

Reviewing Gaps in Work-Life Research and Prospecting Conceptual Advancement

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Abstract

Within various organisational, behavioural and management studies, work-life balance is still a discursive subject. Focal themes and implications of most research findings on this social concept often disclose the need for working adults to consolidate efforts in finding the right balance between their work and non-work roles while organisations are scrutinised on implementing a variety of work-life practices and policies that can foster workplace well-being. However, gaps in accentuating its meaning, the dominance of role conflict realities and continuous emphasis on negative work-life outcomes still proliferates studies of this nature. Thus, the modest ambition of this paper is to assess trends in research evidencing gaps in work-life literature and what prospects are available to overcome such hiatus in work-life theory, practice and policy development. This review concludes by stimulating scholarly minds on potential collaborative solutions and proactive changes that human resource managers and employees' alike can capitalise on for a more sustainable and fulfilling enactment of a win-win work-life situation.

Keywords: *Work-life-balance; Work-life conflict; Friendly-family policies; Training and development*

JEL Classification: *M5*

Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) has become one of the topical mainstays of human resource repertoire (Gibson and Tesone, 2001). For many years, work-life researchers have generated theoretical frameworks and empirical reports about the antecedents, correlativity and significance of attaining equilibrium between both domains of life through various social and corporate interventions as well as unmasking the consequences of role conflict experiences (Eikhof, Warhurst and Haunschild, 2007). In employment relations, WLB practices also emerges as an integral matter for human resource management and a core component of organisation's recruitment and retention strategies (Cappelli, 2000). Posteriorly, Lockwood, (2003) ostensibly observed that, "In today's fast-paced society, human resource professionals seek options to positively impact the bottom line of their companies, improve employee morale, retain employees with valuable company knowledge, and keep pace with global workplace trends".

However, the transformation of gender profiles in the labour markets particularly with the changing demographics with the increasing number of female participation and dual career families within various forms of employments (Baral and Bhargava, 2010), the integration of modern technological complexities, extensions in working hours with the contention that many employees are spending longer hours at work due to the tight labour markets, current global recessions increasing flexible employment contracts and job insecurities are some of the contemporary challenges producing detrimental consequences on the psychological well-being and work-life balance outcomes of employees. Thus, Kossek, Kalliath and Kalliath, (2012, p. 739) observed that these negative dimensions arising from the changes in employment relationships has increased the prevalence of precarious working conditions undermining organisational productivity and people's quality of life. To this end, the widespread of reported claims of role conflicts have unequivocally created growing concerns in terms of economic losses incurred by both employees and employers. However, in order to fully comprehend the impact of work-life difficulties relevant to this review, it is important to critically examine the challenges arising from its conceptual definitions in literature.

What is Work-Life Balance?

In broad terms, WLB presents a significant social reality prescribing that the paid employment and private life of an individual should be seen as less competing priorities but rather as complementary elements of a full life (Manfredi and Holliday, 2004). In other words, Clark, (2000, p. 751) defines WLB as a state of "satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict". Felstead et al, (2002) further suggested that WLB borders on the nexus between "institutional and cultural times and spaces of work and non-work matters in societies where income is mainly created and distributed through labour markets". Thus, Nwagbara and Akanji, (2012), opines that a general WLB framework underscores the congruous integration achieved by an individual's involvement in multiple roles of life as diagrammatised in figure 1 below, and the consequences of how these harmonious balance imparts favourably on work commitment, job satisfaction, family life and other social related themes that finds resonance with the nature such interfaces.

