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"WORK-LIFE BALANCE? THAT'S JUST FOR MANAGERS"

Time Policies and Practices in Blue-Collar and White-Collar Work

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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will:

1. Understand the uneven impact of work-life balance policies across different types of work and workers.
2. Learn how the concept of "work-life" is designed to extract additional labor out of individuals through the creation of the ideal worker.
3. Identify actions to redress the problematic use of work-life policies across various types of work.

Introduction

The assumptions about workplace wellness afforded to particular people and denied to others are prominently featured in social constructions of time and work (Ballard & Aguilar, 2020). These assumptions circulate in a broader historical context ranging from state-sanctioned violence in the United States against enslaved bodies who did not perform fast enough (Berry, 2017) to a Jim Crow era mythical legend John Henry who gladly sacrificed his life in a race against a steam drill, symbolizing the countless non-mythical African Americans who died building and maintaining American railways (James, 1994). Despite the creation of contemporary labor unions (including the United Farm Workers of America owed to the work of Cesar Chavez) and the end of Jim Crow, norms about time and work continued to intersect around race in the late 20th and early 21st century.

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James (1994) first accounted for this intersection in his *active coping hypothesis* (measured through items about personal agency realized through hard work and unrelenting commitment to achieving difficult goals), ultimately naming the construct *John Henryism* in honor of an African American sharecropper he met with the same name as the steel-driving legend. The increased risk of hypertension among African American men engaged in *blue*-collar work (who score highly on John Henryism) exemplifies the quality-of-life costs that certain bodies bear in the workplace in exchange for gainful employment and upward mobility. Notably, James found no relationship between John Henryism and hypertension among those engaged in *white*-collar work. Equally telling, it was not the work alone but the individual's *relationship to their work* that was associated with hypertension. Thus, there is evidence to suggest a complex interrelationship between class, race, access to wellbeing, and the structure of work (i.e., blue or white collar).

The COVID-19 pandemic helped bear witness to the high costs of effortful coping for some bodies, as a disproportionate number of essential workers were BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) individuals engaged in blue-collar work, and suffered greater exposure and death associated with the virus as a result (Rogers et al., 2020). Accordingly, our focus in this case study is how early industrial and pre-industrial era assumptions about wellbeing at work are reproduced in the structure of contemporary work—and this is readily seen in everyday popular discussions of work-life balance and the related policies to achieve it. Ultimately, we make several claims guided initially by the literature and, later, by findings in the present case:

- The history of work-life as a concept was intended to professionalize workers by creating and nurturing a professional identity as the "ideal worker" separate from their personal identity.
- Contemporary work-life policies help to accentuate the ideal worker identity by affording unique privileges while simultaneously being problematic for personal autonomy.
- Organizations tend to reserve work-life policies for individuals in white-collar jobs, despite the time-based concerns shared by all organizational members.
- If organizations want to improve access to wellbeing for all members, a shift to focusing on time-based policies rather than work-life balance policies can create a more inclusive and resilient organization.

We elaborate on these issues below, first by clarifying the key problems with work-life balance as a policy and then move to elaborate on its origins

in early industrial work. Next, we more closely consider the exclusionary and implicit time-based issues in work-life policies and practices. Finally, we describe the methods used for this case study, report our findings, and conclude with a discussion and implications for future research.

The Problem with Work-Life Balance

As a construct, work-life balance can be defined as a worker's attempt to attend to personal and professional responsibilities with the same level of engagement and satisfaction (McMillian et al., 2011; Greenhaus et al., 2003). Despite research identifying the practical, ethical, and discursive problems associated with work-life research (Lewis et al., 2007; Shockley et al., 2018), this area of scholarship continues to enjoy considerable interest among scholars as well as in popular parlance (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Powell et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2020). This interest is not surprising given the compelling focus on everyday quality-of-life issues and the emancipatory aims associated with work-life research (Leslie et al., 2019). Nonetheless, not only is it a problematic approach to wellness as scholars have argued for decades, but work-life policies are simultaneously characterized by: 1) the exclusion of (disproportionately BIPOC) individuals in blue-collar work, and 2) the demand for additional labor from those in white-collar professions. Thus, we argue that work-life balance policies reproduce—rather than overcome—the constraints of capitalism. As such, traditional work-life policies are without merit as a tool to support DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) issues.

