The Role of Self-Regulation in Work-Life Balance

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the phenomenon of work-life balance (WLB) through the lens of Stuart Shanker's Self-Reg® framework. WLB is an individual human ability to perform everyday negotiations between the roles one performs. The key to successful WLB is optimal and smooth self-regulation of stress in accordance with the Self-Reg method, which this article is an attempt to introduce the readers to. The Self-Reg method consists in skillfully switching between arousal, when needed, and inhibition or recovery. In this perspective, self-regulation consists of five stages: reframe (the behavior), recognize (the stressors), reduce (the stress), reflect (enhance stress awareness), and restore (strategies to promote resilience and restoration). Self-regulation ability enables efficient participation in all systems, integrated fulfillment of roles, smoothly switching attention between "I" (self-knowledge and the fulfillment of one's needs) and "we" (acting for the benefit of the group, family, or mankind). It thus allows not only for reducing the stress but also for achieving balance and harmony.

KEYWORDS

SELF-REGULATION
WORK-LIFE BALANCE
FAMILY

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INTRODUCTION

The systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1984) postulates that a person is part of many systems (family of origin, nuclear family, groups of friends, workmates, etc.). According to the role theory (Kahn et al., 1964), an individual simultaneously performs many different roles in their lifetime: father, son, brother, husband, subordinate, superior, friend, neighbor, etc. Therefore, the question worth asking is: How to maintain balance when performing so many roles and functioning in several systems at once? The most important systems in an adult's life include working life and private life, and one of the greatest challenges in the contemporary world is to reconcile the demands they impose. The present article argues that what makes it possible to maintain balance between career and private life, referred to as *work-life balance (WLB)*, is the smooth self-regulation ability, which is called Self-Reg in the perspective offered by Shanker and Barker (2016).

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance in an adult's life has not been unambiguously defined. Originally researchers understood it as the absence of conflict between the demands of the professional role and those of roles other than work (Wayne et al., 2017). The term "balance" assumes the individual's equal engagement in career and other activities as the main goal, leading to satisfaction. This does not reflect the various possibilities and styles of reconciling different roles, not necessarily by devoting the same amount of time and energy to each of them (Clark, 2000). As a result of qualitative research on the phenomenon of WLB, some scholars therefore began to perceive it as a situation of day-to-day negotiations between the roles one performs rather than as an established, measurable, rigid, and precise construct. Consequently, WLB is fluctuating, elusive, and changeable (Wattis et al., 2013).

WLB can be understood as an individual human ability that one can learn in order to balance the components of work and private life (including family life). In this perspective, balance is an personal choice and the individual is fully responsible for it in their life. Some researchers believe that it is a matter of good time organization and prioritizing (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018). Others stress how important varied individual abilities are in the process of achieving this balance (Hobson, 2014). Most studies focus on how support in achieving this balance can be provided to individuals by their employing organizations (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016) and by legislators (Herman & Lewis, 2012). According to one of the definitions, WLB is a mental state influenced both by the individual and by their environment (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016). There are few studies, however, that address the issue of whether the ability to balance career and private life (especially family life) is a personal skill based on some other important psychological abilities. For this reason, no knowledge is available concerning how it can be enhanced through appropriate psychological training.

WLB is also defined as a subjective sense of efficiently reconciling one's roles and of participating (in a way that one perceives as adequate) in all systems one is part of, thanks to the dynamic ability to negotiate between the demands of all these systems. Research has shown that ineffective reconciliation of roles leads to heavy stress (Wattis et al., 2013; Frone et al., 1997). Strategies for coping with stress were among the strongest predictors of WLB, much stronger than organizational support (i.e., support from the government, the law, and

enterprises; Amazue & Onyishi, 2016). Balance results from the use of coping strategies in constantly changing circumstances and from simultaneously and smoothly responding to the demands of the multiple systems in which one functions (Marks et al., 2001). A person achieves balance not only through the reduction of stressful experiences (tensions, conflicts) but also through self-development and caring for resources (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Kalliath & Brough, 2008).

The author therefore decided to use the theory of stress management (self-regulation) in the present study to look for an answer to the question of how to balance career and family life effectively. The psychological state of balance is the outcome of a broader process of self-regulation, which consists in adjusting the individual's expectations and resources to the challenges the individual is faced with in a given life situation. A state of balance cannot be achieved once and for all. It is achieved continually through self-regulation.

