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Impact of Work-Life Balance

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<u>**Literature Review**</u>

Work and family are arguably two of the most important institutions in our society. Together, these two institutions tend to comprise the majority of working parents' time. Since work and home activities almost always occur in separate locations and times (Googins, 1991 in Clark, 2002), working families must find a way to negotiate the work and home life. When work and personal life conflict, consequences can range from an increase in stress levels to less job and life satisfaction (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Kossek & Ozeki, 1999 in Bochatin, 2008). Clearly, work-life conflict is an area of practical concern for working adults.

Since the 1970s, work-life research has been abundant in the social sciences. Many scholars choose to use the metaphor of "balance" to describe how families can and/or should attempt to negotiate work and family commitments. This term has spread into the public sphere, where ideas about managing work and family life have flourished. Recommendations for employers and employees alike of how to achieve and maintain work-life balance are everywhere, from the popular press (see e.g. Drago (2007) Striking a balance: Work, family, life) to a variety of websites (e.g. www.worklifebalance.com).

Despite the popularity of work-life balance resources in the public sphere and the abundance of this concept in scholarly work, there is still no universal definition of "balance." Generally, balance is implied to mean the absence of conflict between work and home life. Clark (2000) agrees that balance should consist of minimal role conflict, which she believes should be accompanied by "satisfaction and good functioning at work and home" (751). Some scholars have expanded this general view as they assert that balance requires equal commitment to and satisfaction in the home and work domains

(Greenhaus et al., 2003). Grywacz and Carlson (2007) disagree, claiming that equality should not be included in the definition of balance because it is nearly impossible to compare work and family domains. Instead, they claim balance is the "accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains" (Grywacz and Carlson, 2007, 458). Greenhaus and Allen (2006) see work-life balance in a similar yet more personal way, in which balance is based on the individual's view of the roles and their own satisfaction. For the purposes of this study, I will avoid more role-related definitions (such as that of Grywacz and Carlson) and focus more on individualistic, satisfaction-based views of balance, which fits with a qualitative research approach.

While scholars cannot agree on a definition for balance, a number of studies highlight similar sources of work-life balance and conflict. The two most common themes are flexibility and permeability. These themes first emerged in Clark's (2000) work/family border theory, which challenged the notion that emotions spill over between work and family and cause conflict. Clark (2000) noted that it is people (not emotions, as outlined in Greenhaus's (1985) spillover theory) that spend time crossing back and forth between domains that they have shaped to be "work" and "family/home" domains (748). The physical and psychological borders that individuals use to define work and home domains have two main characteristics that Clark (2000) originally identified: flexibility (whether and how much a border can expand/contract due to demands of other domains) and permeability ("the degree to which elements from other domains may enter") (756).

But what degree of flexibility and permeability is desirable in order to achieve work-life balance? Cowan and Hoffman (2007) interviewed 30 workers about their

understanding of the terms "flexibility" and "permeability" and discovered that workers desire four main types of flexibility: time, space, evaluation, and compensation. However, a major limitation that Cowan and Hoffman (2007) acknowledge in their study is their limited sample of only professional workers. They suggest further research about workers in more manufacturing or service industries to inquire as to whether these workers are offered the same mechanisms for flexibility as professionals, or if they even desire the same level of flexibility. Schieman et al. (2009) use a more diverse population in their study of flexibility and permeability when they analyze work-life interference. Their results indicate that professional workers report more flexibility, but also more work-life interference (or permeability) that contributes to stress. So while higher-status jobs may have more flexibility than lower status jobs (which may seem desirable according to Cowan and Hoffman), these jobs come with higher permeability and therefore more stress. This brings us to Clark's (2000) claim that there is no particular level of work integration or segmentation to achieve work-life balance; rather, "communication and central participation" in each domain are the keys to negotiating work-life conflict (766).

