

Balancing the work-life balance: A cognitive approach to subjective well-being

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Track: Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management

Abstract

Today, our jobs have become less secure as a lifelong career and more reliant on technology where knowledge is shared real-time irrespective of the location or time. Although employees now have more flexibility over how they work, they constantly must manage the challenges of balancing three key areas: their mental and physical well-being; their family members well-being; and their work performance and relationships. This paper focuses on work-life balance (WLB), and how this can be sustained overtime. We assert that by using the theorisation of psychological distance in Construal Level Theory (CLT) and Hedonic Adaptation theory, it is possible to get a deeper understanding as to how temporal, emotional and behavioural demands are constructed and the effect of cognitive biases in shaping our perceived situational awareness. We use a novel approach to conceptualise that it is possible to achieve cognitive reframing and perceive the natural state of the situation to sustain WLB and baseline happiness. We assert that cognitive reframing could lead to maintaining an overall sense of harmony in life by improving the subjective well-being without overdependence of material well-being.

Key words: Work-life balance, mindfulness, construal level theory, well-being, psychological distance, hedonic adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

The gig economy is changing the work dynamics of employees and how organisations perceive work relationships with their employees. Today, our jobs have become less secure as lifelong careers and more reliant on technology where knowledge is shared real-time irrespective of the location or time. As such, the boundary between professional and personal life is becoming blurred. The importance of having better health and well-being of employees and those around them are becoming increasingly important. Although, employees now have more flexibility over how they work, they constantly must manage the challenges of balancing three key areas: their mental and physical well-being; their family members well-being; and their work performance and relationships. As such, Work-Life Balance (WLB) is receiving increasing attention from the management and employee representatives, government and the popular media due to its strategic importance in meeting stakeholder needs and sustaining competitive advantage (Wang and Barney, 2006).

WLB from an employee perspective, is the maintenance of a balance between responsibilities at work and at home (De Cieri et al., 2005). However, maintaining a balance between personal well-being, work performance and well-being of others is perceived as something difficult to achieve. Because there are things that you have no control of (for example, accidents, and unforeseen circumstances) and there are things that you have little control of (decisions and actions of others). Some people need to work long hours to earn enough money, while others may have to put in long hours as they have an enormous workload. Some may love their work and work long hours by themselves, while others feel that they need to work long hours to demonstrate their commitment to their work (Chandra, 2012). When one fails to maintain a balance between responsibilities at work and at home, it can create a spill over effect. The Spill over theory suggests that a person's experiences that develop in one domain can carry over into the other domain (Zedeck, 1992). As such, when the demands of work hamper the personal well-being, work interferes with family life and vice versa (Crouter, 1984; Du et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand the underlying relationships that affect individual's ability to balance such situations.

The existing literature related to WLB focuses on the objective measures such as time (long working hours), organisational aspects (job demand, structure, management style and type of jobs),

technology, and job position (Iacovoiu, 2020).The researchers have also used psychological measures such as emotional intelligence and self-efficacy to understand how they affect one's ability to balance the work-life conflicts. For example, 'emotional intelligence' has been identified as a factor that is negatively associated with work related stress and positively related with quality of life (Min, 2014; Görgens-Ekermans and Brand, 2012). The researchers have found a positive relationship between self-efficacy and work-to-family enrichment, which in turn had a positive effect on work-life balance (Chan et al., 2016).

The primary focus of the existing WLB literature is to show 'what happens' to WLB when subjective and objective variables are at play. This paper intends to uncover 'how' individuals could behave in a certain way that they could effectively manage WLB along with work-family demands. We assert that by using the theorisation of psychological distance in Construal Level Theory (CLT), hedonic adaptation theory and the Buddhist philosophy, it is possible to get a deeper understanding as to how temporal, emotional and behavioural demands are constructed and the effect of cognition in shaping our perceived situational awareness. A problem associated with increases in material goods and income is that their effects on subjective well-being seem to be rather short-lived. People soon become accustomed to a given level of material welfare. This phenomenon of habituation and adaptation to the circumstances of life is call the 'hedonic treadmill effect'(Seligman, 2002). We posit that the answer to managing WLB lies in knowing two key things: situational awareness and baseline level of happiness. The next section will discuss the key literature related to WLB, Construal Level theory and Hedonistic adaptation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-life-Balance

