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Not all work-life balance is equal – the role of social class

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SUMMARY: This paper sets out to explore the dynamics of work-life balance through the lens of social class. In doing so, it seeks to challenge the middle-class bias in current work-life literature whereby working-class employees have largely fallen outside of work-life discourse. Drawing on interviews conducted with UK employees across a range of occupations, this paper presents a study of the role that social class plays in work-life balance outcomes. Preliminary findings suggest that work-life balance is more challenging to navigate for individuals in lower socio-economic occupations for a variety of reasons that have been largely overlooked in the work-life literature to date.

TRACK: Human Resource Management

NOT ALL WORK-LIFE BALANCE IS EQUAL – THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASS

INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to explore the dynamics of work-life balance through the lens of social class to draw attention to the tensions social class can bring to the interplay between work and home. In doing so, it seeks to challenge the middle-class bias in current work-life literature whereby working-class employees have largely fallen outside of work-life discourse. Drawing on interviews conducted with UK employees, this paper explores experiences the role that social class can play in work-life balance outcomes. The aim is to address criticisms that current policies supporting work-life balance are overly focused on issues of time that are reported by financially secure middle-class workers and is neglectful of other capitals such as economic and cultural capital as a cause of work-life imbalance.

BACKGROUND

It has long been acknowledged that how individuals manage the relationship between their work and non-work lives is important with a need for balance and minimal conflict as precursors for success and well-being (Powell et al., 2019). However, existing research has tended to adopt a narrow frame focused principally on the work-family interface and nominally concerned with dual working heterosexual parents (Özbilgin et al., 2011). This has been largely at the exclusion of other demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, marital status, and social class (Kelliher et al., 2019; Özbilgin et al., 2011) leading to criticisms that existing research and theory is not fully representative of reality (Powell et al., 2019). At the same time social class is becoming increasingly recognised as playing a critical role in social and workplace outcomes (Ashley et al., 2015; Friedman et al., 2015), yet only minimal attention has been given to the interplay between social class and work-life balance. Even where working-class employees have formed part of the analysis, the focus has remained resolutely on working mothers (e.g., Crompton and Lyonette, 2010; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Furthermore, the concept of ‘life’ used in research and organisational policy is often based on a narrow definition comprising family, caring and domestic responsibilities rather than other components of life such as friendships, hobbies, and community life (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Consequently, discussions around notions of work–life balance are often actually

referring to work–family balance (Rottenberg, 2018) and adopting a middle-class discourse (Warren, 2015; Gatrell et al., 2013).

Definitions of work-life balance have largely focused on time and role enactment foregrounding middle class managerial and professional workers in work-life research and policy. However, work-life balance can have very different drivers, such as inadequate pay, and outcomes for different types of workers (Warren, 2016). Drawing on the plethora of definitions used in the literature, I define work-life balance as congruence between work and non-work where an individual has satisfaction and good functioning in their work-life interplay with minimal conflict or interference between the two. The notion of balance can be further broken down into different categories: temporal balance - the total hours worked, the timing of work hours, work intensity, and the employees' control over their working time; locational balance - the physical spaces where work and non-work are located; and psychological balance – the ability to synergise thinking and behaviour patterns (*habitus*) across work-life settings (Clark, 2000).

In shining a class-based lens on work-life outcomes, this paper draws on Bourdieu (1984) to define social class as systematic differences in capitals (resources) reflected in an individual's position of relative advantage or disadvantage within the field (e.g., workplaces, local communities, educational institutions, neighbourhoods, religious communities). Bourdieu presents four forms of capital: economic capital (wealth and income); cultural capital (informational assets such as educational credentials and the possession of legitimate knowledge, skills, and tastes); social capital (valuable social connections and friendships) and symbolic capital (the prestige and legitimacy associated with different types of capital: Bourdieu 1987). Class differences are maintained by the interplay between a relative capital and an individual's 'learned set of preferences or dispositions' by which a person orients to the world in which they operate (*habitus*: Bourdieu, 2002: 27). From a work-life perspective, the different domains of work and life used in border theory and viewed as often having quite separate spaces, each with a distinct set of rules, emotions, thinking and behaviour patterns (Clark, 2000) can be likened to Bourdieu's concepts of fields and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984). Class differences are maintained by the interplay between relative capital and *habitus* within the socialised norms of the field. This can be helpful in exploring the power imbalances relevant to work-life dynamics to challenge the middle-class dominance in existing research (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

