
Book Review

Barbara Hobson (ed.) (2013) *WorkLife Balance: The Agency and Capabilities Gap*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 297 pages.

The issue of work-life balance (WLB) has become a highly relevant field of discussion in academic and public debate as the pressure people feel as work intensifies in Western societies is increasing along with the perception of time famine (Van Echtelt et al., 2009; Robinson and Godbey, 1997). The interrelationship between work and life has been a focus of social research for decades. The volume under review provides an exceptionally comprehensive examination of WLB in the field of comparative welfare state research, mainly in the European context, although it provides an example from Asia as well.

Amartya Sen's capability approach (1992) serves as the conceptual framework for the analyses. The approach was developed by the author in the 1980s who introduced this concept of 'capabilities' as a measure of well-being, and held the view that equality of capabilities should be promoted in society (Sen, 1985; 1992). In accord with this approach, choice and agency are at the core of the model presented in the book. Consequently, individual preferences based on the capability of people to choose another way of life and an exploration of these capabilities and potential choices are the focus of the work. Accordingly, the complex, multidimensional nature of achieving balance between work and private life is underlined.

The aim of the book is twofold. On the one hand, it is designed to incorporate the agency and capabilities approach and based on this established model explore the gap between aspirations and practices in WLB. On the other hand, it is also intended to broaden the capabilities framework through its research into WLB.

The book employs an institutional approach to defining a multidimensional model which outlines the conversion of resources into agency and incorporates the determining factors, the capabilities, and finally, the opportunity to achieve WLB (which is called agency freedom) into this model.

The three levels which are investigated constitute the conversion factors which may be defined and modified based on Sen's categories. Individual, institutional and societal factors are distinguished; however, these levels are intertwined. Accordingly, these conversion factors define a set of individual capabilities which impact agency freedom and thus the real opportunity of people to achieve balance between work and life.

The concept of situated agency is employed in the book to accentuate the overlaps which exist between different social categories: this notion is employed to highlight the interaction between these dimensions - such as gender (the key dimension), education and skills, etc. - which shape capabilities. Therefore, as the individual factors together comprise the concept of situated agency, the role of gender is underlined.

At the societal level, norms are the primary focus, and the central role played by gender also appears in the book at this point with a view to examining the significance of gendered norms related to parenting and employment.

Concerning institutional factors, these constitute the centre of the model since the most significant role in the conversion of resources is attributed to this level. The institutional level is divided into two further groups: welfare regimes and firms, and the policy dimension and organizational culture are thereby also integrated into the model. Furthermore, working time and flexibility are also included as institutional factors, revealing some of the features of the labour market.

Besides capturing subjective experiences with WLB, the cognitive aspects of capabilities are also developed in the book. Accordingly, the sense of entitlement to make claims (including individual-level perceptions) and the scope of alternatives for achieving WLB make up the dimensions through which the cognitive level of agency is captured. This approach reveals how the institutional and social context may modify alternatives and individual perceptions about creating balance between work and home life.

Consequently, by applying the agency and capabilities approach the author emphasizes that choice in WLB is multidimensional in nature: it reflects individual perceptions about available options and strategies, and it is substantially determined by the institutional and social context.

Concerning the extension of the conceptual framework, the investigation into capabilities at different levels, the integration of the firm as a decisive location for the making of claims, and lastly, the introduction to the cognitive dimensions of capabilities are underscored.

The innovative approach to researching WLB using an agency and capabilities approach is threefold in nature, considering 1) the broad theoretical framework, 2) the WLB concept, and 3) the measurement of WLB.

Focusing on capabilities using a multilevel approach facilitates a broader exploration of the factors behind work-life tension than by using classical approaches such as conflict theory (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Furthermore, in referring to models that reject the existence of a strict distinction between the life spheres (such as spillover and border theory (Staines, 1980; Clark, 2000)), the capabilities approach also accounts for the blurring of boundaries between different domains. WLB is conceptualized as 'functioning for wellbeing' and is thus situated in the framework, therefore the researching of capabilities highlights the complex and dynamic nature of the interplay between the diverse spheres of life.

Moreover, the focus is on the cognitive aspects of WLB. These cognitive aspects are measured through integrating the sense of entitlement to make claims and the scope of alternatives for achieving WLB. This approach facilitates understanding not only of individual satisfaction based on subjective measurements but also of the complex relationship between expectations, the perception of opportunities and of satisfaction.

The book is well-structured and clearly written using ten chapters. Eight different empirical studies are connected through the theoretical and conceptual framework that is presented in the book. These chapters are framed by the introductory and concluding chapters. In the introductory chapter, Barbara Hobson

establishes the model used in the volume. Furthermore, the book is divided into two sections according to the sites of WLB claims. The first part (Chapters 2-5) focuses on the individual/household level of agency and capabilities, whereas the second part (Chapters 6-9) addresses the firm level. One weakness of the volume arises from the application of the same framework in the research; namely, the fact that some studies overlap and repetition occurs.

Both sections contain a chapter (Chapters 2 and 6) that describes the capability approach at the investigated levels based on cross-national survey data, primarily covering European countries. The remaining empirical case studies mostly represent European examples and diverse institutional contexts by employing a variety of methods, although qualitative investigation is used in the majority. Most of the data analysed in the book were collected in the period from the mid-2000s to the emergence of the global financial crisis.

The book includes findings from Western countries (Germany, the Netherlands, the UK) and post-socialist ones (Slovenia, Hungary), in addition to one Southern (Spain) and one Scandinavian (Sweden) country, contributing to a comprehensive examination of the applied capability approach to exploring WLB-related issues. Moreover, a further chapter about Japan serves as an example of an Asian society.

