

## **Is It Still Just a Women's Issue? A Study of Work-Life Balance Among Men and Women in Public Relations**

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*This study examined how work-life balance is perceived by male and female public relations professionals. Eight focus groups were conducted. Findings revealed a fluid and complex work-personal continuum affected by such factors as societal norms; organizational contradictions; new technology; professional identity; and parenthood. Practitioners expressed blame and guilt narratives. Several challenges to work-life balance were discussed, and various strategies for attaining balance were detailed.*

### **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, public relations scholars have examined the gendered nature of public relations work (Aldoory, 2003, 2005; Aldoory & Toth, 2002, 2004; Creedon, 1991, 1993; L. A. Grunig, 2006; L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Hon, 1995; Sha, 2001). However, little has been done to examine intersections between work and family and the conflicts that arise when attempting to balance work with family life. Work-life conflict is a current concern of organizations and yet a critical gap in public relations research. This study explores work-life balance as it is perceived by male and female public relations professionals.<sup>1</sup>

Studying work-life balance is significant for the field of public relations. First, the prevalence of women in the field calls for a deep examination of gender conflicts related to work-life balance for men and for women. Negotiations made by practitioners between work and family might be dictating their perceptions about discrimination, job satisfaction, and lowered salaries. Second, public relations professionals are consumers of their own organizations' family-friendly policies, but they are also sometimes responsible for planning and implementing internal

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communication about organizational policies. Even when they are not specifically responsible for this, they often act as organizational communicators. Therefore, they must negotiate their organizational roles with their personal conflicts between work and life outside of work.

Eight focus groups of men and women were conducted, and the resulting dialogue was analyzed for themes that explained perceptions of work-life balance, identified challenges to finding a balance, and defined strategies that the women and men used to help achieve a sense of balance. The implications of understanding work-life balance are significant to scholarship as well as to the professional practice of public relations. This study expands gender theory in public relations. Gender theory in public relations has examined several concepts—such as roles, salary compression, job satisfaction, and leadership—that link together to explain how power is created and perceived by women and men in the field and how they enact their professional roles. An analysis of how work and life outside of work are negotiated can influence such concepts as job satisfaction and leadership for both men and women in public relations.

## **Literature Review**

### *Defining Work-Life Balance*

The term work-life balance is often used without clear definition. Other terms such as “work-family” balance or conflict are also used. For purposes of this study, work-life conflict and work-life balance describe efforts by male and female employed persons who juggle various personal, home and work responsibilities. While “balance” is not necessarily the result of this juggling, it is often a desire, and thus, researchers continue to include “balance” in conceptualizing the intersections between personal and work life. Medved (2004) assessed work-life balance by the extent to which women could manage temporary and permanent interruptions to their daily routines in work and personal lives. Brown (2005) argued that the concept does not mean an equal amount of time is devoted to work as to activities out of work.

While most of the work-life studies have focused on women (Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Alldred, 2003; Farley-Lucas, 2000; Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Perrons, 2003), Mumby (1998) argued that “men have gender, too” (p. 164). Kirby, et al. (2003) stated that in devaluing or ignoring men’s experiences, scholars “continue to constrain the possibilities of change for women as we conflate women and gender...Masculinity and femininity must be explored as co-constructing and constraining discourses in relation to work-family issues” (p. 29).

### *Gender in Public Relations*

Aldoory (2007) summarized existing published research on gender in public relations and categorized studies into three groups: 1) descriptive, 2) explanatory, and 3) critical. Descriptive scholarship has examined women’s status and compared it to

that of men in public relations, focusing on discrepancies in salary, hiring, and roles (Cline, Toth, Turk, Walters, Johnson, & Smith, 1986; L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Toth & Cline, 1989; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998; Wright, L. A. Grunig, Springston, & Toth, 1991). Other studies in this group have described sexual harassment and difficult experiences with seeking promotion (Hon, L. A. Grunig, & Dozier, 1992; Serini, Toth, Wright, & Emig, 1998). Explanatory research has sought underlying reasons for gender inequity for purposes of theory building (Hon, 1995). Explanatory factors have included the marginalization of the public relations function; women's exclusion from men's social and informal work networks; women's lack of self-esteem; too few female role models; outmoded attitudes of senior men; conflicting messages for women; women's balancing act between career and family; gender stereotypes; socialization; sexual harassment; and ageism (L.A. Grunig et al., 2001; Hon, 1995; Serini, et al., 1998). Critical research has highlighted the ideologies that legitimize masculine dominance in public relations and has suggested that women AND men should resist the institutional systems that constrain their work (Creedon, 1991, 1993; L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; L. A. Grunig, & Toth, 2006).