Importantly, we know little about how an individual's social class (and relative capitals) affects their work-life balance. This paper argues that social class has significant implications for work-life balance, particularly when broadening the concept of balance beyond 'temporal' outcomes and the notion of life beyond 'family'. For example, evidence is emerging that lower-class and socially mobile individuals often experience greater conflict navigating between their work-life environments (Evans and Wyatt, 2022) suggesting that social class origin and social mobility are important factors in work-life balance. Additionally, Warren (2021) argues that current policies supporting work-life balance are overly focused on issues of time reported by financially secure middle-class workers and neglect financial capital as a root cause of work-life imbalance. As a result, working class lives have been overlooked in work-life research because of a preoccupation in the literature on the 'ideal-typical' work-life balance worker, such as middle-class mothers and managerial/professional workers.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated social class inequalities in the UK with large class differences in work-life outcomes in terms of time, finances, and well-being. For example, employees in high-status professions were more able to mobilise their work to the comfort of their homes, and earn their full wage (Collinson, 2020). Only 10% of working-class women and 4% of working-class men worked from home in January 2021 in contrast to 48% of managerial/professional women workers and 54% of managerial/ professional male workers (Warren et al, 2021). This unavailability of homeworking for working-class employees increased their chances of contracting the virus due to their propensity to occupy keyworker, front-line occupations, thus risking their physical health. Therefore, seemingly, those who are born with the highest forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), disproportionately maintained their social advantages during the pandemic.

Despite the lack of attention played to social class in the work-life literature, this paper argues that social class plays a critical role in work-life experiences and outcomes, and thus warrants further research. This paper shines a classed lens on the mainstream work-life balance agenda by challenging the typically narrow treatment of the work-life concept and exploring the impact of social class on physical, temporal, and psychological balance. Building on the concept of 'bridges' in work-life research (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2009) it draws on the notion that social class acts as a bridge between work and non-work lives whereby work-life balance is achieved when the bridge between work and life is more of an 'open road' (short, stable, easy to traverse

crossings between work and non-work lives) with strong trusses and suspension (support from other domain members in both work and non-work settings e.g. colleagues, managers, family, friends) and, low, or no tolls to pay (i.e. few costs to the individual in balancing their work and non-work lives) (Evans and Wyatt, 2022). This research project set out to do address following research questions:

1. How does social class affect work-life balance outcomes?
2. What role has social class played in any changes to work-life balance resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic?

METHOD

This paper presents the preliminary findings of a project designed to explore the role played by social class in work-life balance outcomes. A qualitative approach was used to examine participants' experiences of work-life interplay. The research was subject to ethical review, ensuring all participants provided consent and were informed of their right to withdraw. Advertisements inviting participation in the research were placed in social media platforms. Additional participants were recruited using snowball sampling to ensure a representative sample of occupations across the socio-economic categories.

Thirty interviews have been conducted to date with interviews lasting between 58 - 138 minutes. The participants worked in a range of occupations in sectors including logistics, retail, higher education, transport, insurance, finance, and sales. Interviews were conducted online by either the author, or a Research Assistant working on the project. To ensure participants' anonymity pseudonyms are reported. Interviewees were asked to give some background narrative about their education, career, and experience of work-life interplay. All interviewees were asked if they self-identified with any particular social class. To offset the challenge of individuals from privileged class backgrounds misidentifying as working class, or long-range upwardly mobile (Friedman et al, 2021), data was collected on each participants' occupation role to measure socio-economic status (SES) and SES origin (using the Social Mobility Foundation recommended question, 'What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were about aged 14?').

The use of a subjective measure in addition to more objective SES measures of social class and social class origin contributes to a greater understanding of how individuals compare their position against others and is key to an individuals' habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). This data is reported in the paper via the SES ranking for their occupation and the industry in which they worked with the sample ranging from L2 through to L13 SES. Further analysis will be conducted on the data to assess the social class status of each interviewee across the 3 measures collected to explore any further insights on experiences and perceptions of work-life balance through subjective self-identification of social class and social class origin. Interviewees were asked to give some background narrative about their education and career to date followed by semi-structured questions to explore the participants' experiences of, and access to, work-life balance, the extent to they considered their social class to be relevant to their work-life balance, and any impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this.