Investigations in the field of the work-life interface have gained drastic momentum in the previous decades (Naseem et al., 2020). WLB, can be broadly defined as maintaining an overall sense of harmony in life (Clarke et al., 2004) with minimal role conflict (Clark, 2000). WLB is about responding to individual circumstances to help individuals fulfil their responsibilities and

aspirations for the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society at large (Chandra, 2012). Although literature related to work-nonwork balance has established the bidirectional meaning of conflict and enrichment (i.e., work-to-family conflict or enrichment; family-to-work-enrichment), there is less consensus exists about the term balance (Casper et al., 2018). More recent definitions related to WLB literature highlighted a two different views related to balance: one view suggested that it as a *psychological* construct held in the mind of a focal person, and the other view states it as a *relational* construct that can be observed by others (Casper et al., 2018).

Valcour (2007) defined and measured “satisfaction with work–family balance” as an attitude—“an overall level of contentment resulting from an assessment of one’s degree of success at meeting work and family role demands” (p. 1512). That same year, Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) argued that work–family balance is not an attitude which exists in the “eye of the beholder” but is embedded in a person’s social environment (Casper et al., 2018). They conceptualized balance as a relational construct, defining it as “the accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his/her role-related partners in the work and family domain” (p. 458). In general, scholars most often define balance as a psychological construct (an attitude or a psychological tendency to evaluate situations with some degree of favor or disfavor). As such, WLB has been conceptualised as a person’s psychological tendency to retain clear demarcation and allocation of right proportion of time to the various demands of the personal and professional lives, consequentially leading towards the equilibrium in life and with the least role conflict (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007; Clark, 2000).

The temporal dimension has been identified as a biggest stress-generating factor that leads to work-life imbalance. Poor management of time can be attributed to lack of self-discipline. However, the underlying tendency of lack of self-discipline can be related to lack of situational awareness. One’s ability to effectively prioritise the activities in the present moment enables their ability to efficiently manage time and achieve established goals leading to fulfilment of task requirements. The link between time and the concept of work–life balance can be reliant on the extent and nature of temporal control exercised by individuals (Roberts, 2008). In other words, individuals may be able to improve their WLB by either gaining greater control over the time they spend working or changing the way in which they view the temporal demands of their employer.

However, the researchers have tended to rely upon the quantitative measures of time, for example hours worked per week as the primary independent variable predicting work-life-balance (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001; Roberts, 2008). Thompson and Bunderson (2001) suggest a research approach that recognises the finite value of time, and the *nature* of activities that we do. They present a metaphor ‘time as a container of meaning’ to argue that the time is fixed (like the container) in the sense that an hour spent at work can never be reclaimed for nonwork pursuits and vice versa. Then it comes to the *nature* of activities that occupy our time (things inside the container). For example, we can fill the container with good things, bad things, lot of different items and or one item and leave it empty. This approach highlights that when individuals spend their time in identify-affirming activities, whether its related to work or non-work interests, they will tend to perceive less conflict between life domains.

The container metaphor provides a simplistic viewpoint in relation what is fixed and what is not. What is in control and what is not. Therefore, by adjusting to what one can change, it’s easier to maintain the WLB. However, this notion of balance implies that every situation is stable and involves certain measures of work and life. There are other researchers who think that life situations are dynamic and that they cannot be adequately presented as a static balanced state (Moen and Sweet, 2004; Polach, 2003; Burton, 2004). Burton provides a good analogy for this dynamic state by using a balancing act of a gymnast. A gymnast is actually in a state of continual shifts in which ‘muscles are always moving, priorities are shifting’ (Burton, 2004). In essence, WLB is not a fixed state, it is a state that needs constant adaptation to situation and responding effectively what is present at the present moment. Therefore, the decisions we make in the present moment decide the future outcomes related to how effectively one can achieve WLB. As such, the temporal framing of the current situation has an effect on how one perceives the rate of change and the extent of change of a future state.

Construal level theory

“People directly experience only the here and now” (Trope and Liberman, 2010, p. 440), it is impossible to experience the past or the future, yet our direct experiences populate our minds with thoughts, emotions, and feelings related to all three temporal frames and guide our choice and action. Construal level theory (CLT) proposes that we do transcend here and now by forming abstract mental construals of distal objects (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Literature related to

psychological effects of temporal distance assumes that the value of outcomes is discounted or diminished over time (Liberman and Trope, 1998). A further insight to the meaning of this construct can be found by understanding the theoretical lens developed by Liberman and Trope (1998). CLT (Trope and Liberman, 2003; Liberman and Trope, 1998) proposes that people construct different representations of the same information depending on whether the information pertains to the near or distant future. “Psychological distance is thus egocentric: Its reference point is the self, here and now, and the different ways in which an object might be removed from that point—in time, space, social distance, and hypotheticality—constitute different distance dimensions.” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440).

