Message from the Co-chairs
Almuth McDowall & Gail Kinman

Work-life balance: European insights

This editorial was written as one of us (Almuth McDowall) enjoyed a visiting professorship for a month at the University of Aix-Marseille in Provence, in the laboratory of Social Psychology. This provided rich and fertile ground not only for academic and theoretical exchange, but also to discuss working practices more widely – with a particular focus of course on academia!

It’s now three years ago that France passed a law to allow employees to disconnect from email, and have time off as organisations above a certain size need to draw up a charter in consultation with their employees. Naturally, one of my first questions to my colleagues was ‘So, has this worked?’ ‘Mais non’, was the emphatic answer, as our academic colleagues are working just as hard as we do in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly in early career roles. Weekend and evening work is routine, and emails from students are abundant and never ending. One of the reasons for this is that French universities are reluctant to embrace technology, so online learning environments are not common in public universities. This means that questions are direct and unfiltered, as there are for instance no discussion forums, meaning a lot of queries are duplicated. So in theory, colleagues would like to disconnect more, in practice this is difficult to achieve. However, the influence of the unions is much stronger in France. Indeed, administrative staff in the university work a very routine schedule – long lunch breaks from 12 to 2 are sacred and no one stays after hours, and short working weeks are common. In practice, this means that academics don’t always find it easy to request equipment, get support with other tasks and so on, increasing workloads.

Naturally, I was also keen to hear more about experiences in the private sector. Again, anecdotal evidence was similar – having a law does not equate changes in policy or practice, even where organisations had gone as far as to draw up a charter, there seemed little evidence that this was taken up in practice.

It was noticeable though, for someone who is used to wolfing down a salad whilst sitting at her desk, that French colleagues allowed far more time for lunch together and informal gatherings and also greeting each other in the corridor each day. This makes for a more relaxed, welcoming and informal atmosphere. There has been much talk this week about the UK universities becoming stressful and ‘unkind’ places with little room for interaction and checking in on people. My visit to France brought home how important these regular informal check points are, and that we should make more time to connect with each other. Social support is crucial for good work-life balance (Kossek et al., 2011), but we need to find ways of strengthening and legitimising such support.

Other aspects which we discussed was the ‘gig economy’, not least as permanent lectureships are hard to come by in France now. Many early career researchers take on posts with little job security and work extra hard in the hope of being able to hold on...
to their current positions. Of course, we have seen similar trends in the UK, across different sectors. Our recent work with Parents in the Performing Arts indicates that self-employment is rife in this industry, as 58 per cent of the people surveyed work freelance, compared to 15 per cent in the general population. Not surprisingly, participants reported lower work-life balance, higher job insecurity, low employability yet also high engagement, indicative of a ‘precarious’ profession where people feel very passionate about what they do, yet make sacrifices.

We will debate such current issues at an event during National Work-Life Week at the British Psychological Society on 14 October 2019, save the date! Dr Marina Burakova from the University of Aix-Marseille has been invited as our keynote to present data from French academics on work-life balance; an interview with her will feature in our next edition.

A bientôt!

**Professor Almuth McDowall**
almuth.mcdowall@city.ac.uk

**Professor Gail Kinman**
gail.kinman@beds.ac.uk

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**References**

To download the PiPA report, please go to:
http://www.pipacampaign.com/balancing-act-survey/

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**Celebrating ten years of the DOP’s Work-Life Balance Working Group**

**An event for National Work Life Week**

**Date:** 14 October 12:15pm–5:00pm 

**Location:** Tabernacle Street

Join us for a thought-provoking afternoon celebrating ten years of the Work-Life Balance Working Group and setting the agenda for the next ten years. During the afternoon a range of high-profile speakers will provide an overview of current and emergent issues in work-life balance; and participants will be invited to help us shape our future agenda. We are delighted that Dr Marina Burakova from the University of Aix Marseille will be joining us as keynote speaker. Marina will be sharing her research into the work-life balance challenges faced by French academics. Other speakers will focus on work-life balance in relation to precarious work, multi-cultural organisations and supporting organisations through change

We only have space for a limited number of delegates and will shortly be disseminating more information and a link to book your place.
I WRITE THIS message having just returned from the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) congress in Torino, Italy. The Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) was well represented with members presenting symposia on return to work, the political sphere, work engagement, and assessment. The Division had an exhibitor’s stand also to promote the 2021 congress which will be held in Glasgow and organised by the BPS/DOP. This is very exciting and a good opportunity to have the largest gathering of occupational/work/organisational/industrial psychologists on our home turf.

With a congress of just over 1900 delegates it was challenging to attend all of the papers that I wanted to attend. However, I managed to attend a few, and there will be an overview of the work-life material from the congress in the next edition of the bulletin.

This edition of the bulletin has a political slant, with Dr Ashley Weinberg, in his guest editor role, providing an edition that looks at work-life balance in the political sphere. This is timely given the visibility of politics across the globe, and perhaps allows us to realise that politicians are people too. My message is brief as the focus is on work-life balance and politicians.

Of course, this edition has a few of the ‘normal’ features, such as the international piece, in which Fang Lee Cooke provides us with an overview of work-life balance in China. It provides us with an interesting insight into a country of 1.4 billion people that covers close to 20 per cent of the world’s population. As Fang notes, China has the largest global industrial workforce, so is one for which we would want to understand how it addresses those work and life issues that arise. I found the article fascinating and I hope you do also.

In another segment, John Hackston covers those work-life balance issues that arise among those who work in the gig economy. As limited research exists at present on the gig economy, this article offers context about a group of workers on which much more research is required to understand their work/life needs.

So enjoy, and we will catch up in the winter edition.

Dr Roxane L. Gervais
DOPWLBEeditor@bps.org.uk
Welcome to this issue (Guest Editor)

Ashley Weinberg

May is a busy month, but none quite so busy in politics as the month just past, with two elections taking place and with May giving way to what follows in every sense. Rightly proud of our capacity to predict the future, psychologists from the Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) have given a politics-themed symposium at EAWOP. This rounds off a month begun at the BPS Annual Conference in Harrogate by the newly-formed Political Psychology section – which is supported and led by a number of Occupational Psychologists – considering ‘Brexit and Me’. As I write this, Ritsa Ventouratos-Fotinatos, Jo Silvester and Maddy Wyatt are at the annual EAWOP conference in Turin presenting at a symposium titled, ‘Politics with a capital “P” in organisations: The global effect of politics on the wellbeing of organisations’. They are leading discussions on behalf of the DOP about what we know about politicians and how politics impacts in many ways on our experiences of the workplace, whether by policy, practice or by mistake.

By the time you read this, the United Kingdom (UK) may have a new Prime Minister or perhaps the date of the next General Election will become clearer. Either way, you will have asked yourself the question, who are these people in charge, how do they do this job and I wonder what might happen in my job if I returned to clients, colleagues or students with the same set of suggestions they had rejected twice before? (Please don’t try this at home).

Politicians may not be your favourite people, but then in our own daily lives aren’t we all politicians? Please don’t worry, this issue isn’t designed to initiate self-loathing or indeed other-loathing, rather to invite you to consider the lives of one occupational group traditionally ignored by researchers and practitioners, yet which exerts a disproportionate effect on all our lives. So, I’d like to thank Roxane and the Work-Life Balance Bulletin team for letting us bring the ideas and issues to you on the following pages and to extend my thanks and appreciation to all of you who have contributed to and supported the establishment of a new section in Political Psychology which brings politicians (however we define them) under psychological scrutiny. We hope to continue these efforts on all fronts through research, teaching and practice.

Of course, you won’t need me to remind you of how politics shapes our lives at work, and in editing this volume for specialists in work-life matters, I’m aware you are all too familiar with the politics of what transpires outside of work as well. So what happens when we shine the spotlight on those curious arbiters of national, regional and local policy – our politicians. What can we learn or dare to believe about their lives outside of the job or where their work intersects with non-work life? Indeed is there such a thing as life beyond politics for those whose career survival may depend on always being ‘connected’ to events, on call at the disposal of a 24-hour media which is hungrily reporting if not leading on emerging stories, whilst vying for the support of a concerned, agitated, disenchanted, bored or intrigued electorate?

Of course this doesn’t mean we should feel sorry for our politicians, but perhaps we
need to consider the potential costs for individuals serving the public, particularly where their ability to function is impaired to such a degree that people are not adequately represented, poor decisions are made and little support is on offer to help remedy the situation. Without answers to these issues, we are all the losers! If you don’t believe this, then it may be revealing to know that in January the (jauntily titled) journal *Parliamentary Affairs* published a paper by work psychologists and political scientists titled, ‘Governing under pressure? The mental well-being of politicians’ and by the end of a politically charged Spring, MIND had written to all Members of Parliament (MPs) in the UK House of Commons to offer psychological help to any MP who needed it!