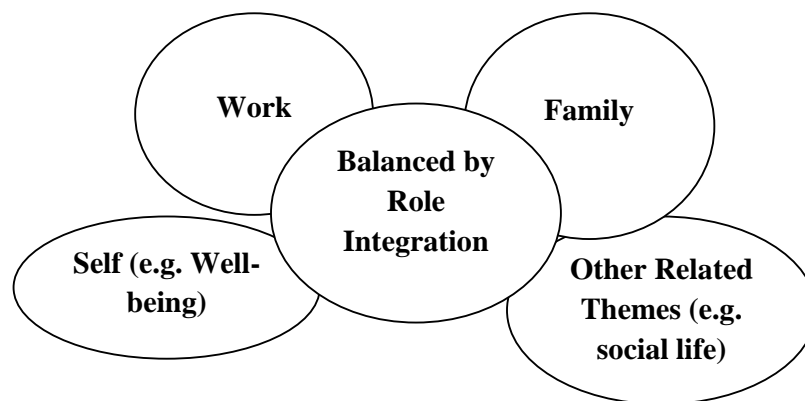


Fig. 1. General WLB framework

Source: The authors' view, (2015)

Although the WLB definitions above seems straightforward and non-contentious in nature, however, some work-life exponents suggests that its meaning cannot be totally accepted as one single social reality due to constant changes of personal circumstances, proliferation of personality traits, gender differences, cultural diversity and other demographic variables that potentially affects perceptions and interpretations of the concept (Fleetwood, 2007). Basically, the underlying ideas behind WLB as a social phenomenon is premised on the fact that a

person’s life is distinctly divided into two marked areas: work and life; with the former often times found to have negative restrictions on the latter (Karatepe, 2010). For instance, in most work-life literature, ‘Work’ is often categorised as salaried jobs while ‘Life’ is generally projected to mean everything that lies outside the realm of formal paid employment but with more emphasis on family ties. ‘Balance’, on the other hand, appears to present an assumption that equilibrium can be achieved in both domains simultaneously. However, the mainstream thinking of the terminology – ‘WLB’ still raises a few questionable presumptions and projects some gaps within the existing literature (Eikhof, Warhurst and Haunschild, 2007). For example, majority of work-life journal articles and academic publications extensively focuses on a single strand of occupational life (that is organisational jobs). In other words, a widespread prescription of work-life research limits economic activities of people to contractual employments within organisational settings. As diagrammatised in figure 2 below which the authors of this review paper framed as ‘the gap model’ was conceptualised to shed light on the lack of diversity in work-life research. This already exposes the limitations within literature as most studies are oblivious of the multiplicity of people’s economic activities and seamless influence that these have on their private lives. Therefore, surrounding ancillary (unpaid) engagements which cannot be categorised as non-work activities such as educational pursuits, journey times to work and back home, spill-over work like responding to unfinished official emails, letters and compulsory work demands that needs to be done at home before the next working day and even working from home are often misplaced in the categorisation of people’s work inclusions (Guest, 2002).

