On the Way to Life-domains Balance: Success Factors and Obstacles

by Harald Lothaller

Abstract: During the 'rush hour of life', people face various challenges from different life domains simultaneously: they have to fulfill a number of different obligations at their workplace, at home, and elsewhere of life (e.g., getting a job and starting a career, establishing a family, moving towards getting their own home, but also meeting people, part taking in leisure activities, etc.). The article examines the factors that have positive and negative effects on the transition from one life domain towards another. In addition, by focusing on the situation of dual-earner couples with young children it briefly illustrates why life-domains balance is significantly linked to the 'rush hour of life'.

A certain phenomenon appeared in political as well as scientific discussions in the last decade – the so-called 'rush hour of life'.[1] It is defined as "a certain stage of life, ranging from the mid-twenties to the late thirties, when persons of both sexes who have just completed their education enter the labour market in addition to starting a family, and therefore have to deal with both job/career demands and family/private demands at the same time […]"[2]. As a corollary to this, many seem to face overwhelming demands from apparently conflicting life domains since "every employed person is faced with the task of defining the relationship between work and family in his or her life".[3] Balancing several life domains, occupation and family in particular, might especially be a challenge for dual-earner couples with young children.[4] Reasonably, one may assume that dual-earner couples with young children are prototypes of people in the 'rush hour of life'[5]: "Both families and work careers go through identifiable stages, which vary according to the degree of involvement they require. The difficulty at this vulnerable point in life stems from the fact that stresses in both cycles characteristically peak then: both seem to require maximum attention.[6] Sociologically and biologically this is the optimal time to have young children, hence family demands are maximal. It is also the time in their employee's lives when employing organizations tend to make decisions about future placement, decisions at least partially based on the degree of involvement and commitment to work demonstrated by the employee".[7]

The relevance of the 'rush hour of life' and life-domains balance increase

There is clear evidence that the 'rush hour of life' and the issue of life-domains balance are major challenges nowadays in particular, and more people have to face them in comparison to former generations. This proposition can be illustrated easily by numerous indicators such as the following selection:

- Women's participation in the labour market has increased within the last decades, while men's participation rate has remained constant.[8]
- Only small changes have been observed in the structures of households and the great majority consist of at least two persons.[9]
- The great majority of employed mothers live together with their partner.[10]
- The age at starting a family has increased as both the mean age of women at childbearing as well as the mean age at first birth have increased by several years over the last decades.[11]
- The mean age at marriage as well as the mean age at first marriage have increased in Europe by several years over the last decades.[12]
- Between the mid-twenties and the late twenties is the time for the majority of people to leave their parents' home and move into their own.[13]
- The portion of higher educated people increased over the last decades, with a much stronger increase for women than for men.[14]
- The division of tasks between men and women has become more equal over the last decades (but nevertheless they are still unequal). More egalitarian divisions of tasks with both partners being involved in both domains raise the issue of reconciling within a partnership rather than resorting to traditional divisions of tasks in which one partner (usually male) is the breadwinner and the other the primary caregiver (usually female).[15]

These indicators point to an increase in the number of dual-earner couples in general, particularly those with young children. In addition, both sexes are more involved in fulfilling demands from several domains. Therefore, many of these people will find themselves right

in their 'rush hour of life' where they have to keep the different life domains in balance.

The aim of this article is to give an overview on life-domains balance and the related factors that lead to more or less balance. It might be useful to shortly explore the term itself before dealing with the possible causes of life-domains balance.

What is life-domains balance?