Rather than being based on DEI principles, the work-life balance literature and related policies are remarkably limited with regard to *whose* autonomy, agency, and wellbeing the research addresses and the interrelated question of *how* these emancipatory ideals can be achieved across varied types of working arrangements. Notwithstanding the laudable aims driving work-life research, this body of scholarship conspicuously overlooks two central, constitutive issues tied to work: (1) the exclusionary nature of structures that organize labor (i.e., *whose* work matters); and (2) time (i.e., *how* work-life ideals can be achieved given the different types of working arrangements held by a range of organizational members). Given the dangers of these costs, highlighted during the pandemic and the ensuing Great Resignation (Shaban, 2022), they demand our attention.

Concerning the first failure—i.e., *whose* work life is the focus of research—scholars have critiqued the overwhelming use of white individuals (mostly women) working in white-collar roles upon which the scholarship has been built, advocating that research expand to consider

how the discourse applies across BIPOC groups and in blue-collar roles (Kelliher et al., 2019; Kossek & Lautsch, 2017). Concerning the second omission, time is an important site of privilege across different types of work. Bochantin and Cowan (2016) point to the lack of time-based accommodations (including time off and flexible working arrangements) that characterize blue-collar work. Ballard and Aguilar (2020) also elaborate on the ways in which pacing norms (which include work-life policies that permit time for recovery and wellbeing) are a privilege afforded to some bodies and denied to others.

Therefore, any policies designed to improve the quality of life for all organizational members must necessarily pay special attention to time if it is to be inclusive. Accordingly, the current case takes on the issue of time in extant work-life research. Our objective is to consider the power chronography of work-life balance (Sharma, 2014). As Sharma describes, "Power chronography is based on a conception of time as lived experience, always political, produced at the intersection of a range of social differences and institutions, and of which the clock is only one chronometer" (p. 15). That is, time must be understood subjectively, including its relationship to power based upon a variety of social intersections and structural inequities rather than only an objective unit of measurement. A brief historical perspective illuminates these various intersections.

The origin of "work-life" balance as a concept is based on a fundamental dualism between work and life that originated in Western cultural attitudes toward work (Cheney et al., 2009). Particularly, during the Industrial Revolution, factory owners relied on this dualistic language to manufacture a strategic time-based boundary around the workplace that taught factory workers to separate their "work" time from some other time in their "lives." Of course, members' personal lives do not exclude their work activities as the research on spillover illustrates (Kelliher et al., 2019). Nonetheless, this language afforded factory owners a valuable tool to build the ideal worker *and* effectively excluded women of color and women in blue-collar roles (Davies & Frink, 2014):

> The ideal worker is one who is devoted single-mindedly to the good of the employer, and is not subject to personal distractions from family or other responsibilities. This ideal is most readily approximated by White, middle-class men because this group is the most likely to have a stay-at-home spouse who provides backstage support. (p. 20)

Historian E.P. Thompson (1967) observed that this separation between work and life was a defining characteristic of *time orientation* (also referred

to as *time discipline* and *work discipline*) and contrasted it with the earlier *task orientation* that preceded the Industrial Revolution. Time orientation was driven by a preoccupation with the clock as a measure of worth and of work. More time (on the clock) invested in work was prized as an outcome in and of itself. Whereas task orientation was focused on high-quality task completion as the measure of work, time orientation made the clock the measure of a worthy employee. Thus, time use became bound up with identity, as it remains today (Feldman et al., 2020). This orientation toward the clock perpetuates exclusions based upon gender, race, and socio-economic status, as some people are able to commit more time to work while they receive domestic support from their partners.

