating a “right” balance that all should aspire to, the author argues that definitions reflecting a situationalist perspective are most valuable to academics and practitioners. Definitions from a situationalist perspective offer an opportunity to explore what factors contribute to attainment of WLB for particular groups of people. Once there are broadly agreed definitions of WLB for groups of people, relevant measures of WLB and WLB initiatives that respond to these definitions can be developed. This will provide a baseline for the comparative analysis of WLB programs. Implications for organization development interventions and change management practice are explored.

Keywords: work life balance; definitions; measures

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DISSENT REGARDING WHAT WORK LIFE BALANCE MEANS

Although the literature is replete with discussion on work life balance (WLB), the definitions of WLB are many and varied. Sharp (as cited in Forsyth, 1980), an early psychologist, felt that his research was hindered by lack of agreement among his participants regarding what was moral and what was not. So too the work life balance field is hindered by lack of agreement over the term balance and the moral implications of the definition. Each WLB definition has a value perspective that determines what factors will be seen as relevant to achieving balance, and definitions can be categorized according to these value perspectives using Forsyth’s (1980) taxonomy of ethical ideologies. Understanding the value perspective is crucial to appropriate application of definitions.

Almost every article on WLB has a different definition of what WLB actually “is.” Kirchmeyer (2000), a prolific and much cited author in the field of WLB, confirmed the contention of the current article that “Those who write about work-life initiatives do not identify routinely what they mean by this term and rarely is a meaning sought” (p. 81), whereas Lewis, Rapoport, and Gambles (2003) noted that “The term ‘work life balance’ remains problematic” (p. 829) because the term overgeneralizes the roles played in the nonwork sphere and oversimplifies the division of spheres. Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) also noted that “the definitions of balance are not entirely consistent with one another [and that] the measurement of balance is problematic” (p. 511), whereas Voydanoff (2005) noted that the inconsistent use of the concept of “balance in previous research creates confusion in the literature” (p. 825). Although this problem of definition has often simply been accepted and then ignored, the issue of definition is fundamental to the logic of advancing ideas, measures, and programs in WLB and requires deeper consideration. Proponents of various definitions generally submit the logic behind their selected definition to show their rationale, and yet intuitively, some definitions will seem more acceptable to particular readers than do others. These “more acceptable definitions” are likely to be consistent with that reader’s values. A more appropriate way to select a definition would be to first acknowledge the existence of the ideology underpinning the definitions and then to select a definition from an ideological perspective that is suited to the application of that definition.

Categorizing Definitions

Definitions of WLB can be considered according to the extent to which the definition implies universal rules of what balance “is” versus definitions that are relative to an individual as well as the idealism of the definition. Idealism refers to the extent to which a definition infers that with the right conditions, the desired outcome can always be achieved, versus definitions that accept that this cannot always be the case. When these two dimensions are dichotomized and crossed, they yield a 2 × 2 classification of ethical ideologies: situationists, absolutists, subjectivists, and exceptionists. This framework has been used in many studies to categorize the ethical positions of individuals. Redfern (2005) described Forsyth’s (1980) taxonomy as a “well cited
measure of ethical ideology in the psychology and management literature” (p. 45). Here it is used for considering the ethical positions of various definitions of WLB. The situationist and subjectivist definitions imply many different forms of balance are possible. Whereas subjectivists argue that “because no moral standards are valid except in reference to one’s own behavior, moral evaluations must depend on personal perspectives” (Forsyth, 1980, p. 176), situationists are more idealistic. Definitions framed from a situationist position focus on a “fitting” definition of balance for a person depending on his or her personal context. This will include their stakeholders, resources, and desires. Using a situationist definition of balance, people could be grouped according to their values and situational variables such as family structure, life stage, gender, career, or income level with varying definitions of WLB for different segments. The subjectivist definition will be concerned only with the individuals’ desires, an “anything goes” type definition suggesting that as long as they are happy with their WLB, nothing else matters.

On the nonrelativistic side of the typology, absolutists and exceptionists’ definitions tend to be less concerned with the consequences of balance. Definitions framed within an absolutist perspective accept that rules can prescribe a “right” formula for balance. An example of this is Greenhaus et al.’s (2003) definition of equal time, equal satisfaction, equal involvement in each of the work and home spheres to achieve work-family balance (WFB). This contrasts with exceptionists’ definitions that are of a utilitarian nature and seek to reflect the greatest good for the greatest number.

Selecting a Definition Appropriate to the Application

Take for example a profession where research has been conducted to establish the optimum work schedule for minimum errors or adverse events such as with medical practitioners. In this case, an absolutist definition of balance may be the most appropriate because empirical evidence has been used to establish rules around safe working times. Of course, this suggests that all doctors regardless of age, years of experience, personal health and fitness, external stressors, and other social influencers all have the same balance rule. This is the absolutist rationale Greenhaus et al. (2003) applied in developing their definition of WFB as equal time, satisfaction, and involvement in each of the work and family spheres irrespective of job demands, family demands, family structure, financial pressures, and so on. This contrasts with a situationalist definition of balance for medical professionals that would focus on achieving optimum benefits and hence, minimum clinical errors, acceptable stress, maximum satisfaction, and maximum experience in each of the work and nonwork environments for the individuals and those they have an impact on. Finally, a subjectivist’s definition would be focused on the individual practitioner and maximizing his or her personal utility, so balance for them would be working as much as suited the individual to achieve his or her objectives. Once the ideology for the definition is understood, it makes it easier to evaluate how appropriate that definition is in a particular situation.