FINDINGS: SOCIAL CLASS & WORK-LIFE BALANCE OUTCOMES

Preliminary findings from the interviews are reported here to explore how the role that social class may play in influencing work-life interplay and the participants' ability to achieve a balance across temporal, physical and psychological work-life outcomes.

Temporal Balance

Research has indicated that long working hours, working during unsocial hours, and a high work-time tempo negatively impact employees' perception of their work-life balance. Conversely, having the autonomy to manage working hours has been associated with positive effects (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; Fagan et al., 2012). Our interviewees all spoke of working long hours and the challenge this presented to their work-life balance. Class differences became apparent around the propensity to work shift patterns and unsociable hours and the level of autonomy to manage their working hours. Those working in lower SES occupations were more likely to undertake customer focused activities requiring them to work shifts, often with unsociable working hours, such as evenings and/or weekends, or split shifts. This limited the time they could spend on 'life', such as leisure time with friends and family, or pursuing hobbies:

My job has a huge impact on my social life. I often have to work the hours that everyone else have free for socialising and when I do have time off work, my friends and family are all working. If I have a special event to attend, such as a birthday party or a wedding I often have to use up my annual leave to be able to go. (Calvin, L12: call centre)

Our participants also talked about the impact of shift work on their health and well-being, such as disturbed sleep and disrupted routines making a healthy lifestyle more challenging to maintain, particularly when shifts rotate, or are unpredictable:

It's difficult to eat healthily and keep to a fitness routine when your work patterns have no routine. It really does have an impact on my health in terms of being a vicious cycle – I don't have predictability and sleep poorly due to shift patterns, which means I have less energy and motivation to eat well and exercise which then impacts on the rest of my life such as energy and motivation to exercise or be sociable or do the household chores and so it goes on. (Oliver, L7: transport)

Participants who worked in managerial and professional roles typically had more work-time autonomy and were able to vary their working hours informally. However, they also reported longer working hours when they took up flexible working opportunities, such as hybrid working, or remote working. They attributed this to increased pressures on their work performance due to negative perceptions in relation to organisational commitment and career advancement for flexible workers. This supports Chung's (2022) notion of the "flexibility paradox" where the blurring of work-life borders brought about by hybrid or homeworking can negatively impact temporal work-life balance because employees tend to work longer and more intensely:

The time that I save on commuting now just gets used up to work more. I feel the need to prove that I am just as productive when working from home so that my organisation doesn't withdraw it, like some other companies have. In fact, I think I probably work longer because I can always access my work, even just checking emails in the evening and at the weekend weekend, which I didn't do before I started working from home. (Ivan, L2: insurance)

Those working in lower SES occupations faced a different challenge in terms of working hours with financial capital playing a critical role in the ease with which individuals traversed their work and non-work lives, impacting work-life balance. Lower SES interviewees were often working in lower-paid jobs and could not afford to reduce their working hours through part-time, or term time working, to improve their work-life balance:

I would love to work less hours, but I simply can't afford to do so. My ideal balance would be to work 3 days a week, but the wage wouldn't cover my living costs, so I have to work longer hours in order to earn enough money. (Emily, L13: retail)

Physical (locational) Balance

The rise of hybrid working, much of which was triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, has been argued to have widened the work-life balance disparity between social classes. Jobs that can easily adopt hybrid working arrangements tend to be office-based professional roles, which are predominantly occupied by the middle class, meaning that these individuals gain access to the advantages associated with hybrid working, such as increased leisure and family time, reduced commuting time and expenses, and improved well-being:

I love the opportunity to work at home for some of the week, which was not offered by my company before the pandemic. I save so much time and money not having to commute every day and it means that I get to see more of my children than I ever used to, and don't have to take leave to pop out for a school event such as their class assembly. It really is a win-win situation for me. (Isabella, L5: finance)

Some lower SES interviewees were able to work part, or all of their job from home, particularly during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they were less likely to report wholly positive experiences than their middle-class counterparts. This was attributed to not having the space or equipment to comfortably work from home, often having to appropriate space within the home to do so due to a lower level of financial capital resulting in smaller living spaces. This was exacerbated if another member of their household also worked from home, or they lived alone in smaller accommodation. Such a lack of space at home to designate for work purposes resulted in spatial conflict which had a detrimental impact on their experience of work-life balance and well-being.