Clark (2000) is not the only social science scholar to point out the power of being proactive in shaping and negotiating borders to maintain work-life balance. In their review of literature, Desrochers and Sargent (2004) incorporate studies on boundary theory and border theory to conclude that employees should have the ability to control work and family boundaries in order to minimize work-family conflict. However, the call for employees to be proactive makes the assumption that all working parents have the choices, resources, and knowledge to shape home and family spheres according to their

preferences. This assumption overlooks the millions of low-income working American families who have far fewer choices of how to manage their work and family time when they are struggling to financially make ends meet. Their voices have been marginalized in the large body of work-life research that tends to focus on middle-class white Americans (Kirby et al. 2003; see also Johnson, 2001).

Since the publication of boundary theory, a number of scholars have called for studies that reveal the work-life balance practices of low-income families (Bochatin, 2008; Kirby, 2003; Poppleton et al., 2008; Schieman et al., 2009; Cowan and Hoffman, 2007). Sociologist Judith Hennessy (2009) recently interviewed low-income mothers on and off welfare about work-family conflicts, discovering that "many poor and working class mothers, as well as middle class mothers, do indeed view staying at home with children as the right thing to do" (157). However, she points out that poorer women do not have as many choices to spend time with their families as middle-class women in more flexible jobs with greater resources (Hennessy, 2009). While Hennessy's (2009) article claims women of different socio-economic statuses desire the same ability to choose to spend time with their family, Duckworth and Buzzanell (2007) discovered that fathers have different ideas of what being a "good" father entails depending upon their social class. Their interviews with fathers reveal upper- and middle-class ideas of good fatherhood that focuses on spending a lot of time with the family (with middle class fathers reporting more difficulty of achieving that goal) to lower-income fathers focusing on being "physically present and responsible" for children as the responsibilities of a good father (Duckworth and Buzzanell, 2007, 19). Both of these studies begin to fill the needed void of research into work and family practices of low-income families; however,

these studies focus largely on role definitions, either of what a "good mother" or a "good father" should be. While this gendered lens is an important contribution to the literature, further research is needed to realize the general processes of work-life balance of both low-income males and females to gain a better understanding how families with fewer choices attempt to manage work and family time.

A second limitation that has been acknowledged of work-family boundary theory is its focus on the outcome of balance (Desrochers and Sargent, 2004; Gregory and Milner 2009). Scholars have criticized this approach as it views balance as a final desirable state to be achieved, rather than an evolving process for individuals to work with and towards (Schieman et al., 2009). Instead of focusing on the product of balance itself, Kirby et al. (2003) have called for communication scholars to take a new look at work-life balance that focuses on the process of working toward balance. They pointed out that communication scholars are uniquely situated to study "the central role of discourse in shaping personal identities and in maintaining and transforming institutional structures" (Kirby et al. 2003). Communication researchers responded, for just three years later Golden et al. (2006) referred to work-life research as a "well-defined area in communication studies" (145). These new studies looked at the processes of balancing work and life from the perspective of organizations as well as the family. Despite the abundance of new research, Golden et al. (2006) pointed out that there were many areas of work-life balance, especially in family-based communication, that scholars had yet to explore. One such area that they briefly mention is anticipatory socialization.

Anticipatory socialization research, like work-life balance research, is a prominent topic throughout social science fields (especially sociology) that has only

recently received attention by communication scholars. Anticipatory socialization is a component of organizational socialization, which is the process that teaches individuals how to properly participate in certain organizations (Van Maanen, 1976, in Lucas, 2004). As Lucas (2007) points out, communication scholars are well situated with knowledge of organizational communication to study the messages that surround organizational socialization and conceptualize it as a process. In her 2007 conference paper, Lucas used a communication lens to "link the processes of organizational communication to social mobility and reproduction" by looking at messages that parents gave their children regarding their future work (2). Her results reported three types of messages that parents used to socialize their children either toward a certain type of career and/or away from a certain type of career: direct advice, indirect messages about work in general, and messages by omission (Lucas 2007). These messages revealed both reproduction messages (encouraging to replicate the parents' career choices) and mobility (encouraging children to do "better" than their parents), even from the same people, providing an interesting paradox in which parents want their children to succeed but also want to keep them close (Lucas 2007). By using communication methods to study anticipatory socialization, Lucas (2007) moved away from the outcome-oriented focus on career reproduction and was able to reveal a process of complex (and often unstated) messages that influence social reproduction or mobility.