Applying the example of medical practitioners further, if we needed them to achieve a particular level of balance to meet a legal requirement for hours away from work to comply with insurance regulations, then a definition framed within an absolutist
perspective would seem a sensible choice. If the health organization was having
difficulties retaining or attracting staff and just wanted them to achieve short-term
happiness to make them feel positive about the organization, then a definition of bal-
ance reflecting a subjectivist perspective might be the most appropriate. If however, the
organization wanted their workers to achieve a more enduring\(^3\) sense of balance
focused on the personal needs, wants, resources, and demands of an individual in his
or her environment, then they would need to adopt a definition of balance that was situ-
ationally based. This would need to reflect the variability of circumstances of a new
intern without family responsibilities from that of a 40-something female specialist
with a baby and toddler at home from that of a 55-year-old obstetrician who has been
working weekends for the past 30 years. If the theory underpinning definitions was
understood and applied, then there would be much less contestation about which was
the “right” definition of WLB and would provide a foundation for understanding what
factors contribute to the attainment of WLB for various groups of individuals.

To further illustrate this point, one might consider the confusion that arises when
the definition of WLB is framed within a perspective that is unsuited to the applica-
tion for an individual. An example is a firm who wants its workers to realize an endur-
ing sense of balance and the achievement of satisfying experiences in all life domains
to a level consistent with the salience of that role for the individual and then simply
puts in place balance programs that only revolve around flex time or work from home
policies. These offerings alone do not allow people to achieve satisfying experiences
in all life domains as it would seem that most of the individuals who take advantage
of these initiatives immediately curtail their career options (Williams, 2000). If how-
ever, the organization’s definition of balance is framed in absolutist terms, offering
people the opportunity of equal time and involvement in home and family, then flex
time and work from home may indeed be the appropriate policies to enact. The defi-
nition can be seen as setting the objectives for WLB; it determines what you are
aiming for and is a natural precursor to strategy development to achieve this aim.

This article presents a rationale for viewing WLB definitions that are from a sit-
uationalist perspective as being of the most valuable because these definitions will
involve making optimum choices for each individual. It is employers who facilitate
this outcome that will truly be employers of choice. The relative value of definitions
within each of the other ethical perspectives (absolutist, subjectivist, and exception-
ist) is evaluated and a presentation of the implications of one’s choice of definition
on the metric used to measure the attainment of WLB. Finally, using a situationalist
perspective, the factors that contribute to WLB for particular groups of people are
considered, and suggestions of WLB programs that may help to facilitate the
achievement of the balance objective are made.

WHY DEFINITIONS OF WLB WITH A SITUATIONALIST
PERSPECTIVE ARE THE MOST USEFUL FOR WLB
ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS

Definitions that are absolutist in nature assume that rules can always be applied
to achieve the best outcome, whereas those from a situationist perspective reject
rules and evaluate individual actions within situational context, assuming that this is the path to achieving the ideal outcome. The exceptionist ideology includes the utilitarian perspective that uses moral absolutes to guide judgments but is willing to make exceptions where greater benefit is possible. This exceptionists group has a low level of idealism assuming that the desired outcome cannot necessarily be achieved.

A summary of the authors of definitions discussed within this framework is included in Table 1.

Situationalists would argue that “balance” is not intrinsically valuable; instead, it is a state that gives rise to satisfactions that are of value to the individual and his or her stakeholders (Fletcher, 1966). Examples of definitions that may be regarded as situationalist include an early characterization offered by Kofodimos (1993), who defined balance as

finding the allocation of time and energy that fits your values and needs, making conscious choices about how to structure your life and integrating inner needs and outer demands and involves honoring and living by your deepest personal qualities, values, and goals. (p. 8)

This situation- or person-specific definition fits with a situationalist perspective, as does a more “open” definition proffered by Clark (2000) that “‘balance’ [is] satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict” (p. 751). In light of work on role salience in determining role investment (Lobel, 1991) and conflict and satisfaction outcomes (Noor, 2004), I present a slightly broader definition than Clark’s to include achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains to a level consistent with the salience of each role for the individual. This definitional variation introduces the possibility of a hierarchy of roles; however, in the spirit of situationalism, it does not demand that a hierarchy is neither necessary nor desirable for balance.

Greenblatt (2002) provided a similar definition to Clark (2000) describing WLB as acceptable levels of conflict between work and nonwork demands. This will usually involve managing competing demands for resources. Greenblatt suggested that achieving WLB is dependent on attaining and managing sufficient resources to make possible the achievements that people regard as the most important. She suggested that this is likely to mean meeting real and perceived personal and work obligations, thus satisfying the key needs of oneself and dependents. Greenblatt identified the three types of resources most frequently discussed in deliberations on WLB as temporal, financial, and control, with a fourth, less frequently discussed group of resources necessary for WLB being personal resources, including the physical, psychological, emotional, and social resources available to an individual.

