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Contact Details

Dr Sweta Rajan-Rankin
Lecturer in Social Policy and Sociology
Social Work Division, Department of Clinical Sciences
College of Health and Life Sciences
Brunel University London
Email: sweta.rajan-rankin@brunel.ac.uk
Direct Line: 01895 268784

Author Biography
Dr Sweta Rajan-Rankin is a lecturer in Social Policy and Sociology at Brunel University London. Her research interests centre on transnational work practices, gender performativity and cultural discourses of work-life balance. She is particularly interested in the mechanisms and processes by which global and new economy work cultures are translated into everyday social practices of offshore workers in developing country contexts.

Paternalism and the Paradox of Work-Life Balance in Indian Call Centres

Abstract

Drawing on Lewis *et al*'s (2007) critical treatment of 'work-life balance' (WLB) as a western, neo-liberal discourse with problematic assumptions of gender and culture neutrality; this study examines the ways in which WLB discourse(s) are translated and adopted within transnational call centres in India. Discursive understandings suggest that work-life balance negotiations are filtered through two dominant discourses: neo-liberalism/individualism and collectivism-paternalism. The contradictions between these discourses are explored using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003) by examining qualitative interviews with 50 call centres in South India. Findings reveal that work-life balance terminology and discourses were used to describe a form of 'global modernity', an extension of professionalism and neoliberal working practices. On the shop floor however, organizational cultures were heavily paternalistic and the workplace was viewed as an extended family whose role was to nurture, care for, and protect workers. The westernized work-life discourse was described as an idealized norm for tidy, segmented lives, while the 'messy' reality of living of family and community life and blurring of boundaries could not be accounted for within this discourse. These study findings confirm the central message of Suzan Lewis's contribution to work-life research: *context matters.*

Keywords

Introduction

The concept of work-life balance (WLB) has captured the imagination of social scientists in the past few decades leading to a plethora of research, especially on the role of organizational culture in promoting work-life integration (Kossek *et al,* 2010; Lewis *et al,* 2013), employee retention and reducing attrition (Carless & Wintle, 2007) and in relation to gender (in) equality within organizations (Holt & Lewis, 2011). A preponderance of this research has been conducted in western Anglo-Saxon country contexts, with little/scarce attention given to the emergence transference, adaptation and implementation of work-life balance discourses and policies within non-western contexts. Caper *et al*'s(2007) meta-analysis of work-life research confirms this view, revealing that over 95% of studies were conducted in the USA or Western Europe, drawing mainly on individual or organizational levels of analysis.

The role of *context* is important not only for embedding current understandings of work-life initiatives and policies within national context, but also in challenging and problematizing the relevance of such discourses within broader social and cultural frames. Globalization and the emergence of the new economy have posed particular tensions in the reconciliation of work and family life, against the background of often contradictory cultural discourses. For instance, Rajan-Rankin and Tomlinson (2013) found that work-life negotiations were mediated by normative and ideological clashes between the western 'work' identity and the more traditional Indian 'home' identity within Indian call centres. Uppalury *et al,* (2012) suggests that work-life attitudes need to be understood against the backdrop of de-traditionalizing gender roles in India. Similar tensions are evidenced in rapidly globalizing Gulf workforce, where burgeoning expatriate populations hold specific views about equality, diversity and work-life roles which are often contradictory to those held by Arab nationals (Alsersham *et al,* 2009). In the context of banking and financial sectors in Nigeria, work-family conflict more than enrichment, characterized the experiences of men and women seeking to manage their multiple roles (Babatunde, 2012). Forson (2013) reminds us that a contextualised understanding of work-life balance needs to take into account not just gender, but also racialized power inequalities experienced by black women professionals in small and medium enterprises. More recently, studies have been able to unpack the hegemonic power relations at a global level, by analysing the *transnational* relationships between western clients and third world workers in relation to gender, race and post-coloniality (Mirchandani, 2005; Poster & Prasad, 2005; Rajan-Rankin, forthcoming). These are essential steps in progressing work-life research into the global arena.

