



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
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Working to live, living to work, or balancing them?

A qualitative study of how early career people working in Sweden
experience work-life balance

By

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Abstract

Early career people are under represented when it comes to understanding their experiences with work-life balance. Graduate programmes in Sweden are an incubator for recent university graduates to enter the workforce and accelerate their careers. Combining those two aspects, this study aims to explore and understand if work-life balance is present and important to early career people enrolled in graduate programmes while working in Sweden. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants enrolled in graduate programmes at well-known companies in Sweden. A thematic analysis was completed to extract the central and subthemes present in their answers.

Our analysis showed that perception of work-life balance differed depending on the individual, managers actions towards work-life balance were more influential than their words, work-related stress is prominent, and the social environment with co-workers is the driving force of work motivation in the participants. Additionally, due to the Covid-19 pandemic occurring in 2020, our analysis uncovered new insights into what potential future work-life balance could look like as the participants experienced a dramatic change in their work routine having to abruptly adapt to working from home.

Our results highlight the experiences of early career people working in Sweden, outlining how they value and achieve work-life balance while enrolled in a graduate programme. These findings can be used by organizations, managers and future work-life balance researchers to comprehend the importance of early career people's perception surrounding work-life balance.

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1.0 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the reader to the background of the thesis, including an overview of work-life balance research. It will also introduce the gap in the research when it comes to early career people, with a focus on Sweden. Lastly, this chapter will present the thesis purpose and research questions.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Work-life balance research

The concept of having a healthy balance between work and non-work activities is an enigma. What constitutes and defines the balance is being researched ad nauseam. The majority of the research has been centralized around the balance between work life and family life (Gagnano, Simbula & Miglioretti, 2020). The initiatives that organizations put in place are skewed heavily towards favouring employees who have children (Bourdeau, Ollier- Malaterre & Houlfort, 2019; Burkett, 2000) and fit the traditional definition of family used in work-life balance research. The emphasis on organizations' work-life balance initiatives focusing on families is a logical approach because workers with families are the ones who are making use of them the most (Beauregard, 2011). The reason for this is not hard to figure out; if these initiatives are beneficial to a certain section of employees, it makes sense the data would say they are the ones taking advantage of them (Burkett, 2000), which would support the amount of effort spent researching it. Recently, a gradual shift in the research approach is occurring as emphasis is being directed towards other aspects that could affect work-life balance such as childless employees (Casper, Weltman & Kwesiga, 2007), health (Gagnano et al., 2020), and work environments (Bradley, McDonald & Cox, 2019; Craig & Kuykendall, 2019).

The traditional family approach to studying work-life balance has revealed better job satisfaction and more organizational commitment for employees who use the benefits in place (Casper et al.,

2007). Casper et al., (2007) set out to determine if childless employees' perceptions of organizational support for their work-life balance was equal to those of family bearing employees. When identifying childless employees, Casper et al., (2007) and Dumas & Perry-Smith (2018) did not stipulate a certain age group and looked at all ages. They concluded that childless employees believe they are not treated equally and it has an effect on organizational commitment (Casper et al., 2007). Dumas & Perry-Smith (2018) believe that childless employees are less focused at work due to the lack of balance in expected family engagements away from work. It therefore becomes important for organizations to be aware of and support childless employees' activities outside of work in an attempt to improve their focus at work (Dumas & Perry-Smith, 2018). The inequality also extends to the expectations put upon childless employees (Casper et al., 2007). These employees perceive the expectations of them are to be ready to pick up the slack from employees with family commitments because they do not have those commitments (Dumas & Perry-Smith, 2018). For organizations seeking to implement work-life balance initiatives that garner positive results, they need to account for the perceptions of childless employees (Casper et al., 2007; Dumas & Perry-Smith, 2018) and not only employees with a family.

Today work-life balance research has branched off into other aspects than just family. For example, labour markets have begun to change and are displaying a diverse expansion of life roles in the market (Gagnano et al., 2020). This expansion is aiding in the focus shifting from work-family research towards other work-life balance aspects such as health (Gagnano et al., 2020). Broadening and increasing the amount of work-life balance aspects from family, can result in organizations having a clearer picture on how to design better work-life balance initiatives (Gagnano et al., 2020) to meet the needs of employees' individual personalities (Craig & Kuykendall, 2019). Workplace environments have also seen an uptick in focus (Bradley et al., 2019; Craig & Kuykendall, 2019). A supportive work environment is one where negative consequences are not felt due to prioritizing a healthy work-life balance (Beauregard, 2011; Bradley et al., 2019). Co-worker friendships have been shown to play an important role in establishing a supportive environment (Craig & Kuykendall, 2019). Work-life balance initiatives

are important for organizations because they can be used to attract and retain talented workers (Beauregard, 2011). However, caution has been voiced from researchers claiming that organizations' work-life balance initiatives can be superficial (Beauregard, 2011), acting as control structures resulting in minimal positive correlations to the majority of employees (Bourdeau et al., 2019).

1.1.2 Graduate programmes

An interest to study work-life balance, and a proximity to entering the job market, motivated us to find out what early career people in Sweden experienced when it came to work-life balance. Early career people is a term that we conceptualized to describe recent university graduates who are at the beginning of their career and entering into the labour market. The idea of graduate programmes as a way to get into the labor market was planted in our heads from our classmates as well as university job fair recruiters. Graduate programmes are a tool organizations use to attract, develop and retain talent from the pool of impending university graduates (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). These programmes are expensive for small to medium sized organizations to create and maintain, so the majority of graduate programmes are mainly implemented by larger organizations (Latukha, 2011). In Sweden, most large, international organizations have graduate programmes in place (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). From an early career person's perspective, these programmes are attractive because they appear to offer a fast-track for career development and advancement (McDermott, Mangan, O'Connor, 2006). Most graduate programmes promote the opportunity to work towards managerial positions, acting as the carrot at the end of a stick dangling in front of recent graduates to attract them (Latukha, 2011; McDermott et al, 2006). These programmes typically run from one to two years and involve spending time learning different parts of the organization within various departments (Latukha, 2011). At the end of these programmes a position in the organization is usually offered (Latukha, 2011; Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). However, people who complete graduate programmes are choosing not to stay, resulting in retention rates from graduate programmes being low (Latukha, 2011). This is in part

due to the inconsistency between graduates' expectations entering the programme and their developmental opportunities experienced during the programme (McDermott et al, 2006).

A generational shift in thinking about careers could also help explain the low retention rates (Connor & Shaw, 2008) as the awareness of career longevity with one organization appears less desirable (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017; McDermott et al, 2006). As one of the outlets to begin a career upon graduation and the assumed prestige placed on the graduate programmes of large, international organizations, we wanted to know what the work-life balance looked like from people going through the process of a graduate programme in Sweden. Graduate programmes can also be referred to as trainee programmes (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017), but for clarity in this thesis, graduate programmes will be used throughout and early career people refer to recent graduates at the beginning of their career who have entered into the labour market.

1.2 Problem area

As the research begins to broaden and explore more specific aspects of work-life balance, knowledge gaps still remain (Bourdeau et al., 2019; Dumas & Perry-Smith, 2018; Gragnano et al., 2020). Graduates entering the workforce have minimal, if any, data on their experiences with work-life balance (Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss & Vanderford, 2018). One study concluded that graduating students are experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression during their studies as they enter the labour force (Evans et al, 2018). Within the first year of employment, university graduates entering the workforce are in an influential stage towards forming their commitment to an organization based on their experiences and met expectations (Meyer & Allen, 1988). Because of this, graduate programmes become important vessels in promoting and supporting a healthy work-life balance (McDermott et al, 2006).

Literature and media present Sweden as a shining example of a nation and workforce that have figured out the key to work-life balance (Raiden & Räisänen, 2013). However, Sweden is seeing an increase in people taking stress related, long-term sick leaves (Blom, Kallings, Ekblom, Wallin, Andersson, Hemmingsson, Ekblom, Soderling & Ekblom-Bak , 2020). Single occupancy

households have proven to be strong indicators of inducing stressors, along with a perceived lack of social connections (Blom et al., 2020). The working population of Sweden between the ages of 25 and 34 in February 2020 account for almost a quarter of the entire workforce, with 18% of the entire population of Sweden classified as living alone (Statistics Sweden, 2020). The younger and increasing Swedish workforce are not self-reporting their experiencing of stress (Blom et al., 2020). A study on the four Nordic countries revealed that poor work-life balance due to work aspects can be a warning sign of potential work absences due to sick leave (Antai, Oke, Braithwaite & Anthony, 2015). Short and long-term sick leaves can result in an increase of costs for organizations (Johansson, 2002).

Previous research has provided a wide angle view into the density of work-life balance concepts across a multitude of perspectives and eras. Evans et al (2018) and Blom et al, (2020) state the significant problem between mental health and retention amongst early career people. Work-life balance research in early career people's lives are still unexplored and therefore this study aims to collect direct insights from early career people working in Sweden.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand if work-life balance is important and present to early career people working in Sweden. In order to fill a gap in work-life balance research and create awareness amongst both management and early career people on highlighting the importance of work-life balance, the following research questions are purposed:

1. How do early career people in graduate programmes experience work-life balance at their current workplace?
2. How do early career people in graduate programmes value and achieve work-life balance?

1.4 Delimitations of the study

The focus of this study is to get a deeper understanding of how early career people in the labour market experience and value work-life balance. Therefore, people that are enrolled in a Swedish graduate programme are chosen to represent this aspect. Graduate programmes became the scope to represent early career people because the premise of a programme is to accelerate career development for recent graduates (McDermott et al., 2006). Sweden became the scope of this study because we could get access to companies operating in Sweden.

Seven participants took part in this study, meaning that the results which will be presented are not generalizable and representative for a larger population. Therefore, the goal of this study is to get insights into their experiences hopefully leading into more extensive research in the future.

The concept of work-life balance has many definitions and aspects to it. In order to complete this study in time a demarcation of theories was executed to limit this thesis' scope. The theories in focus are motivation, stress, organizational support and career phase. These were chosen due to previous research and will be discussed more in Chapter Two.

1.5 Disposition

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first introductory chapter is followed by Chapter Two, which covers the theoretical framework of the thesis, presenting concepts of work-life balance. Chapter Two also introduces theory on Organizational Support, Stress, Motivation and Career Phase, which are the theoretical framework of this thesis. Chapter Three explains the methodology, clarifying how the data was collected and analysed. Chapter Four will present the empirical findings which will be displayed via quotes from the participants' responses. Chapter Five includes the discussion of the theoretical framework and empirical findings. Lastly, Chapter Six addresses our conclusions, the limitations of the thesis and further research opportunities.