Cutting across all this research is a view that gender is set of cultural norms rather than physical traits that differentiate human beings (Aldoory, 2007; Creedon, 1993; Rakow, 1992). The expectations and stereotypes ascribed to femininity and masculinity are enacted through communication practices in economic, political, and social arenas (Buzzanell, 1997, 2001; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). Research on gender and public relations, therefore, examines how women and men are gendered communicators who interact within gendered organizations (Aldoory, 2005). They are given assumed roles to play as "woman" and as "man" both at home and at work—and these work and home roles often conflict with each other and with other societal norms about what is expected of women and men.

### *Work-Life Research*

Organizational communication researchers (e.g., Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Bowers, Liu, & Conn, 2005) have argued that organizations embrace and legitimize certain gender enactments over others (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Martin & Collinson, 2002; Mumby, 1996; Mumby & Stohl, 1998). Scholars have suggested that these gender enactments are what facilitates perceptions of conflict between work and other aspects of life. Gender enactments can be found in the following areas that are often the focus of study: discourse, identity, bodily performance, time, and the public/private divide (Ashcraft, 2006; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Farley-Lucas, 2000; Mumby, 2006; Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006; Townsley, 2006). Each of these five areas of study are briefly described below.

*Gendered discourse.* Organizational discourse creates, recreates, and enhances the career qualities that prioritize the interests and needs of organizations over those of employees (Trethewey et al., 2006). Specifically, organizational discourse legitimizes masculine enterprising qualities (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). The masculine qualities

require employees to work long hours and privilege career success over personal happiness (Buzzanell, 2001; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). Females are expected to enact masculine career qualities and, furthermore, *also* be responsive to their responsibilities outside the workplace, such as marriage, motherhood, and civic engagement (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Buzzanell et al., 2005). These meanings are articulated through organizational culture, dialogue, and artifacts.

*Identity and its negotiation.* Identity has been linked to the way people negotiate their workplace, family, and personal roles and how they feel about their career and personal needs. According to Buzzanell and Lucas (2006), "Identity is an ongoing process with different manifestations in different contexts" (p. 170). In the process, both men and women confront gendered expectations of work and personal roles they ought to live up to. However, they have been left with no room to negotiate a family/life identity with their organizations. Townsley (2006) argued that postmodern organizational life is constraining in that both women and men fail to "fashion (or refashion)" their "transformative identities and subjectivities" (p. 145). In this context, people can perform occupational identities vastly different from their personal identities but consistent with the values and interests adhered to by their organizations (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). Men and women have idealized identities, such as what it means to be "a professional," that subdue behavior or even require opting out of family obligations.

*Bodily performance.* Organizational discourse ascribes to both women and men an idealized professional identity that is free from sexualized performances of human bodies, such as pregnancy, caregiving, menstruation, and emotional responses during work (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby, 1997, 2006; Trethewey, 1999; Trethewey et al., 2006). In order to demonstrate they are physically and emotionally competent to embody the masculine professionalism, women engage in constant self-monitoring of their bodies, such as appropriate dressing and nonverbal displays (Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey et al., 2006).

*Time.* Time at work is valued over time away from work. One's commitment to work values is assessed by the amount of time one spends in production, presence (face time) in workplaces, reduction in time used for personal reasons (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000). This conceptualization of time has helped create the situation of U.S. professionals attempting to balancing work and family time (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). For example, due to obligations with family, leisure time and community services, women and men are not always able to work extra hours or accommodate business relocations and trips; consequently, they may be devaluated as incompetent and incapable by organizations' time-based assessments of individual performance (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006). Women's career advancement may be jeopardized by taking maternity leave. This may make women miss experience accumulation and skills acquisition that are critical for career development (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Hewlett, 2002; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Liu & Buzzanell, 2004; Wood & Newton, 2006).