'Context Matters': Suzan Lewis's Contribution to Work-Life Research

In a career spanning three decades, Suzan Lewis has been one of the pioneers of work-life research, both in the UK and globally (Lewis, 1997; Lewis & Smithson, 2001; Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Lewis *et al*, 2009; Lewis & Rajan-Rankin, 2013). While her contributions have been numerous, especially in advancing gender-equity (Lewis, 1997; 2001; Bailyn *et al*, 2001); for me, her main and enduring influence has been in her critique of the neoliberal WLB discourse and the call for 'context' in work-life research. Following on from the classic works of Rapoport & Rapoport (1969), Lewis has been able to make the crucial link between the growth of global capitalism, changing family forms and gender-role expectations in the workplace (Lewis, 1997). Her influential paper on the 'sense of entitlement' highlighted the implicit normative assumptions underpinning gender role-expectations in relation to work-life

benefits viewed as an entitlement (mostly by male workers), even as women workers continued to seek these benefits as 'favours' from organizations (Holt & Lewis, 2001).

Lewis has also galvanized work-life research in international contexts with studies comparing work-life policies across European and transition economies (Lewis *et al*, 2009); and in comparing advanced industrialized countries with developing country contexts. In their seven country study including India, South Africa, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, USA and the UK, Lewis and colleagues were able to provide a unique comparison of the applicability of the WLB discourse in western and non-western contexts (Gambles *et al,* 2006). Similarly, her more recent literature review comparing maternity provision in SME organizations, provides an important comparative analysis on WLB provision in cross-national context (Lewis *et al*, 2015). A central feature of Lewis's research, has been the recognition that the WLB discourse has emerged within a specific time, place and context and its applicability is limited because of this. Her research highlights three main limitations to the WLB discourse: its claims of gender neutrality, assumptions around individual choice and blindness to cultural difference.

> "WLB discourses, by claiming gender neutrality and obscuring wider ongoing gendered discourses and practices serve to reinforce and reproduce gender inequalities…." (p364).

> The 'choice' assumptions implicit in the WLB discourse neglects not only the gendered contexts in which individual and household 'choices' are produced…but also the changing nature of work, workloads and employer/ manger practices and strategies that constrain 'choice' (p366)

> The use of the WLB discourse in diverse cultures masks an assumption that this is culture free and obscures its Anglo-American origins. (p367).

These are important observations, especially given that most work-life research is dedicated to the empirical examination of *how* WLB can be achieved through organizational policy, rather than *if* such initiatives are helpful in advancing gender equity. Lewis reminds us to take the time to repose, and deconstruct the discursive intent of the WLB discourse and acknowledge the social inequalities in the ordering of 'work', 'family forms' and 'organizational and national cultures' (Lewis & Rajan-Rankin, 2013). While Lewis's research does not extend to a broader sociological analysis of work-life in non-western contexts; this emergent critical lens, has provided a starting point for scholars to problematize the discursive meanings and processes of cultural transference of the WLB discourse within the wider global economy. It is from this point of departure, that the current study germinates.

Cultural Contexts of WLB: A Multi-Layered Framework

How then can 'culture' and 'context' be operationalized in the study of work-life balance discourses in developing countries and collectivist societies? In this study, I propose a multi-layered framework (see figure 1) to examine cultural context at three main levels: *meta- level-* at this level the discourses of WLB and deconstructed and reconstituted within wider processes of globalization and gendered relations; *macro-level-* specific cultural frames are adopted, in particular the individualism/ neoliberalism and collectivism/paternalism models in order to explicate dominant normative frameworks around work-life roles in different cultural contexts; and finally, at the *micro-level-* WLB discourses are examined in relation to organizational cultures, individual discourses and social practices to capture what managers and employees 'say' and 'do' in relation to the management of work and family roles.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Globalization and Paternalism