Medved et al. (2006) were the first communication researchers to examine family socialization practices of work-life balance. In this study, they analyzed over 900 messages that university students were able to recall their parents stating about work, family, and/or balance. By looking at these messages, Medved et al. (2006) recognized

three main themes of how individuals come to understand boundaries and roles in work and family life from messages from their parents. Of the three dominant themes they analyzed, the messages surrounding "work as personal fulfillment" are the most important for my research. Many of these messages from parents encouraged children to see work as "enjoyable, personally enriching, or a means to balance in life (or a combination of these)" (Medved et al. 2006). However, their sample is limited to university students, whose parents probably had the opportunity to look for jobs that they enjoy. Further research is necessary to see if low-income families who may not have as many choices of careers or work privilege work in the same way.

Studies of blue-collar socialization practices do exist, but as Medved et al. (2006) point out, most of these studies "are often too contextual in nature" (163). For example, Lucas and Buzzanell's (2004) research of occupational narratives of miners provides an in-depth explanation of themes of the miners' communication practices regarding their work. The miners' interview responses revealed unique constructions of career models and career success that replaced traditional white-collar hierarchical definitions. While these findings shed light on previously unstudied socialization and communication practices of miners in a specific community, it is important to note that the results may not be applicable to a larger population of blue-collar workers in general. Even Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) acknowledge that their findings may only apply to the very specific group studied, for they all shared "geography, occupation, and the centrality of mines within the community…which may not be evident in other blue-collar workers' narratives" (287). In order to understand more fully the socialization practices and

communication about work of low-income families, further research is needed that includes workers from a variety of job types.

In sum, the extensive research on work-life balance emphasizes the practices of white, middle-class mothers. However, little is known about how low-income families meet the demands of work and family time. In order to give a voice to these families and learn about their work-life balance practices and origins (including generational impacts), the following research questions will guide this study:

RQ 1: How do low-income families manage their work and personal time?

RQ 2: How do parents' work-life balance practices influence how their children spend work and family time?

Method

Participants were recruited from six geographically diverse areas in the greater Tacoma, Washington area. These areas included a food bank at a church in fairly rural outlying community (Edgewood, WA); a food bank in southeastern Tacoma; a food bank at a church in Northern, more suburban Tacoma; the Tacoma Housing Authority; a mobile food bank near a military base; and a food bank/public health clinic in the urban Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma. Visitors and/or members of these locations were offered a $15 Safeway gift card in return for their participation in an interview. Participants were screened on the basis of age (must be at least 18 years old to participate), employment status (must have been employed for at least the past year), and income (less than 30% of the area median income (AMI) of Pierce County). In order to

examine generational effects, participants needed to be raising children and/or have been raised at 30% of the AMI.

The interviews were conducted by two primary researchers and two volunteer interviewers on-site in private areas (which differed from enclosed offices to tables set up outside, depending upon the location) at the six various sites, or conducted at another public location at the participants' convenience. The first step in each interview was to explain the IRB consent form and thoroughly respond to any questions and concerns. Once participants had granted permission to record the interview and had signed the consent form, the recorder was turned on and interviewing began.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion, with an interview guide consisting of five small sections: parents' work, parents' life/free time, interviewee's work, interviewee's life/free time, and closing remarks. A short questionnaire was administered immediately following the interviews in order to collect basic demographic information. These interviews were audio recorded using Olympus brand digital voice recorders. They were all professionally transcribed for a total of 179 pages of single-spaced text.