2.0 Theory

This chapter offers an overview of the theoretical aspects which are derived from previous research on work-life balance. The theories presented here will provide a theoretical framework which will serve as a tool for the collection and analysis of the empirical data.

2.1 Work-life balance

The concept of work-life balance has been researched heavily and widely used throughout literature, however an agreed upon definition of what work-life balance is remains elusive (Kalliath & Brough, 2008). Conte and Landy (2019) believed that work-life balance is the gratification a person experiences at work being closely linked to the joy they experience away from work and vice versa. Darcy, McCarthy, Hill and Grady (2012) described work-life balance as the improvement of employee experiences at work and outside of work. Through a literature review, Kalliath and Brough (2008) developed a definition stating work-life balance is how the individual perceives the compatibility between work and non-work activities. The amount of ways to define work-life balance are vast and contribute to the muddiness in understanding what it really is (Kalliath & Brough, 2008). Darcy et al (2012) problematized it further by arguing that work-life balance differs depending on what stage of life the individual is in and that a universal approach from organizations to work-life balance is ineffective in terms of meeting the needs and expectations of different individuals. From the attempts of researchers to define work-life balance seen above, two themes emerge: perception and individuality. The core of work-life balance is found in the individual's perception and what they believe is a balanced lifestyle (Kalliath & Brough, 2008).

Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) echoed and furthered this sentiment believing that perception of balance between working and external activities away from work are key in understanding work-life balance. They examined issues related to achieving work-life balance on three levels: individual, organizational and societal. Achieving work-life balance on an organizational level entails appropriate management systems and personnel policy whereas on a

societal level it may require an accessible labour market and sense of security though the ease of finding suitable work (Richert-Kazmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016). By exploring organizational and societal aspects they suggested that work-life balance is an individual's capability to combine work with other factors of life such as family, health, and socialization (Richert-Kazmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016). They acknowledged that achieving and maintaining this balance is difficult and will be different for every individual. Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) concluded that the most commonly mentioned themes when researching work-life balance literature are: family situations, working conditions and economic aspects.

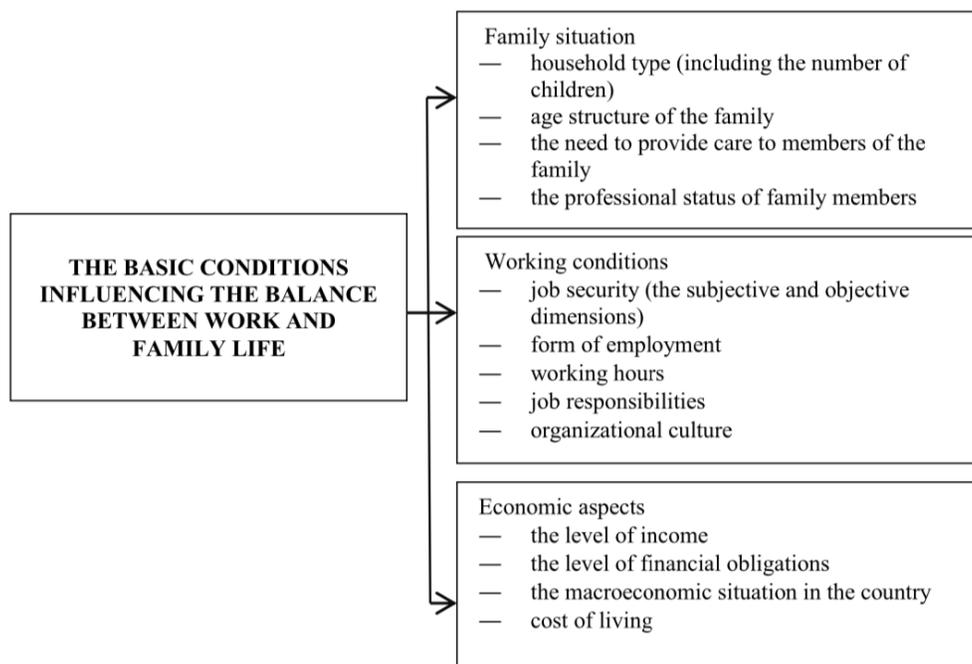


Figure 1: Model of Individual conditions influencing work-life balance (Richert-Kazmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016 p. 683)

2.2 Motivation

Organizations spend a large amount of resources on training and integrating motivation in employees to reap the benefits of a motivated employee (Latham, 2012). A motivated employee can be more efficient, effective and satisfied in the workplace, resulting in a decrease of employee turnover (Latham, 2012). Since the 1900's, scholars have been attempting to crack the

code as to what motivates employees and how organizations can use it (Latham, 2012). Similarly to work-life balance, there are numerous approaches to defining motivation.

A starting point in the motivation research is Taylor's scientific management principle which stated that job satisfaction is closely linked with a monetary reward system for the work (Locke, 1982). Taylor believed that money was the main motivator when it came to output at work (Locke, 1982). A controversial counter approach to Taylor's belief system on work motivation came from Mayo and the Hawthorne studies (Latham, 2012), which revealed that an improved social relationship between employees and management was the key factor in motivating employees (Wickström & Bendix, 2000). The Hawthorne studies inadvertently became the base in formulating the human relations movement (Latham, 2012).

Two classic theories on motivation followed Taylor and Mayo: Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory. The hierarchy of needs proposed the idea that humans have five levels of basic needs they need to fulfil that affects their motivation (Latham, 2012). The two-factor theory took the five needs suggested by Maslow and condensed it down into hygiene and motivator needs (Conte & Landy, 2019). Meeting hygiene needs do not result in increased motivation, but they do remove dissatisfaction (Conte & Landy, 2019; Latham, 2012). Examples of hygiene needs can be salary, job security and benefits (Latham, 2012). Fulfilling motivator needs act as a catalyst to improvements in effort and personal satisfaction (Conte & Landy, 2019). Motivator needs are more aligned with social and esteem levels of individuals connecting to the work aspect and can look like recognition, responsibility and empowerment (Conte & Landy, 2019; Latham, 2012).

Other authors offered a contrasting viewpoint to the traditional approach of studying motivation and focused on the individual aspect of people. Viewing humans as individuals reveals differences in how motivation theories are researched and proposed. Goal-setting theory is a well studied and practical approach to assessing motivation at work (Locke & Latham, 2002). Its main point is that having a clear end goal enhances and incentivizes employees to reach that end goal (Locke, 1968) placing the responsibility firmly on the individual to accomplish it (Locke & Latham, 2002). The expectancy theory refers to the link between effort and reward (Conte &

Landy, 2019). The greater the perceived reward the greater chance of effort maximization expended (Latham, 2012). Training programs can use expectancy theory as a tool for influencing motivation and employee output (Conte & Landy, 2019).

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) categorized motivational theory into three main groups: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and interactive motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to actions that provide no tangible reward but supply personal satisfaction (Latham, 2012). Extrinsic motivation is behaviour enacted to earn a reward (Conte & Landy, 2019). Interactive motivation is an approach that can be described as culture and identity driven (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). This motivational trifecta can be connected to workplace environments because it includes intrinsic motivation such as learning, extrinsic motivation in the form of compensation and interactive motivation that incorporates the aspect of workplace culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

Extrinsic	Intrinsic	Interactive
Salary	Development, learning	Norms
Promotion/ Career	Social connection/ relationships	Identity
Partnership/Ownership	Fun/enjoy at work	Reciprocity

Table 1. Categories of Motivational Theory (Adapted from Alvesson & Svenningsson, 2012, p. 371)

2.3 Career phase

A theory on career development proposed by Levinson (1986) determined that men develop through four time periods in their life with age being the predominant factor to identify stages. These stages are categorized as pre adulthood (age 0-22), early adulthood (age 17-45), middle adulthood (age 40-65) and late adulthood (age 60- death) (Levinson, 1986). Those time periods were further broken down into career stages and tested to see if age was a valid indicator

(Ornstein, Cron & Slocum, 1989; Rush, Peacock & Milkovich, 1980). Age was determined to not have as much influence on career stages as previously proposed by Levinson (Ornstein et al., 1989; Rush et al., 1980). Instead, factors related to work prospects such as wage, motivation and satisfaction were more of a driving force behind establishing parameters of career stages (Ornstein et al., 1989; Rush et al., 1980; Smart & Peterson, 1994).

A contrasting view on career stages was presented by Super which stated that people experience different career stages based on current situational perceptions and not age (Ornstein et al., 1989). These four career stages can be described as trial, establishment, maintenance and decline (Ornstein et al., 1989; Smart & Peterson, 1997; Super, 1980). According to Super's theory, people can pass through the career stages at different points in their life and are not restricted by the linear process of ageing that Levinson proposed (Ornstein et al., 1989; Smart & Peterson, 1997). Another way to comprehend different career development patterns is through the career concept model (Larsson, Brousseau, Kling & Sweet, 2007). The career concept model deals with assessing the individual's perspective of their career and assigning a label to their progression (Larsson et al., 2007). These labels are expert, linear, spiral and transitory (Larsson et al., 2007). The term career phase encompasses differing views on the career trajectory people can experience and will be used throughout the thesis when referring to the path a career can take.

2.4 Stress

Work-related stress can impact employee retention rates, especially in young workers (Bridger, Day & Morton, 2013). Sources of work-related stress include job demands, organizational role, relationships, career development, and climate (Bridger et al., 2013). Manifestation of these stress sources impact both individuals and the organization, with the individual symptoms affecting the organization (Bridger et al., 2013).

A traditional view on stress can be attributed to Lazarus and his colleagues (Harris, Daniels & Briner, 2004) which argued that individuals experience stress differently through appraising the situation, coping with the situation and the outcomes of the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus' transactional stress and coping theory is a psychological and emotional approach

to identifying and coping with stress (Harris et al., 2004). In a work setting, this theory is easily visible due to the multitude of emotions expressed and experienced by different individuals when asked what causes them stress (Perrewé & Zellars, 1999). The stress causing situation at work is usually not detailed, instead the emotions and feelings attached to the situation are described (Perrewé & Zellars, 1999). The workplace is a good place to test the transactional stress theory because the environment where individuals experience stress play an important role in the intensity, appraisal and coping methods of the stress (Harris et al., 2004; Perrewé & Zellars, 1999).

The conservation of resource theory on stress dealt with the loss of an individual's own resources (Krohne, 2002). The four categories of resources held by individuals can be identified by objects, conditional, personal and energy (Hobfoll, 1989). Object resources can include physical items an individual owns, conditional resources are described as relationships, personal resources are skills, and energy resources are the individual's ability to obtain more resources through money or knowledge as examples (Krohne, 2002). A key point of this theory implied that people with more of these resources are better prepared to deal with stress (Merino, Privado & Arnaiz, 2019). As the participants in this study are at the start of their career, it is assumed they are building their resources and are susceptible to increased exposure to stressors.