*The public/private divide.* The public/private divide is an important conceptual anchor for examining gendered organizational life (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Waldron, 1994). The public domain is constructed with masculine understandings while the feminine is ascribed to the private domain, which includes childbearing and rearing, housework, and familial relations (Farley-Lucas, 2000). Within this gendered framework, women who struggle for success in careers are expected to leave qualities of sexuality and emotionality at home and embody those of impersonality and rationality, which are often valued by employing organizations (Kugelberg, 2006; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). Work-family challenges have been primarily ascribed to women with children--women take on primary responsibility for childbearing and working mothers have a harder time reconciling their competing obligations (Bui, 1999; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Smith & Stokoe, 2005). The contradictory social prescriptions of career and motherhood have created burdens on women who are expected to be adequate in both domains (Medved & Kirby, 2005). Today, however, men have also been socially constructed as "superdad," and thus, have also been negotiating family roles with working life and trying to live up to expectations of both fatherhood and employment (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Nordenmark, 2002).

### *Strategies for Attempting Balance*

Individuals engage in strategies to resolve their own perceptions of imbalance and to resist organizational demands on personal time. There are four general types of strategies, those used for purposes of resolution, those used for resistance, those that focus on new technologies, and those that are formalized by institutions.

*Resolution strategies.* Medved (2004) found that women adopted "improvising" (p. 136) and "restructuring" (p. 138) action plans when their daily routines were disrupted by temporary and permanent changes. Improvisation strategies included "requesting assistance," which is seeking temporary help from colleagues, family members, and friends in order to accommodate work schedules as well as childcare (p. 136); and "trading off," where spouses take turns to manage domestic needs (p. 137). Restructuring actions consisted of "deliberation," thinking of alternative and making decisions; (p. 139) and "negotiating," striving for shared solutions in face of incompatibility between work and life goals (p. 139).

*Resistance strategies.* Based on a study of mother engineers, Jorgenson (2000) found that participants dealt with schedule conflicts by "stealing time" from work or family to meet the obligations in family or work and managed emotions by socializing with female colleagues. Another strategy found by Medved (2004) was "evading": intentionally avoiding interruptions by "altering or withholding" information (p. 138).

*Use of new technology.* New technology has reshaped the boundaries between work and personal life (Avery & Baker, 2000; Ballard & Gossett, in press; Fielden, Tench, & Fawkes, 2003; Mallia & Ferris, 2000). Perrons (2003) found that use of new technologies (e.g., Internet) and flexible working patterns (e.g., e-training, e-marketing, e-pr, and web-based graphic design) assisted her participants in balancing

employment and caring responsibilities. Other scholars, however, have uncovered more exploitation of personal time by new technologies for occupational use (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001).

*Formalized and structured strategies.* Some scholars have emphasized the benefit of family-friendly policies for individuals' management of work-family balance and organizations' long-term success (Ewing, 2002; Kirby, 2000; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Kopelman, Prottas, Thompson, & Jahn, 2006). Toth and L. A. Grunig (2003) argued that an organization's work-life initiatives can ultimately contribute to a company's bottom line. Wooldridge (2000) suggested that policies enhancing work-family balance help to maintain employees' loyalty to their organizations.

## **Research Questions**

The current research was guided by the following Research Questions:

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of "work-life balance"?

RQ2: What are the challenges to work-life balance for public relations practitioners?

RQ3: What strategies do public relations practitioners use to mix, balance, or sabotage work and personal commitments and desires?

While RQ1 remains open to positive and negative meanings for work-family balance, RQ2 focuses on challenges or barriers to what is perceived as balance. RQ3 addresses the practical, institutional, and resistance strategies that may be used to perceive and acquire more personal and family time away from work.

## **Method**

To explore how public relations professionals made meaning of work-life balance, eight focus groups in four U.S. metropolitan areas were conducted. Focus groups allow for dynamic discourse where meaning is constructed socially. This social construction was critical to addressing the goals of this study. One all-male group and one all-female group were held in each city (Washington, DC; New York, NY; Chicago, IL; and San Diego, CA). The different cities allowed for broader representation, from the West, from Eastern urban areas, and from the mid-west. The moderators of the groups matched the sex of participants; same-sex moderators facilitated more honest, comfortable talk from participants. Refreshments were served, locations for the groups were proximal to where participants worked, and the time for group sessions was set for after work hours. Institutional Review Board approval was secured.

