



Outcomes of work–life balance on job satisfaction, life satisfaction and mental health: A study across seven cultures

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of work–life balance (WLB) on several individual outcomes across cultures. Using a sample of 1416 employees from seven distinct populations – Malaysian, Chinese, New Zealand Maori, New Zealand European, Spanish, French, and Italian – SEM analysis showed that WLB was positively related to job and life satisfaction and negatively related to anxiety and depression across the seven cultures. Individualism/collectivism and gender egalitarianism moderated these relationships. High levels of WLB were more positively associated with job and life satisfaction for individuals in individualistic cultures, compared with individuals in collectivistic cultures. High levels of WLB were more positively associated with job and life satisfaction and more negatively associated with anxiety for individuals in gender egalitarian cultures. Overall, we find strong support for WLB being beneficial for employees from various cultures and for culture as a moderator of these relationships.

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1. Introduction

Work–life balance (WLB) is a central concern in everyday discourses (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003; Guest, 2002; Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014; Maertz & Boyar, 2011). However, despite its popularity, WLB remains one of the least studied concepts in work–life research (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Valcour (2007) noted that it is “a concept whose popular usage has outpaced its theoretical development” (p. 1513). A reason for this is the field’s struggle to agree on a common definition of WLB (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Another reason is that research on the positive individual outcomes of WLB has been relatively slow to accumulate (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Maertz & Boyar, 2011). In addition, most of the current studies focus on work–family balance, without considering individuals’ broader lives including community, leisure, church, sport and other activities (Hall, Kossek, Briscoe, Pichler, & Lee, 2013). In this study we work with a relatively consensual definition of WLB as being an individual’s assessment of how well her or his multiple life roles are balanced (e.g. Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Haar, 2013; Kossek et al., 2014). We aim to contribute to WLB research at solidifying the concept of WLB by examining its relationship with four important individual outcomes: job satisfaction, life satisfaction, anxiety, and depression.

Furthermore, we know very little about the impact of cultures on the relationship between WLB and individual outcomes. A recent review of cross-national work–life research has identified only two cross-cultural studies focusing on WLB compared with 29 focusing

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on conflict and nine on enrichment; the only cultural dimension examined in these studies was gender egalitarianism (Ollier-Malaterre, 2014). This is a clear shortcoming of current research given that numerous calls have been issued to broaden the scope and ambition of work–life research by conducting cross-national studies that consider the impact of multiple cultural dimensions (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Kossek, Baltes, & Matthews, 2011; Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, den Dulk, & Kossek, 2013; Poelmans, 2005). In this paper we address this gap by testing whether the relationships between WLB, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, anxiety, and depression are moderated by two important cultural dimensions: (1) individualism/collectivism (I/C) and (2) gender egalitarianism (GE). Based on a sample of 1416 employees from seven distinct cultures – Malaysian, Chinese, New Zealand Maori, New Zealand European, Spanish, French, and Italian, we find strong support for direct effects of WLB across all of the study's samples. We also find moderating effects of I/C and GE on these relationships.

Our study makes three important contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to establish WLB as a solid construct that sheds light on major individual outcomes, thereby encouraging future research on WLB as a way to better understand a complex work–life interface, and encouraging practitioners to assess their employees' WLB as part of their HR efforts. Second, our study is unique in the burgeoning body of cross-cultural research on the work–life interface (for a review, see Ollier-Malaterre, 2014) since it is the first, to our knowledge, to focus on WLB rather than work–family conflict or work–family enrichment and to have collected evidence that two dimensions of national culture, i.e. I/C and GE, moderate the relationships between WLB and individual outcomes. The finding that WLB has beneficial outcomes for individuals across seven distinct cultures lends further support to the construct of WLB. Third, our study provides evidence that work–life concepts that originated in Western cultures are generalizable beyond these cultures – we do so by including cultures of growing interest in the literature (e.g. Malaysia and China) as well as understudied cultures (e.g. New Zealand European and Maori).

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Work–life balance

Consistent with recent theoretical advancements (e.g. Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Haar, 2013; Kossek et al., 2014), we conceptualize WLB as an individual's perceptions of how well his or her life roles are balanced. This conceptualization of individuals subjectively gauging balance between the work and the rest of their life (Guest, 2002) is in contrast with prevailing views that considered balance to be equivalent to low role conflict (Duxbury & Higgins, 2001), to high role enrichment (Frone, 2003) or to an equal division of time and attention amongst the several roles that compose an individual's life system (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Our definition is grounded in the perception-centred approach that considers work–life balance to be a holistic concept, unique for each person and that depends upon his or her life values, priorities and goals (Kossek et al., 2014).

With a few exceptions (see Hill, Yang, Hawkins, & Ferris, 2004; Lyness & Judiesch, 2014), cross-national research has mostly neglected work–life balance. However, there is general consensus amongst scholars that work–life balance is highly valued by nearly all employees (Kossek et al., 2014) and it has important implications on people's well-being and work productivity all over the world (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014). Interestingly, research conducted by IBM has shown that people's nationality does not translate in differences in the expressed desire for work–life balance (Hill et al., 2004). Regarding the effects of WLB, extant research shows that people who perceive balance between their work and life roles tend to be more satisfied of their life and report better physical and mental health (Brough et al., 2014; Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska, 2009; Ferguson, Carlson, Zivnuska, & Whitten, 2012; Greenhaus et al., 2003; Haar, 2013; Lunau, Bamba, Eikemo, Van der Wel, & Dragano, 2014). Building on these premises, in this article we hypothesize, for two reasons, that WLB will be positively related to job and life satisfaction and negatively related to mental health universally for all employees.

First, we believe that individuals who experience WLB may be more satisfied of their job and life “because they are participating in role activities that are salient to them” (Greenhaus et al., 2003; p. 515). Second, we believe that balanced individuals may be mentally healthier because they experience a sense of harmony in life and optimal psychophysiological conditions which enable them to meet the long-term demands of work and nonwork roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003). This may lead them to be less apprehensive about their abilities to conciliate work and nonwork commitments and also less prone to develop ruminating thoughts about the lack of balance in life that can deplete their physical and mental resources (Rothbard, 2001). Accordingly, we hypothesize that the benefits of WLB will be universal across all country cultures.

H1. WLB will be positively related to job satisfaction across cultures.

H2. WLB will be positively related to life satisfaction across cultures.

H3. WLB will be negatively related to anxiety across cultures.

H4. WLB will be negatively related to depression across cultures.

2.2. Moderating effects of individualism/collectivism

I/C is the cultural dimension that has received the “lion's share of attention as a predictor of cultural variation” (Brewer & Chen, 2007, p. 133). This dimension is also a powerful moderator of employee cross-cultural studies (Ramamoorthy & Flood, 2002), including work–family studies (Hill et al., 2004; Spector et al., 2004, 2007). I/C reflects whether people view themselves as independent (individualists)

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