

The ability of work-life balance policies to influence key social/organisational issues

Paula Brough, Jackie Holt, Rosie Bauld, Amanda Biggs, and Claire Ryan

Griffith University, Australia

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:

Associate Professor Paula Brough, School of Psychology, Griffith University, Mount Gravatt
Campus, Queensland 4111, Australia. Email p.brough@griffith.edu.au

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Abstract

There is increasing evidence that work-life *imbalance* has a direct impact on societal issues, such as delayed parenting, declining fertility rates, ageing populations, and decreasing labour supply. It is documented that work-life balance policies are beneficial for individuals, their families, organisations, and society. However, other evidence demonstrates that the associated benefits are not always realised and for example, work-life balance policies can result in reinforced gender inequities and *increased* levels of work-life conflict. This paper reviews the ability of work-life balance policies to actually influence some key social and organisational issues. Current developments, such as an increased casual workforce and the impact of changes in newly industrialised nations are discussed. Recommendations for work-life balance to be addressed via a comprehensive multilevel approach are made.

Keywords: work-life balance, human resource policies, casual labour.

The concept of work-life balance is not new. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, life was divided into phases of work, rest, and recreation, as the timing and distribution of work was based on the day-night cycle and seasonal demands. The introduction of automated machinery during the Industrial Revolution transformed the organisation of work, enabling industries to increase working hours and productivity. This produced a conflict between organisational goals for increased productivity and the employees' goal of work-life balance. This argument was encapsulated in 1889, when US workers went on strike to demand an eight-hour work day. Their slogan was 'eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what you will' (Rosenzweig-Fogel 1985).

The transformation of work was accompanied by an increase of male employment that facilitated the rise of the single 'breadwinner' model of employment in most industrialised nations (Creighton 1999). However, this model was significantly challenged during World War II, when women were called upon to work in manufacturing industries, to replace the enlisted male employees (Brough, O'Driscoll, and Kalliath 2007). Many governments opened temporary child-care centres to support the entry of women into the paid workforce. According to Glass and Estes (1997, 291) although these centres were closed after the war, "*postwar expansion included federally mandated employer participation in such areas as workers' compensation and Social Security, institutionalizing the notion that employers had at least some obligation to provide for the security of the families of their employees*". This can perhaps be recognized as the starting point that work-family balance was not merely a private concern but a wider social issue.

More recently, dramatic shifts in the composition and nature of the economy have renewed interest in the debate concerning who is responsible for work-life balance. For instance, current approaches to work have increased economic pressure on organisations, which has equated to greater work pressures and work-life imbalance for individuals. While individual consequences of work-life imbalance are documented (e.g., Brough and O'Driscoll 2005), research delineating the societal consequences of work-life imbalance is now emerging. Higgins, Duxbury and Johnson (2004) for example, in a benchmark study estimated that work overload cost the Canadian health-

care system CA\$5.92 billion per annum, followed by caregiver strain (CA\$4.85 billion), work-to-family interference (CA\$2.77 billion) and family-to-work interference (CA\$514 million). The reckoning of both the direct and indirect costs of work-life balance raises the issue of the *proportion of responsibility* that is legally or morally attributable to organisations and to societies for the provision of services to facilitate balance for employees.

Labour market and population changes (such as those discussed above) heralded the beginning of both government-sponsored and organisational family-friendly initiatives (e.g., Glass and Estes 1997). The original initiatives focused on the introduction of family-friendly policies such as the recognition of care-giver demands upon employees in the 1970's. Recent policies have expanded this scope to now include initiatives for employees to achieve balance regardless of their actual care-giving responsibilities (Lewis, Gambles, and Rapoport 2007). Currently, there are four major categories of work-life balance and family friendly initiatives: (1) flexible/alternative work arrangements, such as compressed working weeks and permanent part-time positions (2) paid and unpaid leave arrangements, such as paid maternity, paternity and adoption leave and unpaid leave for sabbaticals, cultural or volunteer reasons (3) dependant care services, such as the provision or subsidy of childcare or elder-care services, and (4) access to information, resources or services, such as Employee Assistance Programs, health facilities and stress management programs (Gray and Tudball 2003). Although research has discussed the consequences of family-friendly policies for individual employees (e.g., Brough, O'Driscoll, and Kalliath, 2005), the actual impact of these policies on organisations and society is less clear.