### *Sampling*

Recruitment of participants was conducted through convenience and snowball sampling: colleagues, acquaintances, and PRSA local leaders were contacted via telephone and email, and these individuals brought other colleagues. A total of 50 practitioners participated in the focus groups—26 women and 24 men. Before each group commenced, participants were asked to complete a one-page demographics questionnaire. A summary of responses indicated that the participants worked in government, education, corporate, military and agency settings. They have worked in the public relations field for an average of 13 to 15 years. Nearly half worked for public relations agencies. All participants had a bachelor's or master's degree. All but two of the participants were white. Most participants' organizations had more female staff than male staff working in public relations.

### *Study Procedures*

The focus groups were held on local university campuses, in local PRSA offices, or at public relations agencies. Each group was two hours long and was conducted by a skilled, trained moderator. Each moderator was not only the same sex as participants, but was also from the same geographic region and worked in public relations. These similarities increased the comfort levels of participants. Three of the focus groups were moderated by researchers in order to gain a more direct experience with the data gathering process. As incentives for participation, participants received dinner and an offer to have a copy of the research findings. Participants were told that all identifying information would be kept confidential.

A written guide of open-ended questions was used during the focus groups to ease into topics for discussion. However, the moderators proceeded with the understanding that tangents and details offered by participants were respected and appreciated. The participants were asked a series of questions about their opinions and experiences with balancing their family needs and work needs. For example, they were asked their opinions about employees with children at home, gender differences in work-family accommodations, and organizational responses to family commitments. They were also asked what their personal experiences were with family commitments and working, and with organizational policies for leave and flexibility.

### *Data Analysis*

All focus group sessions were audio taped, in order to later grasp every detail for purposes of analysis and reporting. The audiotapes were transcribed professionally, retaining the actual speech style of participants and moderators. The transcripts were analyzed and coded according to a grounded theory approach for data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, a constant comparative method and open coding were used to discover common themes that emerged in the male focus groups and the female focus groups. Following this separate analysis, the males and females were analyzed together. Similarities as well as differences between men

and women are highlighted in the results summarized below.

## **Results**

### *RQ1: How Do Public Relations Practitioners Make Meaning of “Work-Life Balance”?*

In general, participants made meaning of work-life balance in multiple and fluid ways. Work and personal lives were not discussed as dichotomous or as distinct sites in time and space. Rather, most participants interpreted their lives as holistic, with work efforts entering and exiting their everyday practices and realities. In addition, meaning given to “balance” implied a process rather than a goal they attempted to reach. While at some moments participants expressed frustration, depression and anxiety over lack of time given to personal commitments, at other moments participants expressed satisfaction with family friendly policies at their organizations and the support they received from supervisors, partners, and colleagues.

There were numerous labels used by participants to define what they perceived as their work-life mix; the number and types of terms illustrated a complex intertwining of work within life. Some of the more common terms included: “tug of war,” “prioritization,” “multi-tasking,” “integration,” “juggling,” “management,” and “flexibility.” One participant used the term “work creep” to describe the perceived invasiveness of her work on her “free” time.

Much of the talk about work-life balance was specific to working in public relations. One participant described his work responsibilities: “...in addition to the full-time job at [my organization], I teach here at [the college]. I also am doing freelance PR work. I’m a board member of IABC (local), so in addition to just the nine to five issue, if you will, then there’s all these other balls in the air to keep track of.” Another participant said: “...especially in the PR agency world because the environment can be so chaotic.”

Participants did not just include “family” as part of their devotions outside of work time. Personal time also included exercise, athletics, private time, and time for pets. One participant explained: “I spend some time with my mom or cousins or sisters and nieces and nephews and stuff and catch up with my friends that I had in school and stuff that are around here.” Another participant stated, “I have 24 hours in a day and I try and balance all of it from beginning to end. It's a meld; it sort of melds into itself.”

Within professional and personal relationships, participants explained, partners and supervisors can greatly influence perceptions of balance and their mix of work and life. Supportive partners and supportive supervisors who encourage time out from work to take care of personal activities increase perceptions of balance. One participant described her supervisor’s role in helping her balance work hours: “He frequently evaluates it or will come up to us and say that it's really important to me that you go home. Or really important that we go out and get ice cream right now.” Another one

explained how her husband changed jobs in order to support their time together: “He has changed his lifestyle so that now he works out of the house. He’s still a salesperson, but he’s a local salesperson, so he doesn’t have to leave me, so it was important that we kind of find a balance there so that we can enjoy each other...”