Increasingly, the western discourse of WLB has begun to have a greater presence among workplaces, businesses and organizations across the world. In part, this could be understood in terms of global scapes and 'transmission' processes of cultural globalization (see Appadurai,1996; Rajan-Rankin, forthcoming). Feminist epistemologies and global ethnographies have been particularly effective in teasing out the social practices and processes by which global capitalism leads to a reproduction of western culture in non-western contexts (see Basi, 2009; Bergeron, 2001; Mirchandani, 2004; 2014; Poster, 2002). In her theory of transnational approaches to work-life integration, Poster (2005) considers the layers of power differentials through which work-life negotiations are undertaken, between the global North and South, parent multinationals and local subsidiaries, managers and employees, western clients and outsourced developing country workers. These links between globalization, hegemonic power relations and gender, have led to theorization around the proliferation of transnational businesses as representing a form of 'global masculinity'. As Connell (2005:72) notes:

> "We are so accustomed to thinking of gender as the attribute of an individual, even an unusually intimate attribute of the individual, that it requires a considerable wrench to think of gender on the vast scale of global society….The world gender order can be defined as the structure of relationships that interconnect gender regimes of institutions and the gender order of local societies on a world scale".

Drawing on this analysis, Connell (1998; 2005) develop the idea of unequal patterns of development within globalization, to mirror the enactment of a hegemonic gender world order, through the formation of 'transnational business masculinities' which are institutionally based in the Global North and whose dominant form is reproduced through the multinational corporations and global finance markets (Elias & Beasley, 2009). Knights and McCabe (2001) for instance, were able to analyse changing forms of managerialism in business process reengineering (BPR) firms to be a shift *between* different forms of masculinities, notably traditional paternalism approaches and transnational business masculinities. Aggressive business masculinities are viewed as being in contrast to softer *paternalistic masculinities* which are more commonly seen in collectivist societies (Pelligrini & Scandura, 2010). Paternalistic forms of leadership involve practices by which organizational loyalty is engendered by treating the workplace as an extended family, where workers are nurtured, protected and controlled. More recently, the focus has shifted from global masculinities to multiple masculinities which enables shifts and continuities between different gendered discourses.

Individualism-Collectivism

In order to connect the global and the local levels, a secondary layer of theorizing is useful, in understanding the normative and ideological cultural frameworks which underpin the neoliberal project and collectivist societies. The most well-known macro-level framework for comparing national culture domains was developed by Geert Hofstede (1980) along a four-fold taxonomy of characteristics including: *power distance* (a measure of inequality between less powerful and more powerful members of organization/ institutions); *uncertainty avoidance* (society's (in)tolerance of ambiguity/ risk avoidance); *masculinity vs femininity* (an assumed polarized presentation of 'women's values' as being different from 'men's values'; and *individualism-collectivism* (characterizing degree of individuality/ integration between groups).

While there are countless criticisms of Hofstede's culture model, especially the problematic gendered assumptions which are biologically deterministic; the individualism-collectivism domain does need further examination. Nair & Venugpolan's (2012) excellent analysis of 'individualism-collectivism' discourses, makes these domains more distinct as a continuum of value differentials *within* and *outside* collectivistic societies; rather than as polar

opposites in Hofstede's original composition (see figure 2). This provides a useful macro-level framework by which to understand individual work-life discourses within normative context.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

A final theoretical layer which enables a more distinct analysis of work-life discourses in developing country contexts, draws from the social practices literature which distinguishes between norms, social attitudes, talk and the 'doing' of social behaviours. This rich and detailed approach to studying work-life balance, enables researchers to distinguish between organizational and cultural discourse about WLB, from how managers and employees 'talk' about and describe the terminology, meanings and concepts of WLB in their daily life. Mescher *et al's* (2010) study of representations of WLB supports in company websites, provides an excellent example of social practices research. By looking at implicit and explicit messages about WLB support they were able to identify the use of hegemonic power processes in shaping dominant organizational discourse:

> "Hegemonic power processes proceed as (sub)routines, effectively regulating daily work flows and interactions in work organizations, without being openly questioned or popping up at the surface. Their implicit functioning effectuates the gendered acceptance of organizational practices, even when these practices bring about unintended side-effects" (Mescher *et al,* 23).

By examining the meanings of work-life balance through discursive intent and social practices, critically positioned within broader cultural frames, this study attempts to highlight areas of contestation and congruence in the transference of WLB in the Indian context.