Conversely, maintaining clear boundaries between work and non-work has benefits, with evidence that homeworking can negatively impact productivity, social interactions, and employees' career advancement (Teevan et al., 2022). This physical separation between work and home is more likely to benefit those working in lower SES jobs who are less likely to have the opportunity to work from home options in less temporal and psychological spillover from work to home creating work-life conflict:

The nice thing about my job is that I can leave it behind when I finish my shift. I can't physically do my job at home so as soon as I walk off site then my time is all my own to do anything but work. (Timothy, L7: logistics)

Psychological balance

Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of fields and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), psychological borders are created when habitus is considered appropriate for one setting (e.g., the workplace), but not for not another (e.g., with family: Clark, 2000), related to the value placed on capitals within those different spaces. How individuals manage any differences in behaviours associated with different fields has been found to impact their levels of stress and well-being. According to Ashforth et al. (2000), work-life balance is determined by how stressful individuals find their role transitions between work and life and how much conflict these transitions trigger. Drawing on social class as a relational concept, based on the volume and composition of capitals together with associated habitus, helps to understand the role of social class in psychological work-life borders and balance. It is argued that individuals carry their social class between 'situation to situation' (Côté, 2011:49) and compare their capitals in relation to others (Bourdieu, 2002). A deficient in symbolic capital in one or more field can lead to feelings of psychological displacement and imbalance (Bourdieu, 2007).

Many of our interviewees were aware of a prevalent social class schema in both their work and non-work settings and this was more acute for the socially mobile, from working-class origin, who might be working in managerial and professional occupations with a strong middle-class schema. This made them more likely to experience stressful work-life transitions as they felt the need to engage in behaviours to conceal their working-class origin to mitigate these challenges:

I always see accents as quite a big like giveaway of someone's like social class. If I am in a situation with someone who I deemed to be of like a higher social class or standing, I'd probably be more careful with how I spoke to try and not have such an accent. (Chloe, L5: marketing)

Some interviewees spoke about withdrawing from either work or non-work settings such as their family or childhood friends because they found it too challenging to switch identities across the different fields. Those who had the most negative work-life outcomes were those who lacked support from others in the field either in or outside of work:

My family make fun of my accent saying that I now speak posh and make fun of my job because it's a non-manual role so isn't proper work. So, it's quite uncomfortable being in their company and I find myself withdrawing more and more as a result. (Emma, L3: higher education)

Other interviewees spoke of resigning from jobs because they felt they did not fit with the social class schema of the workplace and/or colleagues made fun of their social class status and associated stigmatised capitals, such as accent, education, clothes, hobbies, and even the food they choose for lunch. Rather than engaging in class work (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013) these individuals chose to withdraw from the workplace setting to mitigate the conflict associated with working in a field that was incongruent with their social class.

This challenge to individual authenticity in either work or non-work fields created psychological strain and imbalance with our interviewees reporting feelings of anxiety and isolation from “acting all the time, having to bite your tongue” (Edward, L2: higher education). On the other hand, some interviewees, often those with more experience of the workplace, spoke of the advantages of switching identities across their work and non-work lives in providing them with an important skillset of being able to communicate across of range of social classes. For our participants who remained class static with class congruent schema across work and non-work fields they tended to report fewer challenges to their psychological balance, or completely denied the existence of any class-based differences:

Personally, I think it's more and more dying out. I don't think there's so much of social class now. (Diana, L8)

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to address criticisms that current policies supporting work-life balance are overly focused on occupations largely occupied by middle-class workers leading to issues of time being viewed as a root cause of work-life imbalance. Preliminary findings from the interviews show that social class plays a role in work-life interplay through job roles, financial capital, and support from both work and non-work domain members with work-life balance outcomes being related to time, finances, and emotional well-being. While initial findings suggest that work-life balance is more challenging to navigate for lower SES/working-class employees for reasons that have remained largely overlooked in the work-life literature to date, higher SES/middle-class occupations are not immune from work-life conflict. The conclusions are presented using the concepts of social class as a bridge between work and non-work through ‘open roads’, trusses and suspension, and tolls to explore the mechanisms at play.