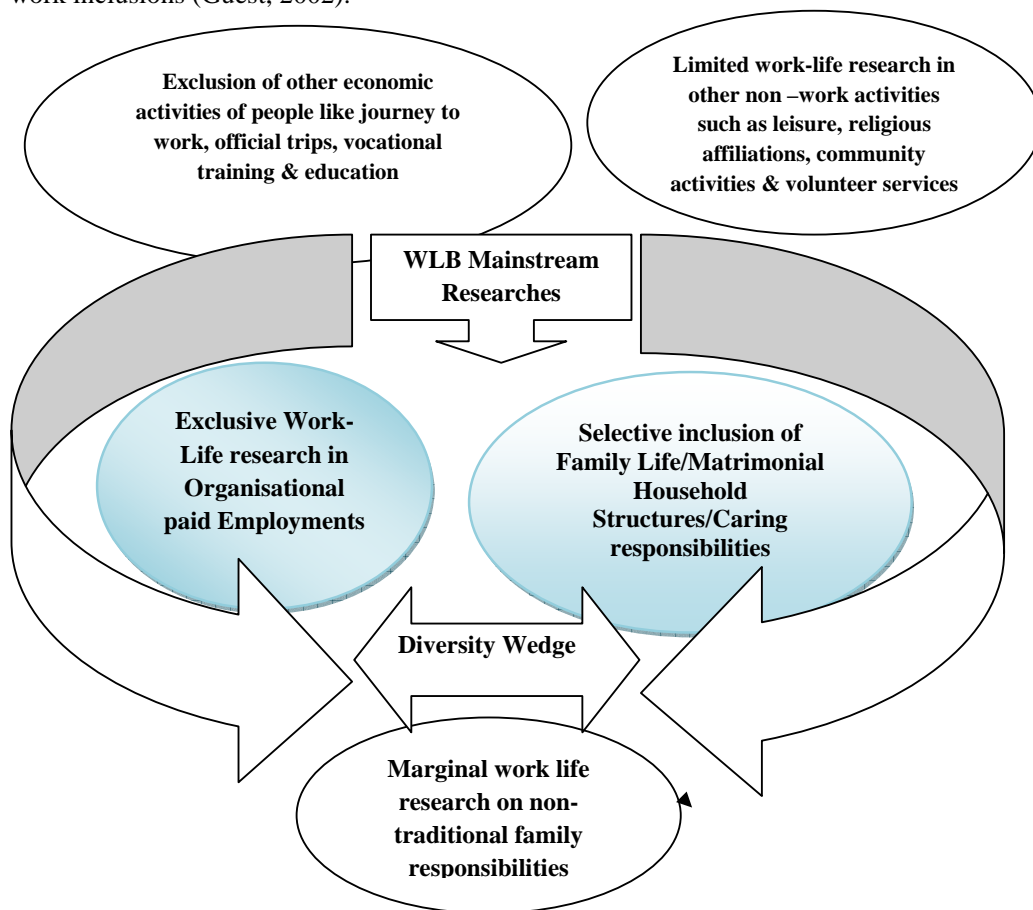


Fig. 2. The WLB Gap Model

Source: The authors’ conceptual framework, 2015

In a similar trend, the framing of 'Life' in most WLB literature generates a restrictive discourse to the domestic activities in a traditional family setting (see figure 2 above). This vital omission of selective inclusiveness of life roles to mundane family life/matrimonial household structures with emphasis on caring responsibilities makes women the primary targets of work-life debates. This also creates an explicit assumption that work-life conditions are merely a woman's problem and thus gender specific (Özbilgin et al., 2010). This reoccurring restrictive and marginal features in WLB discussions (see figure 2) defeats the essence of gender neutrality proposals that emphasises the enactment of policies and practises that accommodates a broader coverage of people in shared parenting, divorcees, same-sex relationships and unmarried individuals. To this end, the term 'work-life balance' replaced what used to be known as work-family balance. According to Özbilgin et al., (2010, p. 5), knowledge enlargement in this regard arose from a critical and positivist scrutiny of the concept that necessitated a semantic shift from 'work-family' to work-life due to the recognition that childcare responsibilities is by no means the only important non-work function in life. Furthermore, the exclusion of other aspects of life's roles such as leisure, community participation, social life activities, religious engagements and extended family integration presents a need for further expansion of most WLB topics (Gregory and Milner, 2009). Evidently, researches on WLB, although topical and widespread, have presented conceptual 'loop holes' which poses a difficult task for HR managers to implement numerous identifiable WLB practices and policies to an organisation's diverse workforce. Thus, Reiter (2007) argues that the lack of a thorough interpretation and full grasp of the conceptual meaning of WLB limits progression in ideas, initiatives, practices and makes policy programmes elusive. This has warranted a call for HR practitioners, policy makers, academics and all interested stakeholders to reconsider their grasp of what ideological perspective will be acceptable for a unified understanding of WLB before they are applied to modern realities underpinning how people can derive physical and psychological well-being from managing their work-life matters efficiently with minimal conflict (Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006).

Therefore, future research directions are required to demonstrate that contemporary framing of work-life should be expanded to cover aspects beyond those life roles centred on only organisational employment and family life. Work-life orientations should generally be about adjusting working patterns so that everyone, regardless of age, race or gender, is able to find a rhythm that enables them more easily to combine their employment and economic status with other responsibilities, goals and aspirations of life (Frame and Hartog, 2003). Apart from these critical evaluations of the WLB concept derived from a blunt reading and review of its theoretical limitations, there has also been an overload in research on work-life conflict and its negative implications at individual and organisational levels. These one-sided arguments have also been observed as a problematic venture since it overrides the initial positive intent of authenticating the benefits of achieving quality life through WLB prospects. This dominating feature of role conflict discussions in literature emerges from the notion that most work-life topics are conducted from a role stress perspective (Casper and Harris, 2008). Thus, key propositions of the work-life conflict features are subsequently explored below.

