Towards Further Discussion on the Work–Life Balance Concept in Anthropology: 
An Exploratory Review to Lay the Groundwork for Research on Japan

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The current panel, consisting of scholars of anthropology based in Japan, all at different stages of their careers and family lives, has been formed to address the notion of work–life balance (WLB) from a variety of perspectives, with the aim of laying a comprehensive groundwork for further research on WLB in the context of Japan within an anthropological framework.

Japan’s long working hours and lack of recreational time, criticized internationally for decades now as abnormal, have recently begun to receive attention domestically as well. For instance, a “WLB Charter to Harmonize Work and Life” was issued in 2007, complemented by an “Action Policy for Promoting Work–Life Balance” far-reaching in its scope, and followed by “Guidelines to Reconsider Working Hours” in 2008. Various initiatives are also held at the local level, such as a series of events to celebrate “Work–Life Balance Week,” carried out every autumn in the Setagaya district of Tokyo, or the fresh out of the news promotion of a corporate culture built around child-care-sensitive managers (Ikubosu Declaration) in Hokkaido. Consequently, the expression waaku raifu baransu (Japanese for WLB) can be heard frequently as a part of public discourse, in the media, and in people’s everyday conversations. However, in Japan, where traditional working ethics demand that one fully devote oneself to the ideals and needs of a company or an institution, WLB risks the fate of remaining a fancy loanword rather than an applicable tool. In a grotesque and tragic way, the potential fate of WLB in Japan is illustrated by the 2015 suicide, attributed to overwork, of a young female worker, an employee of Japan’s largest advertising and public relations agency. Ironically, the victim was an employee of a company that has been creating, among other projects, numerous commercials for Japanese corporations, often picturing, each in its varied way, solutions for rest and leisure. This fact highlights the striking difference between idealized images of workers who enjoy refreshing drinks and relaxation goods after hours and the lived realities of working men and women in Japan, for whom the best WLB they can hope for is often simply surviving. Consequently, when one’s physical viability is in danger, we are left incapable to question one’s room to just be in more humane terms.

Studies of WLB have been undertaken from a variety of disciplines, including labor economics, sociology, and psychology. For instance, Williams et al. argue that as long as the idealized identities of what it means to be good men and women “are forged on the job,” effective WLB will remain difficult to implement (2015: 532). In the context of work and family, WLB is often perceived as aimed at women only. Padavic et al. argue that the “work-family narrative encourages even ambitious women to see themselves as family-primary,” depriving them of opportunities for professional growth (2015: 11). However, for working wives and mothers, home is often no less of a labor site than the workplace (Hochschild and Machung 1997). Finally, there is the risk that WLB will become work-centered, where one’s leisure or even health is construed as supporting one’s status as a worker and “performance at work is understood as being influenced by all aspects of a worker’s life” (Kelly 2013: 176). This panel aims to address these previous studies while determining the grounds for a discussion of WLB from an anthropological point of view. To achieve this, we will utilize the concepts of time and space use where they relate to strategies people employ to achieve balance in their lives, and the ontological perspective of just being, traditionally unaccounted for by WLB studies. The latter can be defined as room to take a step aside and reflect, leeway for creativity, or headspace for things other than work and non-work in their most clear-cut dimensions. Additionally, we will look at public discourse on WLB, circulated through digital media, and question its effects on people's perceptions of their identities as workers, partners, and parents. Our discussion will be complemented by pilot case studies from our own research in such localities as Japan, USA, Spain, Russia, and Uganda.

References:

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