Open roads

The concept of open roads refers to the ease with which individuals navigate between their work and non-work lives with minimal conflict to achieve a balance between the two. Interviewees in lower paid, working-class occupations were less likely to be offered flexible working arrangements that improved their work-life balance, such as hybrid, or working-from-home. They were also less likely to benefit from reducing their working hours to improve work-life balance because their lower financial capital meant they were unable to afford to do so.

Trusses and suspension

The concept of trusses and suspension refer to the impact of members across work (e.g. line managers, colleagues) and non-work domains (e.g. family, friends, neighbours) on an individual's work-life outcomes (see border theory (Clark, 2000)). In terms of our interviewees, in the workspace this translated to inclusive organisational policies on work-life balance and flexible working arrangements in conjunction with supportive line managers and colleagues. For working-class employees this included being given access to all available flexible working arrangements, including shift working patterns that facilitated some temporal work-life balance and autonomy of working-time (e.g., being notified of shift patterns well in advance, adequate time off between shifts, and some time off in the evenings and at weekends), provision of equipment to enable working-from-home, and supportive line managers/colleagues. Many of our working-class interviewees felt that these support mechanisms for work-life balance were retained for managerial and professional staff, highlighting a class difference in the work-life balance opportunities across organisations. In non-work lives, supportive partners, house mates and families were essential to managing the overspill of work into non-work fields, such as physical home spaces when working from home; unsociable working hours creating temporal challenges for non-work activities and psychological spillover from a blurring of work-life borders. For example, interviewees working shift patterns (who were more likely to be working class) spoke about the importance of having understanding partners, family, and friends due to the detrimental impact their working patterns had on their availability to attend social and family events, while those working from home spoke about the need for space and understanding household members to support this mode of working.

The costs (bridge tolls) of social class - work-life balance outcomes

Interviewees from working-class origin were more likely to report work-life conflict, particularly in reference to the Covid-19 pandemic. Those who were able to work from home reported issues around space and resources and an inability to draw clear boundaries between work and home as a result, which impacted their well-being. For those working shifts, and working throughout the pandemic, reports of the impact on non-work life was significant. This included the unsociable hours of their shift work impacting on their social life and ability to maintain hobbies, while also disrupting physical well-being in terms of sleep and nutrition. Our middle-class interviewees were more likely to talk of work-life balance in terms of temporal and work-family balance, but did report the propensity to work longer hours, or more intensely when working-from home together with being more likely to talk about a psychological spillover between their work and non-work lives. Conversely, our working-class interviewees were more able to psychologically switch off from work when they left their workplace and reported less psychological imbalance. We also found that social class origin plays a role in psychological work-life balance outcomes with socially mobile participants discussing the challenges associated with changing class schemas across their work and non-work lives, although some found that this added to their workplace skill set by providing a more positive experience. This highlights the importance of social class to psychological work-life balance and the complexities of this process.

Implications

This research shows the impact of social class in differential work-life balance outcomes and the challenges this presents for policy making and organisational practice. This begins with acknowledgement that the minutiae of "life" extends beyond the scope of "family," and the diversity of employees encompasses more than the "ideal-typical" worker. By illuminating the class-based aspects of work-life balance, this work highlights the need for future research to add greater understanding to the mechanisms in play so that policies supportive of all employees are developed at both organisational and national level. Such support can be engendered by organisations to foster work-life balance for all employees with a need to:

1. Acknowledge the influence of social class in shaping differential work-life needs and outcomes related to work-life balance.

2. Recognise social class as a significant demographic and driver of inequality by incorporating the measurement of employees' social class and social class origin into related EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) audits.
3. Review existing work-life balance policies and support systems for any biases stemming from class-based perspectives and revise them accordingly to ensure fairness.
4. Strive towards a class-fluent culture by openly discussing social class, encouraging senior leaders to share their class backgrounds, and honestly addressing any class-based barriers that their organizations may (re)produce.
5. Provide training to managers on the challenges faced by socially mobile individuals to better support those in roles that involve discrepancies in social class.

By implementing these strategies, organisations can promote a more inclusive work environment that acknowledges and accommodates the diverse work-life needs of employees, regardless of their social class, ultimately leading to improved work-life balance and employee well-being.

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