The term 'life-domains balance' refers to a concept that is widely used. More commonly, it is called 'work/life balance' or 'work/family balance'. Yet, these two terms are to be criticised for several reasons. One of them being, that within these two terms other life domains are either neglected or not differentiated. For instance, 'work' is used for paid work and the occupation domain only, but a lot of (unpaid) work is carried out in addition to a job. To overcome the given points of criticism, we should better call the concept 'life-domains balance' as occupation, family and partnership,

> When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure.
> / Peter Marshall /

education, leisure time, voluntary social work, etc, are all different domains in people's life and have to be reconciled and kept in balance.[16]

Regardless of the terms, the issue of life-domains balance lacks comprehensive theories. Empirical work in the field relies on evidence-based models rather than on theoretical concepts. There is neither an explicit and comprehensive definition nor an explanation of what it means to have different life domains 'in balance'. Most authors seem to take its meaning as self-explanatory and "for many writers, work-family balance represents a vague notion that work and family life are somewhat integrated and harmonious".[17] This still holds, particularly for textbooks and political statements. However, in the last years an increasing specification can be found, at least in empirical research.

The two components of the terms can help us to approach the concept. The first one regards the considered life domains. Along with an "over-emphasis on the work domain"[18], there is hardly any empirical evidence concerning

other domains than the occupation domain and the family domain with regard to balancing life domains. Over and above, some authors criticise the inclusion of other domains in the debate. They explicitly insist on focusing on the complex interaction of occupational demands and family-related demands only because "playing a game of golf or two may be good for one's morale, but it is not an obligation as such".[19]

The second component of the term is 'balance'. The widely used view of balance is the absence of conflicts between the different life domains. Balance can be jeopardised due to overwhelming demands from different life domains, or in other words due to conflicting life domains. In that, prior studies raised the concept of 'work/family conflict' and defined it as "a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by the virtue of participation in the family (work) role".[20] More recent literature distinguishes two kinds of conflicts between these two life domains[21]: on the one hand, the family domain can cause obstacles for the occupation domain (i.e., family negatively interferes with job), and on the other hand, there can be obstacles derived from the job for the family (i.e., job negatively interferes with family). Once again, it might be better to use the terms 'family-to-job conflicts' and 'job-to-family conflicts' instead of other common terms that use 'work' for paid work only. Anyway, recent research suggests that balance is more than just a lack of conflicts. Grzywacy and Marks take the "generally accepted assumption that the interface between work and family is best characterised in terms of strain"[22] as one of the most significant limitations in this respect and they note that the consequence is "an almost exclusive empirical focus"[23] on conflicts between life domains. But it seems reasonable to assume that there are positive effects from one domain on another too. Experiences, skills, and positive effects gained by doing family-related activities can make it easier to fulfill demands in the occupation domain and vice versa.[24] Being involved in several domains can provide resources and opportunities. For instance, having a partner to talk with might help to overcome strain from the job. This supportive impact is named facilitation, enhancement, or positive spillover in current literature. Taken together, life domains should be more balanced the less conflict there is between the demands from different domains and the more the participation in a domain facilitates dealing with demands from other domains. Both conflicts and facilitations between the life domains are bidirectional: Each do-

main can conflict with or be hindered by other domains. In addition, each domain can also ease the strain on another domain or benefit from the resources provided by another domain.

> He who is of calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressure of age, but to him who is of an opposite disposition youth and age are equally a burden.
> / Plato /

Causes of life-domains balance

Life-domains balance is characterised by the extent of conflict and facilitation between life domains. Consistently, some aspects of a person's situation can cause conflicts and decrease balance, while others enable facilitation and increase balance. Frone (2003) summarised factors leading to life-domains conflicts and postulated two general categories, namely role environment and personality. With regard to the first, he furthermore distinguished between several kinds of role-related predictors of conflicts between life domains: behavioral involvement, psychological involvement, role-related stressors and effects, and role-related resources. Frone focused on (a) conflicts and (b) the occupation domain and the family domain only when presenting these systematically. In any case, on the superior level focusing on life-domains balance, the role-related resources in particular as well as positive effects should be supportive and causes of facilitation. Also, equivalent causes from life domains other than job and family should have equivalent effects on life-domains balance.