OK, this may sound a little dramatic, but it doesn’t require an issue of the *Work-Life Balance Bulletin* to tell you that democracy is facing major challenges. What I hope this issue will offer is an insight into the work-life experiences of those who put themselves forward for office – locally or nationally – how or whether they cope and how equipped are parliaments to deal with the associated problems. Research has shown consistently that the work-life interface for politicians is a key predictor of their mental health as it is for most of us – the difference is that if the balance is lacking for this occupational group, then this is a potential challenge for democracy and all of us.

I do hope you will find this issue of interest and of use. Articles are inspired by Belgian researchers examining work, family and politics among local politicians, the UK experience of redesigning the work of the MP and its impact on work-life balance and the difficulties of having a life outside of work facing national representatives in Malawi. The ‘interview with a politician’ represents a necessarily tricky manoeuvre – it is a composite of conversations with politicians, some attributed and some not, some nearly and some complete, which reflect their work-life realities.

Was that really a whole editorial on politics which didn’t mention Brexit yet? In case you’re getting withdrawal symptoms, and if you feel that joining a vibrant political psychology movement is the logical step, then please feel free to join (for free until 2020!) the new BPS Political Psychology Section. You can access the web address below for more details about this exciting development, with news about events and how to join, or please feel free to drop me a line at a.weinberg@salford.ac.uk

https://www.bps.org.uk/member-microsites/political-psychology-section

Enjoy!

All best wishes,

Ashley Weinberg (Guest Editor)
A.Weinberg@salford.ac.uk
University of Salford
Salford, United Kingdom
The politics of work-life balance – for politicians
Ashley Weinberg

HOW EFFECTIVELY an employee can deal with the challenges of balancing her/his job and life outside of the job depends on many considerations. For the Member of Parliament (MP) where the job requirements pervade time, the role played by the MP’s employer in encouraging each politician to maintain this balance is likely to be significant. However, for MPs there is no employer or indeed clear definition of their job! They are classed as ‘individual office holders’ (Cox, 2018).

Representing constituents, holding the government to account, acting as a good political party member, being seen by the electorate to do the right things and being present or virtually visible at any time as required by local or national events, mean there are many acting in the role of would-be ‘employers’. This presents an immediate issue of being accountable to many, but actually being employed by no one. The House of Commons is one of two places constituting the MP’s place of work, where offices, expenses, administrative and research staff are based – with the need for these to be reflected in arrangements established by the MP in their own constituency. However it was only in 2010 following the expenses’ scandal that a Members’ Handbook was introduced to inform and guide MPs about their role and subsequently their pay and expenses have been handled by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

In terms of work-life balance this places a firm emphasis on the capacity and success of MPs in self-monitoring, devising their own strategies for achieving some form of workable equilibrium. Family and friends are integral to this, along with trusted advisers and colleagues, political mentors and sponsors. At the 2015 annual Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) conference, Almuth McDowall, Gail Kinman and Christine Grant ran a workshop fostering work-life balance competence and noted ‘a growing recognition that enabling employers to self-manage their work-life balance will not only have benefits for well-being and performance, but can also act as a “trigger” for culture change’ (2015, p.31). As other articles in this edition demonstrate, the link between work-life balance, performance and wellbeing among MPs is clear. However the culture in which they are required to operate runs counter to this in many ways. It is enlightening and at times alarming to consider how this can be seen in practice and the reality of extended working hours – which mean life is often mainly about working – can mean prolonged exposure to a toxic psychosocial environment.

Toxic organisational culture
Dame Laura Cox chaired an enquiry into the bullying and harassment of House of Commons staff and published her findings last autumn. Her report highlights the importance of the culture of the organisation in permitting the continuation of unacceptable standards of working. It is based on the testimony of many of the 2300 people working at the House of Commons, as well as of the 650 MPs they support. While the report concludes ‘the overwhelming majority of Members behave entirely appropriately and courteously towards members of House staff’ (2018, p.153), the catalogue of past and ongoing abuse and negligence is shocking. Acknowledging the
professional and high standards of the vast majority of politicians and staff of the House, the report is scathing of the extent of abuse and clear in its aims: 'This is not to demonise the entire institution, but unacceptable behaviour by some, whether elected Members or House staff, inflicts damage on everyone and undermines the legitimacy and authority of the House of Commons. Parliament is diminished'. (2018, p.4).

Cited examples of reported behaviours include, ‘Some women... being humiliated in front of colleagues by comments about why they needed to work or have a career if they had a husband, or “why do we need another woman in here, we already have two.” Some members of staff from “BAME” backgrounds reported racist abuse, or being frequently challenged as to their right to be in particular parts of the estate’ (2018, p.51). The devastating impact of being exposed to this type of treatment was also evidenced: ‘People who believed themselves to be strong, capable individuals suddenly found that they were unable to eat or sleep properly, or they were shouting at their children or partners, or were prone to sudden bouts of crying or panic attacks... People gradually lost all belief in themselves and some have suffered lasting physical or mental ill health as a result’ (2018, p.51).

Publication of the report attracted widespread media coverage and public furore, but there was pessimism in Parliament about the likely uptake of recommendations for training, the availability of electronic resources and reconstitution of remedial and complaints procedures. In relation to psychological support, some optimism is warranted as recent years have seen the introduction of a counselling service for MPs and access to occupational physicians has existed for far longer. Nevertheless, the report recommended, ‘The Health and Wellbeing Service merits greater recognition and support, and its role should be expanded, promoted and adequately resourced’ (2018, p.151). A different form of aggression has sadly underlined the need for psychological support as there is continued targeting of a number of MPs by online hate campaigns which mean that at whatever moment they take to social media, they are subject to negative and threatening abuse. The seriousness of this has been further highlighted by the imprisonment of a man who had engaged in online threats against Stella Creasy MP. However the tragic murders of Jo Cox MP at her constituency office and of Police Constable Keith Palmer during an attack outside Parliament demonstrate the real dangers to life of working as part of the democratic system.

**Young families in politics**

The reciprocal and life-changing impact of work and home factors for national politicians is clear and in addition to the spill-over from work to home, it is important to consider an example of family-to-work conflict. The need to take care of one’s child whilst being called on to make decisions of national importance provides a good example of the politician’s ultimate work-life balance dilemma. On 18 April, 2018, the United States Senate changed its rules to allow children access to the floor of the House. The following day, this legislation was tested as Illinois politician Tammy Duckworth – having become the first US senator to have a baby while holding office only ten days before – felt compelled to attend at the prospect of a knife edge vote over the appointment of one of President Trump’s nominees. She duly appeared in a wheelchair carrying her daughter and was welcomed by colleagues including the Leaders of both majority and minority parties. On the one hand, this is a welcome embrace for politicians as humans, however the existence of the need to interrupt parental leave should be questioned and perhaps what is regarded now as a political necessity, will perhaps be addressed by future consideration of how legitimate absence by a politician from the job is covered in future. Senator Duckworth was clear about her view: ‘It felt so much to be able to cast the vote as a mom and be able to do my job and take care of my baby at the same time’.

Contrast this with an incident this Spring
in the Parliament of a country renowned for its generous parental leave and positive attitudes towards harmonious work-life balance. In March this year, Danish legislator Mette Abildgaard decided to bring her five-month old daughter to the parliamentary chamber when an unexpected vote was called. Her husband was unable to be there and so armed with a ‘dummy’ and with her secretary on stand-by if the baby cried, the politician entered the arena, which is not covered by any rules about the presence of children. Speaker Ms Pia Kjaersgaard passed a message via a colleague to say it was ‘not good’ to bring babies to the chamber, bringing an end to the child’s presence there. This sparked a flurry of comment from all sides of the political spectrum – not all of it supportive of a parent bringing her child to work. However such a frosty reception had not been evident three years previously, when a different Speaker of the Danish Parliament passed no comment at all on a legislator bringing their child into the chamber, even when the enlightened youngster decided politics was not so exciting after all and started crying!

Some may feel that the focus on a woman carrying out parental duties while in a political role presents a skewed picture of parenthood and risks ignoring the role of men in bringing up their children. However it is the scale of the challenge facing women in political leadership roles while caring for young families which provides a stark context and begs the question ‘why is this unusual?’ When in 1990, Benazir Bhutto became the first woman to give birth (to her second daughter) while Prime Minister of Pakistan, she faced calls for dismissal and a hostile cultural context in which the rights of women in society were under challenge. In juggling the demands of her job as politician with family life, her son noted recently how she was ‘making time to have a meal with us every day, taking us the mosque every Friday, helping us with our homework and most annoyingly never missing PTA meetings!’ (Bhutto Zardari, 2018).