2.5 Organizational support

Being a participant in a graduate programme is a career pathway (McDermott et al., 2006). Acceptance into the programme establishes a relationship between organization and participant resulting in the first instance of authentic organizational support (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2016).

Organizational support theory (OST) refers to an employee's commitment to an organization grounded in their belief that their contributions are valued and their happiness is important (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). This perception of an employees' reality is referred to as perceived organizational support (POS) (Baran, Shanock & Miller, 2011). POS grows within employees as a function of the employee to employer relationships' ability to

reward their efforts for the organization (Baran et al., 2011). It is the continuous exercise of giving and receiving that fosters POS. The reward can be tangible like money but it also extends to intangible resources like acknowledgement (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS can act as a mutually beneficial theoretical contract between employee and organization. However, if an employees' POS is bad it can influence employee turnover (Eisenberger et al., 1986). OST and POS have expanded to include the closer relationship between manager and employee which can be seen as a more valid indicator of support to an employee in comparison to the organization to employee indicator (Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988). The perceived supervisor support (PSS) acts in the same way as POS except on a more personal level (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski & Rhoades, 2002). PSS and POS are closely connected to one another and both can affect the levels of the other (Eisenberger et al., 2002). PSS can lead to POS and changes in POS can lead to changes in PSS. This could imply that direct supervisors play a more vital role in the employee's commitment to the organization because of the assumed closer and more human relationship leading to PSS affecting employee turnover rates (Eisenberger et al., 2002). It could also be argued that PSS is directly influenced by POS because of the power a supervisor may possess in fulfilling the employees' wants and needs on a macro level in the organization such as increases in tangible rewards (Eisenberger et al., 2002). The participants' perception of support from the organization and supervisor becomes their reality, making it crucial for organizations to understand their experiences (Baran et al., 2011).

2.6 Theoretical framework

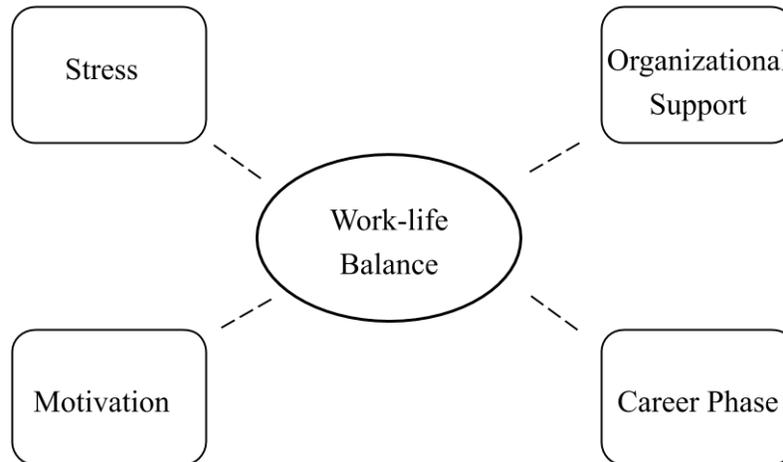


Figure 2: Our Theoretical Framework

Using the Richert-Kazmierska and Stankiewicz (2016) model (see Figure 1) as a guide, we have extrapolated their suggested work-life balance determinants and applied them to the subject group in this study. We then propose our own initial framework of what we believe will be the indicators affecting work-life balance. They are: motivation, stress, organizational support and career phase. These theories are categories of research that will be used to try to identify early career people's work life balance experiences and contribute to a more fitted adaptation of our theoretical framework. Work-life balance research brought up many different aspects to what can affect the balance. However, these theories have been highlighted due to what previous research has proven to affect work-life balance (see Chapter 1), in combination with the Richert-Kazmierska and Stackiewicz (2016) model. For example, in Figure 1 the economic aspects strengthened our selection of motivation and working conditions were intertwined with previous research on organizational support. The only concept that was unexploited in relation to

work-life balance research and Figure 1 is the theory regarding career phase. This was added in agreement with our supervisor, to explore if it has an affect on the participants work-life balance.

This framework will be used as a theoretical background in the methodology for designing the data collection and analysis. The purpose is to explore how previous theories and research applies to early career people. How the theories are used will be explained in the following chapter.

3.0 Method

This chapter offers an overview of the methodology which will be used in this study. Later on in the chapter the participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical aspects and the credibility of the thesis will be presented in depth.

The study focused on the interest of finding out how early career people working in Sweden experienced work-life balance. As mentioned, the research on early career people's work-life balance is lacking. Therefore, a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews was considered the most fitting for this study's purpose. Willig (2013) emphasized how the qualitative method explores a particular experience in great detail. She continued by stating how the objective in qualitative research is to create a comprehensive picture of participants' words and experiences (Willig, 2013).

The study's epistemological position was a realist approach. Willig (2013) stated how the researcher in this approach seeks "knowledge that captures and reflects as truthfully as possible something that is happening in the real world" (p.15). With a realist approach, the assumption is that objects and phenomena exist independently of our own view (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019). Willig (2013) continued by stating how there are different types of realist approaches, which therefore makes this study's approach a critical realism. A critical realist approach assumes that our experience of a phenomenon does not constitute a direct reflection of what is happening in the world (Willig, 2013). King et al., (2019) explained how critical realism is the belief that experiences are generated by "underlying structures such as biological, economic or social structures" (p.9). These structures can impact our lives (King et al., 2019) meaning that the data needs to be interpreted in order to deepen our understanding of the underlying structures which generate the phenomena we are trying to gain knowledge about.

Braun and Clark's (2006) guide to thematic analysis was used to help navigate the analysis of the data. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research since it is not tied to any

philosophical or theoretical position, and can be applied to a variety of data sets (Cunliffe, Grandy & Cassell, 2018). The analytical process was a combination of a deductive and inductive approach. This meant that the analysis was driven by pre-decided theories and research questions (Willig, 2013), but allowed for new themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.1 Participants

With the research questions in mind, we needed to get access to early career people in different graduate programmes. To be able to collect data for the research questions, a purposive sampling was used (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Bryman and Bell (2015) explained how the purpose of this method is to choose the participants that are relevant for the formulated research questions, and not to randomize or find answers that are generalizable for a population. When using purposive sampling, people and organizations are chosen because of the relevance to the social context of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In order for the purposive sampling to be applicable, parameters were set up in order to participate in the study. To participate, the subjects needed to be new in the labour market (maximum 2 years), enrolled in an organizations' graduate programme and childless.

To reach the parameters of participation, companies known for their graduate programmes in Sweden were chosen: PwC, Tetra Pak, Capgemini and KPMG. We established connections with representatives from the aforementioned companies during Lund University's career days in February 2020. These connections agreed to forward the study's information to the graduate programme employees to see if there was an interest in participating. Eventually, PwC, Tetra Pak and Capgemini were the ones who participated in this study. Contact was established with the study's participants through the help of managers and project leaders responsible for the graduate programmes. After the participants showed interest, contact via email was established where further information about the study was shared. A conversation around a timeline for the interview was then developed. Seven participants enrolled in graduate programmes, three men and four women, ages 25 to 28 showed interest in the study.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were determined most fitting for the study. Willig (2013) explained how a semi-structured interview is one of the most used methods in qualitative research because it can be analysed in a variety of ways. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by the interviewer asking questions which encourage the participants to talk (Willig, 2013). For this, some questions were prepared which derived from the study's theories, but also new questions evolved depending on the interviewee's responses. To make sure the study's theories were covered in the questions, an interview guide was developed before the data collection started (see Appendix 1). King et al, (2019) states how an interview guide outlines the main topics researchers would like to cover, but allows the participant to lead the interaction in unforeseen directions. Questions were designed after the theoretical framework: Work-life balance, Organizational support, Stress, Career phase and Motivation (see Figure 2). The questions were composed as open-ended to gather the participants' own experiences under the framework theories to collect insights into their work-life balance (Seidman, 1998). Career phase did not have its own section in the interview guide because gaining understanding of their career phase was covered throughout the other questions. For example, the question "*what are your expectations of work-life balance in the future?*" fell under the work-life balance section in the interview guide but it could reveal aspects related to the participants' career aspirations and land into a career phase (see Appendix 1). The first interview acted as a trial interview to test if the interview guide generated the data needed. Bryman and Bell (2015) recommended revisiting the interview guide to see if it needs altering. The interviews were carried out in English, and after the first interview, two more questions were added that emerged naturally from the first participant. Additionally, two questions regarding how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted their work-life balance were later added.

Initially the interviews were intended to occur face-to-face. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the most fitting alternative was conducting them online. For this, the interviews were carried out over Google Hangouts during two weeks in March 2020.

3.2.2 Process.

Every interview started with going through the interviews' purpose and the ethical aspect which worked as verbal informed consent. The participants were informed of their anonymity in the study, what would happen with their answers and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. As mentioned, the interviews were held through Google Hangouts which were recorded on two devices to ensure the data was captured. We alternated roles between being the interviewer, and being an observer, resulting in one of us doing three interviews while the other performed four interviews. Both of us were present throughout all the interviews, allowing for the opportunity to become familiar with the data directly and also to pitch in if it was ever needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Parallel to performing interviews, the transcription process began. Bryman and Bell (2015) recommended this action since transcription can take many hours. They also state how the transcription process is the first step of data analysis, since it is a way of familiarising with the data and to already reflect on what themes show up (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For the transcription of the interviews the digital software Trint was used. The software translated the audio file into text, and then we went through the audio and text file to correct any transcription errors.

3.3 Data analysis

The study's analysis was done via thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated how thematic analysis is a way for identifying and reporting patterns within qualitative data. With this method, researchers try to identify themes in the textual data (Grandy et al., 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006) defined a theme as something that captures the essence of the data in relation to the research question. They also state that a theme could "represent some level of patterned

response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are two approaches to thematic analysis: a theoretical analysis or an inductive analysis. This study used a theoretical analysis since the research questions were based on a number of topics which derived from previous research and theories connected to work-life balance. However, one of the perks of thematic analysis is the flexibility of the method, which allowed different themes to emerge which did not fit into the original topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) also stated how a researcher needs to decide whether they identify the themes on a semantic or latent level. The data in this study was interpreted from a semantic level, meaning that the analysis was done on what was explicitly said from the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The goal was not to look for anything beyond what was said.

