1. Introduction to the *Research Handbook on Work–Life Balance*

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Two years ago, when we received the proposal to engage in an editorial project for a handbook on work–life balance research, we were hesitant to accept, aware of the increasingly contested and problematic nature of the very construct of ‘work–life balance’. However, we eventually decided to accept the invitation, with the idea of collating not so much an exhaustive compendium of the research works focused on the relationship between work and other dimensions of the biographical experience of individuals, but rather a text offering both theoretical reflections and empirical research examples illustrating the multiple strategies through which the different articulations that characterize this intersection can be analyzed. Our aim was to devise a text not only able to account for the richness of lenses and perspectives, together with their translation and actualization into specific research practices and methodological choices, but that would also shed light on its potentialities yet to be thoroughly explored.

We believe the final result matches these objectives to some extent and that the volume offers a rather broad and articulated selection of reflections and contributions focused on how research is carried out and could be carried out when it comes to the relationship between working life and other life areas; also in light of the controversies the work–life balance construct carries and especially the changes that have characterized these areas over the last few years, with the gradual dissolution of the boundaries between the different domains, and also as a result of the processes of digitalization. In this regard, it should be remembered how, just as we were composing the volume, we found ourselves confronted with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and its overbearing impact on everyone’s lives. The recent months’ events have deeply affected both our way of working and our way of managing personal and family relationships and commitments, producing situations where the boundaries between the different dimensions suddenly appeared blurred, thus generating the need to redefine our analytical and interpretative frameworks.

Observing what was happening around us further consolidated our awareness that the theme addressed in this volume called for approaches other than those constrained within thematic or methodological boundaries, and to some extent it also pushed us to rethink the structure we had originally designed, which was based on a distinction between contributions according to the level of articulation (macro, meso and micro). Many of the texts in this volume prove in fact problematic when attempting to delimit or label it within a single category or boundary. In particular, on a methodological level, the book features numerous mixed-methods contributions, aiming to answer the same research question through different lenses, as well as contributions characterized by methodological pluralism, aimed at answering different research questions by combining data provided by different methods. This trend highlights how what the literature describes as work–life balance has become an increasingly complex terrain for the combination of a plurality of different factors. Among these, for example, are the rise in number of dual-earner couples and the ongoing redefinition of family roles; the

higher life expectancy; the weakening of the welfare systems, now unable to respond to the intensified complexity of social life; the differentiation and individualization of life and work experiences; the surge in jobs and work contracts with flexible hours generating intermittent work periods; and the consequences of the growing digitalization of labor, including the redefinition of workplaces, an acceleration of which we have witnessed during the pandemic with the various forms of home working. In this scenario, the adoption of multi-focus methodologies allows us to highlight how the ways and times in which we reconcile family and work are being redefined, and to better grasp the underlying processes. Further enriching the picture is also the emergence of new research techniques and methodologies, made possible in particular by the development of digital technologies, which offer the possibility of pursuing new research avenues to investigate traditional as well as new research questions, representing an addition to more established tools and approaches.

The first part of the volume aims to outline the theoretical and methodological framework of the book. The chapter written by Anna Carreri, Annalisa Dordoni and Barbara Poggio introduces the scientific debate on work–life balance, starting from a short reconstruction of the history of the concept, from the emphasis on the conflict between the separate spheres to the more recent urges to abandon it, because of its many limitations and biases. Moreover, the authors here outline the main thematic axes around which the debate on work–life balance has developed, such as gender and generation, but also those that should be better considered, by adopting an intersectional approach in the analysis of the relationship between work and other spheres of life. Finally, the ongoing changes, implications and challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic are considered, in order to identify the possible trajectories and perspectives opening up for future research agendas.

Chapter 3, by Sonia Bertolini and Rosy Musumeci, reflects on the methodological implications of work–life balance conceptual constructs and theoretical approaches previously described. The authors here identify some of the main recurrences, criticalities and potentialities in the research approaches studying work–life balance. Empirical methods and research designs are closely intertwined with analytical goals: the methodological choices depend on the research questions and conceptual constructs, and vice versa. The chapter illustrates the main research designs and empirical methods used in work–life balance, and the main innovations arising from studies and reflections presented in the chapters of this edited volume and from the wider literature on work–life balance, as well as the consequences and challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic may present in terms of doing research on work–life balance and the approach to fieldwork.

The second part includes three contributions which reflect on the opportunity to adopt multilevel research approaches and perspectives, along gender and temporal axes.

The first, written by Emily Hallgren and Barbara J. Risan, stresses the importance of adopting a multilevel analytical approach to research on work–life balance, within a gender structure theory. They argue that research on work–life balance should be contextualized at different levels of analysis: individual, interactional and macro-level. Even where a single study focuses on a single level of analysis, it is important to take into consideration the overall gender structure within which work–life balance needs, assets and practices are framed. Moreover, they suggest that both the material and cultural aspects of this structure should be considered and analyzed, showing how they are closely intertwined. In the last part of the chapter, the authors offer a set of recommendations regarding research on work–life balance based on the chapter's main assumptions, and present a couple of examples. One of them is

a multilevel model of lagged generational change, useful to explain the slow progress toward equality in the gender division of work and comparative research. Based on interviews with working mothers from four cities in four different countries, it is aimed at studying the relationship between cultural ideology and state policies in influencing working mothers' work–life balance experiences and perceptions.