Methodology

This study draws on a qualitative study of call centre workers in two large business process outsourcing (BPO) firms in New Delhi and Hyderabad, India. Call centres are unique global workplaces, where dedicated customer service agents provide support to western clients across the globe, replacing face-to-face encounters with technology assisted support (Jaarsveld & Poster, 2015). In recent years, IT-enabled services (IT-eS) and BPO's have mushroomed across India, due to the plentiful supply of educated English speaking graduates (NASSCOM, 2007). Despite this, call centre work remains a much contested terrain in the sociology of work and employment, representing on the one hand prestige and social status in India (Basi, 2009); while simultaneously characterized by low-wages, routinized and repetitive work processes

(Rajan-Rankin & Tomlinson, 2013). The study methodology included semi-structured interviews with 50 customer service representatives (CSR's), voice and accent trainers, managers and policy experts in two call centre organizations. Ethics approval was granted by the Brunel University Research Ethics Committee before embarking on the project, and interview guides were conducted in English, although care was taken to transcribe any colloquial terminologies spoken in 'Hinglish' (a curious mix of Hindi and English commonly spoken in the metropoles in India). All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim and were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms. Due to the high likelihood of being recognized, elite interviewees and policy expert demographic information was completely delinked from their narratives, to minimize recognition within the industry. The demographic profile of interviewed participants revealed a larger number of men to women, consistent with global processes which take place during evening/ night shifts (NASSCOM, 2007). The employees tended to be between 18-25 years of age (although managers were older), mostly single with few married employees and parents. Given the discursive intent of the study to understand meanings and social practices associated with WLB in a contextualized way, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology was adopted. This sort of fine grained analysis, enables what Fairclough (2012:4) terms "the analysis of dialectical *relations between* discourse and other objects, elements and moments, as well as the analysis of 'internal relations of discourse'". It therefore allows the contestations, debates and contradictions between WLB and other layers of cultural discourses to emerge as a dialogue, rather than a binary that ceases to exist when it comes in contact with other cultural discourses. An example of CDA analysis is provided in the excerpt presented in table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

From the above excerpt we can see the processes by which the narrative text is subject to two layers of coding for discursive intent and normative inference and social practices. In-depth line by line coding enables connections to emerge not only between individual and organizational discourses but also systemic discourses around gender and race inequalities which are reflected at a global level.

Findings and Discussion

Neoliberal Discourses of WLB

The language and terminology of work-life balance was used as part of popular organizational discourse, and the interviewees were familiar with this term. Work-life balance was mentioned as an issue, mainly in relation to working hours and shift work practices. As the client groups

being serviced are located in different time zones (mainly US) which are 12-14 hours ahead, most Indian call centre workers operate in the evening or the night shift.

This form of global working practice has been referred to as the 'colonization of time' discourse (Mirchandani, 2004) and is reinforced by the policy expert's view that work-life balance for western clients, is achieved by developing country workers labouring through the night.

> In policy terms there is no comparison. Work-life balance has entered India as well. The main issue in terms of work-life balance in BPO's is the biological clock. When employees have to continuously work evening and night shifts, it has to have an impact on their bodies, on their psyches. Then work and family roles become reversed. It's like when the west sleeps, then India has to wake- so actually they get the work-life balance, and we get the sleepless nights" (Policy Expert)

Not surprisingly, much of the neoliberal discourse around the business case for WLB, is to mitigate the negative effects of shift working to ensure there are 'happy workers'. These micro-level adjustments however, do not address the wider systemic issue of working conditions within call centres.