There were some gendered perceptions about the meaning of work-life balance. The men in the focus groups did articulate a desire to better integrate work with personal time, but the men also believed that balancing work and family remains largely a women’s issue. As one male put it, “I think women talk about this issue more than men, just in general. I’m not saying that to be pejorative about it, but I think that they’re more focused about it.” Female participants also perceived work-life balance as a women’s issue, by placing responsibility for its existence on women. For example, some of the women argued that women “do it all” out of choice. One woman said, “I think we put those expectations on ourselves.”

*RQ2: What are the Challenges to Work-Life Balance for Public Relations Practitioners?*

In summary, the participants discussed societal, organizational and individual concerns, including identity, time, and the perceived role of parenthood. But, as one participant put it, “The challenge, I would say, is finding time that you don’t have to do a damn thing.” Similarly, another participant remarked, “Even if you’re not working overtime at work and you are at home, whether your kids are grown or little or whatever, it just seems like there is very little time just for yourself.”

*Public relations as the site of struggle.* Public relations was presented as a service industry with unique balancing acts. One participant said that he believed balance cannot be achieved in public relations: “No, not in our profession, particularly if you’re a corporate spokesperson, which I’ve been for the last 18 years.” Another participant responded to a personal experience where he missed a family funeral for a work obligation: “There’s definitely a different mind set for people in public relations than in any other job out there. Like, there’s got to be something that drives you to forego going to a family funeral to be with a client.”

*Societal pressure and norms.* Participants blamed society for creating constraints to their efforts at balancing work and life. While several participants described their own organizations as flexible to their personal needs, they acknowledged that societal expectations and norms still created pressures on them. Male participants said that expectations about men being the primary breadwinner still hold true in today’s organizations. This translates into work hours, as one participant put it: “It’s almost this red badge of courage to say oh, I’m crazed and I’m working these many hours.” Another participant referred to the good father stereotype: “I’ve found that typically my clients and others are much more forgiving if it’s something for my kids or family that sounds really heart strung like my child’s kindergarten graduation. Nobody batted an eye for that. But if I were to say I can’t come because I’m doing something for myself, like going to a baseball game, they would be like, ‘Hmm, sounds like you are goofing off.’”

*Organizational "lip service."* Some participants criticized their employers for not following through when employees decided to enact flexible leave policies. Employers gave some participants the impression that taking advantage of family-friendly policies would be detrimental to a career. In other words, the organizations were giving "lip service" to work-family balance rather than actively assisting employees. One explanation offered by some of the men—and none of the women--was that being fully engaged in the "rat race" and acting as a "martyr" was favored at their organizations.

*Women themselves as barrier.* Some of the female participants (and none of the male participants) blamed women for making it harder for other women. They said women, not men, are responsible for the "super" woman image. One participant explained: "Like we feel if with show that little bit of weakness, that someone might see it, and kind of attack us sort of thing, and point us out." Another participant said, "I think women are the hardest on other women...I know a lot of women, who think they have to act like a man."

*New technology.* Participants struggled between the constraining and facilitating roles of technology. Participants referred to "crackberry" use and their "addiction" to monitoring e-mails using handheld devices. According to one participant, the ubiquity of technology is due to "the amount of time that people feel the need to constantly be connected." Another participant said, "You don't have an excuse any more that you didn't get the email." One participant confessed her addiction, "Blackberry just seems like it's a constant--I find myself checking email while I'm driving which is awful and every time I do it, I think, 'Oh my God, what the hell are you doing?' But wait, I can answer it really quick at the stop sign!"

*Struggle with separate yet fluid identities.* Participants revealed a sense of separate yet fluid identities when they were doing work and when they were in personal or family spaces. Some participants admitted to limited self-control as a challenge to keeping work out of home. One participant said, "It's gotten to the point where my wife has become very accepting of the fact that I'll be getting a call in the middle of the night, on a Sunday, at an event, at a family gathering, whatever. It's just part and parcel of what I do..." Another participant labeled himself as having a "split personality." He described the challenge this caused: "I clearly wasn't the same person at home that I was in the office. And when you start taking that persona home with you, and you find yourself being defensive like you were defending a client, instead of giving an honest answer for something really stupid, it caused a lot of problems." This participant later joked that he had once said to his wife, "I don't do dishes. It's not billable."