The process of the analysis was done according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps, which were followed until the final themes were set. They emphasised that analysis is a recurrent process rather than a linear one (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step is to become familiar with the data, which was done during the transcription process by reading the transcript individually. The next step is generating initial codes, which were executed by digitally color coding the aforementioned topics, and adding a color for everything which did not fit into the theories. After this, we went back to step one to read it through before proceeding to step three; searching for themes. This part was first done individually, to allow us not to be affected by each other. Later, a discussion of what was found took place. After agreeing on the prevalent themes, we took time to review them and read through the data again, which is step four.. The reviewing process was performed through looking at the data with accordance to theory, and seeing if the themes represented what was said by the participants. Step five is defining themes which was done through discussions and mind maps and later on came step six, producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the sixth step, it was decided that the themes and data would be visualized to increase their impact and take advantage of using visual aids which are underutilized in qualitative research (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013). Verdinelli and Scagnoli (2013) stated this could be accomplished using a network display along with a modified form of

boxed display. Network displays are effective for showing relationships between themes and subthemes while a boxed display can feature interesting details for the reader (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013).

3.4 Validity, reliability and reflexivity

The quality of qualitative research has been argued by many researchers (Willig, 2013). How to apply validity and reliability has been debated with some believing it should be judged the same way as quantitative research, while others believe alternative criteria needs to be followed (Willig, 2013). However, Bryman and Bell (2015) see that validity and reliability can be used if they are not connected with the quantitative procedures which they are usually linked to. For this study, multiple sources have been used to secure quality.

3.4.1 Validity

In qualitative research validity is often divided into two categories: internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to whether the research results reflect the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In order to secure internal validity, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested how to not only look for pre chosen themes but also search for contrasting evidence of the themes. This was secured by first analysing the data individually, and later reconvening to compare and share findings. Thereby, some themes from the theory were rejected by empirical data, and discussions on confirmed themes were enhanced by contrasting views.

External validity refers to which extent the study's findings can be generalized across social settings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, Bryman and Bell (2015) stated how this is often seen as a problem because the sample in qualitative research is usually small and specific. Instead, a more fitting criteria for this is transferability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Willig (2013) defined transferability as "the extent to which the study may, or may not, have applicability beyond the specific context within which the data were generated" (p.170). To ensure transferability in a study, researchers need to describe participants and their social context to allow the reader to decide the applicability of the findings (Willig, 2013). This was ensured by explaining the

situation and the sample in section 3.1. However, all information could not be shared to maintain the participants anonymity.

3.4.2 Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Kvale (2013) explained how reliability can be decreased in qualitative research by having the interviewer asking leading questions. This can affect the result and give the participants hints to what they should answer or what they think the interviewer wants to hear (Kvale, 2013). This can be mitigated by asking open-ended questions and for the interviewer to be as neutral as possible towards the different answers (Kvale, 2013). Bryman and Bell (2015) also divide reliability into external and internal reliability. Bryman and Bell (2015) explains how external reliability is concerned with to what extent a study can be replicated, while internal reliability refers to if researchers agree about what they see and hear (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

External reliability can be hard to secure in qualitative research since it is hard to replicate a social setting and the circumstances the study was made in (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, internal reliability was secured by both of us being present during the interviews and maintaining a continuous discussion throughout the analysis.

3.4.3 Reflexivity

One concept that is often forgotten in qualitative research is reflexivity (Willig, 2013). Reflexivity is a concept which refers to researchers reflecting on the methods and personal biases they carry which can have implications to the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Willig (2013) argued that in qualitative research it is impossible for the researcher to be “outside of one’s subject matter while conducting research” (p.170). Therefore, she stressed the importance of exploring how researchers' involvement can influence the data. Willig (2013) stated that there are two types of reflexivity researchers should include: personal and epistemological reflexivity.

In personal reflexivity the researcher needs to reflect on how their own values, experiences, beliefs and interests can affect the end result (Willig, 2013). The premise of this study started with our interest in work-life balance, and previous knowledge gained from our bachelor's degree. This is an example of personal reflexivity that could affect the interpretations of the collected data. When it comes to epistemological reflexivity, Willig (2013) argued how this requires the researchers to reflect on how research questions and assumptions about the world can affect what findings will emerge. In this study, a critical realist starting point was taken. According to Willig (2013), this type of epistemological view could prevent data that could have emerged with another view. Our epistemological approach made it possible for us to interpret what was actually said during the interview. However, other approaches might have made it possible to analyse even further. Willig (2013) explained that this is a trade off every researcher needs to face. Another element of epistemological reflexivity is critical language awareness, which refers to the awareness of how language can construct different realities (Willig, 2013). This awareness was applied when creating the interview guide, and the first interview being used to see what types of answers were captured.

3.5 Ethical principles

Bryman and Bell (2015) bring up four ethical principles in business research: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception.

According to Bryman and Bell (2015), harm to participants can entail a number of facets like physical harm, stress, and harm to self-esteem. In this study, the interviews were done digitally so physical harm could not occur. Before every interview it was clearly stated what the purpose of the interview was, what the data would be used for and that participants have the right to not answer questions. That was indicative of mitigating stress and harm to self-esteem. It was also stated that anytime during the process participants could withdraw their answers if they felt it was necessary. This worked as verbal informed consent, where the interviewees needed to agree and understand these aspects before the interview started. The informed consent also stated the

anonymity of the participants, where they all got randomized numbers in the study. A couple of the questions in the study might have made the participants feel an invasion of privacy. For example, questions about their social context such as family and future aspirations. These questions were included because it could potentially give the study another dimension. However, comfort was assured and some participants chose not to answer those types of questions. The last ethical principle is deception, which occurs when researchers represent their study as something other than what it is (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this study, deception was never used because the purpose of the study was presented to all the participants before they even agreed to the interview. This was done through email because it was important for participants to know all of the aspects of the study so they could give genuine answers.

To summarise this chapter, a qualitative method was chosen to gather information about the participants own experience and thoughts regarding work-life balance with a thematic analysis being used to analyse the data. Multiple aspects of qualitative methods were discussed to prove credibility of the study. The following chapter will present the themes that came from the analysis.

4.0 Results

The theories used surrounding work-life balance heading into the interviews are presented in Figure 2. These theories were used to guide the interviews and were formed from the previous research on work-life balance. The theories were also used as a foundation to code the data to find the central themes in the participants' responses. After analysis of the data collected, the framework has transformed from theories into our theoretical model containing the following central themes: Perception of work-life balance, Stressors, Managers as role models and Intrinsic motivation. Every central theme got their respective subthemes (see Figure 3) and will each be addressed in this chapter.

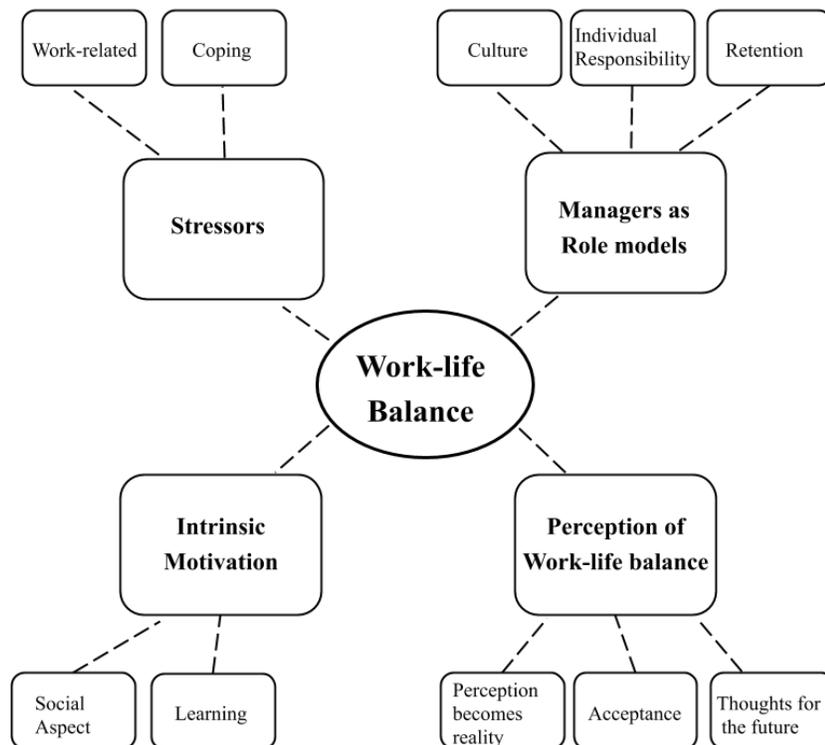


Figure 3. Our Theoretical Model; Central themes and Subthemes

Some aspects that were in common throughout all the interviews was the importance of work-life balance for the participants, the individual responsibility they felt for their work-life balance and how they all expected a heavier workload in the future. During the interview process the Covid-19 pandemic got worse; an aspect of how it has affected the participants is presented in

some of the subthemes. The results are presented in quotes from the participants' interviews. Possible changes in the quotes are marked and do not affect the content of what was said.

4.1 Perception of work-life balance

What became clear throughout the interviews was how differently work-life balance is interpreted by people who are roughly the same age and have similar work responsibilities. This central theme presents the different thoughts and experiences from the participants. Figure 4 highlights the subthemes that make up the central theme and provides insight from the participants on the respective subthemes. The subthemes are: perception becomes reality, the acceptance they experience in their situation and how they see work-life balance in the future.