SHANKER AND BARKER'S SELF-REGULATION THEORY

In the perspective proposed by Shanker and Barker (2016), self-regulation is the response of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) to stress that consists in activating the metabolic processes (consuming energy) and then initiating compensation processes (restoring balance, growth, and development). Every day, faced with numerous situations and challenges, people alternately experience activation, triggered by the sympathetic nervous system (which releases cortisol and adrenaline, thus increasing the arousal of the organism), and inhibition, triggered by the parasympathetic nervous system (which releases acetylcholine and serotonin, decreasing the arousal of the organism). An increase in arousal consumes energy, while inhibition is needed for recovery and the restoration of resources. From this perspective, balance means smoothly (and consciously) switching between arousal, when needed, and inhibition (recovery), which continues throughout a person's lifetime. Practicing this balance is not tantamount to practicing self-control ("restrain yourself", "control yourself", "resist impulses").

Self-regulation means recognizing the many different signals of arousal (including heightened stress), analyzing the situation based on self-knowledge and the knowledge of the environment in which one functions, and skillfully managing oneself and the situation so as to turn off this alert (and in order not to cause excessive exhaustion in the future). Self-regulation is based on constantly monitoring one's situation (external and internal stimuli) and evaluating whether a particular arousal is needed and useful (activity and energy needed at work and at home) or whether it has become a case of overload. When one is overloaded, one feels that one has no reserves left and perceives many negative thoughts, behaviors, and emotions (e.g., uncontrolled outbursts of anger, lack of strength, or quite the opposite— inability to stop). One then falls into the vicious circle of chronic stress. When a situation evokes anxiety in a person, the level of tension increases, the level of energy decreases, and it becomes more difficult for the person to understand signals from the social environment. This in turn impairs their ability to benefit from the positive influence of other people and brings them to the verge of an emotional crisis. Such situations may occur more frequently in individuals with a sensitive temperament, higher reactivity, and lower resistance to stress.

Self-regulation is the ability to smoothly manage energy in such a way as to function efficiently in changing conditions and achieve a dynamic balance. The method of self-regulation (or Self-Reg) designed by Shanker (Shanker & Barker, 2016) is the outcome of research on stress and clinical experience of work with parents and children in the stress loop. This method is based on the cycle of arousal in stress and on the ability to diagnose stress in five main domains. Self-Reg is not merely individual regulatory strategies but

a holistic understanding of human functioning throughout the lifetime. The method is meant to develop greater resistance to stress, ensure greater balance, and promote coping with the challenges of everyday life in all of its domains. Self-Reg consists in building the ability to diagnose oneself and the situations one is in in order to be able to manage one's choices and reactions in such a way as to avoid overload. To develop this ability, it is necessary to learn each of the five stages (Table 1). Each stage will be discussed in more detail and its aims will be explained.

Table 1. Stages of Self-Regulation

STAGES OF SELF-REGULATION	
Stage 1: Reframe	Monitoring one's situation (thoughts—emotions—behaviors), reading the signals, and reframing behaviors
Stage 2: Recognize	Identifying the stressors
Stage 3: Reduce	Reducing the stress
Stage 4: Reflect	Awareness of the causes of stress overload
Stage 5: Restore	Learning the ways to recover and restore the resources

STAGE 1: REFRAME (THE BEHAVIOR)

The first stage consists in identifying the symptoms of stress and reading them as signals of a deeper problem. What is helpful at this stage is good self-knowledge and a good knowledge of one's organism. The signal symptoms may be somatic (e.g., stomachaches, headaches, trembling hands) or mental (sadness, anger, fear, helplessness). The better the self-knowledge, the easier it will be to identify these symptoms (for example, if one is aware that one laughs hysterically under stress, one will quickly realize that one is in a situation of tension).

After reframing, most overload behaviors can be interpreted as symptoms of stress. What is crucial here is the understanding of human behaviors as energy deficits or as signs of breakdown in a crisis rather than, for instance, as intentional and malicious.

STAGE 2: RECOGNIZE (THE STRESSORS)

Simultaneous functioning in the domains of work and private life exposes a person to stress, which may be related to problems at work, conflicts at home, work overload, and lack of time. In Shanker's approach (Shanker & Barker, 2016), stress and stressors are very broad concepts, covering all situations that consume a person's energy (i.e., require effort). In this perspective, stressors originate in five main domains: biological, emotion, cognitive, social, and prosocial. When one of the domains is disturbed, the entire system will be destabilized. A destabilizing element can be hunger. The feeling of hunger (the biological domain) results in increased tension and anger (the emotion domain), impairs understanding and attention (the cognitive domain), and—like a snowball—may trigger an avalanche of stress and upset the balance. In the second stage one should be a detective investigating one's own stress, which means one should recognize which of these domains one is experiencing overload from. The table below details the domains of stress.

