

## OPENING THE BLACK BOX OF WORK LIFE BALANCE THEORIES: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*With the recent advancements in technology, the work-life boundaries have blurred affecting the performance of the employees while catching the attention of the researchers as well as the practitioners. The purpose of this study is to conduct a review on the work-life-balance-theories and their evolution over the last century while discussing the development of the concept from work-life-balance to work-life-integration. The relationship of work and family has been evolved drastically over the years, which resulted in the development of new theories for exploring this changing relationship. The paper will introduce the progression in work and family relationship by describing the historical factors that led to the recent development in this field. The underpinning theories of work-life-balance are then reviewed from the two perspectives of work-life-conflict and work-life-balance.*

**Keywords:** Work Life Conflict, Work Life Balance, Work Life Integration, Work Life Balance theories.

### INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance is the term that is being used very often nowadays. It is the state of equilibrium when someone is required to equally prioritise their professional and family demands. However, the nature of humans to thrive professionally make them compromise their own well-being and focus more on their career (Wepfer et al., 2018). The work life balance has been defined by Kirchmeyer (2000) as: “*achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains and to do so requires personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment to be well distributed across domains*”.

Theories are the foundation of any research study; despite the discipline of the study, it holds the research framework together. In the field of HR, the concept of work life balance plays a pivotal role because it revolves around the wellbeing of the employees. And for any organization to thrive the employee satisfaction is of utmost importance (Bello & Tanko, 2020). According to Guest (2002) the relation between employee’s work life and family life plays an important role in the attainment of company’s goals.

During the past two centuries the concept of work and family have been changed conspicuously. As the relation between work and family life has been evolving, therefore, in this regard new theories have been used to describe this changing relationship by research scholars (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014). Over the last three decades the topic of work family balance have become a topic of interest, despite being two separate domains, they both significantly influence one another (Karassvidou & Glaveli, 2016). In today’s era the challenge to strike balance between work and family life is not only area of concern for individuals but also for the policy makers of the organisations. In this regard organizations are striving to formulate new policies and strategies to facilitate their employees to accomplish work life balance which results in achieving organisational goals. On the other hand, as far as the theoretical perspective is concerned, there has been multiple theories which are linked with work life balance since 1970s. With the advancement of technology, the demographical changes, inclusion of women in workforce, dual earner couples, tele-working all these factors call for the development of newer theories which may address the evolving relationship of work and life.

The topic of work life balance is not only the topic of interest for employees, but it has been the topic of importance for researchers, employers, and employees’ families (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014). With the increase in research over the topic of work life balance during last three decades it is

evident that the topic has become of an utmost importance for the researchers. Over the course of time the structure of work life balance has emerged from early stage to the transformation stage (Kumar & Janakiram, 2017) this emergence has become a foundation for the development of work life balance theories. Subsequently, despite having multiple theories used for numerous attributes of work life balance, there has been no common theory which can be universally accepted as the underpinning theory of work life balance (Bello & Tanko, 2020).

The studies on work life balance started to be recorded since the late nineteenth century when the traditional structure of families started to change. In a study by Kleinberg (1989) on “*The shadow of the Mills: the working-class families in Pittsburg from 1870-1907*”, she explains the effect of industrialization on the work family relationship from multiple viewpoints. Such as, during the period of industrialization, the shift of income from inside to outside the house which creates a contradiction between work and family. However, in 21<sup>st</sup> century the structure of families began to change due to increase of women participation in the work force, dual earner couples and single parents (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These socio-economic conditions change the roles and values of individuals which result in conflict between work and family life (Karassvidou & Glaveli, 2016).

During the era of early industrialization, the earlier state of balance shifted substantially (Lewis, 2003). Which ascend the need for newer perspectives on the concept of work life balance. The current study will be focusing on the historical development of theories linked with work life balance and with the assumption that these developments in theories will carve a way to develop newer theories in work life balance.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Work Life balance theories: From where to start.**

Despite growing number of research studies on the topic of work family relationships and the issues related to both fields, an unusually little effort has been seen in terms of consolidating the theories related to work life balance (Guest, 2002). The focus of available research is either on the relationship of work and family variables or summarization of existing theories (Bello & Tanko, 2020). However, there are number of theories that are providing useful lens about relationship between the variables of work and life, yet a comprehensive overview is still missing in the existing literature. The scarcity of such research reviews led to many severances in work life balance exploration (Rincy V Mathew, 2014).