One way to expand beyond the class- and race-based limitations of the identity work that is bound up with the ideal worker conception is simply to look at time in work. In the "work-life" literature, scholars implicitly reference time but do not address the underlying time-based issues. Instead, researchers often discuss topics such as boundaries, roles, identities, policy implementation, and social responsibilities. Explicitly considering the role of time in member wellbeing, work-life policies are designed to support unifying underlying aspects of the literature and point to practices with relevance for all organizational members.

Common time-based issues discussed in work-life literature center on: the *pace* of work itself—reflected in concerns about regular time off as well as vacation and family leave policies (Kirby & Krone, 2002); *flexibility*—exemplified by policies and norms that permit flexible work arrangements (Meyers et al., 2012); *scheduling*—control over when work happens (Schwartz et al., 2015); and *separation*—centered on the boundaries organizations and their members erect between work and home (Feldman et al., 2020). Notably, many of these practices are not available to those who perform blue-collar work (Bochantin & Cowan, 2016). For instance, policies that permit self-pacing—such as vacation time, sick leave, and family leave—are often not included in their benefits packages. Flexible working arrangements are also not logistically feasible for many roles. Schedules are typically precarious and change from week to week outside of the employee's control. In contrast, reduced separation is more commonly an experience in white-collar work because of the prevalence of remote work as well as the identity issues tied to the ideal worker (Golden, 2013; Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021).

Therefore, we are interested in learning more about the implications of work-life balance across organizational members, with a focus on those in low-wage jobs. As such, the following research question guided this investigation: *How do organizational members—across racial and class-based groups—describe the role of time in their work and personal lives?*

Method

Interviews using a semi-structured protocol were used to elicit personal narratives about participants' experiences of time as related to their professional and personal life. A scheduled but flexible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) eight-question, multi-tiered interview guide structured the interviews. Interview participants were informed of the work-life aspects of the study.

Participants

While in the overall project, 67 working individuals were interviewed, for this case study, we report and analyze the data from 47 participants that represented mid-career and late-career professionals. Classification of participants was based upon national and regional economic statistics indicating the low-income line and hourly wages (< $10.00/hour). In total, 20 participants engaged in blue-collar, low-wage occupations, 18 of whom identified as people of color (16 Latinx and 2 African American). We did not observe notably different responses from the two white participants in this group, although we use quotes below exclusively from Latinx and African American interviewees. In total, 27 participants (all white) engaged in white-collar, mid-to-high-wage occupations. Participants lived in three geographic areas: Central Texas, Eastern Tennessee, and South Louisiana. While interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, not all interviews lasted for that amount of time. One interview lasted 3½ hours, and a shorter interview only covered 33 minutes. All interviews summed to a total of 72 hours, but the average length of time was 64 minutes. Interviews were recorded (when organizations allowed) and transcribed into manuscript form resulting in 268, single-spaced typed pages. Notably, this data was collected before the COVID-19 global health pandemic, during the early rise in the mainstream popularity of "work-life balance" as a solution to employee woes. It forecast the fundamental problems that would intensify for both blue-collar and white-collar workers, especially during the pandemic.

Data Analysis

Based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), we employed grounded theory to analyze and interpret interview data. Consistent content themes emerged within the interview transcripts offering useful insight into answering our research question. After combining and condensing themes, seven categories emerged. Of these seven categories, three categories provided the most fruitful answers to the current research question. Specifically, the following themes emerged as class-based and racial time

constructions: discourse around "work-life balance," the control of time related to work, and the use of technology to achieve work-life balance.

Findings and Interpretations

The Experience of Time Scarcity Across Participants

Interviewees in both blue-collar and white-collar roles experienced time as a scarce commodity to be taken, protected, controlled, and used before it is taken away. When asked to describe their work and personal time, many participants claim to just "take time" for their personal life. In this regard, "taking time" refers to the perceived possessive nature of time. These workers view time as an entity to exercise agency and control over before someone else exerts control over their time. For instance, in their white-collar roles, Emily "just take[s] time for my family. If I don't take it, I won't have it" and Michael "generally schedule[s] my day so that I can take the time I need with my family in the afternoons and evenings." Similarly, in her blue-collar role, Meagan also "take[s] the time when I need it; if I need it for a sick child or a doctor visit … I just do the things I need to do. Work comes second. When I need personal time, I take it." For all of these participants, nonwork time is scarce and needs to be taken (and often protected) before it is lost or taken by someone else.