Table 2. Domains of Stress

Biological domain (fundamental, energy basis)	Stimuli: light, sound, temperature, touch (texture), smell, allergens, air condition and contamination Physiological reactions and processes: aches (stomachache, headache, spine ache, etc.), illnesses (including heightened body temperature), hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, physical fatigue
Emotion domain	Emotions as a source of overload (internal stimuli)
Cognitive domain	Learning, attention, comprehension, information processing, memory, prediction Information overload, inability to critically analyze sources, cognitive dissonance, intellectual challenges, etc.
Social domain	Situations in which being in the social environment is stressful (mobbing, domestic violence, and neutral contacts with people which are nevertheless straining for an introvert or for a person with low social intelligence)
Prosocial domain	Empathy (understood as the ability to perceive other people's mental states) and functioning for the benefit of others (abandoning a focus on oneself and one's needs in favor of a focus on others and on their needs), namely: selflessness, sacrificing oneself for other people's good, cooperation for the group's goals, the burden of job burnout in social work occupations, parental burnout, etc.

Self-regulation is a dynamic system; anything that happens in one element of the system influences its remaining parts. The greater the tension caused by stressors from one domain, the lower the level of general energy resources and the more difficulty the next domain poses to the person (e.g., it is hard to cognitively focus at work when the situation at home has strongly affected one's emotions). In this situation, the threshold of resistance to stimuli from further domains decreases (i.e., reactivity increases). The vicious circle of stress is triggered (the way a snowball starts an avalanche)—stress affects successive domains, tension escalates, and the level of energy for coping with the challenges decreases exponentially. In order to maintain balance, one needs to simultaneously work on stabilization in all domains or to replenish energy in one part of the system with resources from another part. Maintaining balance means attempting to maintain homeostasis by constantly juggling with energy and tension.

STAGE 3: REDUCE (THE STRESS)

After identifying what is stressful for you, the next step is the management of stressors in order to reduce them. The mindfulness method, crucial for self-regulation, is incessant internal monologue ("what I feel", "what disturbs me", "what I care about "). In psychology, the application of mindfulness-based methods brings notable effects in working with stress and emotion regulation (Khoury et al., 2015; Paulus, 2016). An individual may control (regulate) the situation they are in (e.g., refuse to see a person who regularly distresses them), the way they think about a given situation once they find themselves in it ("The person must be very lonely and takes it out on others like this"), and possibly the way they cope with the situation and with the emotions it has evoked ("I felt sorry after visiting this person, I feel a decrease in energy") or the way they seek to restore the resources ("I will phone my husband and seek his support"). One can try to adjust the home or work environment to one's preferences.

STAGE 4: REFLECT (ENHANCE STRESS AWERNESS)

Functioning in a hurry and in many roles, people often do not realize that they have been overloaded with stress for quite a long time. Even when they finally do realize that their energy resources are running out, they are still not fully aware of the causes of this overload. One "earns" exhaustion for a long time by failing to regulate one's life in such a way as to

ensure a balance of stimuli in it. Good self-regulation is based on thorough knowledge of the causes of one's state (what is happening to me and what it may stem from—broad and narrow circumstances). The essence of regulation lies not in controlling or reducing difficult behaviors ("I must restrain myself more effectively"; "I will try not to shout at my child ever again") but in stopping and devoting time to reflection on what a given behavior signals (presumably, stress—in other words, excessively high arousal combined with inadequate resources and recovery) and on how one can operate the stressors (now or in the future) to reduce them.

STAGE 5: RESTORE (STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE RESILIENCE AND RESTORATION)

The last but not less important stage consists in developing strategies that will help a particular person reduce tension and regain energy. This stage, again, is an individual matter. The next step to self-knowledge consists in familiarity with the activities, behaviors, and circumstances that soothe the individual and help them recover by restoring their resources (sports, social gatherings, reading books, going on holiday, taking a walk, watching films, movement or immobility, etc.). What often contributes to recovery in individuals strongly overloaded with stimuli is sensory deprivation—sitting in silence and darkness (or gazing at one point). The idea is to develop constructive strategies while not allowing detrimental ones (which give temporary relief but are destructive in the long run), such as drinking alcohol, eating sweets, etc.