Work-Life Conflict Suppositions

In literature, work-life conflict (WLC) is premised on any form of role struggle that produces discordances between a person's work and private life arising from either environmental or mental pressures (Roche and Haar, 2010). Trends in work-life publications have manifestly shown the dominance of work-family conflict (WFC) situations in numerous studies premised on theories that the two domains are in a perpetual state of antagonism. The most cited definition of WFC is that of Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p. 77) which states that WFC is "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are

incompatible. That is, participation in work is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family role”. Thus, WLC perspectives draws from the resource scarcity hypothesis pioneered by Kahn et al., (1964) that is based on the assumption that devotion to both roles results into a zero-sum game. In other words, the emphasis on the incompatible role theory suggests that an individual’s personal resources (e.g. time, energy and money) are finite, limited and cannot be evenly distributed to attain a win-win work-life situation (Beutell and Wittig-Berman, 2008). It is therefore argued that there is a restrictive gauge on an individual’s physiological and psychological resources and as a result of this, competing demands encountered between work and domestic life degenerates into a tug-of-war situation where the involvement in one domain is usually at the expense of the other (Roche and Haar, 2010).

A practical example of the high level of perspectives of WLC realities was further illustrated in a fieldwork carried by the authors of this paper sometimes in January-May, 2015. This were business cases on sampled interview comments of 50 Nigerian middle-line management employees working in service management organisations (i.e. call centres, retail banks and motor insurance companies). The qualitative interviews questions were framed to investigate the availability, non-availability and accessibility of the different types of WLB policies enumerated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Data results

Number of managers in organisations	Types of WLB policies	Availability	Non-availability	Accessibility	Outcomes
Eighteen Call centre team supervisors	Flexible Hours (FH)	Yes	-	Partially because managers are obliged to work full-time	Accentuates work-family conflict
	Maternity Leave (ML)	Yes	-		
	Child Care (CC)	-	Yes		
Twelve Commercial Bank managers	FH	-	Yes	Very low as middle managers are expected to work full-time	Induces family problems for women in managerial roles
	ML	Yes			
	CC	-	Yes		
Twenty Motor insurance managers	FH	-	Yes	Below average because of managerial career advancement	WLC
	ML	Yes	-		
	CC	-	Yes		

Source: Business case findings carried out by authors, 2015

Our findings revealed that the lack of a robust provision of FH, ML and CC at a managerial level was the root cause of WLC and family challenges within the Nigerian context. Furthermore, some of the challenges highlighted as the reasons for the shortage of WLB policies in the study were said to be as a result of the high level of unemployment, fear of job loss, lack of WLB awareness, government insensitivity and organisational focus on performance and profits at the expense of employee wellbeing. However, there have been criticisms of the perpetual dominance on the conflict propositions in work-life research with limited knowledge development in role enrichment theories and practice. Some WLB critics have argued that this

should be the optimum focus of people's work-life matters (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). More so, it is further contested that people's conflict experiences may be a mere reactive proposition as a result of the one-sided gender connotations surrounding most work-life research and also a highly subjective line of inquiry into personalised weaknesses of people who cannot enact and manage conflict roles circumspectly. We therefore argue in this paper that work-life thinkers and scholars should begin to focus on the bright side of life by exerting more scholarly efforts on assessing and reporting the significant effects of positive outcomes that can arise from work-life harmonisation. We further contest that advancing research in the direction of work-family facilitations rather than conflicts will assist human resource both managers and employees gain practical knowledge on ways to enact a win-win work-life situation.