What is common to all of these definitions is the focus on the individual relative to his or her circumstances. It is this feature that should make the definitions appealing for business researchers and practitioners developing theories and programs to help organizations reap the benefits of WLB because focusing on the individual will result in the person achieving his or her personal WLB, and the benefits to the organization will flow from this.
Adopting a situationalist perspective of WLB opens up the possibility of developing different notions of WLB for different “segments of the market.” The absolutist definitions have involved coming up with one definition of balance for all people rather than looking at people-specific circumstances and considering what “balance” would look like for these individuals. If, however, academics and practitioners view WLB as not an end in itself but instead as a way people perceive that

**TABLE 1**

**Taxonomy of Ethical Ideologies With Examples of Definitions of Work Life Balance (WLB)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idealism</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Situationists</td>
<td>Absolutists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rejects moral rules; advocates individualistic analysis of each act in each situation; relativistic. Example: Different people will balance their home and work lives in different ways depending on what they value and their personal circumstances. There are however guideposts or illuminators to help you achieve balance in a way that is positive for you and your stakeholders.</td>
<td>Assumes that the best possible outcome can always be achieved by following universal moral rules. Example: You will achieve balance by investing equal time and equal involvement, and experiencing equal satisfaction in work and family and balance will lead to high quality of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Subjectivists</td>
<td>Exceptionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appraisals based on personal values rather than universal moral principles; relativistic. Example: As long as I am happy, nothing else matters.a Author with subjectivist definition: Amundson (2001)</td>
<td>Moral absolutes guide judgments but pragmatically open to exceptions to these standards; utilitarian Example: Less work, more play. Author with exceptionist definition: Burton (2004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


a. One of the principal concerns with this type of definition is that what makes one happy now may cause one to feel unhappy in the future. For example, a husband may be happy with a picture of WLB that sees him at work from 7 a.m. to midnight every day of the week; however, if his wife and family are unhappy with this balance, he may find himself without a family, wondering what happened.
they can achieve “dolce vita”—“the good life”—then we must understand what people are striving for to know what will lead to balance. This idea is further supported by the thoughts of Kofodimos (1997), who stated that “finding balance means recognizing and transcending . . . [mastery orientation⁴] assumptions and defining what success means to one personally” (p. 58).

Rationale for Rejecting Absolutist, Subjectivist, and Exceptionist Definitions

Absolutist Definitions

“Moral absolutists” type definitions dictate a “right” balance. These definitions tend to treat balance as a noun rather than a verb.⁵ Those whose definitions might be regarded as in the moral absolutists sphere include Mead (as cited in Greenhaus et al., 2003), who reported that individuals can and should demonstrate equally positive commitments to different life roles. Greenhaus et al. (2003) also used an absolutist definition, incorporating three components in their definition of WFB: time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance; requiring equality of time, involvement, and satisfaction in each of the work family spheres. They identified the possibility of positive or negative balance depending on whether levels are equally high or equally low. This is an important distinction because people could be equally disengaged from their roles and still be balanced. Marks and MacDermid (1996) and Greenhaus et al. focused on those who were equally positively engaged as those they regarded as balanced.

Marks and MacDermid (1996) described “positive role balance [as] the tendency to become fully engaged in the performance of every role in one’s total role system, to approach every typical role and role partner with an attitude of attentiveness and care” (p. 421). This definition’s requirement of an attitude of attentiveness and care suggests that people who are not predisposed to such an attitude will have no possibility of balance. It seems highly prescriptive to present this state as an ideal that all should necessarily aspire to, and the notion that all roles and role partners should have some equality in this receipt of attentiveness and care would seem idealistic and in my opinion, unrealistic.

More recently, Barbara Pocock (2005) used the inputs-driven definition developed by the U.K. organization Employers for Work-Life Balance. This organization believes that WLB is

about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society. (Employers for Work-Life Balance, 2005)

This definition sets up the rules for balance to be achieved, implying that adherence to these will lead to balance. The definition does not include reference to whether individuals actually feel balanced, are satisfied, or the level of conflict they experience
in their lives. It is regarded as absolutist because it suggests that following these rules will result in the ideal WLB for all.

Kirchmeyer (2000), in her chapter on “Work-Life Initiatives,” defined a balanced life as “achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains” (p. 81). Although this initially sounds like a situation-specific definition, Kirchmeyer went on to be more prescriptive, stating that to achieve satisfying experiences in all life domains “requires personal resources like energy, time and commitment to be well distributed across domains” (p. 81).

Although these definitions share the benefit of being “one size fits all” type approaches that remove the complexity of person-specific variables of need, desire, and situation, the definitions lack “real-life” applicability. The definitions raise the question of how realistic it is to achieve these types of balance and have given rise to the confusion between striving for balance and striving for increased efficiency (Caproni, 1997) that has fueled “backlash” to the concept of WLB. Given the prescriptive nature of these definitions regarding the way people should live their lives, it is surprising that “balance” has not been accused of being some type of capitalist-invented ideology aimed at focusing the masses on increasing their productivity beyond any desirable level and aspiring toward an unattainable Mecca—“balance.” The value-laden terms used in the WLB literature would have provided Marx with substantial fodder to suggest that this form of balance is designed to serve the capitalist society at the expense of the individual. These authoritarian definitions are in direct contradiction to the spirit of much of the WLB work, which is about recognizing people’s needs for fulfillment as a path to enlargement of the individual and the achievement of “happiness” as not only one of life’s higher goals but as a pre-determinate of many of the positive states that organizations seek to benefit from (retention, morale, low absenteeism, ambition, enthusiasm, commitment). Indeed, Hochschild (as cited in Callero, 2003) “produced insightful descriptions of workers who struggle with new and ambiguous self-understandings and self-meanings that are being constructed in response to powerful changes in capitalist labor processes” (p. 122). These are thinking, questioning people, not people who will bow to an imposed “balance” program. The absolutist definitions also raise the questions of what and who is driving the WLB agenda (De Cieri, Abbott, & Fenwick, 2003).