Access to Work-Life Policies Denied in Blue-Collar Roles

The similarities ended with this basic idea of time as a scarce commodity. When participants were asked to, "Tell me your work-life story" reactions fell along lines of class and race. In terms of class, while the idea of work-life balance permeated and consumed the conversations and identities of participants in white-collar roles, it was not a concept with any purchase for participants in blue-collar roles. Among this group, the only interviewees who had heard of the phrase work-life balance worked for larger corporations. James cited hearing his previous employer using the concept, stating: "I remember [Organization] would post signs and talk about work-life balance, but they didn't mean it. At least, they didn't mean it for us on the line." Similarly, Julie recalled how "people began talking about it 9 or 10 years ago, but nobody meant it." Claudia works for a large, corporate chain organization, and she literally laughed when asked to define work-life balance, noting: "Oh yeah, that's just for managers [laughter]." These interviewees have heard of the concept "work-life balance," but they did not find a connection to it. Due to the discourse surrounding it within their organizations, the term did not resonate as something available or relevant to them.

Some struggled with defining the term "work-life balance," even admitting to never hearing of the concept at all. For example, Christy asked, "What do you mean by work-life balance?" and Jeremy questioned the concept: "What do you mean? I've never heard that word." When Jeremy was probed for his experiences of work and personal time, he asked: "Why wouldn't I spend enough time here? I work here … and then I go home. At home, I spend time with [son], I watch TV, we eat; I have a nice life. I love my job and my family." Once the definition was clarified, all but two interview participants recognized the desire for something resembling balance. Thus, at a conceptual level, the idea of attending to work and life with the same level of engagement and satisfaction appeared somewhat absurd on its face, even though all participants were actively engaged in working toward the same. They were simply viewing it from different vantage points based on the tools available to them.

Ideal Worker Identity as Constraint on Personal Agency

Participants in blue-collar work viewed their personal time as *their time*. For instance, James clearly stated, "People are in control of work-life balance. If they want more time with their families and less time at work, they can change that." As a former employee of a large organization offering work-life balance initiatives, James recalled hearing about work-life balance at work: "I remember hearing all those managers and executives talking about work-life balance, 'be sure to have work-life balance.' YOU make your work-life balance." Similarly, Julie stated that she "would love to do everything, but I can't. So I prioritize and do what I can. Instead of choosing to stay up until 2 in the morning, I have learned to say, 'No.'" A newly divorced mother of two, Julie focuses on decreasing her pace in order to achieve work-life balance. While a power chronography perspective calls attention to structures of power at play—such as the likely need to work more than one job—in this case study we simply want to call attention to the weaknesses of the ideal worker identity and related preoccupation with work-life balance. In contrast to what we describe in the next section on white-collar work, none of the BIPOC participants in blue-collar roles had expectations of the organization extending support to them outside of a paycheck. We argue that this is due to a historical context in which BIPOC and blue-collar workers were not afforded the same consideration as white or white-collar workers. It reflects structural inequity and it suggests the need for greater formal protection and consideration for their wellbeing at work.

While participants in blue-collar roles viewed their time as a personal responsibility—for better or worse—those in white-collar roles viewed their

personal time as a commodity given to and extracted from them by the organization. Thus, the ideal worker identity deprived them of agency through a self-imposed (as opposed to structurally or formally imposed) set of demands. George recalled stories of an organization unwilling to allow for personal time: "Ten years ago, I remember thinking, 'How much more do I have to give here?' [Organization] demanded so much of me and my time. Now I know I just have to take it; otherwise, they'll take it from me." George's experience was shared by a number of other interviewees in white-collar roles. Jeanne explained how "It has gotten better here. Before, you would feel guilty asking for personal time. Now, I just take time. [Organization] provides me with enough tools that if I need to finish working at home, I can." Likewise, Connie added, "I have balance 60–70% of the time, but sometimes I think that work wants more out of me than I ought to be giving." These accounts suggest the ideal worker identity constrains their sense of personal agency. Instead, the organization controls, even owns, employees' time.