The Work-Life Enrichment Concept

Greenhaus and Powell (2006, p. 72) suggested that the work-life affairs can produce positive outcomes in people's lives, and defined work-family enrichment as "the extent to which experiences in one role improves the quality of life in the other". It is thus suggested that there is a possibility for the workplace to positively affect an individual's quality of life. Alternatively, positive experiences occurring from meaningful involvement in family roles can also increase employees coping strategies, resulting in increased workplace performance (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006, p. 72). Greenhaus and Powell aimed to extend work-life literature by specifying the realities under which work and non-work domains of individuals can become allies, through two proposed path to enrichment; namely: the instrumental and affective life paths. In addition, Greenhaus and Powell (2006, p. 74) suggested that a wider range of resources generated in one role can be used in the other role in such a way that the two different paths to enrichment are achieved. Since the essence of the WLB discussions is to proffer solutions in extenuating role conflicts, it is imperative to acknowledge the elevating interdependencies of how people's involvement in multiple life roles can improve their psychological and mental health (Shein and Chen, 2011) and mitigate the negative effects of role stress. We further suggest additional research on the positives of work-life integration and feel that this will widen propensities of policy development and organisational awareness in understanding the need for work-life initiatives designed to foster workplace cultures that are supportive of the work-life enrichment (Kossek, Lewis and Hammer, 2010). For example, Table 2 below presents some conditions in a country like Nigeria that can facilitate the adoption of WLB practices for purposes of mitigating the outcomes highlighted in Table 1 as problems causing WLC at the managerial level.

Table 2. Suggested WLB solutions

Categories of work-life policies	Conditions for enforcement
Flexible work arrangements	Government legislations statutorily empowering employees to request for atypical working patterns
Various levels of work leave (e.g. maternity, paternity, casual, contractual, sick leave and leave of absence)	Arousing organisational sensitivity to the advantages of protecting employee rights to the various work leave to improve employee wellbeing
Dependent care facilities (e.g. crèche)	Provision of child care nurseries by organisations especially for working women with children needs. Also managerial training of supporting demands for these policies

Source: The authors views, 2015

Therefore, we propose that work-life scholars and practitioners should also focus research agendas on the following areas that can advance conceptual understanding of how organisations can meet their employees' work-life expectations.

1. Implementation of family-friendly policies for all and sundry

The significance of achieving WLB should be conceptualised from organisational adoption of family-friendly policies (FFP) in form of benefits, initiatives and programs that will enable employees to achieve a balance between their mandatory working obligations and private lives. It is worthy to note that as a result of labour force diversification since the 1980s (Lewis and Campbell, 2007), there has been increased need for organisations to introduce FFP for retention and recruitment purposes. This FFP are mostly aimed at facilitating the fulfilment of family responsibilities by employees who require such support. For instance, a cursory look at a cross-section of European countries like Britain, France, Germany and Sweden, Norway, Spain and Finland reveals the existence of policies allowing time flexibility which covers flexible working hours, part-time work and compressed hours, telecommuting and leave flexibility ranging from maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, short-term and career breaks, and child care support (Gregory and Milner, 2011). Further, Germany, Norway and Finland have been found to have lower levels of employee work-life conflict than Spain because in these countries there are organisations and institutions offering FFP policies more generously (Cegarra-Leiva, Sánchez-Vidal and Cegarra-Navarro, 2012). However, it has also been criticised that there is a lop-sidedness as to who can benefit from FFP. This is because such policies are still seen as targeted at employees with family responsibilities and as such most of these policies are framed to cater for women exclusively. There is therefore need to advance work-life research to cover a wider spectrum of meeting the work-life needs of a diverse workforce and ensuring FFP are conceptualised as packages for all and sundry.