The appearance of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern with her partner and three-month old baby daughter at the United Nations in June 2018, suggests that high profile examples of politicians juggling work-life balance remain rare but are unlikely to be stemmed by uncooperative voices. However she is only the second woman to have a child in office. Returning to work after six months parental leave, the Prime Minister was clear about the opportunities she has: ‘I have the ability to take my child to work, there’s not many places you can do that. I am not the gold standard for bringing up a child in this current environment because there are things about my circumstances that are not the same’. For the sake of representative democracy, it is hoped whatever one’s responsibilities outside the job, that the culture of political workplaces incorporates the respect and flexibility which are so important to political jobholders’ wellbeing and ultimately to their performance on our behalf.

Author
Dr Ashley Weinberg
A.Weinberg@salford.ac.uk
University of Salford
Salford, United Kingdom
References

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MEMBERS of Parliament (MPs) play a critical role in the development of the country through law making, representing their constituencies and providing an oversight function monitoring the executive arm of government. Despite the important roles that MPs play in the development of the country and the consequent financial benefits of their job, they continue to be confronted with work pressures and lifestyle demands which are potential risks for occupational stress. The job is highly demanding, as MPs play a major role in addressing the needs of their constituents whilst performing legislative and oversight functions in Parliament. Political office is immensely hard work that intrudes upon family life, is unconfined to any normal hours of work, requires working in more than one locality and more than one area and entails continual shuttling between the constituency and Parliament (Roberts, 2017).

Quantitative studies in the United Kingdom have revealed that national politicians are no different from other occupational groups who continue to be confronted with increasing political demands and work overload (Weinberg, 2012). While occupational stress and mental health in various segments of the working population (students, nurses, military and business personnel) appear to be heavily researched, it is surprising that so little empirical research has been conducted among privileged occupational groups like elected national politicians, given the influence of their roles. Clearly much more research on the mental health of this occupational group is warranted and my study set out to identify common sources and effects of stress, as well as potential coping mechanisms for MPs.

Representing the people of Malawi

The Malawi National assembly was established under chapter VI of the 1994 Republican Constitution. Its core mandate is to perform legislative, representational and oversight functions. Currently, it consists of 193 elected members representing every constituency under the determination of Malawi Election Commission, an institution mandated by an act of Parliament to conduct presidential, parliamentary and local elections in Malawi every five years. Currently, there are five political parties and of those elected as MPs, 32 (17 per cent) are women.

It is recognised that the nature of parliamentary work and constituents’ expectations of MPs present potential sources of stress, which can impact on their overall performance of their duties as well as their health. Reports in the past of sudden deaths of MPs were believed to be linked to stress induced cardiovascular problems and this contributed to the desire to conduct this study. For example, the sudden death of a former Speaker of the Malawi Parliament, who died while presiding over a parliamentary session is one such typical example. Unless the occupational stress related problems are explored and addressed among these privileged occupational groups, the MPs will still be psychologically confronted with effects of occupational stress and thereby suffer...
in silence. By association, the promotion of mental health is critical in the healthy functioning of organisations across Malawi as it can help to increase productivity and foster psychological health and wellbeing. Within the country, it can be claimed that occupational stress is not being given the attention it deserves and there is great scope for understanding the role of occupational stress within organisations, including among MPs.

There is no any other empirical research conducted in Malawi that centrally investigates or explores occupational stress among national politicians and to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, this is the first empirical study in Malawi focusing on the psychological wellbeing of MPs.

Perceptions of stress
It is well known that during the process of coping we reappraise ongoing situations, which can reduce or increase the experience of stress and, as a result psychological wellbeing (Lazarus, 1999). In this way our cognitive appraisals mean the same situation may cause stress for one person at a given time, but not for another. For example, shuttling from their constituencies far away from Parliament can be a potential stressor for some MPs, however, not every MP who is exposed to this potential stressor will perceive travelling long distances as stressful. Similarly while one MP might assess continued demands from their constituents to provide financial support to tackle problems in the constituency as a threat to him/her tenure of office and thereby experience related stress, another member might assess this same situation as a welcome opportunity to enhance the welfare of his/her constituency and will therefore not experience stress.

The role of perceptions also relates to the situation in which national politicians have more job demands with greater control, which in theory should reduce their overall risks of job-related stress compared to a job strain scenario with low control (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). However whilst that might hold true in other developing countries with a stable democracy, this scenario can be different in Malawi when considering socio-economic factors and the political landscape which are stressors in themselves. Legal rulings were required prior to the announcement of close-run presidential elections in May this year (i.e. 2019) and in January Cyclone Idai caused widespread devastation in the south of the country as well as neighbouring Mozambique and also Zimbabwe. Work-life balance comes with many complications in such a context.

Research with Malawi’s MPs
The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, involving interviews with two senior parliamentary employees, as well as a survey distributed to a random sample of 75 sitting MPs. It should be noted that the researcher’s background as a member of parliamentary staff may have influenced his approach to the research, however this also facilitated increased access to MPs in order to conduct the study. The research was approved by permission of the Speaker of the Parliament of Malawi through the Clerk of the Parliament, who granted an approval to conduct the study with MPs and the Parliamentary Secretariat.

Among the measures, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988) was used to assess MPs’ mental health, alongside bespoke measures designed for use in evaluating the impact of work-life balance of politicians (Weinberg, 2015). Out of 75 surveys distributed, 41 (55 per cent) MPs from across all five political parties responded to the survey including eight women (20 per cent). MPs’ reported length of experience in the job was evenly divided between those who had served for less or more than five years.

Fifty-six per cent of respondents reported a moderate to severe negative impact of their working hours on family relationships; in contrast ten per cent reported no such negative impact. MPs in the 31 to 40-year-old age group were more likely to report the
negative impact of long working hours on family relationships. The recurring theme emerging from both quantitative and qualitative findings was the pressure emanating from constituency work. Forty-two per cent of MPs completing the survey reported experiencing conflict between home life and constituency demands, while pressures from constituents, particularly in relation to their monetary and other needs, could put MPs in a very awkward position. In endeavouring to avoid disappointing constituents, MPs may try as hard as possible to get extra resources and this in turn creates pressure. This idea of generating high expectations despite limited resources to deliver on them, resonates with a taxonomy of political stressors proposed by Flinders et al. (2019).

In relation to their mental health, the GHQ scoring method highlighted that 42.5 per cent of respondents scored on or above a caseness threshold of 4 out of 12 (indicating presence of psychological ill health), which broadly compares with high levels of stress reported by 40 per cent of a sample of UK MPs following the expenses crisis of 2009 (Weinberg, 2015).

It was instructive that 78 per cent of the survey sample disagreed with the statement, ‘the job of MP is manageable and does not require psychological support services’. Accordingly 95 per cent of respondents agreed with the necessity to introduce counselling and psychological services for MPs. In addition, a number of MPs suggested the need for a recreation centre and medical clinic within Parliament, as well as access to sporting activities, in order to help them manage occupational stress.

Implications of this research
The study met with considerable support from MPs and this was reflected in the participation rate. The prevalence of symptoms of poor psychological health matched those of UK MPs when in a crisis situation, which may underpin further support for the availability of psychological services in Parliament. A key challenge to work-life balance which stood out for MPs in this sample was that posed by meeting the expectations of the electorate, which for almost half of respondents led to conflicting demands when returning to their home in the constituency. The role of long working hours in impeding work-life balance was particularly salient.

In practical research terms, some difficulties were encountered such as MPs not returning the survey and the administration of the questionnaires was carried out during the busy period of the 2017–2018 national budget session, which curtailed response rates within an already reduced sample. Therefore the small sample size should be noted as a limitation of the study. However the research succeeded in establishing some baseline understanding of occupational stress among MPs in an African cultural context, particularly in Malawi.

It is hoped that the study will contribute to the design of parliamentary training programmes to allow the inclusion of mental health awareness training for MPs. This is an important step as traditionally, such programmes have only considered basic parliamentary procedures and practices without attending to the psychological health and wellbeing of Members of Parliament. Furthermore the potential to raise awareness of mental health at work more generally is considerable and suggests exciting developments in the future.

Author
Macjellings Mulenga
macjellings@gmail.com
Senior Assistant Parliamentary Security Officer
Parliament of Malawi
Malawi
The work-life balance of an MP in Malawi

References
N THE FIELD of work-life balance, most research focuses on the reconciliation of role-related expectations deriving from work and family spheres. This article aims to identify coping strategies that reconcile life spheres in situations that go beyond this classic two-sphere framework by analysing coping behaviours of individuals who juggle three life spheres: local politicians.