In recognizing the dissenting definitions of balance, Greenhaus et al. (2003) acknowledged that their conceptualization of balance is “independent of an individual’s desires or values” (p. 513) and “believe that an individual who gives substantially more precedence to one role than the other is relatively imbalanced even if the distribution of commitment to family and work is highly consistent with what the individual wants or values” (p. 513). This is fascinating to consider relative to the expectations of practitioners when they institute WLB programs. Do practitioners seek WLB programs because they aspire for their workers to achieve a balanced distribution of commitment irrespective of the wants and values of these same employees? Although this may have credibility in terms of producing some desired outcomes of retention and reduced stress/sick leave, I expect that practitioners more probably seek these programs because they are attempting to respond to the individual wants and values of employees so as to increase their satisfaction and reduce conflict.
Subjectivist Definitions

Subjectivist definitions are principally concerned with the individual. Like situationists, subjectivists reject adherence to moral codes. However, whereas situationists will seek a contextual appropriateness for moral decisions, subjectivists assert that moral evaluations ultimately depend on personal perspectives (Kernes & Kinnier, 2005). Amundson’s (2001) role balance seems to resonate with the subjectivist view. His role balance looked at the total role system of an individual rather than an atomized view of the various roles within the total role system. Amundson presented “3 dimensional living” with a person’s life having a length, width (as defined by involvement in a wide range of activities), and a depth (purpose and meaning in life). He noted that “We need to be fully engaged in our lives in all of our roles while maintaining healthy balance” (p. 117). Amundson suggested that people need to live their lives according to their own natural rhythm, which will be different for everyone. He described “problematic configurations that emerge during a lifetime of experiences [as] the more common characteristics associated with a loss of balance” (p. 118). Amundson saw this life balance as encompassing many areas of life reflected in sets of contrasting factors: work and play, physical and spiritual, social and personal, and emotional and intellectual (Poehnell & Amundson, as cited in Amundson, 2001).

Many authors’ ideas of balance also include the highly subjectivist notion that few academics are comfortable with: “happiness” (Clark, 2000; Diener, 2000; Lewis et al., 2003). It seems that for many, attempting to understand the role of “balance” is at least in part about how happy people are with the outcomes of their choices about the way they spend their time. John Wood, founder of “Room to Read,” is quoted as saying, “I don’t look at balance as an ideal. What I look at is, Am I happy? If the answer is yes, then everything else is inconsequential” (Hammonds, 2004, p. 70). Other terms used in the literature to describe this are optimal experience (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2004) and the good life (Kernes & Kinnier, 2005), whereas Diener (2000) elucidated the same ideas under the more frequently used term subjective well-being (SWB).

People experience abundant SWB when they feel many pleasant and few unpleasant emotions, when they are engaged in interesting activities, when they experience many pleasures and few pains, and when they are satisfied with their lives. There are additional features of a valuable life and of mental health, but the field of SWB focuses on people’s own evaluations of their lives. (Diener, 2000, p. 34)

In a theme reminiscent of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Inglehart (as cited Diener, 2000) proposed that “as basic material needs are met, individuals move to a post materialistic phase in which they are concerned with self-fulfillment” (p. 34). Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi (2003) drew directly on Maslow when discussing the “business of happiness” for people who strive toward self-actualization. Csikszentmihalyi framed this in terms of

being able to express all the potentialities inherent in the organism. It is as if evolution has built in a safety device in our nervous system that allows us to experience full happiness only when we are living at 100 percent. (p. 24)
This drive perhaps propels us toward the “busyness” Cross (2005) defined as “the opportunity to intensify sense experience—a longing that may well be built into us all, but has become possible because of modern technology and marketing. It is the promise of more life per life” (p. 282). Kaplan, Drath, and Kofodimos (1991), in the picture they painted of expansive executives, made it clear that these individuals “are capable of creating lives that are markedly out of balance. Striving for mastery takes precedence over practically everything else” (p. 134). However, in what they termed moderately expansive executives, the very considerable drive to mastery is moderated to make possible what they termed a “workable imbalance” (p. 135).

Whereas the concepts of happiness, the good life, well-being, and the intensification of experience all seem like attractive goals, their place in the definition of balance is questionable, and one might imagine a definition of balance where happiness was a necessary but certainly not a sufficient condition for the achievement of balance. After all, what value is balance if it means that you are not at least reporting that you are happy? But if balance can be equated to happiness, if John Wood is right, then would not balance come down largely to personal affectivity bias and personality variables? And would not balance be highly dependent on mood and the satisfactory operation of all of the support systems that facilitate happiness, that balance would become so flimsy that one adverse event could totally destabilize one’s balance? Would balance not be so person specific that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to put in place programs to enable balance because it is impossible to make everyone happy? The search for balance must shift beyond this overly individualistic approach to include the social nature of balance (consistent with definitions from a situational perspective) and thus take into account the influence of the individual seeking balance on those around them and the influence of those around them on the individual seeking balance. For the study and understanding of balance to be useful, it must be able to be generalized beyond the individual and understood in terms of the relative impacts of the environment on the individual and vice versa.

Exceptionist Definitions

Teleological (consequentialist) theories, including “ethical egoism,” suggest that action that “maximizes my good—that is, action that benefits me the most or harms me the least” (Donaldson, Werhane, & Cording, 2002, p. 3) is the “right” action. Although these theories lack popularity today, in reality this is often the rationale for people’s actions. Exceptionists, who although “accept[ing of] moral codes to guide their judgments . . . are open to exceptions in these standards” (Kernes & Kinnier, 2005, p. 89), have been placed into this group. An example of such a definition is one that does not appear often in the literature. Charlotte Burton (2004) claimed that “What most people mean by the term [balance] is less work, more play” (p. 12). Despite this being a view that is out of favor, this idea was supported by the results of Greenhaus et al.’s (2003) study that found “Quality of life is invariably highest for those who are more engaged or more satisfied in family than work, and is lowest for those who are more engaged or more satisfied in work than family” (p. 526).
The reason for the lack of popularity of this definition may lie in the fact that it seems to infer that people who seek balance are lazy or do not want to work. This is the exact opposite of what many people striving for balance know to be true and is the same prejudicial view that many people using WLB programs come up against. In fact, it is this definition of balance that has resulted in many workers refusing to take up WLB initiatives for fear of being labeled other than an “ideal worker” (Bardoel, 2003; Nord, Fox, Phoenix, & Viano, 2002; Williams, 2000). If this definition of balance were to hold, then the “solution” to people achieving WLB would be both simplistic and unattainable for all but the few who could financially afford it. An exceptionist’s definition of WLB is not useful to academics and practitioners, and indeed these definitions can be destructive to the advancement of WLB initiatives that otherwise have the opportunity of creating much benefit for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE WLB DEFINITION FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF WLB