2. Mainstreaming gender diversity in work-life studies

In the book titled "Redefining Diversity" published in 1996 by Thomas, R. Jr suggested that diversity at any level of human relations should take into consideration all the needs of organisational members and all multidimensional related issues which may include all the specific features of organisational members especially when proffering solutions in meeting their employment needs and aspirations. It is evident that workforce diversity has become a demographic reality in organisations today which makes it imperative to review the notion that WLB matters is an exclusive right of the female gender (Özbilgin et al, 2010). It should be made apparent that gone are the days when women are perceived as only home keepers, while men were regarded as the sole breadwinners. As stated earlier, in our contemporary workforce composition, more women are taking up employments as well as taking advantage of the flexible working patterns for their private life issues beyond just family responsibilities. Conversely, social trends have shown that men also want to spend more time with their spouses and children (Gregory and Milner, 2011). So the changing social preferences and patterns in parenting are the reasons for not only developing better WLB practices for women but also for working fathers. It has been found that a critical review of gender relations in domestic life unveils that both gender's dispositions to family/domestic life have changed (Chelsey, 2005). For example, it was found in a cross-national comparative study that there were significant similarities in fathers' rights and obligations in Britain and France and notably an increased recognition in EU policies of the benefits of fathers' involvement with their children and the introduction of measures designed to encourage a better WLB for working men (Lewis, 2009). Thus, Gregory and Milner, (2011) suggested that in countries like UK, "civil regulations has developed to moderate rights for fathers with the establishment of the principle of joint parenting, along with parental leave schemes, the introduction and/or extension of paternity leave as well as the development of advisory vehicles regarding fathers' role as parents". We therefore further propose that for organisational and behavioural research development, the vital

role of men involved in work and family care should no longer be marginalised in mainstream work-life research.

3. Emphasising training and development

People's awareness of how to adequately respond to their role demands for purposes of producing sustainable work-life integration through effective self-regulatory systems has become needful (Porath and Bateman, 2006). Consequently, more research is required on how organisations can subscribe to knowledge dissemination on training their employees on how to effectively respond to work-life demands with a higher sense of purpose (Hanson, 2007). For instance, organisational training and development can improve employee's ability to efficiently distribute personal resources such as time, energy and income across life domains in reducing conflict experiences. It has further been observed that training and development can influence both an employee's decision and choices on how to trade-off resources for purposes of enjoying positive spill-overs between their work and non-work affairs. For example, Grawitch, Barber and Justice, (2010), suggested that greater skills acquired through training and development initiatives can improve an individual's orientation of achieving satisfaction when they know how to effectively manage their personal resources to meet their work and family obligations.

4. Prospecting a supportive organisational culture

According to Buchanan and Huczynski, (2010), workplace culture can be expressed as the personality, philosophy, climate and ideologies of any organisation. It can also mean how employees carry out their work and treated by the organisation in relation to performance. In exploring WLB practices, organisational culture is of great significance for enhancing work-life affairs of employees. For example, a case study conducted by Eriksson, Jansson, Haglund and Axelsson (2008) on a Swedish industrial company showed a workplace culture with a decentralized organisational structure comprising of self-managed teams where workers have a high level of control over their work tasks created an extensive possibility for their personal development that also impacted positively on their well-being, job satisfaction and WLB. Subsequently, the implications of WLB addressed from an organisational culture perspective should focus on the extent to which "the shared assumption, beliefs, and values regarding the length to which an organisation supports and values the integration of employee's work and family interface" (Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, 1999). This makes the workplace positively influence employee's performance on and out of work that can result in increased efficiency and work productivity.

Conclusion

It is undisputable evidence from this review that the conceptual interpretation of WLB in literature and the practical implementation of work-life practices and policies suitable to all has been a major challenge for many years. However, the ability to manage the boundaries between work and life, minimising conflicts and leveraging enrichment can cumulate into beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders. Judging from the Nigerian case presented earlier, it is clear that the governmental and institutional realities that should propel robust WLB practices in the Nigerian service sector is weak. This calls for the urgent need for policy guidelines and supervisory structures to assist organisations redesign work in ways that it would be acceptable to their workforce and reflect global HRM best practices. Thus, the significance of WLB in employee relations can be better achieved if future research can focus on the four important areas highlighted above. It has also become imperative to note that the significance of WLB practices can only be impactful if researchers and practitioners re-conceptualise the notion and context of the WLB theory before attempting to reach consensus on its definition and application, or else risk doldrums in the field of WLB research. Further, HR professionals should understand the vital issues of WLB and champion its course for the benefits of

increasing employees' morale, reducing negative turnover intentions, absenteeism and enhancing sustainable win-win work-life outcomes.

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