A second relevant perspective from which the relationship between professional and private life can be considered is that of life-course research. In their contribution, Jeanne Ganault and Ariane Pailhé highlight how work–life balance research and literature has been predominantly cross-sectional, and suggest the opportunity to adopt a life-course standpoint instead, which would be able to offer a dynamic conceptualization of work–life reconciliation issues and capture the changes occurring over time. The chapter presents a review of the recent works on reconciling work life and private life, focusing on the objective and subjective measures of the work–life conflict throughout our life course. Four different measuring methods are identified: by exploring employment and family trajectories over the life course, by studying paid and unpaid work time throughout the life course, by identifying work–life strategies linked to life-course events, and finally by analyzing perceptions of work–life conflict through the life course.

The opportunity to adopt an unusual perspective based on a temporal perspective in the study of work–life balance is recommended and explored by Anne E. Barrett, Rachel Douglas and Jessica Noblitt in a chapter that focuses on work–life balance in the second half of life. While research on the reconciliation between work life and private life usually tends to mainly consider the experience of relatively young, employed adults caring for small children, this contribution aims to expand the research scope by considering work–life balance in middle and later life and making aging more explicit. In particular, the authors identify three main themes: the long-term effects of work–life balance in early adulthood; the issue of care work for spouses or partners, older family members and grandchildren; and leisure in later life. This widening of the temporal horizon could bring several benefits to both the research and the design of public policies.

Comparative research based on quantitative methods is at the heart of Part III. In Chapter 7, Dirk Hofäcker and Simone Braun combine different levels of explanation about the persistence of inequality in the division of unpaid work, considering both the micro and macro level. While the first perspective highlights the role of individual (economic) resources in making the division of work among spouses economically rational, the other stresses the relevance of traditional gender norms within society. The authors provide an example of how advanced methods of multilevel regression models can be used to empirically explore such relationships, in a comparative way. Results show that, apparently, societies largely rejecting a traditional male-breadwinner model provide both a supportive normative framework as well as institutionalized support for a more equal division of labor between the sexes, as reflected in the reconciliation-oriented policies of Scandinavian countries.

The chapter by Rossella Bozzon and Annalisa Murgia uses a quantitative methodology to study how the heterogeneous category of self-employed workers experience work–family conflict. Basing their work on the European Working Conditions Survey (sixth edition), the authors develop an empirical exercise starting from a descriptive basis and then referring to a series of multilevel models, aimed at analyzing how subjective work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict vary across different types of self-employment, dependent employment and informal work. Their analysis shows that, despite the high level of autonomy

and control over their working conditions, the self-employed with employees and the solo self-employed workers share such overwhelming work demands that they end up experiencing a higher perception of work–family conflict. Moreover, they demonstrate that job-related resources and demands play different roles in mediating subjective work–family conflict, according to the type of self-employment.

The fourth part includes contributions adopting qualitative approaches based on longitudinal, discursive and narrative perspectives. Manuela Naldini's chapter illustrates the theoretical and methodological challenges of longitudinal qualitative study, focusing on the transition to parenthood and the work–family balance of dual-earner couples in Italy. The work is based on interviews with mothers and fathers about their desires, values, choices and practices before and after their transition into parenthood. The background for the analysis is the life-course perspective and, in particular, one of the key principles in the analysis of transitions, that of 'linked lives'. The analysis, based on a longitudinal perspective, reveals a number of signs of change, and thus of variability in parents' behavior. Among mothers, some redefined their priorities in favor of the family, finding a balance by applying for part-time work or reducing their job commitments, while others decided, despite the uncertainties and difficulties, to stay in the labor market, not simply out of need but also following strong personal motivations and a sense of identity rooted in their professional or non-domestic lives. As for fatherhood, the study revealed areas of continuity but also a break with the past, as well as a significant variability in motivations and behavior, and a group of fathers who are coming to grips with men's 'dual presence' in the workplace and the domestic sphere.

In their chapter, Suvi Heikkinen, Marjut Jyrkinen and Emilia Kangas show how discourse analysis can be used in order to study work–family issues, with a specific focus on the fathers' experience. The adoption of methodological approaches based on language and discourse offers the opportunity to better understand how people interpret their experiences and the emotions and feelings associated with them. In particular, they present two empirical examples where a discursive analytical perspective is used to study work–family issues from a male perspective in the Finnish context. The first is aimed at revealing how media discourses portray fatherhood in the context of work life, while the second is aimed at studying the discursive ways in which working fathers make sense of emotions in their daily experience of work and family life. Discourse analysis emerges as a useful approach to analyze the complex intersections between work and family, shedding light on meanings that often remain unexplored. Moreover, it allows for a temporal and space-specific framework, as well as a multi-layered investigation of work–life balance.