Concerning the individual facets that are investigated to approach the problem of WLB, the volume includes some studies that concentrate on working time. Chapter 2 explores the agency gap through examining attitudes to WLB priorities and working time capabilities, thus comparing actual working hours and 'capability hours'. Susan Fahlén analyses the interrelationship between policies, gendered norms and practices based on various cross-national quantitative data that covers eleven countries from Europe and Japan. Laura den Dulk, Sandra Groeneveld and Bram Peper (Chapter 6) examine 21 European countries by employing cluster analysis. Their data come from a European survey on working time and WLB. The study is designed to identify what kind of country-level public policies and workplace support create the most agency and capability-related freedom for working parents in their quest for WLB. In line with this, the remaining chapters concentrate on examining the role of issues that enhance or constrain WLB for employees. Colette Fagan and Pierre Walthery (Chapter 7) use the same European dataset to investigate individual adjustment options concerning full-time and part-time work from the employers' perspective, emphasising that employer policy is one of the important conversion factors.

Since the sense of entitlement appears as a core concept, it is also addressed in two chapters in the book. The third chapter's main object of research is the cognitive level of capabilities which are explored through sense of entitlement. Barbara Hobson, Susanne Fahlén and Judit Takács investigate individual perceptions of alternatives and the ability to make a claim for WLB through a comparison of Sweden and Hungary. The study is based on qualitative interviews with employed parents in the two capitals. An Asian example is presented in Chapter 4, wherein Mieko Takahashi, Saori Kamano, Tomoko Matsuda, Setsuko Onode and Kyoko Yoshizumi apply the same framework used in the comparison of Sweden and Hungary to explore the obstacles that working parents face in Japanese organizational culture. The study

focuses on the new policies that are designed to enhance WLB, while the role of gendered norms in work and family life appear to be emphasized most.

Furthermore, one piece of research approaches work life balance by accentuating the problems with the resources-demands model. In Chapter 5, Sonja Drobnič and Margarita León apply the capability approach to reconsidering inequalities with gender agency. This chapter compares German and Spanish employees. The analysis is based on different types of European survey data. The authors find that the difficulty of combining family and work roles for women still exists due to labour market constraints, normative expectations and a low level of social support.

As mentioned above, the studies in the second section address the organisational level. Two chapters discuss organisational culture and examine capabilities by comparing the perspectives of employers/managers and employees. Accordingly, managers' practices and attitudes towards work-life policies and employees' (working parents') perspectives are described by Bram Peper, Laura den Dulk, Nevenka Černigoj Sadar, Suzan Lewis, Janet Smithson and Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes in Chapter 8. The study focuses on the banking sector in three different countries (the Netherlands, the UK and Slovenia) and explores the impact of managers' attitudes on employee capabilities by applying a qualitative multiple case study design. Aleksandra Kanjuo Mrčela and Nevenka Černigoj Sadar (Chapter 9) examine qualitative data (focus group and individual interviews) gathered from both employers and employees in three different sectors (retail, health and IT) in Slovenia. The aim of this study is to increase understanding of the significance of the features of the sector that influence the capabilities and practices of parents in relation to achieving WLB in the same institutional and societal environment.

Finally, the book ends with a summary written by the editor.

Edited by Barbara Hobson, the book contributes to understanding the complexity of work-life balance by applying Sen's conceptual framework and therefore comprehensively explores the interplay of factors and dimensions that influence individual perceptions of satisfaction, thereby revealing the real opportunities people have to achieve balance between work and home life. Consequently, the book addresses the manifold mechanisms of WLB. Furthermore, by employing qualitative methods, more nuanced insights are obtained. Although the framework incorporates individual and also institutional factors which cover some components of home life, a more extensive, deeper investigation of the household level using this approach would enrich our knowledge of how work-life balance may be created.

One of the important merits of the book is its signal emphasis on fatherhood. Since gender is the main focus, gendered norms related to parenting are demonstrated through a focus on understanding the fathers' role in the household. The examination of both genders contributes to highlighting the importance of the interaction which occurs between family members in determining quality of life. In addition, the empirical results also confirm the concept of 'new fatherhood' and broaden previous findings about the increase in the work-life conflict of fathers.

The integration of the experimental cognitive level of agency through an investigation of the sense of entitlement and the scope of alternatives is, on the one

hand, a notable contribution to the conceptual framework; on the other hand, it reveals the weaknesses inherent in the subjective measurement of satisfaction and happiness.

Kitti Kutrovátz (kitti.kutrovatz@gmail.com)
PhD student, Doctoral School of Sociology,
Corvinus University of Budapest

References

- Clark, S. C. (2000) Work/Family Border Theory: A New Theory of Work/Family Balance. *Human Relations*, 53 (6): 747-770.
- Greenhaus, J. H. and N. J. Beutell (1985) Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 10 (1): 76-88.
- Robinson, J. P. and G. Godbey (1997) *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University.
- Sen, A. (1985) *Commodities and Capability*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality Re-examined*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Staines, G. L. (1980) Spillover versus compensation: A review of the literature on the relationship between work and non-work. *Human Relations*, 33 (2): 111-129.
- Van Echtelt, P., A. Glebbeek; S. Lewis and S. Lindenberg (2009) Post-Fordist Work: A Man's World? Gender and Working Overtime in the Netherlands. *Gender & Society*, 23 (2): 188-214.