While political work takes up a huge amount of their time, most local politicians are not paid a salary and also work for a living. Moreover, a local political mandate converts their life from a two-sphere reality into three spheres when they also have a family or other dependents. We wanted to understand how this group deals with the accumulation of demands to avoid conflict between the spheres in the first place. In doing so, we assumed our participants were consciously managing the time demands of their various social roles. To discover these strategies, we looked at the borders of these spheres and probed the degree of permeability and flexibility between them.

Work-family-border theory explains how individuals manage and negotiate the interfaces between each in order to attain or maintain a balance. These borders can be physical, temporal or psychological, and they display specific characteristics. Firstly, borders can be evaluated on their permeability: the degree to which elements from other spheres may enter (Beach, 1989). Secondly, flexibility indicates the extent to which a border may contract or expand, depending on demands (Hall & Richter, 1988). When a border has high degrees of permeability and flexibility, ‘blending’ can occur as the area around the border is no longer exclusive to one sphere. Borderlands can be places of conflict if the spheres differ considerably. Nippert-Eng (1996) coined the term ‘boundary work’ to describe how individuals engage in the effort of constructing, dismantling and maintaining the work-home border (Kreiner et al., 2009).

In this article, our focus is on coping strategies, classically defined as efforts to manage and overcome demands and critical events that pose a challenge, threat, harm, loss or benefit to a person (Lazarus, 1991). However in the case of local politicians, we feel there is a need to extend the basic theoretical framework to include a third sphere which we relate to the concept of ‘community’. According to Voydanoff (2005), community participation includes time spent in formal volunteering in the broader community, informal helping and contact with friends and neighbours within informal networks. This description relates closely to the activities local politicians undertake, most of which is voluntary and in order to construct their social network they invest effort in building community ties. This can provide resources such as access to instrumental and emotional social support, companionship, value consensus, role models, identity maintenance and the rewards of helping others. However time demands, excessive obligations and lack of reciprocity can negatively affect work and family spheres.

Community demands and resources differ from work demands and resources in that they originate outside the work and
family spheres. The extent to which they influence inter-role conflict depends on the permeability and flexibility of the boundaries among the three spheres (Voydanoff, 2004). In this study, we investigated the coping strategies used by local politicians to reconcile their work, family and political spheres and how they avoid conflict between the three life spheres.

Method
As no large-scale study providing valid data on individuals facing three life spheres was undertaken, we used a qualitative approach to study the presence of a third life sphere, interviewing a sample of Flemish local politicians. Students trained in qualitative methods from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp conducted in-depth interviews with local politicians lasting approximately one hour. Most had another professional occupation in addition to their political role. We selected politicians whose youngest child was under 10 years old and therefore more likely to experience demands from the family sphere and a higher risk of inter-role conflict.

Sixty-four interviews were analysed including 11 mayors, 24 alderman and 29 councillors, representing six political parties. The final sample featured 22 women and 42 men and reflects the proportion of women in local politics in Flanders (Meier, 2007).

Semi-structured interviews were based on questions about managing the demands of three life spheres: politicians were asked to elaborate on their political function and what it entailed; to describe their work and family situations; as well as experiences of conflict and handling expectations in combining politics, family and work. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and a thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Detecting the presence of a third sphere
Our interviews found that taking on a political function turns individuals into public figures. Local politicians see themselves as having an important duty to their fellow citizens, which requires an appropriate level of engagement with the community. In wanting to be open to people, they attend events in the hope of making themselves visible and approachable. However this generates pressure because local politicians cannot attend everything, despite feeling obliged to do so. As a result, they consider their political work is never done, and duly sacrifice time and energy they would otherwise spend in other spheres in an attempt to be as involved as possible.

It is unsurprising that this leads to time-based conflict: ‘Time is a scarce item, but for a politician it is even scarcer than for others’; ‘Honestly, I don’t have much of a private life. I have almost made a second profession out of my political function’.

Interviewees also reported strain-based conflict, when difficult political decisions or arguments are often still on their minds while at work or at home, and this influences their mood and ability to work productively or participate in family moments: ‘They stay on my mind when I am at the table eating dinner with my family… So, in addition to being physically absent a lot of the time, when I am at home I can also be mentally somewhere else.’

Coping strategies
Based on our analysis, we derived five coping strategies used by local politicians to reconcile their three life spheres. The political sphere can be considered as the strongest, the least flexible and with the most impermeable borders. This leads to multiple incursions of this sphere into the other two.

1. Communication with family was the first strategy and the most important for avoiding conflict between the different life spheres. The political sphere can be considered as the strongest, the least flexible and with the most impermeable borders. This leads to multiple incursions of this sphere into the other two.

tician’s partner’s support. In this way we can consider the partner as a border keeper for the family sphere: ‘Her support means a lot to me, you can’t do this without support, that’s impossible’.

2. Recognising priorities within the political sphere helps to tackle the intrusive nature of the political sphere and distinguish between what is important for political ambitions and the pressures from other sphere members. This helps to prevent one thing automatically leading to the other: ‘Yes, it is actually kind of a snowball effect’; ‘for almost half of the stuff I am being asked for, I refuse and that is really the case’.

3. Consciously creating time for family moments counterbalances the amount of time invested in work and politics, often by planning quality private time, such as going out for dinner or spending weekends together. This scheduling ensures the family sphere becomes less flexible and its borders stronger: ‘What I try is to block one evening every week, …that I really stay at home without anywhere to go to. That is for my family’.

A frequently quoted example of such ‘sacred moments’ is eating together – a significant way of keeping in touch and sharing experiences and concerns. Moreover, the participants with children often reported that showing an interest in their children’s hobbies and accompanying them to various events are also valuable. These high-quality moments compensate for the fact that the greater part of the day is spent on work and politics.

4. Downsizing the spheres. This strategy could be applied to the three different spheres. In relation to the political sphere, this would mean withdrawing partially or altogether, thus limiting political ambitions. However many participants, especially politicians with an executive position, reported that they had reduced their involvement in work to part-time: ‘I really need that time for my political activities… I keep my job, because after this mandate you never know if you will be elected again’.

When applied to the family sphere, downsizing could imply delegating domestic tasks and care duties. Our data identify clear gender differences with respect to this strategy. Male politicians often reported that their partner performed most of the domestic tasks: ‘I have one advantage, she works part-time. […] We often asked ourselves what would have happened if she would have worked full-time’. Furthermore, we found that female politicians are – in many cases – the managers of the household as well. If their political involvement prevents them from doing the domestic tasks and caring for the children, they tend to be responsible in arranging outsourcing within a supportive network of helpers. For this reason, female politicians can never really take their minds off the family sphere, as many of their male colleagues do. Together with the political culture late weekday meetings, weekend events and other non-family friendly characteristics this may discourage some women from being active in local politics.

5. Segmentation between the different life spheres meant that most of the participants reported they try not to talk about politics outside of this sphere. This can be described as a psychological boundary: ‘When I am with family, we seldom talk about politics. I try to avoid that. It is not the moment to do so. I see my family so little.’

Complete segmentation is not always realistic, however a recurrent example is politicians often return home from work to have dinner with the family, and then deal with political activities after their children have gone to bed. Here, we can speak of a temporal boundary.

However blending this sphere with the family sphere is often not seen as an effective solution. When politicians take their partner or children to a social event, the latter often complain because the politician is a public person at the event and unable to divide his/her attention between the political and family spheres. Borderlands can enhance conflict when the spheres are very different. In this case, the borderland is a place where individuals
find it difficult to juggle conflicting demands. We can conclude that the borders of the political sphere are not flexible and impermeable. They can be described as strong borders. By comparison, our data show that the degree of integration between work and political spheres is perceived to be fairly balanced, due to the availability of flexibility for local politicians.

**Conclusion**

Our study revealed that the political sphere can be considered quite ‘greedy’ (Coser, 1974). Politicians were well aware of this and actively implemented the strategies mentioned above to manage expectations. While their strategies are not essentially different from strategies and boundary-work tactics used by people with other life-sphere constellations, local politicians implemented these in order to be able to pursue their political function. They are also very aware of the family time they sacrifice: if family time is not actively planned in the schedule it does not happen. The common feeling is that it never stops, and this places the most strain on individuals. While these findings may not be generalisable to all Flemish local politicians, let alone all individuals managing a third sphere, we hope the description of these coping mechanisms could be helpful in comprehending the lives of individuals trying to cope with demands from different life spheres.