The direct comparison of the consequences of the various types of work-life balance policies is difficult due to cross-cultural variations in government regimes, employment policies, and labour market conditions (Ackers 2003). For example, policies in Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Australia, tend to emphasise individual responsibility and are voluntarily adopted by organisations with little government influence. In contrast, policies in Scandinavian countries (e.g., Norway and Sweden) are influenced by a prevailing public responsibility model characterised by generous leave

conditions and benefits (Brough, O'Driscoll, and Kalliath 2007; Gauthier and Hatzius 1997). Work-life balance research has also been predominantly conducted within individualist countries (e.g., US, UK, Australia) although the recognition that theoretical models should also be applicable to collectivist countries (e.g., Asia and South America) is now occurring (e.g., Spector et al. 2007). Interest in multi-cultural work-life balance issues is also increasing due to the globalisation of the world economy and multi-national corporations being deployed in a number of countries. This paper focuses on the effectiveness and the consequences of work-family balance policies and reviews research based on both individualistic and collectivistic cultures where available. We review the social costs of work-family balance policies to the population and labour market (e.g., ageing population and declining fertility) as well as organisational costs (e.g., increased stress, turnover, and absenteeism).

Australian and New Zealand Labour and Work-Family Balance Policies

Australia and New Zealand are geographic neighbours and have similar labour markets; both countries are currently experiencing relatively strong economies and high rates of labour force participation. The rate of participation of women in the workforce is virtually identical: In 2006 women comprised 45% of the Australian workforce and 46% of the New Zealand workforce. However, in both countries female workers are over-represented in part-time employment: Approximately 35% of female workers and 10% of male workers are employed on a part-time basis. Female workers are employed for an average of 29 hours per week, compared to 40 hours for male employees (Statistics New Zealand 2007). In 2002, New Zealand extended its unpaid statutory parental leave policies to implement Government-funded paid parental leave. This statutory paid parental leave now covers a period of 14 weeks (for the primary caregiver) and offers weekly financial support. In contrast, Australia has no statutory paid parental leave provisions, although paid parental leave of between 1-24 weeks duration is offered by some individual Australian organisations and is accessible to an estimated one third of Australian employees. Instead of

statutory paid parental leave, the Australian Federal Government provides all new parents with a lump sum monetary payment (the ‘baby bonus’). While the Australian Government provides this monetary payment as an incentive to increase national birth rates, criticisms have arisen based on the point that this payment “is not tied to any economic activity such as earning income, or expenditure on childcare or education - it is simply conditional on the birth of a child” (Guest 2007, 11). The capability for this payment to assist employed new parents in managing acute family and work demands has not been formally assessed. Both Australia and New Zealand also offer statutory *unpaid* employment parental leave for the primary caregiver, typically up to 52 weeks duration.

Key Issues Facing Industrialised Societies

A number of industrialised nations are experiencing societal issues such as delayed parenting, declining fertility, increased longevity, and decreasing labour supply. The ageing profile of these populations is forecast to result in significant welfare and healthcare costs (Dey 2006). The economic priority issues therefore, for most industrialised nations include: rising health-care costs, reduced economic capacity, and population decline. A range of strategies have been offered by organisations and government to address these issues.

Many governments are seeking to address the labour shortfall by increasing the labour force participation of *existing* population members, with targeted strategies aimed especially at female and older members of the population (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2006). Comprehensive family-friendly initiatives (targeted at females returning to the labour market) and work-life balance initiatives (for older males) have been identified as effective methods by which to recruit these target groups (e.g., Reday-Mulvey 2005). It has been postulated that these strategies will enhance income growth and the capacity to ‘pay’ for the social costs of ageing, as well as contribute to the reduction of negative consequences to individuals and families (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2006). A review of these two key strategies follows.

Female Recruitment

While female participation in the labour force has increased over the past 20 years, there remains significant room for improvement. Participation rates vary across industrialised countries; from approximately 60% in Turkey, Korea, Mexico to over 80% in the Nordic countries (Jaumotte 2003). A recent review of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries found that approximately 12% of currently unemployed women would prefer to be employed (Jaumotte 2003). Research has demonstrated that the provision of family-friendly initiatives facilitates *both* increased fertility *and* labour force participation. The research has for example, demonstrated a relationship between high fertility rates and female employment with increased family-friendly initiatives in France (Prioux 2002) and in Nordic countries (Jaumotte 2003). An analysis of data from 12 countries revealed that regardless of the predominant welfare regime, continuous employment was greater within countries that implemented supportive policies and practices for working mothers (e.g., Stier, Lewin-Epstein, and Braun 2001).