Psychological distance generally has a common meaning in relation to spatial distance, temporal distance, social distance and hypotheticality. Trope and Liberman (2010, p. 440) explain how this common meaning is automatically applied to different types of distances, “for example, on a rainy day, it matters whether an umbrella one notices belongs to a friend or to a stranger (social distance); in the jungle, it is important whether a tiger is real or imaginary (hypotheticality); in making a financial investment, it is important whether a recession is anticipated in the near or distant future (temporal distance), here or somewhere else (spatial distance).” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 444). They point out that although psychological distance and construal levels are related, they are not the same. Psychological distance refers to the perception of *when*, *where*, *to whom* an event occurs and *whether* it occurs. Construal levels refer to the perception of *what* will occur.

CLT argues that when the psychological distance increases it leads to high construal features (abstract and decontextualized representations that extract essential features of events) and the temporal distance is greater (e.g. a high school student’s desire to become a medical doctor). When high-level construal features change, they produce major changes in the meaning of the event. In essence, high-construal features represent the big picture. In contrast, low-level construal features are richer, subordinate, and contextualized (e.g. a high school student preparing for his or her exam). Low- construal features are related to near-future events, and changes to these features produce relatively minor changes in the meaning of the event. CLT proposes, “that the same information is constructed at a higher level when the information pertains to distant-future events than when it pertains to near-future events” (Trope and Liberman, 2003). To illustrate: a person thinking about starting a new business venture five years from now might think in terms of more

superordinate goals, such as “introducing a value creating solution to an existing problem,” whereas a person thinking about starting a venture in a few weeks’ time might be construing it in terms of more subordinate and concrete goals, such as “purchasing raw materials.” In essence, high-level construal (e.g. a higher goal) concerns the reasons ‘why’ one does something, whereas low-level construal (e.g. intention) reflects ‘how’ one is doing something in order to attain a higher goal (Förster et al., 2004).

The higher level construals are likely to remain unchanged than a lower level construal. For example, the higher-level goal to visit a friend in another country is more stable over time than the more concrete goal to send her an e-mail, because Internet connection might not be available or other more urgent tasks may take over. A series of studies conducted by Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, (2006), identified that self-control involves making decisions and behaving in a manner consistent with high-level versus low-level construals of a situation. The self-control can be broadly conceptualized as making decisions and acting in accordance with high-level construal of the situation rather than low-level construal (Fujita et al., 2006). A higher level construals lead to greater self-control than activation of a lower level construal, and decreased preferences for immediate over delayed outcomes, greater physical endurance and less positive evaluations of temptations that undermine self-control.

CLT theory highlights desirability and feasibility as key elements in temporal framing which affects alternative causes of action (Liberman and Trope, 1998). Desirability, reflecting the super ordinate ‘why’ aspects of an action, hypothesized to be a main reason to act, especially for distant future scenarios (Perugini and Bagozzi, 2004). It also focuses on the valence of an action’s end state or the value of a particular goal outcome rather than on the process of valuation (Perugini and Bagozzi, 2004). Feasibility involve the means used to reach the end state (a low-level construal feature).

Perugini and Bagozzi (2004) state that “a key causal element leading to intention formation and action is the personal motivation (i.e. desire) to achieve an end state and not an inherent objective property of the end state itself (i.e. desirability)”. What this means is that it is not the desirability of getting something that causes someone to act towards getting it but his or her *desire* to have it. Perugini and Bagozzi’s (2004) work is important for two reasons. First, their study found that desires and intentions are two distinct constructs. They are different because they represent

different levels of perceived performability, action-connectedness, and temporal framing; for example, unlike intentions, desires are less performable, are less connected to actions and enacted over longer time frames. Perugini and Bagozzi (2004, p. 71) define desires as “a state of mind whereby an agent has a personal motivation to perform an action or to achieve a goal”. Second, desires are important as a predictor and are considered the main determinant of the corresponding intentions. Bagozzi, Dholakia and Basuroy (2003) found goal intention (certainty of goal attainment within a particular time frame) was significantly influenced by goal desire (motivational state of mind) in 177 undergraduate students.