**Authors**

Ms Laura Emery  
Laura.Emery@vub.be  
The Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Brussels  
Professor Petra Meier  
petra.meier@uantwerpen.be  
Faculty of Political Sciences  
University of Antwerp  
Antwerp  
Belgium  
Professor Dimitri Mortelmans  
dimitri.mortelmans@uantwerpen.be  
University of Antwerp  
Antwerp  
Belgium

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The BREXIT debates may well live long in the memory, but for the people of the United Kingdom (UK), it is likely our emotions activated by both sets of campaigns will have more visceral connotations. Since the Spring of 2017, it has not been hard to turn a polite exchange about the weather into a conversational free-for-all – whichever side of the Referendum one voted, changed one’s mind about, felt duped by or simply learned to resent. As we know, emotions are not easily switched off and for those whose job is to take major political decisions, their lives inside and outside of work have components of a non-stop roller-coaster ride. The job is not a 9–5 phenomenon: ‘Being an MP is a way of life’ one Member of Parliament told me. This is as true now as ever before.

The day before the European elections this May, Leader of the House Andrea Leadsom closed the front door to her house and was immediately confronted with reporters asking her view on the Prime Minister’s final proposal for a Brexit deal. Having answered the question with a simple statement that she was going to consider it, she turned to the man waiting by her side and kissed him on the lips, before getting into a waiting vehicle. This interesting cameo featured on the day’s BBC lunchtime news. What it suggested to some was that the Leader of the House had one eye on an impending leadership election and wanted to deliberately position herself as a human being first to the watching public; after all controversy over the issue of family life had scuppered her previous leadership contest with Theresa May. Sure enough, within an hour or so, Andrea Leadsom had resigned her cabinet post and followed this up with a renewed leadership bid. Work-life balance can be an interesting phenomenon for politicians as well as the rest of us, it seems.

It is important to bear in mind that the demands of Parliament, political party and media presence account for only half of the job carried out by an MP; the other half involves managing and endeavouring to handle the concerns of constituents and the impact of policy and events on the area within their constituency. Much of this work resembles casework in which an MP seeks to assist individual constituents facing sometimes overwhelming and often complex circumstances. Usually the MP will see constituents at a ‘surgery’ and has entitlement to financial support through legitimate parliamentary expenses to fund a constituency office which can field enquiries and provide support whilst seeking solutions to individuals’ problems through the week. However the weekends can still be overtaken by addressing local meetings, attending events and meeting constituents as part of the need to remain ‘visible’ as an MP. One eye has to be kept on re-election and the accusation, ‘We only see you when you want our vote’ is never far away.

The case for reform
In 1992 when I first started researching the mental health of national politicians, I was struck by the evidence given to a parliamentary committee examining the timings of debates in the UK House of Commons. Since Victorian times, debates had begun at 2pm and late night sittings lasting into the early hours remained commonplace, whilst matters for discussion were often not disclosed in advance by the ruling party until the last practical moment – one way of gaining political advantage. The impact on
work-life balance was predictable, but was excused as part of the way politics worked. Evidence given to the committee by government ministers highlighted the disastrous toll for MPs. Conservative MP Edwina Currie spoken of ‘a trail of broken marriages’, while Labour MP Jack Cunningham pointed to ‘exhausted irrationality’ in making key decisions at all hours about the running of the country. Some minor reforms were adopted, including recognition that advance notice of debates was useful and that the weight of constituency work should be reflected in increased funding for offices as well as having ten Fridays in the year without debates, in theory allowing MPs the time to attend to local matters without this consuming entire weekends. The surveys I carried out to evaluate these reforms unsurprisingly found no impact on levels of psychological strain among the 124 participating MPs, although 79 per cent believed the changes had made the job at least a little easier (Weinberg et al., 1999). Three-quarters of the sample reported they did not spend enough time with their partners or children and the majority did not have sufficient time for hobbies; such pressures were reflected in that over 80 per cent found it hard to mentally ‘switch off’ from work when at home and almost three-quarters found that work stress caused or exacerbated arguments at home (Weinberg et al., 1999).

Ten years later, a new determination to reform debating hours was shown by the Modernisation Committee and the then Leader of the House Robin Cook battled with his opponent Eric Forth to bring in greater change. Having recruited a representative cohort of MPs willing to take part in survey research into wellbeing, I was able to evaluate the psychological impact of the trials of new working hours introduced. The results seemed to show that you really cannot please all members of one occupational group and the vote to bring in the changes was close and brought with it amendments (just like Brexit!). Nevertheless compromise was reached and a pattern of no sittings of the House on a Friday, early starts for debates on other days, plus the use of Parliament’s Westminster Hall as a parallel chamber for discussion ensured a more workable solution, at least for some. Forty-nine per cent of a cohort of 64 MPs agreed they had more time to spend at home and for MPs with constituencies within a 150-mile radius of London, their work-life balance improved. However colleagues with constituencies further afield felt ‘marooned’ and socially isolated as they were left behind on weekday evenings and were unable to commute home (Weinberg, 2015). Despite the changes, 41 per cent reported working more than 70 hours per week, highlighting the continuing overall demands of the job (Weinberg, 2012).

Out of control
The opportunity to participate in changes to one’s working patterns makes good sense to occupational psychologists (e.g. Karasek, 1990), and the role of perceived control in this cannot be underestimated. However MPs are a surprisingly unusual group as their perceptions of control are lower than comparable occupational groups (Weinberg et al., 1999). The nature of being ‘on-call’ at all hours and more often responding to events than creating them, places the onus on resilience, self-belief and support networks to deal with whatever transpires. The expenses crisis of 2009 represented a scenario of ‘no control’ as a national media campaign released details of MPs’ parliamentary expenses to momentous effect. Whether an MP had committed an unforgivable act or not, each was tarred with the same brush and the expenses procedures of the House of Commons which had fostered bad practices were found wanting. Among my modest cohort sample of 64, rates of poor psychological health doubled when compared with the previous averages, which had tended to match the general population. Their own faith in the job and in the House of Commons dwindled and the impact on MPs’ families was palpable for almost half of my
cohort who had children. One fifth of the MPs reported deteriorations in their health as a result of the whole episode (Weinberg, 2015). One can imagine how individuals and their families are currently coping with the unrelenting nature of Brexit-related social media campaigns.

The future of work-life balance for UK MPs?
This article aims not only to give an insight into the work-life balance of national politicians, but also into the challenges faced by their families, whether in times of ‘business as usual’ or not. The idea of parliamentary procedures as ‘fascinating’ may not win any more plaudits than suggesting MPs’ mental health is important in the scale of things. However by attempting to understand the impact of working practices in an institution operating as a foundation of the democratic process of the nation, it is hoped that this highlights challenges facing meaningful representation of the people. 70,000 constituents rely on one MP and their employees to ensure this happens. The role of the psychological and physical wellbeing of our politicians is not therefore a ‘luxury’ topic with a select number of well-paid beneficiaries (Flinders et al., 2019). Key decisions are made (or not made) by this occupational group and supporting optimal functioning in this role is a necessity which can benefit the whole electorate. Parliament is set for a lengthy relocation to permit refurbishment of its crumbling Westminster home and while experiences of Brexit bring with them political and other changes too, the view of how we ‘do’ democracy remains as important as ever. Occupational psychology has a contribution to make and in so doing, can continue to highlight the vital role of work-life balance in mental health among MPs as well as the rest of us.

Author
Dr Ashley Weinberg
A.Weinberg@salford.ac.uk
University of Salford
Salford, United Kingdom

References
The WLBWG asks

The challenges of interviewing a politician
Ashley Weinberg

ASHLEY, there are five secret servicemen outside our door, my wife called out. ‘OK, I’ll be there in a minute’ was the best reply I could muster in the circumstances – I busied myself accordingly. I must confess that ever since my journey in the hotel lift a short while before, I had been wondering about the seemingly distracted man opposite, who occasionally spoke into his sleeve and then apologised curiously for any inconvenience ‘our presence’ was causing. Should you be faced with a detachment of such personnel, there is little advice I can give, but armed with a pen and a scribbled piece of paper I cut a disarmingly eccentric figure and proffered my note, requesting an interview with the politician we’d been tipped off they were protecting. It was no surprise this came to nought, but what was astounding was that Bill Clinton emerged from the room next door. He had been speaking in the conference room downstairs and raising funds for Hillary’s upcoming campaign. We were not permitted to travel in the same lift, so my wife and I took the stairs to the expansive reception area in time to see the former US President ‘working the room’. He smiled and waved, shook hands and appeared genuinely pleased to be speaking with everyone present, who I noticed were very happy to reciprocate. This man seemed to have palpable charisma and I don’t know if it was the proximity to power or celebrity, or simply his considerable capacity to charm, but there and then, it seemed to work. I had a long line to wait in if I was going to get that interview.