Whether the work-life balance provisions are universally beneficial however, is somewhat debatable. First, the effectiveness of work-life balance policies may depend on each country's cultural context. For example, a study of 22 industrialised nations (1970-1990) produced mixed results regarding the associations between fertility rates and benefits such as maternity leave and family allowances (Gauthier and Hatzius 1997), while a second investigation involving 21 OECD countries found divergent results between fertility and the provision of childcare (Castles 2003). Second, the provision of work-life balance policies is often an insufficient step to fully address social consequences, such as declining fertility rates. For example, rising unemployment and falling incomes may also cause fluctuations in fertility rates, even within countries that are currently experiencing improved fertility rates such as Sweden (Castles 2003). Thus, family-friendly policies *alone* may not sufficiently increase fertility rates. Finally, the strategies employed to redress equity between genders and promote female labour-force participation may, in fact, exacerbate gender

inequality (e.g., Brennan 2007). This is evidenced in countries where attempts to improve equity within the workplace have not been matched by efforts to address inequities in the division of unpaid labour. A number of industrialised nations based on the traditional gendered models of male income and female support (in the home), have reported that family-friendly policies have reinforced traditional models of work and have in fact contributed to *increased* work-life conflict for employees (for a review see for example: O'Driscoll, Brough, and Biggs 2007).

Recruitment of Older Workers

Until the 1970s, approximately 80% of men aged between 55 and 64 years in all OECD countries were engaged in paid employment (Sigg and De-Luigi 2007). Over the next 25 years the labour force participation of older male workers declined to an average of 30% (Walker 2005). The major reasons for this decline were the introduction of 'exit' pathways, such as public sponsored early retirement plans, which were introduced as one solution to youth unemployment and employer-sponsored early retirement plans which supported employers to 'downsize' during the recession. Additionally, a number of discriminatory attitudes towards older workers occurred in relation to their capabilities to perform some physical and cognitive tasks. Much of the emerging research now challenges these viewpoints of the capabilities of older workers; however age discrimination is still evident (Equal Opportunities Commission 2006). Although there are a number of issues that need to be considered about the health and well-being of an ageing workforce, the social and economic benefits of retaining older workers is crucial. Economic experts report for example, that the retention of at least 50% of older workers in employment is required to meet European labour force demands (e.g., Morschhauser and Sochert 2006). The recent reported employment rates of older workers reflect this recognition of the value of retaining these skilled employees, although rates do vary by country: e.g., 30% to 42% in the Southern European and Continental European countries, 50% in Nordic countries and the UK, 59% in the US, and 62% in Japan (Burniaux, Duval and Jaumotte 2003).

Older people considering early retirement are faced with a number of work practices that act to prevent them from remaining in the workforce. Mercer (2004) for example, reported that while 93% of UK unemployed workers aged 55–64 would prefer to be working, a lack of access to flexible work conditions and quality part-time work directly prevented their employment. The Equal Opportunities Commission (2006) also reported that many older workers would choose to stay with their current employer if a reduction in working hours was permissible. Although the *type* of employment is an acknowledged crucial factor in these retention arguments: Reday-Mulvey (2005) for example demonstrated that older workers in ‘low quality’ jobs, were four times as likely to leave employment as compared to workers in ‘high quality’ positions.

Key Issues Facing Organisations

Over the past 25 years many industrialised nations have undergone economic reform marked by increases in downsizing, work intensification, unpaid overtime, and expectations for higher employee performance. For example, approximately half of the overtime worked in Australia is unpaid due to understaffing:

“This has led to a situation where the “survivors” take on added duties or are asked to handle the tasks of absent workers rather than hire temporary staff. This can lead to increased stress on workers and impinge on their ability to manage their family commitments. If time off to meet family commitments is to be a reality, then employers must have enough staffing flexibility to enable this to occur.” (Wolcott 1994, 75).

Organisations are adversely impacted by work-life conflict through reductions in productivity and increased withdrawal (i.e., absenteeism, turnover) of employees. Some of these adverse consequences may be mitigated by the provision of useable family-friendly policies. Work-life balance and family-friendly policies are usually regarded only in positive terms; for example, they have been heralded as strategies that organisations can implement to recruit and retain staff, as well as to decrease absenteeism and levels of occupational stress (e.g., Brough, O’Driscoll, and

Kalliath 2007). Family-friendly policies are also positively perceived by shareholders, and organisations that have announced work-life balance initiatives have typically observed a (short-term) increase in their share price (Arthur and Cook, 2004). However, the *actual cost-effectiveness* of these policies and their genuine ability to promote work-life balance requires further exploration.