> In terms of managing the team, we always try to ensure that they have a good work-life balance. We never schedule two straight night shifts, and always give them 'offs' (day shifts) so they don't get too stressed. When they have a good work, and a good life, they are happy and this is what we want for our employees. (Anand, 30, Manager)

Paternalism

Discursive interpretations of work-life balance meanings and metaphors were strongly influenced by underpinning paternalistic masculinities, which were commonly attributed to collectivist societies. Paternalistic leadership styles have been described as evoking the image of the workplace as an extended family, with managers providing nurturing and protection to their workers (Pelligrini & Scandura, 2010). In the first quotation, Nidha's description of why she would not recruit a female CSR to a global process within a call centre, has complex layers of meaning. In this instance, a female manager is adopting and enacting paternalistic practices to 'protect' a fellow female worker from enduring the work-life imbalance she had to go through herself. This is consistent with Derne's (2005:87) observation that "because nationalist Indian men identified the public world as a typically male domain, they made women the primary bearers of Indianness..". This paternalistic narrative is also evident in the semiotic and

linguistic description of terms used to describe employees as 'boys' and 'girls' who need to be entertained, less they are bored by their repetitious jobs.

> When I hear that a female CSR (customer service representative) is applying for a global process, it does give me pause…I do think to myself "she may just be married, and may have children, so will probably leave in a few years". This is no job for a woman with a family. Before I became a manager, I had to juggle having a baby and doing this job. I wouldn't want that life for anyone". (Nidha, 35 years, Call Centre Manager)

> There is no question it is a stressful job. Everyday, the same task, it can get boring. We always try to ensure that the boys and girls get breaks, that we have some team-building activities, some games in the rec room, so they feel motivated in their breaks, to go back to work. (Trimurti, Team Lead)

Interestingly, the presence of paternalistic practices is viewed as harmful for both men and women workers in call centres. Due to the rising number of cases of sexual assault by unregistered cab drivers against women working the night shift (BBC,2014); call centre organization had begun to provide free transport services to ferry female workers from and to their homes. Anil, comments on this practice as being gender discriminatory. While he acknowledges the vulnerability of female workers to sexual assault during night shift work, he argues the need for both men and women to have access to these services from a class equality point of view.

> What is unfair I feel, is that night drop services are only given to the girls. I understand, it is night shift work and the girls need to be safe. But there is cost involved, and the boys need to get home too. We also need a night bus, not just for cost but safety too. (Anil, CSR, 21 years)

Racialism

Another dimension of paternalistic work-life narratives was the perceived or imagined notions of the 'western client' (for a fuller treatment, see Rajan-Rankin, forthcoming). Poster's (2002) concept of 'racialisms' are useful in considering the ways in which racial hierarchies are both embedded within organizations, but also in the ordering of global work relations between western and developing country nations. Surprising results emerge when racialisms interlink with gendered attitudes. This male CSR is evoking his gendered status as a man to dismiss the

western client (assumed to be a white, older woman) to be a technologically challenged female; however, when whiteness discourses are evoked, he reframes the client to be his 'mother', signalling a higher social status within the paternalistic hierarchy, to enable him to treat her with respect, based on the values of a collectivist society.

> Interviewer: So who do you think your clients are? That you talk to everyday, given they are just a voice on the phone, and you can't see them?

> Kamal: (laughs) *Hoga koi gori meim! (Must be some white lady),* I don't really know. I just assume it is a women in America who can't turn on her printer. Sometimes they can be quite rude you know, they can use the four letter word a lot. So I just think to myself "you are like my mother, my better, so I will not lose my temper". I try to respect them, and from me, they also learn to be respectful. (CSR, 23 years)

Heteronormativity and Gender Performance at Work

Role performance is not just limited to racialisms. Employees reported many instances of having to 'perform' their gender roles in relation to the normative expectations of a collectivist society. The extracts below provide new insights into the failure of work-life policies which do not take into account the status of men in society. Home-based working was associated with a failure of masculinity, and IT workers who attempted to work from home, were soon shamed into returning to the public sphere of waged work.

> Aman: I have worked in the BPO industry for a long time, and there is one anecdote that always makes me smile. When I worked in Bangalore for company X, we had just rolled out a working from home policy, to reduce operational costs for office space. At first, my boys were very excited, they were like "Yes sir, we want to try this, sir". Within two weeks, they were back, begging me to come back to the office. "My neighbours are laughing at me sir, they are saying I have lost my job. My wife wants me out of the house!"

> Interviewer: So, in fact while work-life balance policies were put in place, in some situations they did not work?