For the young public relations practitioner, identity was constructed through the job. Younger professionals said they pushed for more work hours and were willing to sacrifice personal pleasures, travel, and friends for what they perceived as career success. For older professionals, identity became fragmented with less emphasis on being defined by the job. Older professionals said they pushed for balance with family time and felt less stressed about the need to work a maximum number of hours per

week. However, a married participant explained how he is negotiating his newfound notions of work-family balance:

The difference for me now is in the old days if an opportunity came to travel on business, I was the first to sign up for it, even if it wasn't my account...because it's a great opportunity to go to a new city, and be part of the thing. And now I do everything in my power to avoid a trip, which is bad, because a lot of my responsibilities now involve visiting clients...

*Parenthood.* Parents and non-parents in the focus groups perceived a lack of understanding by “the other side” – this indicated a significant role that children played as barriers to flexible leave policies, professional responsibilities, and collegial attitudes. Participants without children felt that preferential treatment in leave and lenient work loads were offered to employees with children. One participant argued against his male colleagues, “...people shouldn't use having kids or being married as an excuse...there's always sort of this expectation of those who are single and don't have to run out, you know, that they would be there on snow days, etcetera.” On the other hand, practitioners with children felt discriminated against by their non-parent colleagues just for having children. One participant said, “[Some] women had no children and had no life out of the job, so they worked until seven or eight at night and didn't understand why I didn't want to do the same thing.”

*Lengthening hours of work.* Participants talked about their number of work hours increasing rather than just shifting. Work is now completed at home, at coffee bars, and at other spaces traditionally defined as personal, and thus it has allowed for more hours to be included, but under the auspices of “life quality.” One participant reflected on this: “So I get to do a lot of work at home at night, and I feel like I balance it that way. And I realized a couple of weeks ago that I have more accounts, more responsibility. I might work even longer hours, but I'm happier, and I'm not stressed.” Another phenomenon discussed was how life pleasures now occur at work, in order for employees to stay at work and get more accomplished. A participant described how her supervisors “used to bring in people that would do massages. I guess its more perks at the workplace.” Another participant said her company hosts in-house wine tastings.

*Guilt.* Both women and men in this study shared stories of guilt. Most of the women's guilt seemed directed to not having enough time for personal relationships and children. The men's stories revolved around being away from work. One female participant, for example, described how other mothers perceived her:

I would show up at some of the school functions at night in a business suit. Because I would get right off the train, and I'd run to the school. And some of the other moms would say to me, “It's so nice of you to come.” I would think: what do you mean it's nice for me to come? I'm supposed to be here. I'm the mom.

A male participant said he misses the “freedom” of being single. He continued:

But the challenge is to be gone two or three days during the week, and leave the burden of the family on my wife and the kids. Like, “Daddy, where are you?” And it's hard... I wish I could travel more without feeling like I need to rush back.

*RQ3: What Strategies Do Public Relations Practitioners Use to Mix, Balance, or Sabotage Work and Personal Commitments and Desires?*

Participants discussed several strategies that helped reduce their perceived stress or/and that increased their actual time for personal needs and leisure.

*Communication strategies.* Both male and female participants encouraged openness and honesty through communication with supervisors, partners, spouses, and older children, in order to reduce the stress that sometimes came from expectations or guilt. At work, participants said they felt less stressed when they communicated about their pressures to their supervisors. Some participants described ways they could negotiate with their employers, for fewer hours at work or more flexible schedules for work. A couple of the women said they requested more staff assistance or a greater number of employees. These tactics increased their time for personal activities.

*Time strategies.* Participants talked about playing and manipulating with time in order to increase work-life balance. For example, some participants found they could reduce their stress when they established simple but firm routines for weekdays and for weekends. A participant described his regimen: “I get up every morning at about five and go to the gym...I think that's really one of the keys to success is having a routine that you can count on...I think that that's when I'm able to be me, the best I can be.” Another time strategy for some participants who lived in outer suburbs of metropolitan areas was to reduce commuting. These participants increased personal time by moving closer to work or by transferring to other offices. Although it was not perceived as favorable, some participants woke up earlier or went to bed later in order to increase the number of hours they had for personal pleasures.

*Using new technology.* For many participants, technology allowed them to keep up with work issues while engaged in personal time. One participant said, “The more that an organization embraces the technology, the easier it is to achieve that work/life balance.” Another participant agreed in describing his work: “I just need a phone and a computer to do my job, and I don't always have to be at my job to get things done...that balance for me is great because I can basically work whenever I want to get the job done.” One participant created a web log to “vent” her frustrations: “It was really therapeutic for me to start a blog. It's silly, but I blog my day.”