When researching his book *The Political Animal*, Jeremy Paxman told me that watching a politician ‘work a room’ was something to behold, and that while Tony Blair was particularly good at this, his wife Cherie was the best he had seen. It put me in mind of the significance and success of political couples and whether it was a coincidence that men and women politicians often seemed to work together – often as one another’s personal assistant or aide – or appear regularly together in public. When I first starting asking politicians about their work-life balance, I was politely informed that ‘the job of MP is a way of life’. This suggested that working so closely was a deliberate choice which made having and maintaining a relationship more possible. This made some sense given the job split between constituency and parliamentary duties, limiting visits home to weekends and holidays. Of course some MPs try to combat the physical dislocation by maintaining a London address so their family can be close by. I remembered my MP where I grew up in North Wales often appeared at public functions alongside his wife who was clearly his emotional rock – they were both lovely to me and always remembered to ask important and relevant questions, ‘How is your violin playing coming along? Are you looking forward to starting sixth-form?’ This very human and individualised touch was the product of a tremendous partnership matched by a formidable political ability too – when Sir Anthony Meyer became the first Conservative MP to stand up to Margaret Thatcher, some smiled at the thought of this mild-mannered back-bencher taking on one of the most powerful politicians in the world. Within a year, the Prime Minister was gone. Despite the local constituency party’s efforts to deselect him after his leadership challenge, he took them to court and won back his seat, with Barbadee Meyer at his side.

The prospect of losing the job one has fought so long and hard to win is daunting
in any career, but the reality has led to publication of the book Losing political office by Dr Jane Roberts, who is a psychiatrist and former council leader in London. Her research has analysed the particular psychological impact of job loss on politicians. Former Canadian politician, Michael Ignatieff wrote, ‘there is nothing so ex, as an ex-politician’, but with determination and party support a political comeback is possible. ‘Imagine the scene’, one political high-flyer told me, ‘I was losing my seat in one constituency and I could see on the television that my partner was losing too in another… it was devastating’. After taking stock, the individual was successful in bouncing back at the next election. However given the combination of loss and the less than rosy public perception of MPs, it is not surprising those who take control of their destiny and choose to stand down, report fewer symptoms of poor psychological health than those who are ousted.

Of course, there are challenges to solid relationships in politics, as elsewhere. Well-publicised scandals have long populated the media, yet unsurprisingly these are tricky to explore in research interviews. However I learned that a far greater threat to relationships and political careers has been the tolerance of alcohol use and its widespread availability in Parliament – sold at one time from 23 bars throughout the Palace of Westminster and much to the chagrin of one occupational physician I met. Whilst striding towards the Houses of Parliament, I struck up a casual conversation with a former party leadership contender and raised the topic. He replied by referring to the temptations of alcohol use, acknowledging that an accompanying unhealthy lifestyle had the potential to take its toll in politics as in any other job: ‘Everyone tends to find their level’, he told me with a knowing look. When I questioned another government minister about the death of an MP who had succumbed to alcohol addiction after losing office, I was told, ‘I have the feeling that we could have done more [to support the individual in question]’. The same minister went on to tell me how leisure pursuits outside of politics were essential and MPs I have spoken to have vouchedsafed a variety of enthusiasms for motorcycling, cinema-going or simply spending time with friends as a way of keeping in touch with life outside. The workplace that is Parliament also boasts its own musical ensembles, chess and sports teams and even its own dog show. That I felt the need to ask about hobbies was prompted by something we have all witnessed: that politics does not sleep.

This raises the possibility of potential addiction to the job. Coupled with a keen sense of public responsibility and a vicious cycle of commitments, pressure can exact the ultimate price. I recall waiting to interview Labour leader John Smith after he had given an address one evening to a packed hall at Manchester University. A local reporter and I were given leave to wait as he sipped water and answered questions individually from anyone in the audience who came forward to talk to him. Mr Smith’s aide turned to me and enquired again, ‘What was it you said you wanted to ask him about?’ I told him about my research into stress and politicians. His tone stiffened, ‘Look at him – I mean you can talk to him if you like, but look at him… he’s out on his feet’. I had driven for an hour and waited for another, and whether this statement was designed to appeal to my better instincts or not, I knew he was right. I nodded and walked away. Six months later John Smith died of a heart attack. There was consensus he had given everything to the fight.

The importance of finding an individualised equilibrium in a work-life equation which features parenthood has been suggested as one way of guaranteeing we are reminded of the advantages and disadvantages of our choices. Of course for MPs this can mean being away from home too much and missing important milestones. However with this often comes the need to compensate in some way or as we have seen in more recent times, determination to push back against the time demands of the job. Talking with an MP in his constituency office one
Saturday morning, seemed a poignant time to ask about spending time with his young family. He told me with a smile how his children were proving a great leveller against any sense of self-importance he might have been in danger of developing. ‘I took my son to Westminster and showed him the Palace, with all its great history, you know… and he did seem to take notice. However what made his day was meeting my colleague who as an actor had starred in a film he had seen – he couldn’t wait to tell his friends about my colleague and nothing else about my job seemed to matter’.

Keen to know how a Prime Minister might cope with the work-life challenges of having a baby while running the country, I did ask Jacinda Ardern for an interview for this column – she is the second leader of a nation to give birth while holding office. I will continue to wait for a reply, but we may conclude that this is how it should be. After all, the job of an elected representative is demanding, hopefully the outcomes are valuable and politicians are human beings (thankfully!). When a shadow minister stopped by at the recent Psychology of Democracy event organised by the Political Psychology section, she told me, ‘I can only stay for a few minutes as I have to get back to my constituency office for a meeting about food banks’. Who can argue with that?

Author
Dr Ashley Weinberg
A.Weinberg@salford.ac.uk
University of Salford
Salford, United Kingdom
Work-life balance: A global perspective

How balanced is work-life in China? Understanding the issues and developing a research agenda

Fang Lee Cooke

Introduction

Compared with other human resource management (HRM)/organisational behaviour (OB) topics, interest in work-life balance (WLB) as a field of research and as part of HRM practices remains relatively low in the Chinese context. This is evidenced in that few organisations have a formal WLB policy in place, flexi-time working mode is largely absent, and only a handful of articles have been found published in English academic journals on the topic, in contrast to more popular research topics such as leadership. In comparison, work-life conflict (WLC) and work-family conflict (WFC) have received more research attention. This is perhaps not surprising, given the trend of work intensification in China. In this article, I first outline key aspects of work-life conflict issues and attitudes towards WLB in the Chinese context. I then summarise existing research related to WLB, WLC and WFC. The article concludes with suggestions for future research in this field.

What are the key issues of WLB?

Does the concept of work-life balance exist in China? The answer is ‘no’ for the majority of its labour force in industrial employment, at least not in the way the concept is understood in developed countries. What are the WLB issues in China? To address this question, we need to first of all look at who are working, and under what employment mode and working conditions.

China has the largest national industrial workforce in the world.1 In 2017, there were 176 million persons employed in urban units (i.e. employing organisations), 30 per cent of whom is female (National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC), 2018).2 In addition, there were nearly 287 million rural migrant workers in China, 137 million of whom were working in urban areas in 2017 (NBSC, 2018). The overwhelming majority of the rural migrant workers are in non-standard employment in the state, private, and informal sector; over 43 per cent of the rural migrant workers were hired without a formal employment contract as of 2013 (Qiao, 2014). Due to the household registration (known as hukou) regulation adopted in 1958 (though now somewhat relaxed but far from being abolished), the Chinese population is classified into urban and rural residents tied to where they were born (e.g. Wang & Liu, 2018). Constrained by limited access to state welfare provision such as public schooling which is linked to hukou, many migrant workers have to leave their dependent children in their rural home to be cared for, while they work long hours intensively in the urban area. As of 2017, an estimated 69 million dependent children were left behind at their rural home.

1 All employment figures are in full-time employment.
2 By law, women have to retire five years earlier than men of the same occupational group as a protection for historical reasons (e.g. manufacturing-based economy, child/elderly care responsibility and physiological conditions).
How balanced is work-life in China? Understanding the issues and developing a research agenda

(known as left-behind children) by their parents who have migrated to urban areas for industrial employment for the prospect of improving the livelihood of their family (UNICEF, 2017). For these rural migrant workers, WLB means working fewer hours and more rest time. Despite the pressure from international pressure groups and sanctions from foreign client firms to improve labour standards in Chinese firms, including reduced overtime, it is the Chinese workers who demand more overtime in order to earn higher wages, especially for migrant workers who do not have a family to go to after work.