The following overview is inspired by Frone, but considers facilitation in addition to conflicts between two life domains. As the majority of prior studies with regard to life-domains balance focus on the two domains occupation and family with a "virtual omission of non-work domain variables"[25], I focus mainly on these two life domains below. Role environment variables (i.e., originated in a certain domain) are considered with reference to life-domains conflicts first and life-domains facilitation second. Personality is discussed afterwards.

Generally speaking, demands and pressures originated in domain A as well as personal characteristics of the individual cause A-to-B conflicts. When A is the occupation domain and B is the family domain, job-to-family conflicts are caused by demands and pressures from the occupation domain or by certain individual aspects of the person. Similarly, family-to-job conflicts are caused by demands and pressures from the family domain or by certain individual aspects of the person.

Behavioural involvement represents the amount of time spent on the one or other domain. A lot of studies have shown that the more time a person spends on the occupation domain the more job-to-family conflicts he/she experiences, and the more time a person spends on the family domain the more family-to-job conflicts he/she experiences.[26] In other words, "the more hours a person worked per week the more difficulty they had combining work and family".[27] Regardless of a lack of empirical evidence, we can assume that time demands of the obligations from other domains lead to similar effects, e.g. spending time for voluntary social work, for maintaining friendships or for regularly doing sports.

Psychological involvement refers to the subjective importance of a domain to a person. Generally speaking, the higher the subjective importance of the occupation domain the more job-to-family conflicts one experiences, and the higher the subjective importance of the family domain the more family-to-job conflicts one experiences. Higher subjective importance is also linked with higher perceived demands because the importance of a domain goes along with, for instance, people's role expectations, career salience and family salience. And when a person is overwhelmed by life domains, he/she will reduce efforts in the less important domain or will withdraw from it altogether.[28] Psychological involvement in hobbies or voluntary social work might act the same way.

Role-related stressors and negative effects refer to both objective and subjective aspects. On the one hand, there are requirements within a domain such as mentally demanding tasks and other characteristics of the tasks, changing situations or certain stressing events as well as within-domain conflicts or work load in general. Such stressors or "strain-based demands are linked to work-family conflict through a process of psychological spillover in which the strain associated with participating in one domain is carried over to another domain such that it creates strain in the second domain, thereby hindering role performance in that domain".[29] The more stressors that are linked with the occupation domain the more job-to-family conflicts a person experiences, and the more stressors that are linked with the family domain the more family-to-job conflicts a person experiences.[30] With respect to the occupation domain, insecurity or fear of losing one's job[31] as well as shift work[32] are additional sources of life-domain conflicts, while the number of children is repeatedly shown as a significant predictor to increasing family-to-job conflicts.[33] On the other hand, experiencing distress, feeling overwhelmed, taking domain-related duties as a burden, within-domain dissatisfaction or other negative effects

from the occupation domain increase job-to-family conflicts as much as they increase family-to-job conflicts when they are linked with the family domain.[34] We can imagine that voluntary social work or engaging in organisations outside of job and family for instance can also bring distress or mental demands regardless of a lack of formal obligations.

While the former role-related predictors of life-domains balance increase difficulties in balancing the domains, the below mentioned role-related resources and role-related positive effects decrease difficulties and support balance by means of facilitation. Although the first group of variables predicts conflicts and the second predicts facilitation as two separate sub concepts, one might presume that on the superior level, the latter can compensate the first with regard to life-domains balance.

Job-to-family facilitation is furthered by supportive resources and positive effective consequences from the occupation domain or by certain individual aspects of the person. Similarly, family-to-job facilitation is furthered by supportive resources and positive effective consequences from the family domain or by certain individual aspects of the person.