Historically, the concept of work life balance has been studied with the viewpoint of conflict between a person’s multiple roles that he performs in a society. Which includes the role at the workplace and the role among family (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Adams, King, & King, 1996; Grzywacz & Marks 2000; Clark 2000; Grzywacz 2000;). In this regard two major theories have been linked with work life balance studies as the fundamental theories, these theories are Boundary theory and Border theory. On the groundwork of these two theories the rest of the theories have been developed. The current article will be reviewing the theoretical approaches that are connecting both work and non-work territories with the intention to compile and consolidate the theories related to work life balance into groups. So that a clear understanding should be developed and severances in the field of work life balance should be reduced. These theoretical methodologies have been expanded from separation of work and life to the integration of both (Cissna et al., 2021).

Most of the studies conducted in the era of 70s, were focused on the “boundary theory” perspective. It was Pleck (1977) who beautifully illustrated the purpose of boundary theory to describe the difficulties being face between work and family relationship. However, the perspective of Pleck (1977) was towards the negative side of work and family relationship which emerged due to personal limitations and role conflicts. Later in 1983, Oslen studies the relationship between work and family and gave further vision about the implication of boundary theory. The main focus of her study was from different perspectives i.e. gender, law, on the restructuring and changes being made in the workplace. The main theme of boundary theory describes work and family as two separate but interlinked spheres which is mostly categorised under social life perspective to be as work and market (Muhammad et al., 2019). According to that theory people are constantly engaged in changing roles from work life to family life. Everyone plays a significant different role in these domains. As they must transform from one role to the other, they must leave one role and start playing the other role as soon as they enter that specific domain. The theory also apprised that an individual cannot play separate roles at the same time and therefore it needs to create a boundary between both (Karassvidou & Glaveli, 2016).

Since the Boundary and Border theories were first anticipated in the two decades, the exponential change of working pattern and change in basic assumptions of working style by the inclusion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has changed the concept of work life balance. In a study by Field, J. C., & Chan, X. W. (2018) the researchers had conducted a survey to study the boundaryless work interface of knowledge workers. The study was focused on the blurring of boundaries between work and life. The study also divided the work life interface theories into three categories: (i) the role strain theory which depicts the negative relation of work life interface, (ii) the role accumulation theory which depicts the positive side of work life interface and (iii) the boundary and border theory that depicts the blurring boundaries between work and non-work.

While multiple studies have been conducted to understand the boundaries surrounding the work life and family life, there were few studies that focused on testing the schemes set forth by these theories. In this regard (Bulger et al., 2007) proposed the segmentation – integration continuum to investigate the boundary management of workers. Later Lavassani & Movahedi, (2014) in their study, combine the seven dominant theories of work life balance under the segmentation- integration, boundary- border and conflict balance continuum. Those theories were categorized in three groups: conflict view, compensation view and balance view.

Based on the framework provided by (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014) the current study will include all the theories being used in the work family relationship studies. The seven major theories utilized to explain the relationship on the spectrum of boundary and border theory are structural functionalism theory, segmentation theory, compensation theory, supplemental and reactive compensation theory, role enhancement theory, spill over theory and work enrichment model. Apart from these seven theories, the literature has added seven more theories in the domain of work life balance so far. These theories are role strain theory, overall appraisal theory, ladder theory, segmentation & integration theory, ecology system theory, instrumental theory, and congruence theory. The theories will be briefly explained in further part of the paper whereas a complete table depicting the theories and their type will be presented at the end as Annex A.

## **THEORIES OF WORK LIFE BALANCE**

**Structural Functionalism theory:** The origin of current references to social structure can be tracked to Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) who was a French social scientist. He argued that the interdependency of social system contributes towards the unity of society. In social sciences the term structural functionalism is the school of thought which says that in a society, the institutions, norms, relationships, and roles, they all serve a purpose and each one of them are imperative for each other's existence (Lane, 2014.)The concept also mentions the tension created within the social system if some part of the integrated social system changes.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the industrial revolution era when economic work was separating from family work, this leads to the roots of social structuralism theory (MacDermitt, 2005). The technological advancements in 19<sup>th</sup> century led towards the separation of work from family but not until early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the theories of work family began to emerge. Structural functionalism was one of the prominent sociology theories in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Demerath, 1966). After big depression, the economy was rejuvenated by World War II. The reason was due to boom in the weapon manufacturing industry. During the war considerable number of workforces, which was men, were sent to the war. Therefore, women had to be used as workforce. After the war ended these women were sent back to their houses to fulfil their family roles so that returning soldiers may get back to their jobs (Bengston et al., 1993). The theory of structural functionalism was influenced due to industrial revolution as the role of men and women changed. The theory entails that life is divided between two domains: constructive life that happens on workplace and emotional life that exist with family at home (Oslen 1983). The theory believes in the fundamental separation of both domains and that people should be specialized in separate domains, men doing the instrumental tasks at workplace and women doing their expressive tasks at home (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). However, in late sixties the dominance of structural functionalism theory was questioned by many researchers (Demerath, 1966), that pave way towards development of new theories to describe the relationship between work and family (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014).