Organisational Costs of Stress, Turnover, and Absenteeism

Both the individual and organisational consequences of overwork and occupational stress have been identified and include for example, high levels of employee sickness absences and decreased job performance (O'Driscoll, Brough, and Kalliath in press). Similarly, failure by organisations to address issues of work-life balance and to prevent discrimination towards pregnant employees can result in considerable organisational costs via high levels of employee absenteeism, turnover, and compensation claims. The organisational costs associated with absenteeism occurring specifically as a result of role overload and work-life imbalance were recently estimated at approximately CA\$11 billion per year (Duxbury and Higgins 2003). Similarly, the turnover of skilled workers who leave the workforce due to insufficient work-life balance has been estimated to cost British organisations approximately GB£126 million per year (Equal Opportunities Commission 2005). The voluntary turnover of female staff is associated with the absence of accessible family-friendly programs, a non-supportive supervisor, and an unsupportive workplace culture (e.g., Batt and Valcour 2003; Thompson, Brough, and Schmidt 2006). Finally, the consequences arising from maternity and pregnancy discrimination are also relevant. In the US in 2006 for example, approximately US\$10.4 million was paid by organisations for pregnancy discrimination alone (for a review see O'Driscoll, Brough and Biggs 2007).

Work-Life Balance and Family-Friendly Policies

There is mixed evidence regarding the cost-effectiveness of work-life balance and family-friendly policies. Some research links these policies with reduced levels of employee turnover, increased

employee satisfaction, commitment and productivity, and decreased rates of physical and emotional disorders associated with work-life conflict (for a review see Brough and O’Driscoll 2005). For example, Glass and Riley (1998) demonstrated that a positive relationship existed between the provision of adequate maternity leave and reduced rates of turnover in US female employees. Similarly, Australian research found that 70% of businesses that incorporated telework options reported a number of positive benefits, such as increased business productivity and reduced costs, improved employee flexibility and work-life balance, and increased workforce participation (Australian Telework Advisory Committee 2006). This research also reported that the major barriers to telework were unsupportive organisational culture and management practices, rather than technological barriers.

However, research has also identified an *increase* in organisational costs due to work-life balance policies. One review for example identified that not all flexible family-friendly policies uniformly improved productivity and some, such as job sharing, actually *decreased* productivity (Myer 2001). In addition, some researchers have questioned whether the cost of implementing work-family balance policies is commensurate with subsequent gains in productivity. Bloom, Kretchmer and Van Reenen (2006), for example, argued:

“Improving work-life balance is socially desirable - workers obviously like it and firm productivity does not suffer. However, our results do not give a green light for policy makers to regulate even more work-life balance. Even if productivity does not fall, work-life balance is costly to implement and maintain, and may result in significantly lower profitability.” (Bloom 2006, 2).

Similarly, a recent comprehensive study of 2,191 UK organisations found that the organisational costs of family-friendly policies were offset by reduced employee earnings (Heywood, Siebert, and Wei 2007, 297). The authors noted:

“Some workers may require family-friendly practices in order to work at all. If these practices are associated with too large an earnings reduction, such workers may find it

optimal simply not to work. If increasing the labour supply of these workers is deemed important, one can imagine that provision of family-friendly practices might be subsidized.”

Thus, it appears that family-friendly and work-life balance initiatives *can* support organisations to address key issues such as retention and productivity. However, specific organisational and legislative conditions should be considered to ensure that the implementation of work-life balance policies have long-term positive outcomes for both employees and organisations. The presence of formal and informal ‘barriers’ often restrict (or block) employee access to work-life balance policies. Examples of such barriers include supervisor support, co-worker attitudes, perceived negative career consequences, and societal norms (e.g., McDonald, Brown and Bradley 2005; Thompson, Brough, and Schmidt, 2006). This ‘provision-utilisation gap’ of work-life balance employment policies is now recognised as a pertinent research issue (e.g., O’Driscoll, Brough, and Biggs 2007).

Discussion

This paper has briefly reviewed recent some of the issues facing industrialised nations in regards to work-life balance employment initiatives. We have argued that recent changes in employment practices and social developments ensure that work-life balance is a pertinent economic and social issue, with ramifications for the labour market, healthcare costs, and the ageing population. Despite some movement away from the traditional ‘breadwinner model’ many jobs have not been re-designed to make provisions for non-work responsibilities. In fact, while there has been a proliferation of work-life and family-friendly policies, there have been few real attempts to re-organise workplaces to ensure such policies can be effectively applied. In most industrialised nations, there remains a predominance of men in full-time employment, while women bear the majority of child-rearing and household responsibilities. While some individuals freely choose this arrangement, others have limited choice. The emergence of part-time work, especially within Australia, was feted as a legitimate way in which workers with dependants could achieve a successful work-life balance. However, part-time work is also associated with a range of negative

consequences including a reinforcement of the traditional male model of work, decreased career aspirations, decreased security and income for women (especially within the context of changing family dynamics), and *lower* levels of work-life balance (e.g., O’Driscoll, Brough, and Biggs 2007; Warren 2004). We acknowledge that effective work-life balance policies require examination from a broad perspective. There is considerable variance between countries and the degree to which their governments are involved in the reconciliation of work and non-work responsibilities. Legal and industrial relations developments are needed to ensure that work-life balance policies and practices are not only provided but are also *actually accessible and used* by employees.