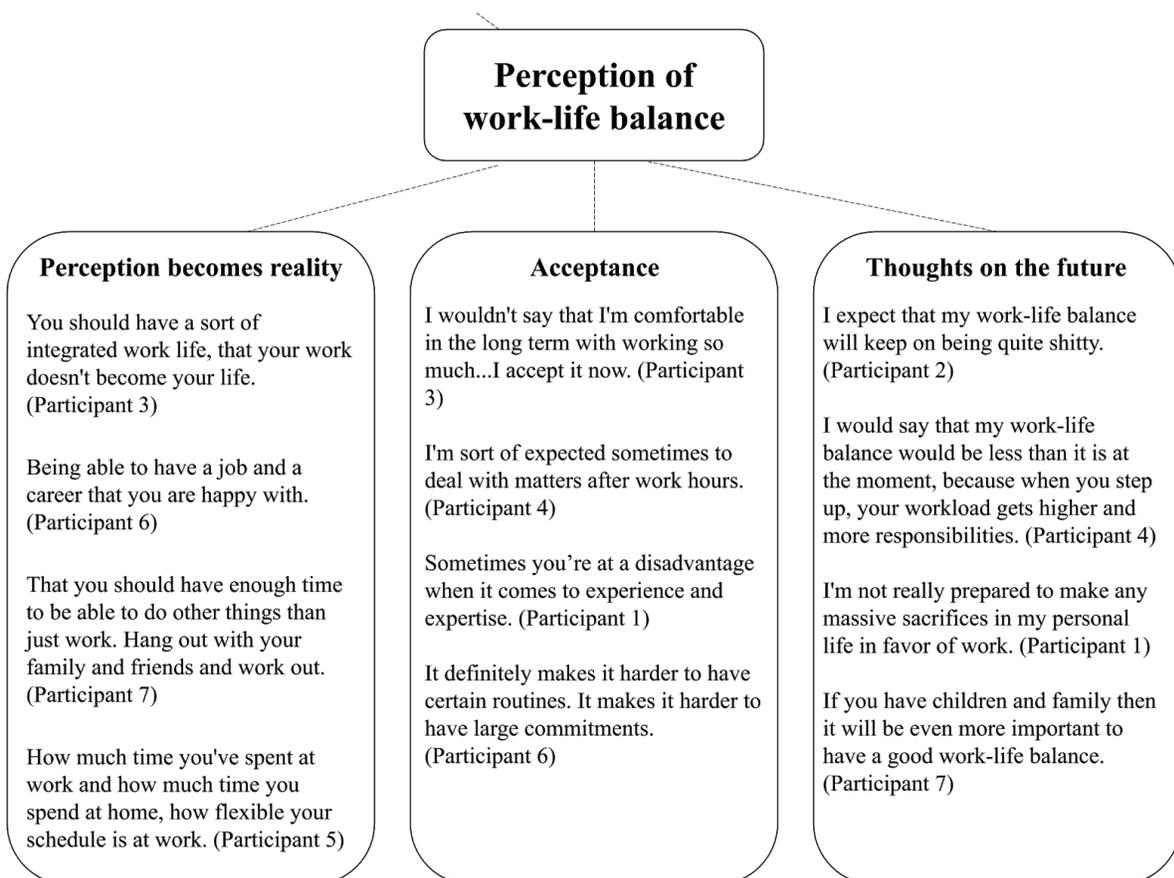


Figure 4: Central Theme: Perception of Work-life balance

4.1.1 Perception becomes reality

The interviews began with the participants all answering the same question: what is work-life balance to you? It was clear that they all had individual ideas and perceptions of it, and that it was based on what their current work-life balance entailed:

I would want to say being able to switch off work when I'm home, but since I can't really do that...Being able to have a fruitful home life at the same time as you have a fruitful work life and not necessarily having those standing in the way of one another.

(Participant 1)

Some participants emphasised the work part when answering the question, for example Participant 6 stated, “*being able to have a job and a career that you are happy with*”, while others addressed the non-work part, “*that you should have enough time to just be able to do other things than just work. Hang out with your family and friends and work out*” (Participant 7).

However, some of the participants struggled with pinpointing when work stops and personal life begins:

Not just working itself, but also like reading things that are connected to work. So which maybe some people wouldn't count in as working time, but just time that you don't spend with anything related to work.

(Participant 4)

The confusion around categorizing what constitutes work time and personal time could be seen as a warning sign for the participants when assessing their own perceptions of work-life balance. It became clear that the participants all agreed that work-life balance is about balancing work to personal life, but how this balance looked was dependent on their current work situation and how much they prioritised non-work activities.

4.1.2 Acceptance for situation

All of the participants reported a difference between contracted work hours and what they actually worked. All seven participants reported their official contracts stated they would work between 37.5 to 40 hours per week, but all of the participants said their work hours are more likely to be 40 to 45 hours per week. Two of the participants explained that sometimes work weeks can be up to 60 hours. What became clear when discussing the different aspects of work-life balance is how they all accepted the situation they were in. The expectations associated with their roles in the graduate programme contributed to their acceptance:

I wouldn't say I'm comfortable in the long term with working so much... I accept it now.

(Participant 3)

I'm on the long road now where I am the most junior. So if there's any task that needs to be done some of the other appointed managers do not want to do, then I feel like I'm expected to, to say that I can offer my services.

(Participant 1)

Participant 1 also expressed that expertise and experience played a role in contributing to them accepting the current situation they were in:

Obviously, when you're at this stage of your career quite early. First of all you want to do a good job. Sometimes you are at a disadvantage when it comes to experience and expertise, so sometimes I spend more hours doing something my more experienced colleagues would do using less hours.

(Participant 1)

As seen in Figure 4, some participants were uncomfortable with the fluctuating work hours and how it affected their life outside of work, but ultimately accepted it as less experienced employees for the time being. There was a line of thought throughout the participants for their

acceptance of the work situation they were in. However, what made them accept the situation differed. Some participants accepted the situation because of their age, some to the expectations they felt and some to the role they had in the company.

4.1.3 Thoughts for the future

An aspect most of the participants agreed on was that in the future, work-life balance will become a more prominent part of their life. There seemed to be a consensus amongst the participants that as they get older the workload would increase. Some of the participants thought the balance between work and personal life would become harder in the future, and seemed to accept what was coming;

I expected it to be a little bit more difficult as I progressed in my career, with the flexibility that I have right now as a junior.

(Participant 5).

I would say that my work life balance would be less than it is at the moment, because of course, when you step up, your workload gets higher and you have more responsibilities.

(Participant 4)

As seen in Figure 4, some participants were not willing to accept what their perceived future work-life balance would consist of. There was understanding how work-life balance in the future might get more complicated, but acknowledgment of not wanting to accept it. Both Participant 1 and 7 stated how they didn't want to sacrifice their personal lives in the future:

I'm not really prepared to make any massive sacrifices in my personal life in favor of work.

(Participant 1)

In the future, of course, if you have children and family then it will be even more important to have a good work-life balance... So I don't have to adjust my life depending on the project or the work situation.

(Participant 7)

The consensus from the participants of this subtheme was that work-life balance will become harder to handle in the future due to a potentially heavier workload. Interestingly, thoughts surrounding how family may affect work-life balance in the future was only mentioned by the women in the study.

Covid-19

Throughout the interview process, the Covid-19 pandemic expanded rapidly resulting in some of the participants working from home and others' working routines being altered. When the participants were asked if they think that the Covid-19 pandemic will affect the concept of work-life balance in the future, they mostly all agreed that it would. There was worry from some of the participants that working from home would blur the lines of work and non-work activities:

It puts the two together and mixes them and you don't really know what you're doing. Am I relaxing now at home or am I working?

(Participant 5)

Increases in stress while working from home was also emphasised:

I think people can get a bit more stressed from it. Some people like me, because if you're not good at working from home and suddenly you have to, then I think that's definitely going to affect work life balance.

(Participant 6)

One participant expressed how working from home due to the Covid-19 pandemic might fast track the digital development and make organizations reassess the expenses associated with traveling to clients or meetings to facilitate the new working situations:

I think that we realize that we are in urgent need of new ways of working. For example, when I was in Gothenburg for a project, a lot of times I was feeling, do I really need to be here? Do I really need to be on the train for three hours and have three hotel nights at the expense of the clients? I think the client will realize that it was quite expensive to have them fly me in or to go by train from Stockholm. Like, we can just do this over Google Hangouts. So I think there will be new tools, or I hope they open up their eyes for the tools that are already out there and there will be a massive growth of those services.

(Participant 3)

With digital solutions and home life on the participants' minds while discussing the Covid-19 working situation they found themselves in, one participant added a deeper consequence of the pandemic:

Some of us are going to say that this sacrifice that I am doing for work, is not worth it. I know I felt that at times. So I expect a lot more people to feel that in the coming weeks... You'll definitely cause people to think about how they prioritize between work and home.

(Participant 1)

Participant 2 was the only one participant who believed that the Covid-19 pandemic would not impact the future of work-life balance, "*People are going to forget about this crisis and I think fall back into a similar situation as previously*". The Covid-19 pandemic had a current impact on the participants' work-life balance and also had them thinking how it may affect it in the future for themselves and society as a whole.

4.2 Stressors

Stress was interpreted in a variety of ways and became a significant theme throughout the analysis process relating to the participant's experiences with work-life balance. What induces stress and how they deal with it is what was asked of the participants to gather their experiences. The responses revealed two subthemes: work as a major contributor leading to experiencing stress and coping strategies when faced with stress. Figure 5 highlights some of the participants' thoughts around the stress they experience at work and how they choose to deal with it.

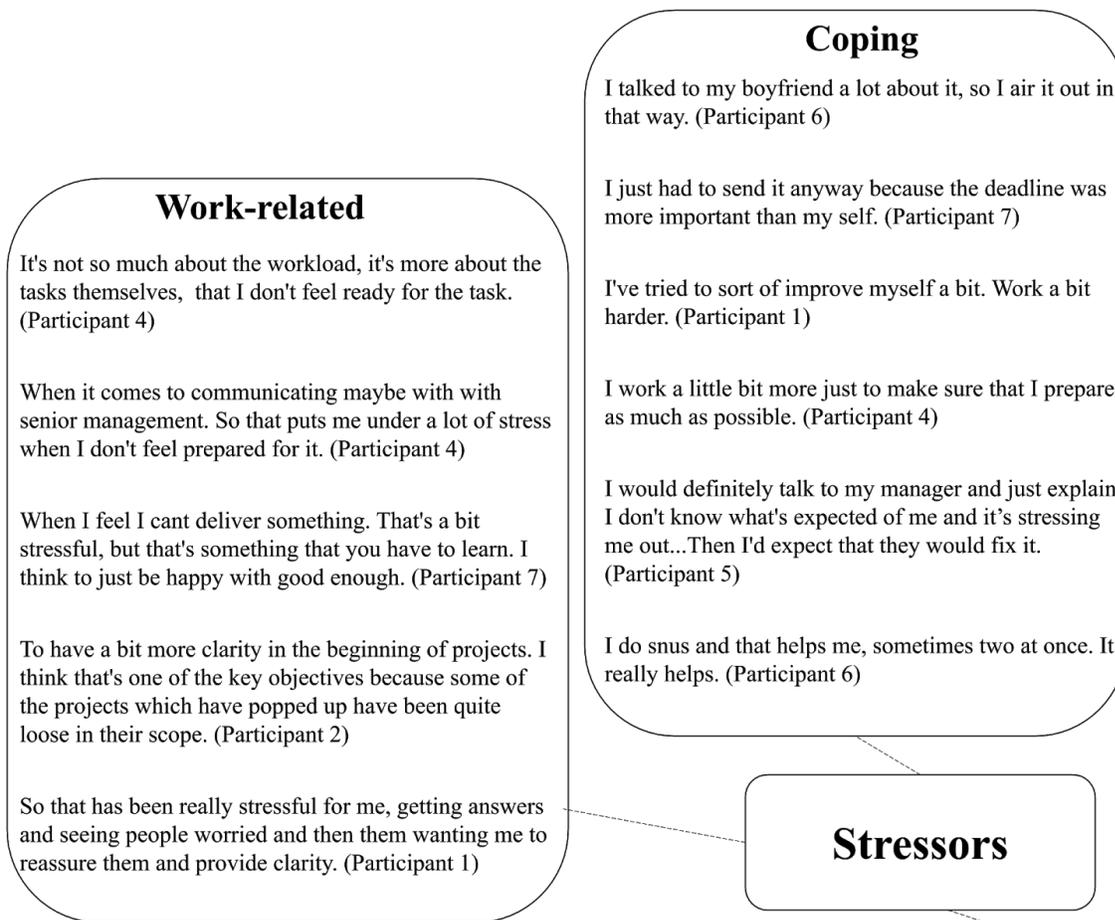


Figure 5: Central Theme: Stressors

4.2.1 Work-related

There were no specifics or parameters on how participants should respond, simply the question asked was: what causes you stress? The responses revealed stress related to work was at the forefront of their thoughts. Participants struggled with the expectations associated with their role:

It was quite difficult to really grasp what my role should be in that project. It was difficult to orientate and that made me a little bit stressed because I didn't know what was expected of me.