The chapter by Kristine Warhuus Smeby and Ulla Forseth explores work–life balance by using a narrative approach. Their research aims to study the experiences of some of the first fathers who took the ten-week paternity leave introduced in Norway, and its impact on the promotion of work–life balance within the couples. The authors analyze narratives elicited during in-depth interviews with working fathers who experienced the full length of the father's quota in one continuous period, when the mothers were back at work. Their contribution is focused on the interplay of three logics: state-regulated welfare schemes, work organizations and individual agency. It allows them to bring forth underlying frames and patterns regarding fathers' practical and emotional involvement and how they re-construct their identities as care-takers, developing new practices of masculinity. At the same time, it reveals balance, tension and conflict between responsibilities at home and at work.

The fifth part includes chapters that combine different sources of data and different methodologies. Kathleen Gerson and Mauro Migliavacca focus on how current economic and social changes have affected the ways people organize work, care and gender relationships, with special attention to the US case. By adopting a mixed-methods approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative data to highlight critical issues in the understanding of the connections between gender, work and care in the new economy, this chapter offers some tools for analyzing the transformation of the work–family relationship in a variety of national and local settings. In the first section, the authors use demographic and related data sources to compare the trends and major axes that characterize changes in work–family relations in the US and Europe. The results of qualitative research based on 120 in-depth interviews with American adults living and working in the heart of the new economy are presented. They also discuss the strengths and limitations of the mixed-methods approach.

A similar approach is used by Kadri Täht, Marge Unt and Epp Reiska, who consider the effect of child-care facilities on labor market participation among young adults in Estonia, where access to affordable and good-quality public care is considered high. Quantitative data from the Estonian Time Use Survey (2009) allow for the study of the detailed time use of household members, including participation in paid work and time spent on care. These data are complemented with interviews selected from an Estonian study to illustrate how the use of formal and informal child-care may affect young parents' labor market participation. The authors use the life stories of two young mothers with low education to illuminate their coping strategies and challenges in combining working and parenting. The results showed that having access to early care facilities reduces the chances of being unemployed or inactive, especially for women.

The opportunity of using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and multilevel analysis is argued in the next chapter, where Eleni Stavrou and Myrto Anastassiadou discuss research on flexible-work arrangements and diversity. The chapter proposes a multilevel comparative framework, articulated on three levels: the individual, the meso/organizational and the macro/supra-organizational. It is maintained that, in this way, it would be possible to gain a more holistic and in-depth understanding of these issues, particularly suited to the study of diverse demographic groups and invisible minorities. Moreover, the authors suggest that proximal and distal outcomes should be incorporated in the examination of flexible-work arrangements. Finally, the use of non-parametric methods is recommended in work–life balance research and, in particular, in research on flexible-work arrangements and diversity.

The last part of the volume is dedicated to a number of research contributions where the authors adopted innovative research methods that benefit from the use of digital and visual technologies. This is a particularly interesting and promising field, probably destined for further development, especially in the light of recent occurrences (during the pandemic, much research has been carried out using these methods, because of the particular limitations for the time being).

The first contribution in this section, by Julia Cook and Dan Woodman, is based on the use of a combination of digital and interview-based methods with Australian young adults in heterosexual partnerships. The study aims to show how the rise of dual-income households, together with that of nonstandard hours in paid employment, has resulted in an increasing need to schedule and manage lives, and thus a contextual feeling of precarity. The participants were asked to write posts on a mobile phone app every day for a week and then discuss the

posts in an interview. The analysis was focused on scheduling and organization of time, considering work–life interferences and leisure time, and it allows them to highlight the gendered dimension of organizing and managing shared time. In the last section of the chapter, the authors offer some useful insights into the challenges and potential of digital qualitative data collection.

A second example of research based on digital resources is offered by Caroline Gatrell's chapter, which introduces the use of netnography (or internet research) to study work–life balance. The author discusses the benefits and disadvantages of using this method in a non-participative form: distant netnography; that is, observing interactions within internet spaces through open-access websites, without personally joining these communities. In particular, she used this method to qualitatively study work–life balance among pregnant and breastfeeding employees. As with the majority of methodologies that use the internet, netnography poses some ethical problems: researchers can observe participants without them being aware of it, and have access to a large quantity of data. At the same time, the author has continued to gather data from websites and discussion groups which are publicly accessible, and within which users usually choose an internet 'identifier' which anonymizes them. In this way, this 'distant' form of netnography preserved women's anonymity in a manner in which other media methods might not have done.

Finally, Marjan De Coster and Patrizia Zanoni introduce readers to the use of visual methodologies, adopting a performative onto-epistemological stance. Two empirical cases are considered: in the first, they used visual elicitation during interviews with project workers; in the second, visual material uploaded online by a group of media influencers, subsequently used to elicit narratives about their experiences. Through the analysis of the collected material, the authors show how visuals offer an anti-narrative space in interview settings, where a more 'entangled subjectivity' can be performed beyond their narrative inscription in the work–life dichotomy. Moreover, they show how the conflict experienced by the participants is not between pre-defined roles in work and personal life, but it reflects the struggle of constituting an ethical self through multiple relations of accountability across work and private life.