> Aman: Yeah, exactly right….you have to think about culture. Not every practice will work in India. We have to go by our culture too, and men are supposed to work from the office. (Team Lead, 36 years)

The costs of paternalistic managerialistic practices experienced by both men and women. In this quotation, Darshan describes the work-family spillover he experiences when attempting to counsel and soothe a call centre worker while working late the day before his wedding.

> There is no work-life balance, but then it's part of the job. Anyone can do the bare minimum, but if you are committed, and you want the best for your team, you will go that extra mile. I remember I was just about to get married, and I had applied for marriage leave. The night before, some of the boys and girls on the shop floor were new, they were stressed, one girl was crying because of a bad call she had to take. I stayed back two hours, just counselling her…the calls were endless, and were even following me to the *Mandap (temple).*
>
> (Darshan, 34, Manager)

While paternalistic approaches to work-life balance are intended to make employees feel nurtured and valued (and controlled), women workers noticed a definite difference between being patronized by male managers and being offered structural supports to help them better manage their work and family responsibilities.

> What we need in this company Y is a crèche, this is what would make most women workers happy…If we just knew our children were close by and we could see them during breaks, we would give our all to the company, and never drop out….
>
> (Aparna, 24, CSR, Group Discussion)

> There is definitely a difference for men and women workers. First, there is safety. The cases of girls being assaulted on the way home, this is happening to women only. Then, is our shift arrangements. If manager wants to hold a team building event or give promotion talks in the evening, I cannot attend. I have to go home to my family. This means even though I work the early shift, no one notices the work I do.
>
> (Sonam, 21, CSR, Group Discussion)

Conclusions

This study highlights the complexities of the work-life balance discourse and the multiple ways in which it can be translated within transnational call centres. The dominant discourse within the call centre organizations was collectivism/ paternalism, and evidence can be found

of both racialism and masculinities intersecting to produce complex gendered narratives in relation to work and family role formations. Employees and managers navigated between individualistic/ neoliberal discourses of work-life balance, and the realities of collectivist/ paternalistic normative expectations in their everyday lives with relative ease, except in cases where the application of a neoliberal work-life policy or practice, conflicted with or undermined hegemonic masculinist assumptions, in which case social practices were put in place to disincentive that behaviour and restore social control. Findings from this study emphasize the need to view work-life dialogues as entrenched in wider structural discourses of gender, race and sexuality; and not as separate from it.

Acknowledgements

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Multi-layered Theoretical Framework for Understanding WLB

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┌─────────────────────┐          ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Meta-level Framework │─────────▶│  Globalization and Gendered World Order │
└─────────────────────┘          └──────────────────────────────────────┘

                                      ┌────────────────────────────────┐
                                  ┌──▶│  Individualism-Neoliberalism   │
┌─────────────────────┐          │   └────────────────────────────────┘
│ Macro-Level Framework│─────────┤
└─────────────────────┘          │   ┌────────────────────────────────┐
                                  └──▶│  Collectivism-Paternalism      │
                                      └────────────────────────────────┘