Although the goals have a longer-term focus, they are also bound to change due to reduction in the affective intensity of the goal. The nature of this change is discussed next under the concept of hedonic adaptation.

Hedonic Adaptation

The word ‘hedonic’ means ‘related to pleasure (desire)’ or connected with feelings of pleasure’ or ‘characterized by pleasure’ (Merriam-Webster.com, 2020). In general, people continuously adapt to situations irrespective of whether they relate to extreme or mild circumstances. Adaptation refers to any action, process, or mechanism that reduces the effects (perceptual, psychological, attentional, motivational, hedonic and so on) of a constant or repeated stimulus (Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999). Adaptation could happen due to physiological responses (moving from sunlight to a darker room) or due to behaviours that reduce exposure to a stimulus. Hedonic Adaptation (HA) is adaptation to stimuli that are affectively relevant and they are mainly cognitive than sensory (Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999). As such, the HA refers to a reduction in the affective intensity of a favourable and unfavourable circumstances.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) state “the pleasure of success and the ignominy of failure abate with time. So does the thrill of a new sports car, the pain over a failed romance, the delight over a promotion, and the distress of a scary diagnosis” (p. 670). However, the literature on negative life events, especially when there is an adverse life event such as unemployment, disability, divorce and widowhood, the well-being decreases substantially, and one may not recover completely (Lucas and Clark, 2006; Lucas, 2005; Lucas et al., 2004). The literature on HA to positive life

changes is relatively scarce (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2012). The most commonly cited study from Brickman and his colleagues (Brickman et al., 1978) found that after 18 months, the lottery winners were in the same mental state in relation to happiness as the ones who had experienced no such windfall. Researchers found that people returning to baseline happiness level (the state where they were before the event) two years after the marriage, and one year after getting a promotion (Boswell et al., 2005; Lucas and Clark, 2006). In short, the happiness that comes after life events are short lived.

However, researchers have attempted to develop models to explain how HA process can be arrested or to persist the initial happiness boost. The Hedonic Adaptation Prevention (HAP) model proposed by Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) suggests two paths leading to changes to well-being. The first path involves emotional perspective on well-being. When a person is initially exposed to a change event that generates positive emotions, the level of intensity of these emotions become less and less frequent over time and may cease altogether. For example, one may experience series of positive change events after buying a new house, but those occasions become less frequent overtime, and the positive emotions (excitement, happiness, pride, etc.) will become less frequent and intense over time. The second path involves changes to aspirational level. For example, one may aspire to become a celebrity, and when that person reaches that level, it will yield regular positive episodes and emotions. However, although their aspiration level regarding the expected quality of life has now increased, she will crave even more popularity. Thus, adapting to their new level of positive experience and requires a new level simply to maintain their initial happiness.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) argue that it is possible to forestall the process by maintaining the variability and surprise inherent in the experiences. When there is continuous variability and surprise at the experiential level, one will maintain continuous stream of positive emotions. However, there model also implies that when one continues to derive varying experiences from a change, they are less likely to fall prey to rising aspirations. Their model specifies that continued appreciation of the original life change and continued variety in change-related experiences contributing to forestall the hedonic adaptation. In short, their findings support a key assumption of the Western notion that happiness might be fruitfully pursued and the ‘quest for more’ may be an essential driver of progress at the societal level and individual level.

TOWARDS DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Our approach to achieving sustained WLB is based on maintaining the baseline happiness and by reaching a desireless state. In order to reach baseline level of happiness (we define baseline happiness as a state where there is no bodily pain and mental pain), one must understand the nature of their experiences in the here and now. Our experiences manifest as feelings, thoughts and perceptions. How we perceive our experiences lay the foundations for our subsequent thoughts and future actions. Our current experiences can be condensed to three kinds of feelings: pleasant, painful and neither-painful-nor-pleasant (neutral). The present moment experiences (such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, tactile sensation, and thoughts) exhibit low-construal features and are related to near-future events. For example, when we hear a sound, the next step is to identify the direction that it comes or to interpret the meaning of that sound (e. g. a bird's sound).