(Participant 5)

Projects and tasks were the prominent aspect of the work-related stress experienced by the participants. The amount of work was not a determining factor of stress:

It really isn't the normal work that creates stressful situations or creates like a necessity to overwork. It is when you don't have clarity in the direction. That's when you introduce additional stress, which I think is, or could be one of the main reasons why it can break people.

(Participant 2)

The ambiguity surrounding their role and responsibilities contributed to the participants experiencing stress alongside the expectations of the programme, Participant 1 expressed it as, “There's quite high expectations when you are part of the graduate programme, because it's all about performing”. In addition to the expectations, some participants felt unprepared for tasks and projects leading to stress. The lack of clarity and communication in the projects and tasks became a factor in causing stress:

When I don't know how to solve a problem and I don't know who to ask. Yeah, and also when I don't know what's expected of me, that's when I think I feel stressed about stuff.

(Participant 5)

As early career people, stress related to work dominated the responses from the participants. Expectations, clarity and communication are three aspects of work-related stress that emerged from the participants experiences. Life outside of work was not mentioned as stress producing nor did any major theme or subtheme emerge from the life side of work-life balance in relation to stress. These results should concern early career people and organizations about the imbalance created that is impeding a healthy work-life balance with regards to stress.

4.2.2 Coping strategies

Having identified that work was responsible for a large portion of the stress experienced by the participants it was crucial to find out how they handled the stress. As seen in Figure 5, the participants had differing approaches to mitigating the stress. One relied on external relationships and talking it out with a boyfriend, while another chose to lean on an internal relationship with their manager. A couple participants chose to look inwards and place the burden on themselves to deal with stressful situations. In one instance, Participant 6 said they relied on diminishing their stress by means of an addictive substance; “*OK, this is probably going to sound really bad. But I do snus and that helps me, sometimes two at once. It really helps*”. One participant chose to combine a few of these strategies by asking for help from a manager while simultaneously addressing unknown expectations by putting the onus on themselves to mitigate the stress experienced from a lack of clarity and communication:

I've also tried to get help from my manager to provide some direction and also for me to start some extra hours, which I have done to break it down into some more palatable tasks for the individuals on the projects. But, I mean, it's a lot of stress and a lot of mitigations.

(Participant 1)

A lot of the responses about coping mechanisms revolved around mitigating stress while continuing to work. Participants felt a need to alleviate their stress as opposed to eliminating it completely:

I tried to be really prepared. Sometimes I work a little bit more just to make sure that I prepare as much as possible. So, if I spend a little bit more time and also make sure that I do not have too many meetings. So it also stresses me when I don't have time to actually prepare myself or do this stuff I should do because I have too many meetings.

(Participant 4)

One participant brought up the aspect of burning out at work. Burnout is a byproduct of work-related stress where employees push themselves to the point of physical and/or mental exhaustion (Evans et al., 2018). They believed that weakening the stress may only help up to a point:

I've noticed when you get stressed that you pass a certain point, and you stop eating. You might only eat like once a day. You get trouble sleeping because you're working nights, and to avoid those situations I try to maintain like normal activities. Like you force yourself to eat like a regular meal and force yourself to do housework, clean your house, make sure everything is in order. And then in some situations, you just have to force yourself to stop working as well. Because you know that you're about to kind of burn out or crash. It's better that you just put everything to the side.

(Participant 2)

All of the coping strategies addressed by the participants were their own ways of dealing with stress they experienced at work. Similar to the previous section, no themes or subthemes materialized around coping methods surrounding stress experienced outside of work. Through the interviews it became clear that the participants placed a large emphasis on identifying stressful situations at work and ways to address them, while ignoring stress outside of work altogether.

4.3 Managers as role models

A theme that became present throughout the analysis was the importance of managers and senior people at the workplace. The participants expressed how they often look up to their senior colleagues both for help but also to see what their possible futures could look like. Figure 6 illustrates the central theme and the contributing subthemes. Subthemes emerging from this central theme revolves around the culture managers create at the workplace, the individual responsibility the participants felt and aspects of employee retention.

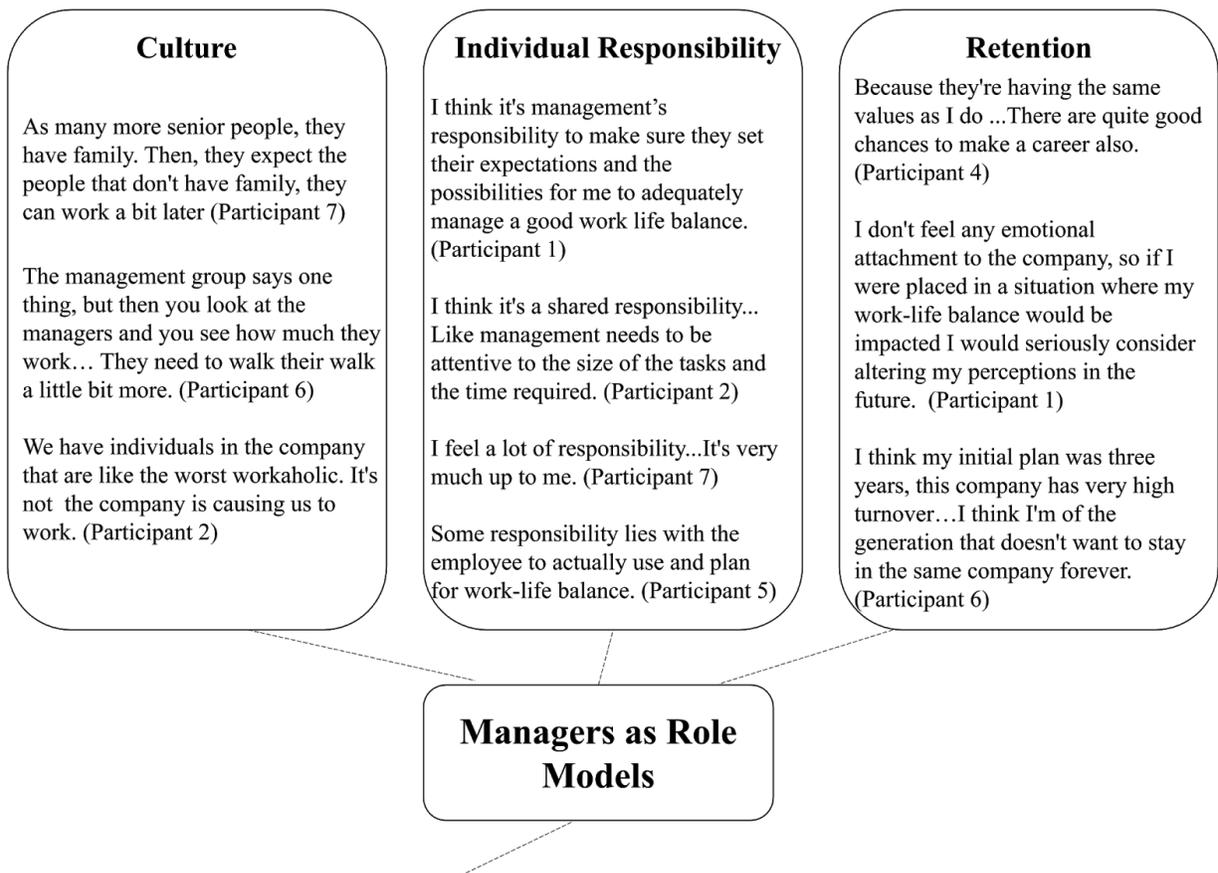


Figure 6: Central Theme: Managers as Role Models

4.3.1 Culture

When we asked the participants if they thought their companies endorsed work-life balance, they all said yes. However, even if they felt the company endorsed work-life balance, some expressed that the culture in the company told a different story and that managers can often send out mixed messages:

There are people that tell you, yeah you should look out for your work life balance, but then they give you so much work that you can't actually do it.

(Participant 4)

Most of the participants believed the culture at their company valued work-life balance but the disconnect between managers practicing what they preached can have detrimental ripple effects. Participant 6 shared an experience, “*Several senior people quit around the time that I started, and one said that it's basically because he doesn't know his kids*”.

The company culture created by management was a subtheme that emerged in all of the interviews. The participants shared how work-life balance is endorsed in their different programs but the culture at the workplace is something different. A pattern that emerged was the belief of the more senior or the higher up the ladder you go, the more workload and the more imbalanced the work-life appeared to be. This showed a tendency amongst the participants to look at how their managers act to get an idea on how they may act.

4.3.2 Individual responsibility

One of the questions during the interviews was regarding whose responsibility it was to have a good work-life balance. All of the participants felt that it was a shared responsibility, meaning that management needs to endorse it practically, but it is the individual's responsibility to actually do it. Even though the majority agreed that management sets the culture for work-life balance, none of the participants mentioned how they could ask managers for help to achieve work-life

balance. Participant 1 did not expect any interventions from above them, *“I don't expect for management to set any limits or to intervene... It's definitely your responsibility”*.

There were conflicting accounts amongst the participants on how comfortable they were with turning down projects. Some of the participants took control over their work-life balance:

There was one project that I was initially meant to be staffed for and I said no to that project. But that was mostly because I didn't think I would be able to do a very good job.

(Participant 6)

While others were unable to feel secure enough in their role to take command over their work-life balance, for example Participant 7 said, *“You basically cannot say no to a project”* and Participant 1 admitted, *“I've definitely said yes to more things than I should”*.