The way one defines balance will determine the manner in which it may be measured. This is important for practitioners to understand because metrics designed to measure WLB framed from an absolutist definition are very different from those developed to measure WLB framed from a situationalist perspective. Although most practitioners would probably advocate a situationalist definition of WLB, two metrics that have been developed to measure WLB measure an absolutist form of WLB, whereas three measure it from a subjectivist perspective. I am not aware of the development of any measures of WLB that could be regarded as measuring balance where it has been defined using an exceptionist perspective. This is not surprising given that the very nature of an exception-based measure would make it both difficult to construct and of extremely limited value. Hence, only the situationalist, absolutist, and subjectivist measures identified are discussed here. The measures of WLB are summarized in Table 2.

Each measure of WLB has been developed to link a notion of balance with particular outcomes, benefits, or attributes. As will be discussed, this can lead to a circular argument.

Because WLB is poorly defined, the validity and reliability of the measures also suffer. Voydanoff (2005) noted that “Measurement of work-family fit and balance is quite undeveloped” (p. 834).

Situationalist Measures

Four measures of WLB that take into account situational factors have been developed. The first of the metrics was developed by Brett and Stroh (2003). This involves five items asking respondents how often they feel that their job negatively affects their psychological well-being, that their job negatively affects their physical health, tension about balancing all their responsibilities, that they should change something
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
<th>Number of Points on Likert Scale</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Men N</th>
<th>Women N</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situationist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brett and Stroh (2003)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Alumni of graduate school of business who had graduated between 1980 and 1990. Men were married with children living at home. Women—no demographic restriction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayman (2005)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Administration and professional employees from large university in Western Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill, Martinson, Ferris, and Zenger Baker (2004)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>IBM employees: Professional women with at least one preschool child younger than 5 years who lived with them at least 50% of the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marks and MacDermid (1996)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>College students in sociology courses at Maine University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career involvement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career satisfaction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family satisfaction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total stress score</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milkie and Peltola (1999)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>Married, employed Americans from the General Social Survey 1996.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (1999)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1,167</td>
<td>1,295</td>
<td>Currently married, at least one of the spouses employed, and there is at least one child younger than the age of 15 years residing at home. General Social Survey of Canada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saltzstein, Ting, and Saltzstein (2001)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>32,103</td>
<td></td>
<td>1991 survey of federal government employees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
about their work to balance all their responsibilities, and that personal commitments interfere with their job. Although Brett and Stroh did not offer a description of how the construct was developed, they reported a coefficient alpha of .79, indicating an acceptable reliability. The questions in the metric allow the participants to evaluate how they feel given their circumstances and their demands, and hence, the metric is of a situationalist form being a self-report within a situational context.

Hill, Martinson, Ferris, and Zenger Baker’s (2004) measure of WLB was based on the mean scores from eight questions about the ability of simultaneously managing the demands of work and personal/family life. The questions were drawn from a survey by IBM of their employees and included difficulty of balancing demands of work and personal/family life, sufficient flexibility in job to maintain balance, sufficient time away from job to maintain balance, ability to separate from work while on vacation, ability to take vacation time without too much role overload before or after, feelings of success in balancing personal and/or family life and work and personal/family life, and frequency of feeling drained at home due to work pressures. This measure focuses on the experience of the individual while using the known indicators of balance such as flexibility, time away from work, and reduced stress. With an alpha of .86, this instrument has high reliability and in terms of responding to a situationalist definition of WLB, also indicates strong validity.

A measure recently presented is an adaptation by Hayman (2005) of a scale originally developed by Fisher-McAuley, Stanton, Jolton, and Gavin (2003). Hayman’s 15-item scale asked people to report how often their job interacts negatively with their personal life (5 items), their personal life impacts negatively on their work life (4 items), their personal life and work life interacts positively (4 items), they are happy with the time for their personal life, and whether they struggle to juggle their work and nonwork demands. Hayman reported an alpha coefficient of .70 on this metric. This metric also allows people to report on how they feel relative to their own situational demands (e.g., life stage, household structure, age), and one could imagine this being used to evaluate the success of WLB programs that have been developed from a situationalist perspective.

Huffman, Payne, and Casper’s (2004) measure was based on Frone’s (as cited in Huffman et al., 2004) suggestion that low conflict and high facilitation between the work and family domain is important to the experience of WLB. This measure fits the situationist form because it evaluates balance within the context for that individual. The scale was specifically tailored for an army population with four items: This career allows me the balance I want between work and personal life, this career allows me to provide my family with the opportunities and experiences I think are the most important, this career creates a lot of conflict between work and family, and this career makes it difficult for me to have the kind of family life I would like.