The 24 participants ranged from 23-55 years old. The sample consisted of 19 women and 5 men, and the majority were Caucasian (62.7%). Other races represented included 12.5% Black, 8% Hispanic, 4.2% Asian, and 12.6% Other. As for educational background, 8.3% reported some high school, 8.3% had a GED, 12.5% had a high school diploma, 41.7% attended some college, 12.5% had a 2-year college degree, 8.3 % had a Bachelor's degree, and 4.2% had a Graduate degree. Most participants (87.5%) were parents and currently had at least one minor child living with them. 39.1% of participants

were currently married, 17.4% had divorced, 13% were separated, 17.4% were currently living with partner, and 13% of participants were currently single. The mean hours of work per week represents part-time employment (23 hours/week), and the range of work hours per week spans from 8 to 40+. The mean time spent at the current job for participants was 3 years 9 months, with a range of 2 months to 14 years. Participants' individual monthly incomes before taxes were represented in four brackets: 12.5% of participants at under $500, 8.3% at $501-999, 37.5% at $1000-$1999, and 37.5% at $2000-2999.

The two primary researchers (my professor and myself) read through the typed interview transcripts separately to begin the thematic analysis. I then made a list of prominent themes and shared them with my professor. After comparing our findings, I went back through the transcripts multiple times to highlight and collect evidence for each of the three major themes we found. Throughout this process, I compared the transcripts to field notes from the interviews (when available). Finally, we met again to discuss my final themes, evidence, and interpretations.

Results and Interpretations

Of the three major themes discovered, the first two relate to the first research question regarding work-life balance practices of low-income families, and the third theme relates to the second research question regarding generational impacts of work-life balance. The three themes are: a) activities and social class, b) work-life conflict, and c) impact of relationship with parents on generational choices.

Theme 1: Activities and Social Class

In the discussions with participants about the time their parents spent with them growing up and what they now do in their free time, many of the activities described were little- to no-cost activities. While families reportedly did find time to spend together, their choices were limited to inexpensive hobbies and events. Social class clearly emerged as a constraint on possible life activities for these low-income families. With the exception of a few mentions of trips to Disneyland, all family activities that participants discussed were relatively inexpensive: camping, visiting extended family, cooking, going to parks, swimming, visiting the ocean, car trips, gardening, fishing, watching TV/movies, visiting the library, picnics and barbecues, going to the zoo or aquarium, celebrating birthdays and holidays, and watching sports.

Theme 2: Work-Life Conflict

When we asked participants about the activities they enjoy in their free time and how they make time for life, some parents mentioned conflicts between work and family time. Interestingly, every parent that mentioned conflict between work and family in which one had to be sacrificed for the other chose to sacrifice work for family time. These sacrifices reduced the valuable work hours and wages of parents who were already struggling to make ends meet. For multiple families, these sacrifices came in the form of switching from night shift to lower-paying day shifts. Allison[1], a mother of two, is a perfect example:

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[1] Note: all names have been changed.

> "My family takes precedence. That's the reason I left the third shift. I took
> a pay cut to get back on days but you know family can actually be a part
> of my life."

Similarly, Bethany explains why she is now in a lower-paying, 9-5 job:

> "I tried working night shifts but I'd never see them [kids] so for me that's the
> biggest thing."

Carol quit one of her jobs all together so that she would be able to spend more

time with her nine-year old daughter:

> "I had another job that I was working 2-10pm but I had to get out of it
> because it was too hard with my daughter being in school, getting off at
> ten o'clock at night I didn't have any time to spend with her so this is like
> a choice I had to make so I could be with her."

Another mother, who actually had her two-year-old son with her at the interview,

explains that she switched from full-time to part-time work and dropped out of school for

a year and a half because she felt that she never got to see him. She defends her decision

of postponing her education because she thought it was more important to spend time

with her son:

> "My son is the most important to me. I choose to make sure that he
> doesn't feel left out. And that's more important to me than my education
> so I know that's probably a little backwards because without my education
> I can't really give him the things he wants in life, but I don't think money
> is everything."

A few other participants reported sacrificing work in order to spend time with

family members other than children. For example, Daleen sacrificed work hours and

wages so she could care for her grandmother:

> "I took a pay cut and all that because we didn't want my grandma going
> into a home."

In this theme of work-family conflict, the importance of family in daily life is clear. All families mentioning a conflict choose to resolve it by sacrificing work hours and/or pay in order to spend more time with their families. Amazingly, these pay cuts affect families that were already struggling to make ends meet, yet they still choice to prioritize family time at the expense of work and wages.