                                                    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                                               ┌───▶│ Organizational discourse of WLB │
┌─────────────────────┐   ┌────────────┐      │    └──────────────────────────────┘
│ Micro-Level Framework│──▶│    WLB     │──────┤    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
└─────────────────────┘   │ Discourse(s)│      ├───▶│  Individual discourse of WLB   │
                          └────────────┘      │    └──────────────────────────────┘
                                               │    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                                               └───▶│   Social practices of WLB      │
                                                    └──────────────────────────────┘
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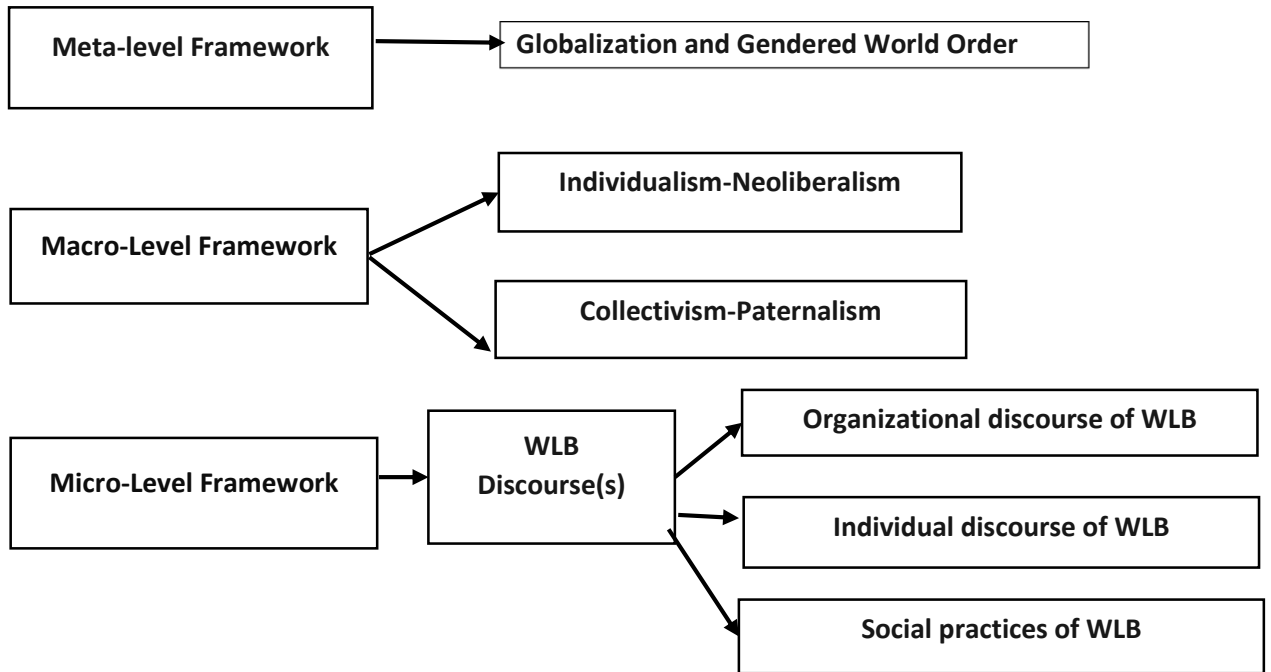
Figure 2: Generalization of values and attributes associated with Individualistic and Collectivist cultures

Collectivism	Individualism
• High regard for others	• Self is primary
• Social harmony and consensus as primary goal	• Self as free agent
• Relationship prevails over task	• Task prevails over relationships
• Opinions are predetermined by group membership	• Individual has distinctive attributes from the group
• Behaviour is regulated through shame or loss of face	• Personal goals of success and achievement are primary concerns
• Hierarchical of status-oriented	• Equality of treatment is desired
• In-groups and out-groups are clearly distinguished	• Apparently does not distinguish between in-groups and out-groups

Source: Paramasivan, S & Nair-Venugpolan, S. (2012) 'Indian collectivism revisited: Unpacking the western gaze', In S. Nair-Venugopalan (Ed). *The Gaze of the West and Framings of the East.* Chapter 10 (pp.156-69), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Table 1: An Example of Critical Discourse Analysis

Transcript	Discursive Coding (What is being said)	Social Practices Coding (What are they doing)
When I hear that a female CSR (customer service representative) is applying for a global process, it does give me pause….	Gendered recruitment process between global and domestic call centres	Managers screening applicants take gender into account
I do think to myself "she may just be married, and may have children, so will probably leave in a few years".	Assumptions of the ideal worker (unmarried, unencumbered)	Shift from gender being a contextual factor, to a recruitment factor
This is no job for a woman with a family. Before I became a manager, I had to juggle having a baby and doing this job. I wouldn't want that life for anyone". (Nidha, 35 years, Call Centre Manager)	Peer protection- women enacting paternalistic practice to shield other women from joining front-line call centre work	Work-life imbalance experience of manager influencing recruitment decisions – paternalism rules enacted to control women's roles within private sphere of the home; enactment of public and private patriarchy