**Role Strain theory:** Sociologist William J. Goode (1960) first originated the concept of role strain theory. According to this theory an individual plays distinct roles based on his social institution and because of these role relationships the social institutes are maintained. It also explains that an individual playing multiple roles may lead to the inter role conflict and role strain. According to this theory the

contradictory demands on energy, time and fulfilling the roles of work and family it becomes difficult to manage the roles separately. According to the definition by Greenhaus and Beutell, (1985) the work and family responsibilities and roles are not compatible in some respect, which makes it difficult to participate in one role by virtue of participation in other role (Justin Craig Field & Xi Wen Chan, 2018). The role conflict has arisen since the work and life structures have been changed due to rise of dual earning couples, single parents etc. Marks (1977) contended that role strain does not occur due to dissenting role demands but it occurs due to the imbalance of roles. In addition to that Hyde & Barnett (2001) also argued that having multiple roles is not the concern, but what matters is the arrangement and eminence of the roles that lead to role strain.

According to (Marks, 1977) the strain in roles does not occur due to non-compatible demands in roles but due to lack of balance among them. He also added, if the commitments are equally distributed whether positive or negative then there will be chances of no strain in roles. In addition to Marks (1977) viewpoints regarding role strain, Barnett & Hyde (2001) added that there is no problem with having multiple roles, however, the problem lies with the combination and quality of the roles that lead to role strain.

**Compensation Theory:** After the conflict view of work and life being two separate domains the second era of work life theories started in late 1970s. Piotrkowski, (1979) in his study of work and family system deliberated that employees look to their homes as sanctuaries, and their families as a source of satisfaction which lacks in their professional sphere. Subsequent to Piotrkowski (1979), Lambert (1990) collected the responses of workers in his study “*Processes linking work and family: A critical review and research agenda*” and the results from the study led to the compensation theory which states that in order to get more satisfaction in one sphere, the workers may try to compensate for lack of satisfaction in other domain. Both spheres have compensating effect on each other. If an individual is not satisfied or happy at work then this negative experience will be compensated by getting positive experience at home (Young & Kleiner, 1992). The compensation theory apprised that individuals seek out more satisfaction in work or home when they are dissatisfied in the other. The compensation theory has been distinguished from previous theories because the positive effect of work to family was recognised for the first time through this theory. But this should also be noted that the original viewpoint of compensation theory, as suggested by Piotrkowski, 1979, was concentrated on the negative effect of work and family life. However, it was the advanced view by Lambert (1990) who recognised the positive effect of work and family life. The further development in continuation of Lambert’s (1990) work opened the door for development of new theories in view of work life balance (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014).

**Supplemental and Reactive Compensation theories:** Supplemental and compensation theories were developed in late 1980s and early 1990s. These two theories are the contradictions of compensation theory. These theories have been shaped by Zedeck, 1992; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990; Kando & Summers, 1971. As the compensation theory describes the behaviour of an individual who seeks out the alternative satisfaction in the other domains, the supplemental and reactive compensation help describe the reason behind that behaviour of individual (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). The supplemental compensation occurs when a person realises that his intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in one domain is insufficient and as a result the person endeavours to supplement the absence of rewards in the other domain. For example, an individual having less independence at work may seek out for more independence outside work domain. Whereas the reactive compensation occurs when a negative experience in one domain is experienced by the individual and as result, he strives for positive experience in contrast from the other domain for example after getting a stressful and fatigue day an individual will seek out to get relaxed and leisure time at home (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000).

**Overall Appraisal Theory:** Overall appraisal theory is the theory of psychology which can be defined in simplest form as “the emotions are derived by the appraisal of situations”. For example, if a relationship ends it leads to a distressed and sad emotion of any individual that is elicited by the fact that what has happened cannot be recovered (Roseman & Smith, 2014). According to Grzywacz & Carlson, (2007) the work-life balance can be assessed by overall appraisal method. The individual general assessment about his situation can be assessed by the overall appraisal method. According to Clark (2000) the work-life balance is achieved by getting “satisfaction and good performance in both domains with less role conflict”. When the overall appraisal theory is applied on the work life balance then the main agenda is to measure how satisfied an individual feel in keeping harmony between work and family life (Kumar & Janakiram, 2017).