People satisfy one another's numerous needs (belongingness and relatedness, affiliation, security, showing love or friendship). Rebuilding resources after challenges that exhaust energy can (and should) take place in relationships with people. The better the social support network, the more mentally and physically healthy people are (Brooks, 2006)—positive social interactions contribute to reducing blood pressure, decreasing cortisol level, activating the immune system (Sternberg, 2001), and even alleviating inflammatory conditions in the organism (Schreier et al., 2013). Interestingly, scientists have discovered that what plays a special role in reducing the stress perceived by the individual is giving other people care and concern (rather than only receiving them). Research confirms that giving support decreases the level of tension and the reactivity of the sympathetic nervous system to stressors (Inagaki & Eisenberger, 2016) and that it directly translates into health benefits (Brown et al., 2009).

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND SELF-REG

The question of how to maintain work-life balance, crucial for satisfaction with life, is in fact a question of how to achieve balance in life in order to be able to simultaneously function in several systems (e.g., work, home) and perform many roles. To answer it, to begin with, it is worth citing three definitions of WLB, as: (1) a situation of day-to-day negotiations between the roles one is supposed to perform; (2) a person's individual ability to balance the components of career and private life; (3) the dynamic ability to negotiate between the demands of all the systems that one is part of.

The question therefore arises of how this balance can be achieved (and what practical abilities to develop to help people achieve it). How to negotiate between the roles one has to perform every day? How to acquire the ability to balance several different components of human life? How to negotiate between the demands of all the systems one is part of? Shanker and Barker (2016) presented a holistic method (Self-Reg) leading precisely to the

maintenance of balance in life. It can be used to develop those human competencies that allow a person to achieve WLB. WLB can be understood as equal division of time between working life and private (family) life. At the same time, these two worlds are not separated; they are united by the fact that the same person functions in both of them simultaneously. Accordingly, balance should not be based on time schemas or established structures built by the employer or the government but on certain traits or **abilities** of the individual that result in an efficient and dynamic balance being achieved every day. Balance should be understood as the domains being divided "satisfyingly in changing circumstances" rather than "equally." Research shows that maintaining clear and rigid boundaries between professional and home roles can be a cause behind the emergence of stress (Smith et al., 2016). A better strategy for the achievement of balance is integration. The idea of *work-life integration* (in place of work-life balance) posits that there are several systems which an individual simultaneously belongs to and that the aim should be to integrate them efficiently and to ensure their coexistence. How to achieve this aim? The key lies in understanding the nature of the stress that an individual undergoes in everyday life and in identifying the optimal strategy for regulating it. When the WLB phenomenon is considered from a psychological system perspective, a holistic and consistent model to apply to it is Self-Reg. Self-regulation ability enables efficient participation in all systems, integrated fulfillment of roles, and smoothly switching attention between "I" (self-knowledge and the fulfillment of one's needs) and "we" (collectivism, community, acting for the benefit of the group, family, or mankind). The system of balance is sensitive to every disturbance; it works consistently as a whole. The effective integration of roles and systems (i.e., WLB) results in increased quality of life in the form of increased well-being, marital satisfaction, better health condition, work efficiency, etc.—namely, in what is called *work-family enrichment* or *work-family facilitation* (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Siu et al., 2010; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2014).

PARENTS AND CHILDREN: SELF-REGULATION AS THE KEY TO HARMONY IN THE FAMILY

It is essential that adults develop their self-regulation ability not only for their own good (and for the good of other adults in their social environment, at home or in the workplace) but also in order to be able to teach it to their children. Stress reactivity is built into neural systems in the first years of the child's life (Bradley, 2003). Even in early childhood infants strongly emotionally resonate with their caregivers (Schore, 1994). This phenomenon is known as limbic resonance (Lewis et al., 2007). It has two aspects, however—reading people's emotions and resonating with them (empathizing), a person may become infected not only with their positive mood but also with stress, anxiety, or anger. Porges (2011) calls this phenomenon neuroception. In his opinion, it is an atavistic neuromechanism which is supposed to constantly monitor if other people (and the predictable situations related to them) are potentially safe or threatening. The social monitoring system carefully observes nonverbal signals—facial expressions, the tone of voice, gestures—and registers them probably below the threshold of consciousness (until they become upsetting, that is, until they induce a fight-or-flight response). Another person's stress or anger automatically stimulates the amygdala (Goleman, 2007).