Work intensification associated with long hours and intensive work pace is not confined to rural migrant workers, it is also occurring with professional and managerial workers in the fast growing industries such as telecommunication, Information Technology (IT), consultancy, finance and real estate industries. Existing studies show that many workers in China work overtime voluntarily and involuntarily, often at short notice and unrenumerated or under remunerated. Amongst the professional workers, overtime is worked regularly, often on a daily basis. This has led to health problems and retention issues. Some firms are now beginning to address these problems by organising after-work social life for their employees, hiring professionals to provide counselling services and introducing some forms of employee assistance programmes (EAPs). While organising social life for employees (and their families) has long been a workplace welfare provision in state-owned enterprises, and to a lesser extent in private firms as part of the Chinese paternalistic culture, EAPs are relatively new and are mainly provided to professional and managerial employees. These examples suggest that WLC in China derives from a range of sources that may differ from those manifested in western societies and require different HRM initiatives and social policy interventions in the Chinese context.

However, improving the nation’s WLB may not be one of the top priorities of the government or employers, in part due to employment pressure for the former and market competition for the latter. Despite the enactment of Labour Contract Law in 2008 and other labour laws to advance the labour rights of workers, it was not until 2012 that job quality featured in a high level government policy statement in the ‘Employment Promotion Plan (2011–2015)’ announced by the State Council. By contrast, the renewed promotion of ‘labour is glorious’ by the state, for example in the celebration of Labour Day, legitimises and reinforces the culture of work intensification and overtime.

Non-standard forms of employment have been growing in China in the last two decades as the state sector continues to shrink and the private firms have become more aggressive in their staffing strategy to contain cost. Non-standard employment is not confined to jobs with lower level skills, but also extends to professional workers. One of the key characteristics of non-standard employment is the working-time flexibility, often with the workers having no choice. Work-life boundary is unclear in China, many workers are on call from their company 24/7 unofficially. In spite of the growth of non-standard employment, part-time employment is not the norm in China, and companies generally do not have a work-life or flexible working time policy, with the exception of some foreign companies (e.g. De Cieri & Bardoel, 2009). Instead, organisations tend to favour adopting WLB practices in an ad hoc manner on an individual basis (e.g. Xiao & Cooke, 2012).

What has been researched related to WLB?

As mentioned earlier, there is limited research on WLB in the Chinese context. What has been examined has tended to focus mainly on the gender aspect of WLB, for example, giving more time for women to accommodate their domestic responsibilities, organisational practices, individual coping strategy and implication for social policy (e.g. Cogin et al., 2018; De Cieri & Bardoel, 2009; Xiao & Cooke, 2012).
In comparison, considerably more research attention has been attracted to WLC and WFC in the recent decade. A systematic search of journal databases on WLC in the Chinese context showed up some 30 relevant articles, the majority of which were published since 2010. The bulk of this emerging body of research has been conducted from an organisational behaviour (OB)/psychological perspective. This body of research is covering an increasingly extensive range of topics straddling the work-life domain, including for example, the role of WLB practices and supervisory support on WLC and wellbeing outcomes (e.g. Chang et al., 2017; Hsu et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2010); WLC and turnover intentions (Chen, Ayoun, & Eyoun, 2018); and the crossover effects of WFC (Lu et al., 2015).

Empirical studies have also examined the role of organisational support, for instance, in the form of work-life support practices or organisational climate, on employee behaviour such as innovative behaviour (e.g. Chen & Huang, 2016; Chen, Jiang, Tang, & Cooke, 2018), and organisational performance outcomes such as customer satisfaction (e.g. Cogin et al., 2018). Research design has become increasingly sophisticated in examining the cross-domain as well as within domain (mediating and moderating) effects of WLB and WFC on psychological, behavioural and organisational outcomes (e.g. Zhang et al., 2018). For instance, Drummond et al.’s (2017) study examined the relationship of social support with wellbeing outcomes via WFC; and Xia et al.’s (2018) study investigated the cross-domain negative effect of work-family conflict on project citizenship behaviour of Chinese project managers.

Policy and research implications
There is vast scope for policy intervention and research to improve work-life balance and employee wellbeing in China. On the policy front, social policy may be designed and implemented to provide better welfare provision, particularly childcare support to enable women with care responsibility to participate in the labour market more effectively. This is an area that may yield considerable effect given the skill shortage on the one hand, and the worsening employer discrimination against female university graduates following the implementation of the two-child policy on the other (Cooke, 2017). A more challenging policy intervention would be to create more equitable rights to work and life for the rural migrant workers. In light of the large proportion of workers in non-standard employment, policy intervention is also necessary to improve job quality. This is in part because the problem associated with poor job quality is unlikely to be resolved by WLB policy at the workplace level. In many cases, employers create poor quality jobs by taking advantage of the regulatory loopholes and labour market conditions in order to contain cost. This reflects a global trend in that employment growth has not been matched by improvements in the quality of work (ILO, 2019).

In terms of research, quantitative method has been the primary methodological approach in extant research on WLB, WLC/WFC, with managerial employees as a main group of research targets. Ling and Poweli (2001) argued that the American-based WLC research models offer limited explanatory power in understanding the distinct work and life context of China. In particular, interference of work in family life is often not perceived as an issue because of the Chinese work ethics and the paramount economic necessity to work (De Cieri & Bardoel, 2009). It is clear that the work-life/work-family situation in China is significantly different from that in western countries in terms of mode of employment, social policy and welfare provisions, employer attitudes and policy, and cultural norms towards work and family life. Future research may adopt a phenomenon-theory-phenomenon approach instead of a hypotheses-investigation-theory approach in order to yield more nuanced findings on issues facing different segments of the
workforce. Issues for fruitful investigation include: employer staffing strategy and job quality; the role of social media, for instance, the use of WeChat\(^3\), in exacerbating WLC. Relatedly, forced overtime in disguise is an area that deserves more research attention, in view of the endemic overtime phenomenon. Research in this area may consider the following questions: What are the societal, organisational and individual reasons? What may be the psychological impact on the workers and individual and organisational outcomes? How do we conceptualise this overtime phenomenon in China? And more broadly, how do we conceptualise work-life in the Chinese context as work has increasingly become part of people’s life?

Author

Professor Fang Lee Cooke  
fang.cooke@monash.edu  
Monash Business School  
Monash University  
Melbourne, Australia

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\(^3\) WeChat is a multi-function messaging, social media and mobile payment application, and has become one of the key means for communication at work and in social life.
Author name

Fang Lee Cooke


New and emerging research

Personality and working in the gig economy

John Hackston

GIG AND freelance workers form a significant part of the workforce and are essential to many organisations (Hipple & Hammond, 2016; Office for National Statistics, 2018). It has been argued that the gig economy shifts the burden of economic risk onto workers while at the same time removing employee benefits from them (Friedman, 2014). Spreitzer et al. (2017) suggest that there are two 'images' of gig work, one of highly skilled workers who choose these alternative arrangements and the other of low-skill workers who struggle to make a living and have poorer work-life balance. Though some studies have looked at the characteristics of gig workers (e.g. Lepanjuri et al., 2018), there has been little systematic research into how an individual worker’s personality relates to their motivations and stressors, or how they can thrive at work.

This study investigated how personality and other factors relate to: differences between gig and ‘regular’ jobs, reasons for becoming a gig worker, types of gig work done and views on gig work. It was hoped that the findings could help individuals be aware of their likely strengths and possible blind spots as gig workers, and help them decide whether this is an environment in which they could thrive. For organisations, the results could facilitate better management of gig workers.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) model of personality (Myers et al., 1998) was utilised for the research. This questionnaire is widely used by organisations and individuals (Furnham, 2017) and therefore provides a useful starting point for personality-based guidelines; it is also (full disclaimer) published by the organisation for which I work. The model measures four dimensions, Extraversion – Introversion (where we get our energy from), Sensing – Intuition (what information we prefer), Thinking – Feeling (what process we use to make decisions) and Judging – Perceiving (whether we prefer living in a more structured or more open way).

Method

Data were collected via an online survey between October 2017 and January 2018, from participants who had previously completed the MBTI questionnaire and had feedback to help them decide their true or ‘best-fit’ personality type. Participants also completed biographical information and rated themselves and their jobs on characteristics that previous research suggests relate to gig work (Posch et al., 2017; Teodoro et al., 2014; Van Den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013). They were asked about details of their gig job, regular job, or both, and also what they saw as the best and worst thing about working both in the gig economy and in a regular job. Gig workers were in addition asked about the number, type and duration of their gig jobs, the extent to which different reasons for becoming a gig worker applied to them, and about using websites or apps to find or organise gig work.

The sample comprised 1308 people, of whom 36 per cent had a gig job, largely in professional or other ‘white collar’ roles; although much debate has concerned less skilled gig jobs, evidence suggests that skilled workers make up a larger proportion of the gig economy (Burke & Cowling, 2015).
Results
The study generated a wide range of findings. Those most relevant to work-life balance are summarised here. Full results are available in a detailed report that can be downloaded from https://eu.themyersbriggs.com/download/item/6a41bb1901ab48d3aa98a6d2dfe899b0.