**Spill over theory:** The Spill over argues that work and life are both integrated to each other. The experience in one sphere affects the experience in another sphere. According to (Glowinkowski & Cooper, 1986) the spill over naturally occurs when the events of domain affect the other domain. Spill over has been theoretically conceiving as positive and negative spill over (Lambert, 1990; Crouter, 1984). As per the theory, individuals carry their emotions, skills, feelings, and behaviours from their work to family life and from family to work life. Its however, more like a case and effect influence from one domain to the other (Rado et al., 2016). Kirchmeyer (1992) gave a multidimensional aspect of spill over; positive or negative from family to work and from work to family.

**Role enhancement theory:** The role enhancement theory describes that multiple roles bring rewards such as experience of success, elevated self-esteem, income, and prospects for social relationships (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Later Frone, (2003) define role enhancement as “the participation in one role made it easier to participate in other role”. From this viewpoint, the arrangement of certain roles has positive effect rather than negative on the welfare of an individual but it needs to be in in the limits as it goes beyond the upper limit then the distress may occur (Kinnunen et al., 2006). Along with the positive effect the theory also acknowledges the negative effect of work family relationship and like positive effect it also create distress if crosses the upper limit.

**Work Enrichment theory:** As the research on work life domain started to mature, drawing on role accumulation theory, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) anticipated the model of work family enrichment. It is defined as ‘*the experiences of an individual in one role improves the quality of life in other role*’. This model has already drawn the attention of many researchers. The model also explains the positive side of the work family relationship. While combining the work and family, Halpern (2008) illustrates that more study should be deliberated while describing the positive interface of work and family domains. The literature indicates that more researchers are conducting empirical studies on the positive effects of work to family and family work (Lapierre and Allen, 2006; Carlson et al. 2006).

**Segmentation and Integration theory:** Segmentation perspective was first originated by Blood and Wolf (1960) who applied this concept to the blue-collar workers. Before that, the concept of work and life was separate segments which does not influence each other and are independent of each other. However, the concept evolved, and Blood and Wolf (1960) explained that it is a natural process for individuals to segment the work and family life in case of rambling jobs. The segmentation of work and family means that both domains are separate with no interaction and the experience in one domain does not affect the experiences of the other (Young & Kleiner, 1992). However, Lambert (1990) suggest that the segmentation does not occur naturally, but the individual must create a boundary or wall between the work and family to avoid any pressure affecting his family life due to stress at work or vice versa. The concept of segmentation was confronted by researchers who established the fact that work and family both are interconnected domains of human life (Pleck, 1977; Bruke & Greenglass 1987; Kanter 1977; Voydاناoff 1987). Guest (2001) considers this as a weakest relation between work and family which can offer a theoretical but not the empirical support. Googins (1997) believed that the solutions regarding work life balance cannot be created in isolation rather it can be achieved by including both the domains with shared responsibility. In this regard, integration theory supports the view of Clark (2000) that flexible boundaries between work life and family life can create a healthy system. Later, Madsen and Morris (2007) also acknowledged the integration theory. According to them all the stakeholders i.e., organizations, workers, and families/ communities, are all the partners with equality to create a work life balance model. Therefore, we cannot consider them as separate domains to create their own balance in isolation, rather integrative view will help achieve balance for both territories (Rincy & Panchanatham, 2014).

**Ladder Theory:** (Bird, 2006) in his study “*Work Life balance: Doing it right and avoiding the pitfalls*”, came up with the concept of the “Two legs of the work life strategy”. He exhibited the approach of organizations who had adopted the one-sided strategy of providing balance to the employees. The focus of organizations was to solve the work life balance problem through embracing new policies and procedures. However, the major concern regarding work life balance is that the organizations had been ignoring the individual side of the ladder. He represents the left leg of the ladder as what an organization can do for an individual and the right leg of the ladder represents what an individual can do for the organization. The rungs of the ladder were represented by the reasons of an organizations to focus the work life balance of employees. The foundation of this concept was that every individual has his own criteria of work life balance and hence it varies among individuals. It is the responsibility of individuals to find their balance that meet their personal and professional expectations. On the other hand, the foundation of organization side of ladder focuses on the best policies and practices of the organizations

which support the work life balance of the employees (Bello & Tanko, 2020). These policies include flexible working hours, child or elder care, telecommuting, leave policies, and other wellbeing policies. If we summarize the theory, we can say that a ladder cannot stand on one leg and both legs are significant for each other.