Criticism of the Huffman et al. (2004) measure was made by Voydanoff (2005), who reported that no independent measures of work-family fit and balance are used, thus confounding fit and balance with conflict and facilitation. . . . [Her] article argues that the sources and consequences of work-family fit and balance are better understood when specific demands and resources are examined rather than relying on appraisals of conflict and facilitation as representations of fit and balance. (p. 827)
These measures contrast with absolutist metrics that tend to revolve around the equivalent weighting of various elements as their measure of balance.

Absolutist Measures

Greenhaus et al. (2003) reported “The measurement of balance is problematic” (p. 511) and believed that “For empirical research on balance to contribute to understanding work-family dynamics, further development of the construct is essential” (p. 511). The construct they put forward for their WFB requires equal time, equal involvement, and equal satisfaction in both the family and work domains. This construct evaluates balance based on the absolutist definition that WFB is equal time, equal involvement, and equal satisfaction in both the family and work domains. If this definition is accepted, then the construct makes sense that contributes to its construct-related validity. If however this construct is used to measure balance where it has been defined in a situational way, for example, achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains to a level consistent with the salience of each role for the individual, then the idea that equality of time, investment, and satisfaction in the work and family domains equals balance loses its relevance, and the validity of the construct becomes problematic. What makes this even more perplexing is that Greenhaus et al. ignored the plethora of demands other than work and family that take time. Cleaning, transit times, hygiene, sleeping, eating—these seem to be ignored in Greenhaus et al.’s work. Greenhaus et al. categorized all time into one of three groups—chores, child care activities, or work time. The time spent on family is the sum of time spent on chores and time spent on child care activities. Part of their definition of balance was equal time in the family and work domains, meaning that a person could spend an equal amount of time on chores as on work (in paid employment) and that this would be “time balanced.” Greenhaus et al. hypothesized that “Total time, . . . total involvement, . . . and total satisfaction . . . across work and family roles would moderate the relationships between work-family balance and quality of life” (p. 520). However, “The relationship between balance and quality of life did not differ as a function of total time, total involvement, or total satisfaction across work and family roles” (p. 521). I wonder if the fact that Greenhaus et al. did not observe the expected virtues of work-family balance may have more to do with their definition of balance than with their central hypothesis that work-family balance would promote well-being. When Greenhaus et al. reported that “Balanced individuals did not experience a higher quality of life than imbalanced individuals” (p. 521), they were reporting that accountants who spent equal time on family and work and had equal satisfaction and involvement with family and work did not experience a higher quality of life than those who did not have this form of equal weightings. A different definition of balance may have produced a very different finding. Furthermore, looking at the results relative to the subgroups within the sample would have been interesting. Almost two thirds of Greenhaus et al.’s sample were men, and only 70% had at least one child living with them despite this being a criterion for sample selection. The analysis was presented on the results overall, consistent with the idea that there is one ideal to aspire to.
Marks and MacDermid’s (1996) definition of WLB also had a distinctly absolutist tone, and the measure they developed in their work (1996) is heavily value laden. Marks and MacDermid’s role balance scale included the items relating to enjoying every part of one’s life equally well, keeping the life in balance: not letting things “slide,” seeing each part of one’s life as equally important (three questions), finding satisfaction in everything one does, and putting a lot of oneself and an equal amount of oneself into everything one does.

Although Marks and MacDermid (1996) reported an alpha coefficient for this scale of .68, the measure has been challenged because “The affective elements of the measure are so confounded with [the] . . . dependent variables that the findings are spurious” (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 429). Although Marks and MacDermid felt that this was not the case, this criticism continues to be a nagging concern for the validity of their scale. It almost seems like the variables could be contributing to a circular argument and hence, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This disquiet was reinforced when Greenhaus et al. (2003) reported that Marks and MacDermid “found that balanced individuals experienced less role overload, greater role ease, and less depression than their imbalanced counterparts” (p. 515). This is hardly surprising given that what determined “balance” was enjoyment of all life areas, finding satisfaction in everything, and putting a great deal of oneself into everything.

Further questions arise regarding the content validity of this scale when one considers the absolutist perspective within which it has been developed. The items on this scale suggest that to be regarded as balanced, you must enjoy, value, be satisfied, and invest equally in every part of your life. This may satisfy a definition of balance that revolves around equivalent weighting, but it does not take into account the different situations that people operate within that may make it entirely inappropriate to see all parts of one’s life as equally valuable. Perhaps, as Marks and MacDermid (1996) suggested, people with the balance as defined earlier do “experience less role overload, greater role ease and less depression than their imbalanced counterparts” (Greenhaus et al., 2003, p. 515), but this may be reflective of the roles of this population rather than providing any insight into how practitioners can help people to achieve balance. The sample Marks and MacDermid used was college students, with only 8% of the sample married and 94% full-time students. The role demands of this group are likely to be very different from those of parents with young children where the conflicting demands on resources may be much more challenging to resolve. When this population is taken into consideration, the idea of equality of value and investment of energies does not seem as sensible or desirable.