The participants showed a recurrent pattern where they believed it is a mix of responsibility to enable work-life balance at the workplace. However, the majority of the participants took ownership when it came down to implementing it. They felt that the majority of responsibility was placed on them and the pressure resulted in experiences of saying yes to projects and tasks they felt they had to, due to their role.

4.3.3 Retention

All of the participants showed a pattern in their responses when it came to their company's work-life balance practices. They all felt that the company endorsed work-life but when they looked at their more senior colleagues they saw something else:

We have a structure where it's associates for two years and then senior associates manager, a senior manager, director, and then if you stay for that long, partner. So I look

at the senior associates and sometimes I get a little bit worried and I look at the managers and senior managers and I get even more worried.

(Participant 6)

When the question was asked if they could see a future at the company, there were mixed feelings:

If I manage to deliver good enough results... Then, yes, I see a future at the company. If I don't deliver those results I would be ashamed. So then I would probably leave out of shame. It's not the company that needs to keep me more motivated to keep up the duration.

(Participant 2)

However, some of the participants expressed some hesitation when asked about their future at the company. One participant had a hard time picturing a future because of the responsibilities of their role:

I see myself working here for maybe three to five years... I think it is because of work life balance, because as a consultant you have to be quite flexible and many of the projects are in different cities and maybe even abroad... I don't want to just leave my family to go for a project.

(Participant 7)

The retention factor for the participants was related to what they witnessed in senior colleagues and managers as well as career plans they had. Participants' expectations of the future were heavily influenced by observing managers.

4.4 Intrinsic motivation

Motivation to go to work and do their job came down to two prominent subthemes: social aspect and learning opportunity. Both of these subthemes fit under the theory of intrinsic motivation due to the fact that the behavior stems from a personal reward, not external reward, which drives the behavior (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Participants were asked to relay their motivations behind attending work and doing their work. Figure 7 shows the two factors that drive the participants when it comes to work.

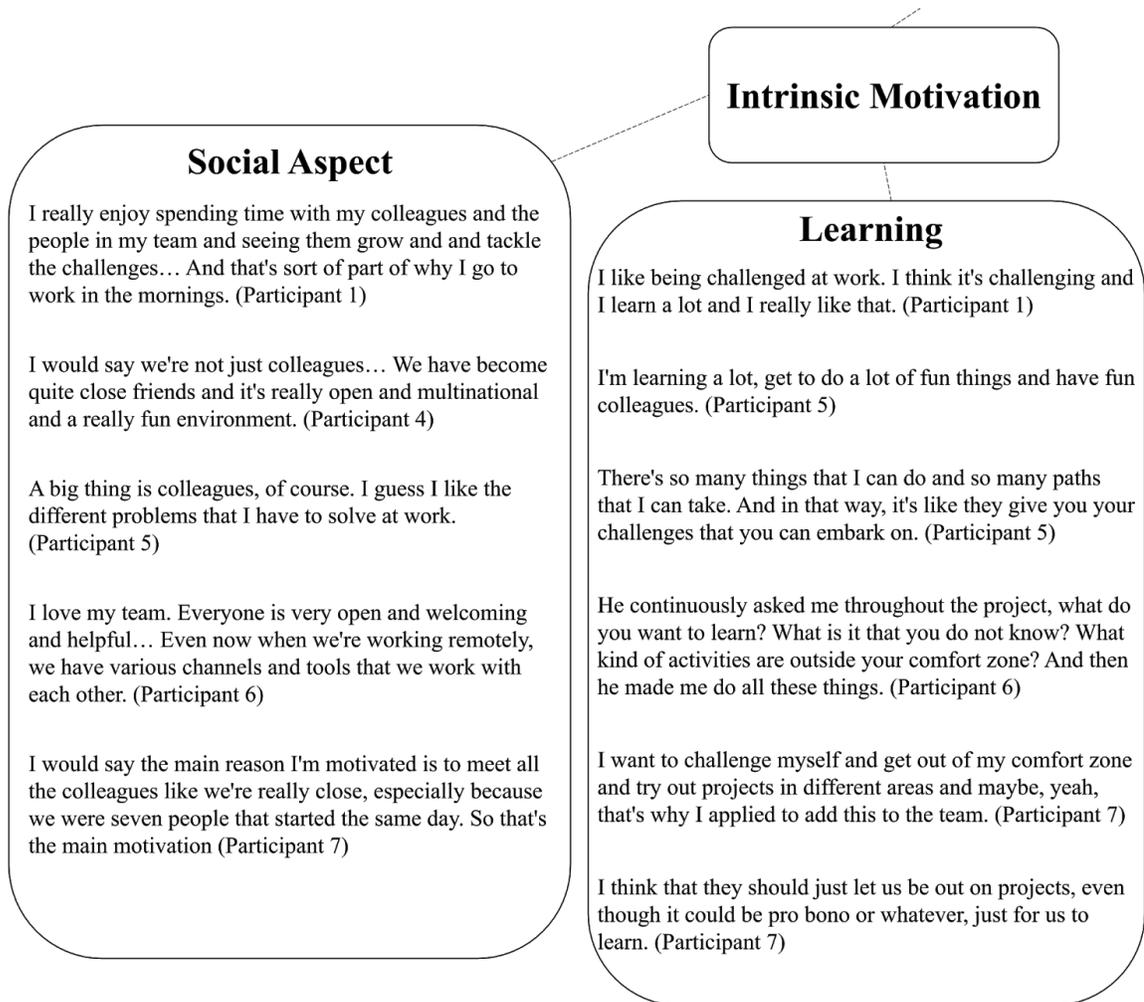


Figure 7: Central Theme: Intrinsic Motivation

4.4.1 Social aspect

All of the participants were asked: what motivates you to go to work each day? The participants' overwhelmingly agreed that their colleagues are the main reason they go into work. The connection and relationships formed at work have developed so rapidly that it has become the catalyst for the participants' work motivation. Figure 7 illustrates the common subtheme that appeared while individually discussing work motivation with the participants. The interviews were done separately and none of the participants would have been aware of what others were answering. The social aspect of the participants' graduate programme is the consensus motivating factor for going into work. Participant 6 expanded on the influence of colleagues adding, "*My colleagues definitely understand how they would also be my reason for staying longer*".

In addition to colleagues, the working environment played a minor role in personally rewarding and motivating the participants to work:

There are some really good working environments. The work is also really fun and we have a really good way of working. It is really agile and you have the feeling that you can improve things. So it's like the motivation that your work actually has an impact and you can help people like improving things.

(Participant 4)

The significance of colleagues was the focal factor of work motivation from the participants. The participants were not concerned with any aspects of extrinsic motivation, meaning that none of the participants ever mentioned their salary or potential promotions as a motivation. Instead they focused mainly on the social environment at work providing them with personal fulfilment at work. Learning opportunities was another prominent factor uncovered during the analysis.

4.4.2 Learning

The ability to be challenged and having access to learning opportunities at work became a popular answer to what motivated the participants to work. Figure 7 outlines a supporting intrinsic motivational behaviour uncovered from the participants.

With access to learning opportunities driving a part of the participants' work motivation, it was also the challenge that arises from the new learning experiences that led to a positive connection to work motivation.

What's important to me is that I feel like I am constantly learning and developing and learning new skills, getting more experience.

(Participant 6)

There was no discourse around learning being connected to rewarding systems such as gaining favour with managers, promotions or salary increases. All the talk about learning was for self improvement and a feeling of being challenged. One participant highlighted the fact that learning opportunities was the reason for applying to the programme:

I thought it would be more projects. Because I have been there one year now and I have only tried an operations project. And the point of this programme was that you are able to try out projects within operations, within finance, within people and organizations. So that was the whole reason and main point of the programme and the reason I applied for this programme. And now I feel like I have only tried one kind of project in... So that's a bit disappointing. But I don't regret that I applied for this. Hopefully there will be more projects after summer.

(Participant 7)

When presented with a lack of opportunities to learn within the graduate programme, participant 7 revealed disappointment. Learning and being challenged became a clear focus of the

participants' desire to be motivated about their work and perceptions of participating in the graduate programme.

To conclude this chapter, many interesting aspects and opinions emerged during the interviews. An overall consensus regarding the importance of work-life balance revealed itself with all the participants. The central themes and subthemes that were presented in this chapter will be discussed in the following chapter in regards to previous research.

5.0 Discussion

This chapter will discuss the findings from the participants' interviews in relation to the theories presented in Chapter two. A discussion regarding the theoretical model and how it can be used by managers will also be presented..

The research questions sought to find out how the participants experienced work-life balance and how they value and achieve work-life balance. Exploring how early career people enrolled in graduate programmes experience work-life balance is an opportunity for organizations to understand this group of employees better. The data suggests that work-life balance is a topic they reflected on and it does affect how they view their future within the organization. Early career people use what information is available to them when developing their perceptions of work-life balance at their organization. They collect this information through observing senior colleagues and management, and adapt to the culture created within the organization.

For the purpose of the discussion, the data will be addressed alongside the initial theories (work-life balance, motivation, stress, career phase & organizational support) from Chapter Two to see if the central and subthemes fit the theories.

5.1 Work-life balance

The results suggest that work-life balance is experienced through perceived individual interpretations. Each participant assigned different meanings to their understanding of what it entailed to them. This is in line with previous research on work-life balance that struggled to find a common definition of what work-life balance is. It is also similar to previous research that believes work-life balance can only be looked at through an individual lens (Kalliath & Brough, 2008). The perception aspect of the results is interesting because the participants in the study were all in the same age and career phase. An assumption could be made that because of this similarity in demographics there would be a common interpretation, but the results say that is not the case. The participants' current working situation was a determining factor in how they perceived what work-life balance was. Their perception ultimately became their lived reality. As

they are early into their career with their respective companies the emphasis was heavily skewed to describing work-life balance from the work perspective and allocated minimal concern to the life portion of the balance. This is crucial for management to know because an unhealthy skewing to one side, especially the work side, can lead to negative consequences (Beauregard, 2011; Johansson, 2002). It is not just management that should heed this warning sign as early career people also need to understand the imbalance that can be created does not have to become the norm or their lived reality.

