

**“Too much of one and less of the other”: Young British and Asian Future Labour
Market Entrants Making Sense of ‘Work-Life Balance’**

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Track 3: Work, Family and Community

Abstract:

What does 'work-life balance' (WLB) mean to new entrants to the labour market and what support do they expect? This paper examines the relationship between young people's conceptualization of WLB and their expectations of employer and government WLB support.

In recent times, the topic of WLB has gained wide academic and public attention. However, an emergent critical perspective signifies the problematic nature of the WLB concept, urging researchers and policy makers to re-examine and re-conceptualize the notion and the context of WLB itself (e.g. Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007). Furthermore, much of the work-family and work-life literature tends to focus on workers who have caring and/or other family responsibilities, thereby confining our understanding of WLB experiences to a particular demographic cohort. As global workforce demographics are diversifying in unprecedented ways, it is no longer apt to infer that workers have similar needs and expectations from work and outside of work. This paper argues that in order to extend our understanding of WLB, it is imperative that other members of the workforce are also considered.

Accordingly, this paper focuses explicitly on a specific age and generational cohort. It examines the WLB perspectives and expectations of young British and Asian people who are in transition from university to work and employment. Existing research indicates that the issue of WLB is an important one for today's generation of young workers, including those who do not yet have caring and/or family responsibilities (e.g. Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen, & Smithson, 2002; Sturges & Guest, 2004). However, the majority of studies have been based in North American and European countries. Less is known about the WLB perspectives of young workers outside of these Western contexts. By including young Asian people's viewpoints, this paper provides insight into how young people from this region talk about and conceptualize WLB. The increased mobility of today's young people in a globalized world affords the opportunity to examine the diversity in how WLB is conceptualized across national and cultural contexts.

In this paper, the variability in the way in which young people make sense of WLB as they and their personal, social, cultural, and historical contexts shift and transform is examined. Specifically, two key research questions are posed:

- 1) In what ways do young British and Asian adults conceptualize WLB at this stage of their life course?
- 2) In what ways do young British and Asian adults expect WLB support from their employer and the government?

Thematic analysis was employed on qualitative data obtained from individual interviews and focus groups conducted with 30 female and male university students from the UK, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework of life course theory (Giele & Elder, 1998) and the sense of entitlement concept (Lewis & Smithson, 2001), the analysis reveals that the notion of 'individual choice' strongly underpins young people's conceptualization and expectations of WLB. While young British and Asian people largely consider WLB as a matter of individual choice, there are also variations in their preferences for how to prioritize their impending employment and personal lives. In this paper, four emerging patterns of WLB orientation preferences among

young British and Asian people are described: 'balancer', 'careerist', 'career-sacrificer', and 'integrator'.

Findings also indicate that the notion of individual choice impacts on young people's expectations of employer and government WLB support, where the majority have a low sense of entitlement to such support. Although most participants demonstrate an awareness of the 'business case' for employers to adopt WLB initiatives, the majority question their effectiveness. Instead, there appears to be a stronger sense of entitlement to individual choice, as indicated by their discussions of not wanting external WLB support to be imposed on them. In terms of government WLB support, young people feel disconnected to what the government can do for them. The findings reveal that social comparisons are made among young British and Asian people at both personal and national levels, which in turn shape their perceptions of what kind of external WLB support is feasible, normative, and appropriate for them to expect. Overall, the paper argues that while individual choice is fundamental in young people's conceptualization and expectations of WLB, the choices that they have are inextricably interlinked with their life course contexts and structural and cultural realities.

This paper contributes to the congress theme and track by aligning to emerging calls for more contextualized and broader approach to understanding people's diverse and varied experiences of WLB in a globalized world. It highlights the importance of contextualizing meanings and expectations of WLB in the timing of people's lives as well as their multiple contexts (structural, national, cultural, and historical). The paper contributes theoretically to the field of work-family and work-life research by proposing and developing an integrated theoretical framework of life course theory and sense of entitlement to examine the various ways in which WLB is conceptualized and expectations of external WLB support are formed. Finally, the paper also considers and discusses the applied implications of the findings for meeting the diverse WLB needs and expectations of today's global talent.

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