*Leaving the setting.* For a few participants, the only strategy to gain balance was to quit current employment. These participants actively sought out more conducive

environments for their quality of life and expressed increased satisfaction as a result of their change. Many started freelancing or independent consulting projects, working out of their homes.

*The strategy of acceptance.* A few female participants said that they had resigned themselves to their work-life imbalance because they did not perceive any ability to change. In response to the pull of work away from family and personal pleasures, one woman explained, "I think you have to resign yourself to some of those things and you can just vent with other women because they're the only ones who understand. Men don't understand that." Another woman lamented, "My life is crazy, and I feel like when I'm here I'm thinking about what I'm not doing there, and when I'm there, I'm thinking about what I'm not doing here. It is what it is."

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

This qualitative study revealed several insights into how male and female public relations professionals perceive and strategize work-life balance. They defined their work and their life outside of work as fluid and complex, and uniquely situated public relations as a field that was not conducive for balance. Experienced practitioners, male and female, reported more satisfaction with personal lives. However, regardless of experience, the unpredictable nature of public relations work added to a sense of lack of control. Yet the participants were for the most part satisfied with the struggles imposed on them by their choice of public relations and its overlap with their private worlds.

Non-work commitments included friends, exercise, athletics, travel, and private time. This seems to illustrate the incomplete and perhaps flawed dichotomy of "work" vs. "family/life," typically used to describe professional balancing acts. Perhaps what is more realistic is a notion of a continuum rather than dichotomy, and an expansion of the term family to include all things personal, outside of work settings. Perhaps a work-personal continuum is more appropriate to examine and apply, and struggles take place by professionals because they are attempting to maintain a centering position between work commitments and personal commitments.

Importantly, both men and women in this study constructed the concept of "work-family balance" as a woman's issue. This is consistent with previous work-family research and exemplifies how the conflict between work and family is a site of struggle for women. Participants articulated the gendered nature of attempts at balance and assigned the challenge of balancing work and life to women. Both male and female participants talked about enacting masculine career qualities, and both also expressed the need for women to be more responsive to motherhood and civic engagement. Evidence of a gendered discourse was particularly prevalent with the themes of societal pressure and norms; organizational lip service; women blaming; contested role of parenthood; and guilt narratives, which were told by both men and women. Women also expressed unmet expectations about other women not being supportive. In terms of identity, findings revealed struggles between fluid and distinct professional and

home identities. In particular, the men enacted values and interests that were consistent with professional expectations of “public relations.”

Participants discussed several strategies for overcoming stress and imbalance in their work and personal lives. They communicated honestly with partners and supervisors and engaged in negotiations with supervisors for greater flexibility at work. In terms of using time to their favor, participants suggested having routines, adding more waking hours in each day, and reducing commute time. Many participants used technology to help them shift their work time, and some participants quit jobs that did not allow them to balance personal commitments with work responsibilities. Some female participants said that their strategy for reducing stress was to stop thinking about it and accept the imbalance. These findings are consistent with Medved’s (2004) “improvising” (p. 136) and “restructuring” (p. 138) strategies and the use of new technology as a strategy to assist with balancing work and personal commitments. However, little evidence supported the use of resistance by participants.

The findings from this study suggest several opportunities for future research. Quantitative research could follow up on the themes found in order to evaluate whether they can be generalized to a greater population of public relations practitioners. Each of the themes found here could feasibly be the focus for an entire study. Societal norms, organizational lip service, and women blaming, for example, could be studied separately for their role in helping create balance.

### *Conclusion*

This study revealed the perceptions, challenges, and strategies of public relations professionals in their negotiations of work and life outside of work. The findings contribute to a new understanding of work-life balance by suggesting a work-personal continuum constructed and navigated by both men and women in public relations. The factors that help professionals measure their place on the continuum include societal pressure; contradictions between organizational policies and culture; the unpredictable nature of public relations work; use of technology; perceived professional identity; parenthood; and a timeshifting process that favors work. The practitioners who participated in this study engaged in various strategies to adjust their perceived place on the continuum. When the practitioners perceived their place on the continuum to be inconsistent with expectations and desires, they sometimes resorted to blaming others, guilt narratives, or cognitive acceptance. Future research has the potential to pick up where this study left off and to quantify and/or examine more closely the factors contributing to the work-personal perceptions and experiences of public relations professionals.

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