Time Discipline by Any Other Name

While the policies did not actually help participants in white-collar roles solve the fundamental problem of time scarcity, the ability to work from home or away from the office was described as balanced. Gina "work[s] more than 40 hours a week, but I have balance because my work and home are connected!. … I truly only 'disconnect' a few times a year, maybe a vacation or if I am out of the country." Through the conversation, Gina continued, "I love that I can work from home; I can be on a conference call and still fold laundry." For Connie, "Technology allows me to always connect to work. Even if I am sick or traveling, I can check-in every hour or so … instead of having 650 e-mails when I return." Similarly, when Beatty "feel[s] overwhelmed in my work-life balance, I take a 'work from home day.' I can work while I catch up on things like laundry, making beds, watering the plants. It feels like 'me' time." For Jeanne, "before technology, I was in work by 5 AM and would work until 7 or 8 PM each night. That is no work-life balance. Now, I can work from home early or late [and] help my family too."

Mothers described working at home as personal time, despite the fact that they simultaneously engaged in both paid and unpaid labor. Thus, the policies available to them simply allow them to work more hours, from home. While fathers did not mention household chores, they also described being available around the clock as work-life balance. Tim explains: "Good work-life balance is you and your laptop on the couch. You use tools to never let work interfere with what I need to do at home. I would have

to work 18 hours at work otherwise. People may look at me and say I don't have balance because I am texting or emailing work from my daughter's volleyball game. At least I get to go. Without the tools, I can't go."

Summary

In summary, participants shared three interrelated experiences with both practical and theoretical relevance for the study of work-life balance. First, consistent with the structure of post-industrial capitalism, all participants experienced time as a commodity. However, work-life balance stemmed from a privileged class position. Individuals in white collar positions had the opportunity—both from a policy perspective and a logistic one—to re-arrange their schedules both in terms of when and where they work. Despite the promise of such policies and their desirability, such "flexibility" also led to more time spent working for the organization. This additional time spent engaged in paid labor also occurred alongside unpaid work (creating a world where women worked all the time), forecasting what would unfold during the pandemic (Schaeffer, 2022). Additionally, while this came to serve as a form of time discipline for those in white-collar positions and most heavily benefited the organization, none of the individuals in our study who occupied blue-collar positions were afforded a means to address this tension through organizational policies. Instead, work-life balance policies were not available to lower-wage earners.

These findings predicted both the structurally uneven and the generally problematic nature of work during the pandemic. That is, individuals in blue-collar positions had to go to a workplace where they faced immediate threats to their safety (and died at greater numbers as a result). Meanwhile, as the physical safety of individuals in white-collar positions was protected, they were likely to work around the clock—especially if they were mothers—doing paid and unpaid labor simultaneously. Taken together, below we use the findings in this case study to describe the inherently flawed premise of work-life balance as a policy to enact greater organizational DEI.

Practical Applications

The contemporary allure of work-life balance inheres in the idea that organizations are protecting, even enabling, the wellbeing of their members through policies that support flexible work hours and work-from-home options (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020). In this chapter, however, we report data from a project that considered the power chronography of

work-life balance. This case study focused on participants' lived experience of time in relationship to their work and sought to illuminate the political dimensions of these policies as a function of class, race, and post-industrial capitalism.

Based on these findings, it becomes clearer that simply extending common work-life policies to organizational members in blue-collar roles who are disproportionately BIPOC will not support the underlying aim of DEI policies. Instead, this study suggests that we need to consider how well work-life balance policies actually align with the best interests of organizational members more generally and work from there. Accordingly, we suggest that looking more closely at issues of time helps identify a better path to support DEI efforts. For instance, participants who held white-collar positions placed a great deal of value on flexible working arrangements. They enjoyed working from home as it appeared to offer them a great deal of autonomy. However, it tipped the scales of "balance," offering the greatest benefit to organizations because they described being available for work at virtually all hours of the day. This served to reinforce the ideal worker identity whose time is owned by the organization. So, while the policies were associated with privilege, they were still associated with overwork.