Individuals with an Intuitive personality preference were somewhat more likely than those with a Sensing preference to have a gig job; amongst gig workers those with a Perceiving preference saw their jobs as more enjoyable and motivating than those with a Judging preference. Overall, gig workers saw their job as more enjoyable, flexible, and financially rewarding than did regular workers, but less empowered and with fewer additional benefits.

Gig workers were asked to rate several reasons as to why they had taken up this role, using a scale from 0 (does not apply at all) to 3 (applies to a great extent). Having freedom and flexibility, working in an area the respondent was passionate about, and being one’s own boss had the highest average ratings (see Figure 1 below).

Three factors accounted for much of the variance: positive reasons, temporary or contingent reasons, and income-related reasons. Those who became a gig worker for positive reasons were more likely to find the job enjoyable, motivating and flexible. Contingent reasons (not something that was planned, doing until something better comes along, having been made redundant) correlated negatively with finding the job enjoyable, flexibility, and degree of empowerment, and positively with perceived higher job demands and stress. In short, those who become a gig worker for positive reasons will tend to enjoy the role while those who are forced into it or who otherwise did not make a positive choice typically will not. Those in professional or business consultancy roles were particularly likely to rate positive reasons highly; those in healthcare or other care roles least likely to do so.

Sixty-seven per cent of gig workers thought that having autonomy and flexibility...
was the best thing about working in the gig economy. In contrast, those in regular jobs saw regular or guaranteed salary and financial security, and consistency and stability, as the best things about their jobs. These views of gig and regular jobs were in many ways mirror images of each other.

Only those aspects showing a difference between gig and regular workers are shown. Note that gig workers were more likely to mention work-life balance as the best thing about their job.

The characteristics that gig and regular workers saw as the worst things about their job were also mirror images. Gig workers were slightly less likely to mention poor work-life balance as the worst thing about their role.

Those gig workers who felt that having an irregular income, or having few benefits, was the worst thing about their role reported the highest levels of job-related stress.

Men were more likely than women to mention a good work-life balance as the best thing about being a gig worker; women were more likely than men to mention avoiding office politics and, in terms of the worst thing about gig work, were more likely to mention being lonely and isolated.

People with different personality type preferences mentioned different features as the best and worst things about gig work and these data were used to develop guidelines (https://eu.themyersbriggs.com/-/media/Files/PDFs/Research-items/Type-tips-for-gig-workers.pdf?la=en) for people of each personality type. For example, those with personality preferences for Intuition (in particular ENTP) were especially likely to mention having autonomy as an advantage of gig work. There were no significant personality differences between those who did or did not mention work-life balance as the best thing about their job, or poor work-life balance as the worst thing.

Discussion and conclusions
As many gig workers have highly skilled, difficult to replace jobs, it makes sense for organisations to try to keep them on board. For example, as almost 70 per cent in our sample nominated the opportunity for flexibility and autonomy as the best thing about gig work, organisations should consider how they can provide this, as opposed to acting in an unnecessarily controlling way.

Although people with an Intuitive preference are more likely to have gig jobs, there are gig workers of every personality type; understanding their personality can help
them understand why they enjoy certain aspects of gig work and dislike others. The research has informed personality type-based advice.

Overall, gig workers in this study saw their jobs as more enjoyable, flexible, and financially rewarding than did regular workers, though less empowered and with fewer additional benefits. They were especially likely to be positive if they had become a gig worker for positive reasons. Gig workers were also more likely to mention good work-life balance as the best thing about their job. These findings do provide some support for the two images of gig work vision of Spreitzer et al. (2017) and it would therefore be useful to carry out further research with low-skilled workers.

Author

Mr John Hackston
jhackston@themyersbriggs.com
Head of Thought Leadership
The Myers-Briggs Company
Oxford
Twitter: @John Hackston

References


Interesting snippets

Creating a work-life balance for women in politics
This e-discussion seeks views on how women who enter politics work to balance their career as well as their family responsibilities. It is telling in itself that men tend not to be asked the same question. The e-discussion poses several questions to get insight into those good practices that improve the work/life balance for women and men MPs, and as well the parliamentary staff who can also work the same long hours as MPs and who frequently travel with MPs in support of committee meetings. Some of the questions include: What measures have MPs personally put in place to balance work and family responsibilities? Is work/life balance a consideration for both men and women when deciding to embark on a political career? Why or why not?

Read the article: Creating a work-life balance for women in politics. iKNOW Politics [Online]. Available at http://iknowpolitics.org/en/discuss/e-discussions/creating-work-life-balance-women-politics

Work-life balance? Not in politics (Ayako Mie)
This article explores how women politicians in Japan are able (or not) to attain work-life balance. One politician, Tamayo Marukawa, is of the opinion that ‘There is no environment in Japanese politics where politicians can have a work-life balance’. The article raises the lack of diversity among politicians in Japan.


Politicians wrestle with work-life balance in the public eye (Sam Clemence)
Sam Clemence looks at American politicians and how they cope with managing their work-life balance. One of the stark outcomes from a 2013 survey is that 86 per cent of United States congressional representatives felt that they spent too little time with their families. According to one of the politicians interviewed for the article, he stated that his wife became a single parent during the week while he was away for work and travelling also. The article presents actions that politicians can do to ensure that they do not become detached from their families.


Gender roles, work-life balance, and running for office (Rachel Silbermann)
Rachel Silbermann’s research article focuses on the reasons why few women run for political office. One of these, she notes, is the amount of travel involved in the role, which impacts negatively on care child. As various other research has shown, caring responsibilities on the whole tends to remain with women still, regardless of their work role. She suggests that in order for equal representation of women to occur in government would be for men and women to start sharing household responsibility equally.

Interesting snippets

MP Tim Hammond’s resignation for family reasons shines a mirror on work-life balance (Jessica Strutt)
This article focuses on work-life balance issues among politicians in Australia. It focuses on Tim Hammond, a Member of Parliament (MP) for Perth, who resigned as he felt that his work role was having too much of a negative impact on his family life. Tim’s young family, three children under six, was not a home situation that benefitted from his long commuting time and long working hours. While this article looked at a male politician, the reality is that the poor work-life balance that exists within the political sphere is one of the reasons for many women not choosing to become politicians. The author queried if the political system can be made more family friendly.

Conference announcements

WFRN 2020 Conference – 5th biennial conference of the WFRN Work & Family Researchers Network
‘Advancing Equality at Work and Home: Strengthening Science and Collaboration’
24–27 June 2020
New York Hilton in New York City
Further information at: https://wfrn.org/conference-2020/

DOP Annual Conference
Crowne Plaza Stratford-upon-Avon
8–10 January 2020
The conference theme is ‘The practice of science: Occupational psychologists at work’.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS
Topics include: Leadership, engagement and motivation; Psychological assessment at work; and Work design, organisational change and development.

CPD WORKSHOP PROPOSALS
Could you deliver a practical skills workshop offering CPD value to delegates? A limited number of slots are available to form a series of parallel workshops.

Closing date and submissions deadline is 6 August 2019, view the website for details.

www.bps.org.uk/dop2020     #dopconf
Author guidelines
The bulletin editor is keen to encourage concise and focused articles for the bulletin. All submissions should be in Microsoft Word format, and could be submitted under the following broad categories:

- Theory, method and research: Peer-reviewed articles and brief reports
- Articles dealing with theoretical, methodological and/or empirical matters are particularly welcomed, as are literature reviews.
- Longer articles dealing with substantive issues should be between 2000 and 4000 words in length.
- Brief articles or comments (up to 2000 words) are also encouraged.

Graphics
The preferred file formats for figures and graphics are EPS, TIFF and PDF.

Events
The WLB Working Group's bulletin provides a platform for publicising and reviewing events. Submissions of this kind should be no longer than 2000 words, and if possible should be substantially shorter than this.

Book reviews
These should not exceed 2000 words. In all cases, the bulletin editor reserves the right to reduce the word limits where appropriate, and to edit manuscripts if necessary.

Manuscript preparation
Manuscripts should be prepared according to the Society’s Style Guide (see www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-style-guide-authors-and-editors). Authors are requested to pay particular attention to these guidelines when preparing references lists. All submissions should be in English.

Manuscripts should be double-spaced throughout, and should incorporate page numbers. The title page should include the full title of the manuscript, author name(s), institutional affiliations and contact details.

We are happy to do some minor copy editing, but we would be grateful if you could ensure that submissions have been proof read and are print ready.

Manuscript submission
All contributions should be submitted by e-mail to the bulletin editor: Roxane L. Gervais (DOPWLBEEditor@bps.org.uk).
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