Indeed, Marks and MacDermid (1996) themselves cautioned researchers to see this work on role hierarchy as an early step in understanding balance and acknowledged that “There may be important difference in [individuals’] styles of structuring hierarchical systems” (p. 429) that will be important in understanding the association between role hierarchy and positive functioning. They concluded on a much less absolutist note that “Role ease and role strain appear to be more a function of how people organize their lives than of what [or how much] they do” (p. 429).
Subjectivist Measures

The subjectivist measures are among the earliest attempts to measure WLB. These are one-item scales based on a subjective interpretation by the respondents of how satisfied they are with the balance they have between their family and work spheres. Milkie and Peltola (1999) asked, “How successful do you feel in balancing your paid work and family life” (p. 481), whereas White (1999) asked, “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the balance between your job or main activity and family and home life?” (p. 167). Saltzstein, Ting, and Saltzstein (2001) hypothesized that family-friendly policies would affect job satisfaction both directly and indirectly. To assess the direct impact of these policies, they used as their dependent variable, “‘satisfaction with work-family balance’, as indicated by . . . responses to . . . ‘I am satisfied with the balance I have achieved between my work and life’” (p. 467). All of these studies involved drawing subsamples from broader general surveys executed by government. As single-item, global measures, these measures may lack construct validity. The same criticism of subjectivist definitions is true of the subjectivist measures. That is, the results are not helpful advancing knowledge about how balance may be facilitated so as to realize the benefits that balance has been associated with.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WLB INITIATIVES

The organizational development field is struggling with the apparent lack of “success” of WLB programs in many organizations. Success of these programs to date has often been measured by the numbers of employees who use the program and how long they participate in it rather than outputs in terms of people feeling or being more balanced. Clutterbuck (2004) reported on the disappointing results from investment by companies and government in WLB initiatives and as part of his quality model for WLB highlighted the importance of the measurement of outcomes. Furthermore, Clutterbuck noted that “To gain real value from investment in WLB, organizations need to recognize it as a complex issue and apply much more holistic solutions than has usually been the case” (p. 18).

Implications for Organizational Change Management Practitioners

If organizational change management practitioners understand the relevance of choosing a definition of WLB that is framed within an appropriate perspective for their purpose, they will be able to consciously assess the suitability of that definition for a particular application and then select an appropriate measure of WLB relative to this definition. They must be very clear about what type of balance they are trying to facilitate. Ultimately, where consistent definitions and measures are used, the practitioner will be able to compare the relative success of various programs. This understanding is crucial to setting up the “goal posts” for WLB programs. Success must start to be measured in outcomes relative to the objective, and the objective needs to be framed relative to the definition of WLB appropriate for that industry or
organization. To measure the success of the program via take-up rates or retention rates may have some relevance; however, this is similar to an organization measuring sales rather than profit: It only tells part of the story. Realizing the organizational benefits of having balanced employees is likely to begin with evaluating what these workers think balance looks like for them and end with measuring whether this form of balance has been achieved. As discussed earlier, this needs to move beyond a person-specific picture of balance to have value to the practitioner in terms of designing WLB programs and result in the creation of a range of balance pictures according to the segments of people the practitioner is serving.

As an example, an outcome of defining WLB as achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains to a level consistent with the salience of each role for the individual means putting in place tailored programs to help people achieve this. This means that if work is important to your self-concept, WLB programs will need to help you to achieve satisfaction—not reduced hours, not flexible delivery, but actual satisfaction. This is fundamental to the many calls for cultural change to deliver real choice for workers, particularly women (Clutterbuck, 2004; Crittenden, 2001; Lewison, 2006; Russell-Hochschild, 2003; Williams, 2000).

At an organizational level, this change can begin now by defining WLB in situational terms, setting objectives for the WLB initiatives in terms of outcomes for the stakeholders, and delivering programs, opportunities, and initiatives targeted at these outcomes. This will involve grouping employees according to their view of WLB with different groups requiring different solutions to achieve satisfying experiences in all life domains to a level consistent with the salience of that role for them. Although further research is required to define these segments, we may use factors previously identified in the literature as impacting WLB (Pocock, 2005) as a starting point. We can imagine these groupings might look like those outlined in Table 3. Some ideas of what type of WLB programs might help these groups to achieve their form of WLB are included.

WLB is about much more than flex time, part-time, and work from home. It is about assisting people to match their behavior to their values (Gurvis & Patterson, 2005). Clutterbuck (2004) suggested that organizations need to examine how they divide up work responsibilities and HR systems such as appraisal, succession planning, and access to training to facilitate this cultural change. Although this may seem rudimentary, the undermining of WLB goals by HR system factors such as remuneration arrangements is clear in many organizations. The law profession provides an example where aspirations for providing WLB are undermined by remuneration practices.

Law firms internationally are suffering from the exodus of women leaving their profession and grappling with what can be done to encourage women to seek partner level (Rhode, 2001). Some of these firms use the system of remunerating their partners according to a points system. The better you are perceived to have performed in 1 year, the higher the points you are awarded, and this dictates the slice of the profit pie you will receive. Many of these same firms are attempting to introduce family-friendly policies to stem the tide of women leaving before they have reached partner; however, it would seem that they may be unwilling to make the
fundamental changes necessary to allow people to achieve the type of WLB they are looking for. If these firms understood that the type of WLB their employees are probably seeking involves achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains to a level consistent with the salience of each role for them, they would understand why most women are leaving instead of taking up the family-friendly policies designed to offer WLB. The women who want to have families know that taking advantage of family-friendly