In order to develop situational awareness with regard to a life event here and now, one must pay attention to three things: (1) to pre-existing conditions (what do I perceive and why?) (2) to what one is doing in relation to those conditions, and (3) to the results that come from one's actions (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1996). This threefold focus enables one to monitor one's actions and adjust them accordingly. In this way, one's attention to conditions, actions, and effects allows the results of an action to feed back into future action, thus allowing for refinement in one's situational awareness. As such, apart from taking necessary action to deal with the present situation (low construal feature) one must have WLB as a superordinate goal. The desire to have a sustainable WLB must function as a high construal feature representing the big picture. High construal goals have long time frames and facilitate self-control.

The situational awareness of a person thus leads to clear comprehension of the nature of the phenomena that is presented here and now, and also the long-term goal achievement. Today, this situational awareness is commonly associated with the term 'mindfulness'. Existing literature related to secular view of mindfulness developed by Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as: 'Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). A detailed explanation related to secular and non-secular version of the mindfulness is beyond the scope of the paper. However, the outcome of a skillful situational awareness leads to clear understanding of the impermanence nature of the life events whether they are related to

high or low construal level events. For example, although a gymnast is actually in a state of continual shifts in which ‘muscles are always moving, priorities are shifting’ a (low construal feature) or getting ready to make another big move (a high construal feature), they eventually come to an end. As per the Buddhist teaching, the impermanence of all phenomena can be contextualized in the impermanence of life itself (Kumar, 2002). With the deep-rooted understanding of the impermanent nature of events and experiences, one sees adaptation as a natural occurrence. This knowledge is what leads to understand the meaning of ‘balance’ in life.

The meaning of well-being of a person and the meaning of ‘balance’ cannot be presented with an objective point of view, they are individualistic and context dependent. However, by grounding on the current literature we can identify the following three underlying expectations that will have an influence on sustaining the work-life balance situation:

- Overall sense of contentment in life
- Ability to fulfil aspirations
- Minimal role conflict and increase the ability to fulfil responsibilities

The overall sense of contentment in life: we measure our contentment level based on one’s condition compared to an external reference standard (social comparison, social or cultural construction) or to one’s aspirations (McDowell, 2006). The problem with this statement is that when we compare our current condition or the quality of life according to external standards, we only to find the baseline level of standard that is relative to current situation. When the situation changes then the standards also change. Schmitz (1930) depicts an alternative view and states that people are deemed happier when the gap between standard and reality are small. In other words, the happiest state of being is a state of being without desires. As such, contentment can be only achieved when we see life-as it is instead of comparing standards of how-life should be (Rojas and Veenhoven, 2013). This can be achieved when one is properly grounded on the knowledge of ‘impermanence’ and perceive adaptation as a natural occurrence.

Ability to fulfil aspirations: Our aspirational levels are formed by two main processes (Stutzer, 2004). The first one is related to social comparison, i.e. one’s position relative to other individuals. The second one is related to our adaptation to previous change event or consumption level. These

two situations always influence how our aspirations are formed. Stutzer (2004) provides empirical evidence for the effect of income aspirations on individual well-being. He found that “higher income aspirations reduce people’s satisfaction with life. This suggests that subjective well-being depends only on the gap between income aspirations and actual income and not on the income level as such. Thus, the higher the ratio between aspired income and actual income, the less satisfied people are with their life, *ceteris paribus*” (p. 105). This is an important finding that highlights, the relationship between our aspirations and satisfaction level. The gap between aspirations and the actual situation can be abridged when one is properly grounded on the knowledge of ‘impermanence’ and perceive adaptation as a natural occurrence.

Minimising role conflict and fulfilling responsibilities: Role conflict refers to “the extent to which person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with the pressures that arise within another role” (Kopelman et al., 1983, p. 201). A seminal study of Coverman (1989) found role conflict decreasing the job satisfaction and marital satisfaction of men and increasing psychophysical symptoms in women. In a similar vein, Schaufeli et al., (2009) found role conflict fully mediating the relationships between workaholism, burnout and well-being. Role conflict leads to work-family conflicts vice versa. This has to be actively managed by developing self-awareness, time management (Bruening and Dixon, 2007) family supportive work environment (Bruening and Dixon, 2007; Allen, 2001). Our roles come with certain responsibilities attached to them. Whether our roles are related to work and family, we have role responsibilities as a job holder, parent, community leader or simply as a human being, and for some, “life” involves responsibilities related to activities that are important to them, such as hobbies, education, exercise, religious or community activities, and other types of caring (Kelliher et al., 2019). As such, when individuals play multiple roles, their responsibilities increase accordingly, and role conflicts compound the complexity of the situation.