Concerning the occupation domain, respective resources can be work schedule flexibility to handle family responsibilities, social support from supervisors or co-workers, and supportive policies and family-friendliness of the organisation. When it comes to the family domain, such resources, particularly from the partner, can be a social support within the family. Assistance in carrying out household and family tasks from one's partner or from other persons like domestic helpers,[35] and a division of tasks between both partners is recognised as being needed for a feeling of satisfaction.[36] In addition, some competences and skills acquired in one domain can serve as resources and be positively transferred to the other domain, such as time management, conflict management, coping strategies, problem-solving competences or manual skills. Taken together, resources from one domain ease the situation in the other domain by means of transferring positive aspects or preventing the transfer of negative aspects. The latter means that resources can help in keeping one's mind free of a problem related to one domain and thereby enabling one to concentrate on tasks in the other domain. This goes beyond the fact that the amount of resources linked with a domain decrease the conflicts resulting from this domain.[37] Competences retrieved from leisure time activities or a social network outside the family and social support from friends might add further benefits.

Contrary to the negative effects mentioned above, positive effects can strengthen people and cause life-domains facilitation. For instance, psychological rewards and personal enrichment, within-domain satisfaction or perceived autonomy, variety, and control in the occupation domain in particular were indicated as relevant predictors of life-domains facilitation.[38] Relaxation and other positive effects should follow from pursuing a hobby, meeting friends, voluntarily doing social work or further leisure time activities.

Frone's second general category besides the role environment is personality. A differentiation should however be added to his systematisation: personality aspects often lead to more of both job-to-family conflicts as well as family-to-job conflicts, when there are individual deficits (e.g., neuroticism or Type-A behavior): emotional instability with a tendency to experience negative emotional states or time urgency, impatience, and being a highly competitive stress junkie increases both kinds of life-domains conflicts. Personality aspects often lead to more of both job-to-family facilitation as well as family-to-job facilitation when there are individual resources (e.g., mastery, self esteem or extraversion). Taking oneself as being able to deal with one's situation, having a positive and valuable image of oneself or enjoying social interaction and being talkative goes along with increasing facilitation and, consequently, a balance between life domains.[39]

Generally speaking, more individual resources should enable persons to better deal with overwhelming demands in comparison to persons with less individual resources or even more individual deficits. In contrast, the latter can complicate the situation and often might make a mountain out of a molehill.

> Human society is like an arch, kept from falling by the mutual pressure of its parts.
> / Seneca /

Gender differences in life-domains balance
Some studies examining the differences between women and men indicate more job-to-family conflicts and more family-to-job conflicts with women than with men.[40] For instance, Voydanoff has shown that "women […] report higher levels of work-to-family conflict, whereas these characteristics are not related to facilitation".[41] Anyway, in his review, Frone clearly rejects the existence, or at least the relevance, of sex differences in the extent of such conflicts as he summarises: "Across a variety of samples […], men and women report similar levels of work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict. Moreover, Grzywacy and Marks found that this lack of gender difference also extends to reports of work-to-family facilitation and family-to-work facilitation. Although some studies with large samples may report statistically significant gender differences, the absolute size of these differences is typically not large enough to be of practical importance".[42]

In addition to the extent of life-domains conflicts, differences between the sexes in the relevance of certain predictors have been shown in some studies, but rather inconsistently and hardly systematically, and some other studies have rejected respective assumptions.[43] For instance, Bedeian, Burke and Moffett conclude from "the fact that the hypothesized model did not operate in a substantially different manner for men and women" that "future research should focus less on sex differences and more on factors mediating work-family conflict".[44]

However, most studies either did not examine the issue of the differences between women and men, or only focused on one or the other. Anyway, bearing Frone's words as well as the fact that there are no clear findings with regard to sex differences in mind, it might be more reasonable to set priorities on other topics in life-domains balance-related research and reviews than on sex differences. This does not mean that future research should not consider both sexes simultaneously, because according to Poelmans, "one should by definition be suspicious of studies that do not distinguish between men and women, because they are probably ignoring the fact that the underlying mechanisms of work-family-conflicts are fundamentally different".[45] In other words, we should not seek for sex differences, but we should be attentive if there are some.