**Ecology system theory:** The ecology system theory was introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005). He was a Russian born American Psychologist. The theory helped in examining the relationships between individual and the society. The concept helped many psychologists to study the human behaviours and their societal roles. Urie divided the ecology system theory into five parts that are also called as the five environmental systems, within which any individual may interact (Christensen, 2016). These systems are Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem. This model had been applied on the human development and that is why ecology system theory is also known as Human ecology theory (Ray, 2016).

Later the theory has been used by Grzywacz and Marks (2000) who studied the concept of ecology system theory in the context of work-life balance. According to them ecological system theory observes the interaction between the individual and the environment which lead to the personal development of any individual (Rincy V Mathew, 2014). This concept explains that work and family life are both joint functions of the activities based on time, context, and personal behaviours (Kumar & Janakiram, 2017). However, the theory was later transformed into the Person-in environment theory to study the relationship between the person and environment variants. These relationships were study on the grounds of social, physical, and natural environments (Bello & Tanko, 2020).

**Instrumental theory and congruence theory:** (Guest, 2002) in his study of “Perspective on the study of work life balance” described four main models of work life balance i.e., segmentation, spill over, compensation, and instrumental model. He described instrumental model as the model, where one domain is facilitated by the success in another domain. He gave a traditional example of an instrumental worker who compromise his routine by working long hours to increase his earnings to purchase house or a car for the comfort of his family. The concept of instrumentality is defined as “to maintain a satisfying and leisure life, one’s career and work are the primary source of providing that comfort or vice versa” (Evans and Bartolome, 1984). In short, the activities in one domain facilitate the activities of the other domain.

## ANNEX A

### WORK FAMILY SEGMENTATION TO WORK FAMILY INTEGRATION

Theories	Segment	Era
Structural functionalism theory Role Strain theory	Conflict Perspective	Early 1900s to late 1960s
Compensation theory Supplemental & reactive compensation theory Overall Appraisal theory	Compensation Perspective	Early 1960s to early 1990s
Spill over theory Role enhancement theory Work enrichment theory Integration theory Ladder theory Ecology system theory Instrumental theory Congruence theory	Balance to Integration Perspective	Late 1980s to present

Congruence theory on the other hand explain that an additional third variable is responsible to affect the balance between work and family. The similarity has been shown through this theory by a third variable between work and family, this variable can be socio-cultural and genetic forces, personality characteristics and behavioural styles (Zedeck 1992; Staines, 1980; Edward & Rothbard, 2000).

The ecology system theory, ladder theory, instrumental and congruence theories have been mentioned in the literature of work life balance theories, but the influence of these theories is extremely limited in research (Khateeb, 2020).

## DISCUSSION

Despite the growing need of work life balance studies, the development of theories in this field is still needed. The present study has compiled all the relevant theories that have been linked with the work life balance studies and the roots of these theories goes back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The research in this area has fostered our knowledge with respect to study the relationship between work and family life but the problem is lack of dominant theory with respect to the specific domain. The current study has described the evolution of theories that have been used from segmentation to integration spectrum of work and family life, but a conclusion cannot be drawn that in each period only the mentioned theories were dominant and appropriate to use in all settings. There is no expiry for the theory, therefore, any theory can be dominant in any specific time domain. However, another interesting area, that has not been found is the use of Life course theory to study the relationship between work and life. There has been significant contribution by multiple researchers like (Bruening & Dixon, 2008) in the Life Course perspective.

The concept of Life course was originated by sociologists who gave the concept a theoretical perspective (Clausen, 1972; Elder, 1974; Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). The theme of Life course has been studied by both sociologists and psychologists such as (Baltes, 1968; Schaie, 1965). The Psychologists covered the life span in behavioural terms, with more focus on inter and intra-individual erraticism in individual's emotional, perceptive and their free will phenomena (Bernardi et al., 2019). Life Course theory is an emerging inter disciplinary theory that identifies how age, relationships, transitions in life, events, time and space, human agency and social embeddedness shape the life of people in a chronological manner from the time of their birth till the death. (D & Hutchison, 2011). Therefore, this theory needs more exploration with respect to work life balance studies as the work and family life of any individual covers all the five parameters of life course perspective. Hence, by utilizing this theory the in-depth studies can be conducted through longitudinal research.

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