The sense of contentment in life and one’s aspirations have a higher psychological distance compared to role conflicts and fulfilling responsibilities. They exhibit high construal features and the temporal distance is higher. For example, when our sense of contentment in life changes, they produce major changes in the meaning of the event. As such, we argue that WLB is a high construal level goal. It is possible to sustain WLB when one appreciates the impermanent nature of the life events. For example, in contrary to what is predicted by the HAP model, one must understand that

it is not possible to sustain positive change through variability and surprise. For example, the difference between buying a house and buying a tailored cloth are only two positive emotional events. The only difference is related to their temporal framing. One may generate longer period of positive emotions than the other. However, they both will eventually be ceased to generate the same effect after a certain period.

Our conceptual model is grounded on the annals of the Buddha’s teaching. We deviate from the Western approach to developing sustainable WLB or sustainable well-being. We assert that by trying to continuously add variety and surprises to our life events in order to maintain a certain level of heightened level of positive emotions is something that is not practically achievable and not a natural state to be in. It is like expecting a gymnast to continuously carry on their acrobatics to keep getting the same excitement of the change in movement. Our conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

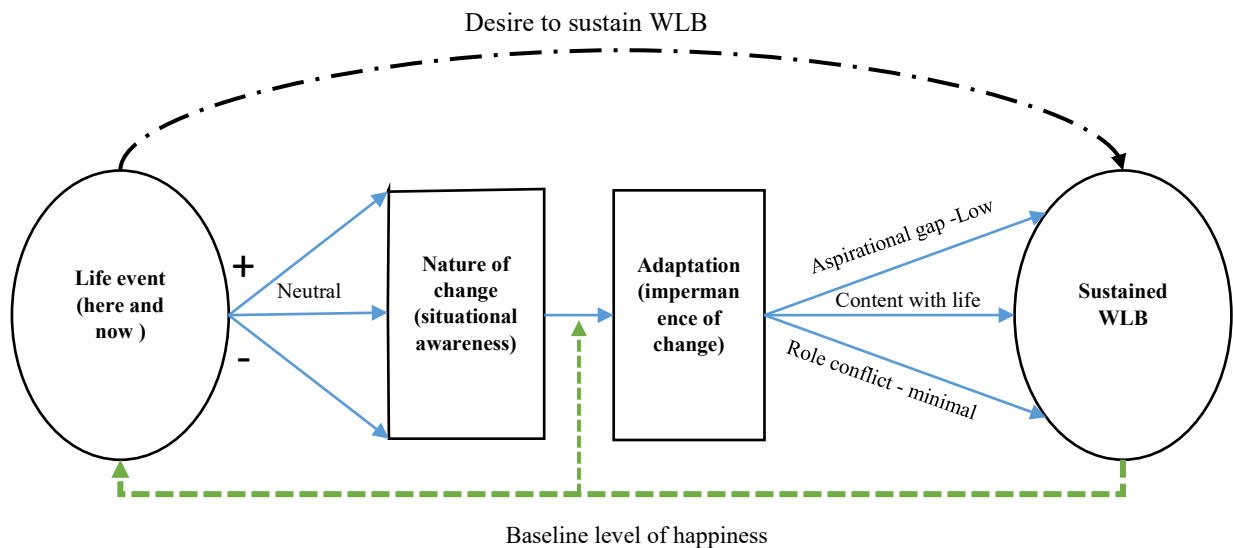


Figure 1: Sustained WLB model

CONCLUSION

In today's dynamic working environment achieving a WLB and general well being of people must come as one of life's priorities. Although Western theoretical models related to WLB suggest various methods to achieve WLB they do not clearly address the underlying tendencies that contribute to why we cannot balance and sustain WLB in the first place. In this paper, we developed a theoretical conceptualization that, in order to achieve sustained WLB situation, one must have the desire to achieve WLB as a part of their life goal, they must understand the true nature of life events (i.e. they are impermanent) and finally, focus on minimising the gap of their aspirations, minimise role conflicts and be content with what life offers. The baseline happiness is always present in us, it has no connection to material possessions. If the body is not in pain and the mind is not perturbed by positive or negative emotions, the neutral state of the mind brings the highest level of happiness one can achieve at the mundane level.

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