The child's basic level of reactivity, arousal, and affect regulation ability develop through interaction between genes and the educational environment (Schore, 1994). It is parents who teach their children how to regulate the states of arousal and inhibition by improving self-regulation and the knowledge of basic principles of emotion regulation

(**recognition**—learning the emotions; **reduction**—learning the possibilities of reducing stress in each domain; **recovery**—learning to build the basis restoring energy).

As a result of a chronic state of stress and arousal the individual becomes hypersensitive to stimuli and evaluates them as threatening even when they are not (this is a process called priming; Levine & Frederick, 2012). Thus, a person in an overstimulating environment, trying to combine functioning in many domains (work, home) is constantly in the fight-or-flight mode (hypervigilance, reactivity, a state of alert) and stress hormones are constantly released in their organism, which causes disturbances in tissues, organs, and systems. In a state of increased stress the organism expends energy (needed for fight or flight), taking it from many domains. This slows down and impairs the functioning of the digestive system, the immune system, and cell growth and reproduction (Mate, 2004). A person who fails to cope with the challenges involved in simultaneously functioning at work and in private (family) life (frequently in a hurry and in overdrive in each domain), lives in chronic stress, using their energy for fight-or-flight responses, thus impairing the functioning of their organism and psyche until breakdown (mental or somatic stress-related disorders; Terelak, 2001). This is how the vicious circle of stress arises.

If the number of stresses is high, a child's brain may become hypersensitive even to slight stimuli (priming) and overreact to them (with anger and shouting—which, again, is yet another stimulus leading to arousal). When parents use inappropriate methods in response to the child's shouting (for example, when they take offense at the child, punish or shout at him or her, or drag the child behind them), they add to the stress, causing the child to fall into the vicious circle of stress. Their own reactions and the reactions of others are further stress-inducing stimuli. The vicious circle of stress is fueled by stimuli from five successive domains of stress. When one of the these domains is disturbed, the entire system becomes destabilized, passing tension on to further domains. People function in self-intensifying cycles of reciprocal behaviors (de Barbaro, 1994; Pohorecka, 1992). An individual's stress loop encounters the loop of another person's stress, and this may lead to the escalation of tension in a feedback cycle.

Additionally, an adult participates in their occupational system and children participate in the school system (which means father's vicious circle of stress encounters the boss's or workmate's stress loops, while the child's vicious circle of stress meets that of the teacher or a classmate, etc.). Therefore, self-regulation is one of the most important abilities for parents to acquire and pass on to their children, enabling them to achieve a sense of balance in their future life.

CONCLUSION

The literature and research on work-life balance are extremely extensive and multidisciplinary. The approach focused on politics and the environment investigates state and organizational social and family policy and its significance for WLB (Gatrell et al., 2013). This approach is concerned with what kind of support from external systems is useful for the achievement of balance in the life of citizens (employees). This support includes both decisions at the government level (family law, labor law—the length of paid maternity leave, paternity leaves, building free nursery schools, the requirement of taking one full 14-day leave in a year, etc.) and the level of employing organizations (family-friendly company policy, flexible working hours, etc.). By contrast, the approach focused on private life is mainly concerned with the division of domestic duties that is conducive to WLB (e.g., smoothly switching between roles; Lyness & Kropf, 2005). All the conceptions discussed above are based on the idea of control and rigid divisions or rules. But the issue of balance in human

life is somewhat more complex than that. Human life cannot be restricted to only two domains: career and home (family life). It is possible to mention numerous examples that do not fully fit into these two spheres (personal development, charity or volunteer work, etc.). It has been proposed that, in our thinking, we should depart from *work–life balance*, understood as setting strict rules and principles (e.g., a rigid division of time between work and private life) and as reliance on behaviors based on self-control, in favor of *work–life integration*, based on smooth and dynamic self-regulation ability. This ability is based on energy management, not on time management (Schwartz, 2007).

Self-regulation is an immensely important process because it also includes reacting to the stress loops of other people whom one depends on. Sometimes effective self-regulation requires teaching regulation to others. Attempts at self-regulation must be adjusted both to the changing situation and to the characteristics of a particular person in such a way as to stop the avalanche in time (or—better—to prevent it a well-thought-out way). This ability, therefore, is not easy; it requires a high degree of insight (into oneself, into the situation, and into other people around) and self-reflection. Although it is highly difficult, this method is likely to be the key to what most people seek: harmony. The topic of self-regulation as the key to successful work-life balance is promising and requires empirical research.

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