Conclusions
The literature review above has shown in short what contributes to more or less life-domains conflicts or life-domains facilitation. From a narrow view, one success factor in this respect seems to be that by reducing conflict between the life domains increases facilitation. The time spent on a domain, the psychological bond with a domain, and the felt stressors or negative effects from a domain are crucial for the extent of conflict from this domain to other domains. But over and above, success might be more than reducing conflicts but positively influencing and easing the situation. These success factors point particularly to a person and his/her role environment. Supportive measures can be settled on three levels: societal level,[46] organisational level,[47] and individual level.[48] Some starting points to increase life-domains balance can be derived from the above-mentioned causes, but discussing the levels as well as reasonable measures in detail would go far beyond this article.

The stage of life that we call the 'rush hour of life' is considered as a current challenge for the

young generation. Yet, it will be one in the future too. Easing the 'rush hour of life' and enhancing life-domains balance is a societal issue. Fertility rates are below the reproduction rate in most European countries and current surveys indicate aspects related to occupational work and career as major reasons for having less to no children.[49] There is a need for structural measures (e.g., public childcare fitting families' requirements with regard to opening times), financial measures (e.g., child-related subsidies to overcome financial burdens from parenting instead of a fulltime job), and attitude-related measures (e.g., promoting the high value of children and multi-children families for our society). This requires top-down measures such as agenda setting and awarding prizes with the aim to open eyes, as well as bottom-up initiatives and small contributions by everyone. It is not about 'the others', it is about us.

Notes:
1. Bittman / Wajcman 2000.
2. Lothaller 2008: 4. Translated by the author.
3. Bailyn 1977: 1.
4. Hammer / Allen / Grigsby 1997; Kinnunen / Mauno 1998.
5. Bailyn 1977; Lothaller 2008.
6. Wilensky 1961; Troll 1975.
7. Bailyn 1977: 18.
8. De Jong / Broekman 2003.
9. Schipfer 2003.
10. Schipfer 2005.
11. Schipfer 2005.
12. Schipfer 2003, 2005.
13. Schipfer 2003.
14. Statistik Austria 2008.
15. Bailyn 1977;Baxter 2002;Byron 2005.
16. Lothaller 2008.
17. Frone 2003:145.
18. Eby et al. 2005: 185.
19. Edgar 1999. Citation from Russell & Bowman 2000:5.
20. Greenhaus / Beutell 1985.
21. Byron 2005; Frone 2003.
22. Grzywacy / Marks 1999:4.
23. Grzywacy / Marks 1999:4.
24. Frone 2003; Grzywacy / Marks 1999.
25. Eby et al. 2005:185.
26. E.g. Frone / Yardley / Markel 1997; Voydanoff 2004.
27. Fine-Davis, n.d;16.
28. E.g. Poelmans 2001.
29. Voydanoff 2004:400.
30. E.g. Frone et al. 1997; Voydanoff 1988.
31. Voydanoff 2004.
32. Voydanoff 1988.
33. E.g. Greenhaus / Beutell 1985; Poelmans 2001.
34. E.g. Frone et al. 1997; Poelmans 2001.
35. E.g. Fine-Davis, n.d.; Luk / Shaffer 2005.
36. E.g. Himsel / Goldberg 2003.
37. Frone et al. 1997; Frone 2003.
38. E.g. Grzywacy / Butler 2005; Voydanoff 2004.
39. E.g. Frone 2003; Voydanoff 2004.
40. E.g. Hammer et al. 1997.
41. Voydanoff 2004:410.
42. Grzywacy / Marks 2003:149.
43. Byron 2005; Eby et al. 2005.
44. Bedeian / Burke / Moffett 1988:489.
45. Poelmans 2001:24.
46. E.g. Barkholdt 2005. Proposed a lifetime account of occupational working time to flexibly deal with.
47. Frone 2003. Family or couple level e.g., Baldock / Hadlow 2004, highlight 'scheduling problems' as crucial.
48. E.g. Wierda-Boer / Gerris / Vermulst 2008. Point to the role of adaptive strategies.
49. Market 2005.

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