Theme 3: Impact of Relationship with Parents on Generational Choices

When we asked participants about the time their parents spent at work and with family when they were growing up, participants' memories and stories tended to focus on either positive or negative views of their parents' work-life balance practices and relationships with their kids. These groupings led to three sub-themes: a) adult children who were satisfied with their relationship with their parents growing up and tended to replicate those decisions, b) adult children who were dissatisfied with their relationship with their parents growing up yet tended to replicate those decisions, and c) adult children who were dissatisfied with their relationship with their parents and changed those decisions.

First, let us examine the stories of the adult children who were satisfied with their relationships with their parents when they were growing up. For every person in this category except one, this satisfaction stemmed from their parents privileging family time when they were growing up. Adult children then replicated these choices in their own work-life balance practices, often times continuing specific activities that they enjoyed with their families.

Elyse, a mother of three, recalled that her parents would work 9-5 jobs and come home for a family dinner every evening. Now, she continues that tradition and discusses why she does so:

> "When my kids are at school that's when I go to work. And then, you know, family time is important and I guess that's what it taught me. That even if your lives are busy you still have to sit down and have that meal together."

When I asked Heather about the time her parents spent with her, she replied:

> "As much as possible. What kind of time? Good quality time. I have fond memories."

She went on to explain some of these fond memories, which included camping trips and visiting the coast. Later in the interview when I asked about the time Heather spends with her family, she seems to have absorbed her parents' values of spending time with children and replicated the camping trips and visits to the ocean that she enjoyed growing up:

> "Working so much I always made sure I was getting plenty of time with my kids…We do all kinds of things together…We do a lot of camping, hiking."

A number of parents recall fondly other activities with their parents that they now practice with their own children. Faith used to take car trips with her family around Washington; now she and her family like to visit Mt. Rainier. When I asked Ginger which of the different family vacations she discussed was her favorite (of trips to the ocean, camping, and visiting a cabin), she said, "Every one was my favorite. We continue to do it now," and went on to explain the yearly camping trips she takes with her two daughters. Others replicated activities that were not necessarily focused on family trips or vacations: Isabelle, a young mother of a four-year-old, recalls "cuddling up on the couch"

with her mother and now makes sure to spend time watching tv and movies with her son.

Similarly, Jen recalls,

> "Yeah, I remember my mom having movie night a lot with me and my
> brothers when we was younger."
> (*Interviewer*): *"And it was as consistent as you do it now [with your
> kids]?"*
> "Uh-hum."

Karen, who had her children with her at the interview, attempts to avoid leaving

her children with babysitters because that is how she was raised:

> "That's why my kids are always with me. I don't believe in babysitters if I
> don't have to. I enjoy them. I had to wait too long for them. And my
> parents were always that way. They didn't leave us with babysitters, You
> just did everything with family. That's what you were supposed to be.
> Family-oriented."

As these examples illustrate, adult children who were satisfied with their

relationship with their parents growing up (usually because their parents spent time with

them) tended to replicate their parents' decisions of privileging family time by spending

similar time with their own families. This replication came in the form of either repeating

specific activities, outwardly discussing their parents' and their own valuing of family

time, or both.

On the other hand, adult children who were dissatisfied with the time their parents

spent with them growing up fell into two distinct generational groups: one group that

disliked parents' practices but replicated them anyway, and another group that disliked

parents' practices and purposely chose to make changes.

When I asked about what kind of time Laura's family spent with her, she could

not recall much time with her parents. Instead, she had memories of playing outside by

herself while her parents were busy with various domestic chores. After her parents

divorced, Laura said her mother "was out of the house most of the time or she was sleeping" and would not take Laura along when she went out with her boyfriend. When I tried to ask her if there were any other activities she could recall doing as a family when she was growing up, she said,

> "Not necessarily with my own family [parents]. With my family [own
>
> kids] yes, I did a whole bunch of stuff."

She later went on to happily discuss a number of activities she enjoyed with her own kids, including: hiking, going to the beach, taking day trips, camping, game nights, and cooking together.