Recognize Time as a Site of Privilege

Therefore, taking a power chronography perspective calls into question the political dimension of work-life balance policies. While the policies certainly privilege some bodies and disproportionately deny these privileges to BIPOC individuals who occupy blue-collar roles, the story is more complex. Additionally, even if flexible working arrangements were a fix-all solution to burnout and overwork (which they are not), the logistics associated with blue-collar work often mean that flexible working arrangements are not possible. As such, in multiple ways, work-life policies fail to offer access to wellbeing. Instead, we recommend refocusing attention on the ways that time is a site of privilege that can be extended across types of work and workers. It provides a far more reaching solution to DEI concerns as well as overall employee wellbeing.

At a formal organizational policy level, paid vacation time, paid sick leave, and paid family and medical leave are all time-based policies that would support individuals in blue-collar roles. These policies would be a more fruitful path to support greater DEI than remote work policies that cannot be accommodated by the logistics of certain work. They are time-based policies that can be applied to and benefit all organizational members.

Reconsider Traditional Time-Based Policies

Additionally, we recommend the inclusion of specific time-based policies that address the unique challenges associated with blue-collar positions. For example, hourly work is often organized in an ad-hoc based that results in irregular schedules that change from week to week (Bochantin & Cowan, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2015). This is a common problem that can be addressed through innovations in scheduling. Solutions might be a nine-day fortnight, where individuals work the same number of hours condensed from ten to only nine days. Recently, an owner-operator at one food service chain has experimented with the three-day workweek "to reduce burnout, increase employee retention, and demonstrate more generous leadership" (Murphy, 2022). The owner-operator behind the innovation reflects, "Obviously that's pay, but beyond pay, it's *time*. So, I thought, how can I get them more time? … How can I get them an opportunity to know their schedule in perpetuity … and they could build their lives, and their vacations, and their plans, and their child care and their school and all of those things around that? And then on a business side of it, it was really I was searching for consistency." His implementation of this policy—which is much more fluid and locally driven than traditional organizational policies—has been associated with reduced turnover and absenteeism.

Co-Construct Work Schedules and Practices

More informally, team leaders can also work collaboratively and cooperatively with team members to define and build practices that serve each of them. The important issue is to refocus solutions on time. For instance, allow team members to participate in the construction of the specific hours they work. Instead of feeling like time has to be guarded, encourage team members to help to co-create the schedules that fit their life goals. Additionally, help team members find areas to grow and offer them protected time to learn. Set aside specific time at regular intervals for your team members to learn. This investment of time will help team members feel supported toward learning and growing in the ways they want to grow. Even more, stay connected with team members to remain aware of the times they feel stress from the time and timing of work. Coach them through stressful conflicts to enable more agency in meeting the demands of life. All of these suggestions require open and transparent communication with our team members—working *together* to address the time and timing of work instead of working against one another.

Conclusion

In summary, our findings suggest that for practitioners and organizations committed to effective DEI policy, attention to the underlying *time-based issues* of interest in work-life balance discussions is critical. While work-life balance policies were applied unevenly across white-collar and blue-collar positions, all of our participants were equally attentive to the critical role of time in their work lives. These policy omissions reflect the classed, racialized nature of work-life balance discourse, consistent with previous research. We also showed how this discourse has had unintended consequences—both for those seeking greater wellness in their personal and professional lives and for those promoting it as a path toward the same. It further reproduces structural inequalities based on class and race while extracting additional labor out of workers who enjoy more privileged positions.

Discussion Questions

1 How is the ideal worker identity tied to work-life balance policies?
2 How does a power chronography perspective offer a new lens on work-life balance?
3 What are some other time-based policies that would support DEI efforts?

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