Future Challenges for Work-Life Balance and Family-Friendly Policies

Casualisation of the workforce

The growth of a casual workforce in many developed countries presents a considerable challenge to the success of many employment conditions, including work-life balance. Recent Australian figures for example, estimated that approximately one quarter (26%) of all Australian employees are employed on a casual contract, with half (55%) of these employed on a ‘permanent casual’ basis (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003). The casualisation of the workforce is often overlooked by researchers who focus predominately on theories and practices applicable to full-time workers.

Unlike full-time work, most casual job arrangements do not qualify for basic employment conditions such as working-time arrangements, minimum wages, sick leave, holiday loadings, and the right to collective representation (Pocock 2004). Some casual employment arrangements offer a compensatory increase in the hourly rate of pay to offset this loss of conditions, although this pay increase is deemed to be inadequate when all conditions are considered. Warren (2004) for example, identified that UK female part-time employees were more likely to be financially insecure, less satisfied with their work-life balance, and have a higher intention to turnover, compared to their full-time colleagues. Some employers of course, recognize the disadvantages commonly associated with part-time employment and are seeking to improve the quality of this

employment option (e.g., Bardoel, Morgan, and Santos 2007). Without such measures, it is likely that the growth of these temporary forms of employment, will *increase* rather than decrease levels of work-life *imbalance* and ultimately *reduce* the labour force participation.

Convergence of individual/collectivist experiences

As was discussed above, the research investigating work-life balance within collectivist cultures is somewhat limited. However, recent research indicates the comparability of many of the work-life balance employment issues across both individualistic and collectivist countries (e.g., Spector et al. 2007). Levels of occupational stress reported by managers for example, was found to be equally high in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and a number of Western countries (Spector et al. 2004). A number of collectivist countries also mirror the labour market changes occurring within Western countries, especially as concerns the increasing participation of women in the workforce, for example (Lo 2003). However, unlike their Western counterparts, benefits relating to work-family balance are rare for both males and female employees in most Asia countries. Lo (2003) for example, reported that the socio-cultural environment in Hong Kong ensured that married professional women received limited support from their husbands and employers to assist them in managing the demands of both full-time work and family responsibilities. In identifying what would help them to improve their situation, the overwhelming response was the need for flexible working schedules. Recent research therefore recognises both the theoretical and practical advantages for ensuring that discussions of work-life balance include a variety of countries and cultures. With the increased international movement of both organisations and labour, the multi-cultural aspect of work-life balance employment policies will become an issue of increasing importance for both employers and researchers.

Conclusion

While existing research evaluates the specific consequences of work-life balance, this paper provided a brief review of how work-life balance policies influence some of the current issues facing organisations and society. The difficulty in reviewing these consequences is that work-life balance and family-friendly arrangements in industrialised nations have been developed differently, depending on historical, religious and cultural influences, stage of economic development, and different government regimes. Skilled labour shortages are the major inducement of voluntary employer policies. However, these policies are dependent upon costs and conditions of full employment and labour scarcity. The evidence that supports the organisational benefits of work-life policies is mixed, primarily due to methodological issues (e.g., a focus on individual organisational case studies and non-random samples). The few cost-benefit analyses that have been conducted examining organisational work-life balance policies are predominately focused on the short-term consequences. Research demonstrating that societal issues, such as declining fertility rates can be improved through effective work-life balance policies is only now emerging and is considered to be an important area for future research. This review considers the evidence for why work-life balance should *not* simply be considered to be an individual's concern. Instead, we urge future research to further consider the organisational and societal concerns we have identified here. Unless age ratios can be improved, the net result of these societal and organisational issues is a markedly reduced labour supply. Only with a comprehensive multilevel approach will some of the entrenched employment practices that currently facilitate work-life *imbalance* actually be remedied. We conclude with a pertinent point from Duxbury and Higgins (2003):

“It would appear that work-life conflict is not only a moral issue – it is a productivity and economic issue, a workplace issue and a social issue, and needs to be addressed as such.” (p xviii)

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