Mary is another mother who was dissatisfied with her relationship with her parents growing up and expresses how she purposefully changed those behaviors when she became a parent herself. She recalls that she was required to be home every Saturday to participate in "family day" when she was growing up, and says of her parents, "They'd act like it was going to be fun and it wasn't." So I was surprised later in the interview when I asked what activities she enjoys now with her family and she told me that she sets one day a week aside for her son. When I asked how this differed from her family day growing up, Mary said she hated giving up her weekend as a young girl, so she now has family night on Wednesdays. She also explained that she makes them more fun with her son by taking him to see a free movie or to the zoo, rather than doing chores together (which is what she remembers of her family days growing up).

As a final prominent example of a parent who was dissatisfied with the amount of time her parents spent with her growing up and attempted to change that practice when she became a parent, Nancy explains:

> "…I think with my mom always being so busy I try to definitely find time for my daughter because I know how that felt when I was younger."

Others who were dissatisfied with the time their parents spent with them growing up expressed a desire to be different from their parents and spend more time with their families, yet still replicated their parents' choices. For example, Casey states:

> "I would say that I'm replaying much of my parents' life although for some reason in my mind I think that I spend more meaningful time with my kids."

But when I asked Casey about this "meaningful time," he cannot think of any examples of family times or vacations that he now spends with his family:

> "We didn't take family vacations so I find myself in a similar spot and not really able to make those decisions, not understanding how and why. Especially because I had so much time when my kids were little."

From Casey's perspective, it appears that parents who were dissatisfied with the time their parents spent with them but still reproduce their parents' decisions do so because they do not know any different. For Casey, this means he is unable to take his children on vacations because he does not have that in his own experience from growing up. But is this always the case? Others who replicate their parents' choices of not spending a lot of time with the family seem to do so not necessarily from a generational standpoint, but more because they have no other financial choice. When I asked Paul about the kind of time his parents spent with him growing up, he replied:

> "All I remember is work, and work, and work. Time to spend with us especially like let's go have fun? No not really."

Later in the interview, when I asked about the time he now spends with his family, Paul named a few activities but admitted he had difficulty finding time: "I need more time with my family…And work is the problem, yeah yeah." For Paul, who was dissatisfied

with his relationship with his parents growing up yet still has difficulty finding time to spend with his family, the lack of time he spends with his own family seems to be less focused on generational replication (as was the case with Casey) and more about the fact that he has no financial choice but to privilege work.

Conclusions

This study has analyzed the stories of low-income families whose voices were marginalized in the extensive literature on work-life balance and added to an increased understanding of how low-income families spend their work and free time. When parents talked about the time they spend with their families, social class emerged as a clear constraint on possible life choices as participants discussed inexpensive family activities. A second theme that emerged was the management of work-family conflict. Participants who mentioned conflicts between work and family time in which one had to be sacrificed for the other always chose to sacrifice work for family, either by switching shifts, reducing hours, taking pay cuts, postponing school, or a combination. It is important to note that these families choosing to reduce work time for family were already in a position of financial hardship before deciding to sacrifice their pay. Further studies may want to question why this occurs: Are family values so important to these people that they always take priority? Or is there some financial decision helping drive this choice (perhaps daycare is more expensive than switching shifts to be home with the children)?

This study has gone beyond the traditional questions of asking what kind of time people spend in their work and free time and looked more and how these processes work and why people, particularly low-income families, make certain choices (if they can be

called that) about work and life. By analyzing generational impacts, a few sub-themes have emerged that help explain when families replicate their parents' decisions. Adults who were satisfied with their relationships with their parents growing up (usually because their parents privileged family night) tended to replicate their parents' decisions. However, those who were dissatisfied fell into two groups: some adults purposely chose to change the decisions their parents made and spend more time with their families, while other parents admitted that they were unhappy with the time their parents spent with them yet they still replicate their parents' decisions. Further analyses should investigate whether this replication occurs because adults are just practicing what they know (providing evidence of generational replication), if work does not allow them to spend the time they would like with their family, or some other reason.

Communication scholars have added valuable knowledge to existing work-life research and generational research; this project shows the two can be merged for a more complete picture of how the process of work-life balance is constructed and carried out in low-income families.

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