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**TABLE 3**

**Segments With Differing Values Driving Their Work Life Balance (WLB) Need**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Appropriate Program to Facilitate WLB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People with dependent children who are primarily focused on their caring responsibilities</td>
<td>Flex time, part-time, work from home where the programs will offer the flexibility to respond to caring demands when necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with dependent children who want to pursue a career while managing child care responsibilities</td>
<td>New-concept part-time work (Hill, Martinson, Ferris, &amp; Zenger Baker, 2004). May involve more focused work role (perhaps limited to a particular field of expertise(^a)) in which they can feel satisfied that they are excelling and can develop their capability. On-site child care may be useful or a company-coordinated nanny service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with younger families who are not principally responsible for child care but want to make sure that they are an integral part of their children’s lives</td>
<td>Flexibility to take time off to participate in children’s events without negative consequences at work and being home for dinner or dropping children at school depending on what is important to that family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those separated, divorced, or who have blended families who have varying demands on their time and emotional resources</td>
<td>Flexibility to respond to needs of family when they arise and making up for this downtime when family needs are not prevalent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older men and women who still have a valuable contribution they wish to make while integrating more leisure activities into their lives</td>
<td>More focused work role (perhaps limited to a particular field of expertise) in which they can feel satisfied that they are excelling and can develop their capability. Reduced number of working weeks per year to allow for greater vacation periods or reduced number of days worked per week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals who have other caring responsibilities such as an ill relative, disabled child, or aging parents</td>
<td>Flexibility to respond to needs of family when they arise and making up for this downtime when family needs are not prevalent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who have interests in a field outside of work that places demands on their resources, for example, sporting</td>
<td>Flexibility of work time such that they may work a shorter working day but “log on” again in the evening to provide a full-time equivalent deliverable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) In Japan, companies are encouraging older workers to stay at work by offering focused work that they enjoy.
policies is not consistent with gaining high points toward partner profits and the accompanying prestige of being a highly valued member of the team. Alternately, they may achieve this and then have the public humiliation of watching their points diminish as they reduce their load. As one “refugee from a law firm environment” (her words) put it, most women and many men are not prepared to buy into this for the long term. After a few years of working incredibly hard, women can see the writing on the wall, and in the absence of strong, positive role models, they are choosing other paths. This does not mean that they are opting out of the workforce, but they are “not necessarily working at the careers for which they have been trained, or at the most challenging levels of those careers, or at the salaries that their training would normally command” (Crittenden, 2001, p. 28). They are seeking employers who do not want all of them, who are prepared to accept that having part of a brilliant person, the part that the brilliant person is excited about giving, is something to be valued. It is these employers that are becoming the “employers of choice,” particularly with women who have caring responsibilities (Meiksins & Whalley, 2002).

Implications for Researchers in the WLB Field

Researchers must now redefine WLB in situational terms, develop an agreed measure that responds to this situational definition, and thus have a baseline for comparative analysis of WLB initiatives. This practical approach to WLB that keeps the values, needs, and desires of the target audience in focus will provide a clearer way forward to understand what factors contribute to the attainment of WLB for particular groups. This understanding will form the basis of grouping people according to their balance needs. Through this, a segmentation model could be developed according to people’s values and motivations and a metric constructed to allow practitioners to easily identify what “WLB needs segment” an individual belongs to. Such a tool could be useful in both developing and offering individuals programs that deliver the type of WLB they are seeking. The use of this type of metric, if administered broadly across an organization, could assist in removing the stigma associated with seeking and/or using a WLB program. A further consequence could be repositioning WLB in the minds of employees to be something that all employees aspire to rather than only employees balancing family commitments. If WLB is seen as achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains to a level consistent with the salience of each role for that individual rather than as either working less or being more efficient, then I expect that more employees, particularly managers and senior executives, would be interested in participating in programs designed to facilitate WLB. It is when this positioning is achieved that the cultural blocks that have to date been credited with hampering the success of WLB programs will have been removed. It is at this point that WLB programs will be seen as beneficial for all workers to participate in, both from an individual and organizational perspective.

The programs suggested in Table 3 are at this stage just ideas. Change management theorists and practitioners should begin to adopt a market-centered approach to determine the appropriate WLB programs that will best assist the employees to minimize the frequency that their job negatively affects their psychological well-being or their physical health, tension about balancing all their responsibilities, feelings
they should change something about their work to balance all their responsibilities, and the feeling that personal commitments interfere with their job (Brett & Stroh, 2003). It is the people that use these programs who are likely to feel “balanced” and the organizations that deliver them that will gain the optimum benefits from their WLB initiatives.

NOTES

1. Lewis, Rapoport, and Gambles (2003) preferred the term work-personal life integration because the term work life balance (WLB) “implies that work is not part of life, ignores the distinction between paid and unpaid work and . . . implies that work and the rest of life are in some way antithetical or mutually exclusive” (p. 829).

2. A reviewer of this article noted that a more appropriate term for Forsyth’s (1980) idealism is optimism.

3. It is argued here that a subjectivist notion of balance may offer short-term balance, but it is more likely to lead to longer term feelings of imbalance as the individual makes decisions that do not take into account the circumstances of the situation, including the people they impact upon.

4. “Mastery orientation is not just an individual character structure but an organizational paradigm—a set of assumptions about what kinds of behaviors are effective, what kinds of work are important, and what rewards are valuable to people” (Kofodimos, 1997, p. 58).

5. Fletcher (1966) identified this as a traditional error in thinking about conscience.

6. Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) noted that “Whether such imbalance in favor of one role is healthy or not is, in our opinion, the empirical question” (p. 513).

7. Marks and MacDermid (1996) rejected this idea in their work where they adjusted for positive affect.

8. The only other two measures identified in the literature but not discussed in this article were mentioned by Voydanoff (2005). These were measures by Valcour and Batt and Joplin, Shaffer, Lau, and Francesco (as cited in Voydanoff, 2005) and were presented at conferences that the author could not source directly.


10. Marks and MacDermid (1996) initially tested a single-item role balance measure, “Nowadays I seem to enjoy every part of my life equally well,” with bank workers (n = 65).

11. Tiedie et al. (as cited in White, 1999) suggested that satisfaction with work-family balance contains an “optimism” component. Although White (1999) did not control for this, he did check the correlations between WFB and satisfaction in work, family, and marriage to make sure that the work-family balance item measures something other than satisfaction with one of these areas. The correlations did not suggest a strong common component (White, 1999).

REFERENCES