The parameters of only studying participants in a graduate programme allowed us to limit the participants to a certain career phase. As an employee of a graduate programme, the requirements are recent graduation from a higher education institute and it is implied they will be learning the organization from the ground up. It can be viewed as an entry level position. This helped strengthen our results when it came to participants expressing their acceptance over their current work-life balance situation. As entry level employees, they felt limited in controlling their work-life balance. Darcy et al (2012) believed that work-life balance is experienced differently depending on which stage of life the person is at. Since Darcy et al (2012) was referring to the life stages of an individual, such as family, our results could build on that premise by adding the entry level career phase to the argument. Removing life stage factors such as family and children provided a different look at how work-life balance is experienced throughout career phases. The acceptance from the participants for a less than ideal work-life balance at this point in their career may be exploited by management. It is not the intention of this study for managers to view potentially exploiting entry level employees as a positive outcome of the results. Instead, it is suggested that management look at how to reduce the feeling the participants expressed in having to accept their work-life balance situation because of their career phase.

Previous work-life balance research has examined the correlation with organizational commitment and employee retention. Our results agree with the previous research that believe it has an impact on those two aspects, but what that impact truly would be is difficult to determine based on the results. Participants did not view their future work-life balance as improving as they

climbed the organizational ladder. When presented with questions on staying with the organization, the majority said they could see a potential future with their current organization, but not long term. All of the participants say they value a healthy work-life balance, all accept their current work-life balance situation because of their entry level status, and all state how their companies endorsed work-life balance practices. Yet almost all believe they could not see themselves continuing a long-term career with the same organization. What can be concluded from this contradiction? In terms of organizational commitment and employee retention, our results indicate hesitation when addressing these topics. The participants may not foresee a future because they have observed work-life balance worsening as people climb the company ladder. This is an interesting insight because even if the company provides work-life practices and endorses them, it might not be enough for the participants to actually feel that they can have a balance that is appropriate for them. On the other hand, the participants all work at perceived prestigious organizations in Sweden. The status of working for one of these companies may overrule work-life balance as a determining factor when it comes to future career decision making. It could also mean that a healthy work-life balance may not be as important to the participants as they describe, and broadly to early career people when discussing their future work aspirations.

Future commitments towards having children and starting a family is only brought up by the women participants. This is not a surprise when discussing work-life balance as a topic because women mentioning family aspects like children is an engrained stereotype in the literature (Bourdeau et al., 2019). Although, it was interesting that when discussing their future, some of the women mentioned family without prompting from us or the interview guide. The sample size is too small to generalize anything from this finding but it does agree with Bourdeau et al., (2019) which stated that traditional gender roles of men and women are still prevalent when discussing work-life balance.

The Covid-19 pandemic occurring at the beginning of 2020 provided the study with new data points to be explored surrounding work-life balance. As most of the world began living with restrictions and working from home, fresh insights into the future of work-life balance could be

authentically addressed. All of the participants were working different routines and schedules than they had been before the Covid-19 pandemic started. This unexpected opportunity was used to ask how working from home has affected their work-life balance and what significance it may have on the future of work-life balance. The results indicate that the line between work and life became hard to identify while abruptly having to switch working routines. It also created unexperienced stress in attempting to balance life with working responsibilities as home became ground zero for both. The data suggests that being forced to work from home abruptly is initially very detrimental to a healthy work-life balance. As the study concluded in the midst of the pandemic, that is the only realistic inference to take from the participants' experiences. However, the study timeline does not affect the data coming out of the participants' thoughts about the future of work-life balance as a result from the Covid-19 pandemic. Because the participants experienced what it was like to have their working lives drastically altered, their opinions on how they feel it may impact future work-life balance should be deemed credible. It was interesting to analyse this data and see how it created multiple opinions on the repercussions of Covid-19. One thing that was clear was how all but one participant believed the future of work-life balance would be viewed differently as it is now as organizations potentially alter their ways of working as a result of working during a viral pandemic.

5.2 Motivation

Motivating the participants was largely dependent on the social aspect associated with conversing with colleagues at work and learning opportunities. Being a part of a graduate programme allowed the participants to have a set of colleagues that started at the same time as them which provided built in work relationships. They were people that could relate to what they were experiencing and could lean on them for support. The data collected suggests that whether intentional or not, the relationship aspect provided by the organization within the graduate programme is a major driving force to motivated employees. This could be seen as a positive and a negative. We were surprised to see such a large emphasis on coworker friendships determining motivation, especially since the participants were working at sought after companies. The environment created within the graduate programme could be viewed as a good example for

companies looking to improve employee motivation. However, it may not be a positive sign that the biggest reason for the participants going into work was based on colleague friendships. The results go against Taylor and Mayo's traditional theories surrounding motivation. Taylor believed money was the key factor of job motivation (Locke, 1982) while Mayo determined that it was relationships between management and employees that increased motivation at work (Latham, 2012). Although it was relationships that were at the core of motivation, it was not the relationship between management and the participants. There were no mentions of achieving specific goals, so goal-setting theory is not applicable. Some similarities could be drawn from the participants' explained motivation and Herzberg's two factor theory (Latham, 2012). By making no mention of meeting hygiene needs, it could be assumed the participants were content with their salary and job security which would remove dissatisfaction resulting in them not even considering to mention these reward systems as motivating factors. Choosing motivator needs such as colleague relationships and learning to incite work motivation align with Herzberg's rationale surrounding improving personal satisfaction being a stimulant to motivation. It is hard to determine if the lack of mentions of hygiene needs is because of satisfaction.

Of all the motivation theories presented in section 2.2, Alvesson & Sveningsson's (2012) categories of motivational theories table provides the closest resemblance to what the data analysis revealed. It was mainly intrinsic motivation, devoid of tangible rewards, driving the participants' reflections concerning their inclination to go to work. For people in competitive, highly applied to graduate programmes with respectable companies, this finding was intriguing and disproved the idea surrounding expectancy theory (Conte & Landy, 2019). Organizations can use these findings to increase importance on stimulating and challenging early career people. This data should not allow for discounting the significance of monetary reward systems, instead it should be used to highlight the influence an intrinsic environment can have for early career people.

5.3 Career phase

As employees in a graduate programme, all participants were at the same phase of their career. The entry level aspect to their work responsibilities shaped their perceptions and acceptance of their work-life balance. The participants' age range was the difference of only three years between oldest and youngest. The similarity in age and career phase provided an interesting way to assess the connection between the two with respects to career phases. Aspects of Super's career stages were discovered from the data. Participants mentioned one of their motivating factors being a part of the graduate programmes was the opportunity to explore and learn new departments of the organization before choosing which path to go down. Super refers to this as the trial stage of a career (Ornstein et al., 1989). While Super attaches an age range (14-25) on this stage, he makes sure to emphasize that people can pass through this stage at different times in their life (Ornstein et al., 1989). Since learning opportunities was one of two main driving forces in the participants, it is safe to say the participants are firmly in the trial stage of their career. The discussion surrounding establishment, Super's next career stage, is interesting though. If it can be agreed upon that the participants are in the trial stage currently, their indications in the data relating to their future indicates they are on the path to establishment within the same organization. This stage implies the person has settled on their chosen career (Smart & Peterson, 1997). Although the data reveals that could happen, we cannot safely say that it will happen. Because of this, the findings of the study share connections with Super's theory due to the fact that people are not tied to a linear process of career development. Organizations can use these results to the benefit of themselves and early career people by allowing for more emphasis in experimenting with different roles when a person is in the trial stage of their career, like an entry level role. The data indicates the importance of this thought considering that learning was an impetus towards motivation in the participants.

Aspects of the career concept model also appeared in the data but it was more connected with future thoughts from the participants. All of the participants' graduate programmes had a career ladder approach to progressing in the organization. The data revealed that the participants were aware and slightly weary of this linear process to career advancement. The linear approach from

the career concept model is rooted in the belief and pursuit of consistently moving up in the organization, increasing responsibility and authority along the way (Larsson et al., 2007). This aspiration was shown in the results when participants discussed future intentions within their organization with the knowledge that the process to advancement from the graduate programmes was linear. However, a part of the linear process in career concepts asserts that the person is motivated by power and achievement (Larsson et al., 2007). This was not relayed from the participants' viewpoint on current motivation and future motivation was not explicitly discussed, so the argument that they fit into the linear portion of the career concept model is less strong.

5.4 Stress

The data shows that work-related stress was the biggest culprit in the participants' experience. This is intriguing because participants were asked to speak about what causes them stress without any qualifying factors surrounding the questions. They chose to disclose work-related stress as opposed to speaking about stress experienced outside of work. This comes as no surprise when considering the participants were gathered through their employers and could have assumed we wanted answers pertaining to their work. Although our intention was not to only gather work-related stress data, that is what the analysis unveiled. In itself, this provides curious discussion points around the participants' experiences of work-related stress and how they coped with the negative consequences of it.

The data confirms part of Lazarus's transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) when it revealed the individual aspect to how the participants experienced stress differently through numerous situations. The results also extend to the multitude of different coping mechanisms being deployed. There are lukewarm connections in the data to Lazarus's theory in how the participants put emphasis on the emotional aspect of the stressful situations as opposed to describing in detail the stress inducing situation.

The results state a mix of both emotional and situational description in relation to work-related stress. These findings are useful for organizations when managing early career people because they show how much influence work can have on inducing stress and how much it takes

precedence over other outlets for stress. The work environment is a hotbed of stressful situations and awareness surrounding the stress and coping mechanisms can be important to understand. The differing methods of coping is not surprising, nor is the reliance from one participant on an addictive substance like snus to ease stress. What is interesting though is the data displaying the participants are placing a lot of responsibility on themselves to cope with the stress and appear to be tempering their stress in order to remain involved in projects and tasks. This could result in unwanted consequences for both the participants and the organization. These results contribute to the validity of the conservation of resource theory which states that people with fewer of the four categories of resources are less prepared to deal with stressful situations (Merino et al., 2019). As was noted as an assumption in section 2.4, because the participants were early in their careers and in a graduate programme, we believed they would be in the process of obtaining resources from each of the four categories.

5.5 Organizational support

Perceived organizational support (POS) and perceived supervisor support (PSS) came up in the results when participants spoke about how their perception of work-life balance is shaped. On a whole, the data reveals that participants' perception of work-life balance contained what they perceived the organization endorsed about work-life balance and what that actually looked like. Since POS is grounded in the employees' perception of support and reward from the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986), the fact that each participant stated their company endorsed work-life balance was key in creating the appearance of a healthy balance. If the company says they endorse it and the participants are early in their career with that organization, it stands to reason why they would believe it. In theory, POS would be strong from the participants. In practice though, participants stressed how most of the senior colleagues they witnessed did not have what they would describe as a good work-life balance.

These results show a divide in the relationship between the participants and the organization. As of now, the participants have accepted their situation with regards to work-life balance, but as Eisenberger et al (1986) point out, poor POS can lead to employee turnover. Expansions in POS

theory towards PSS have included the closer relationship embedded in the supervisor to employee relationship. The analysis uncovers that the participants are closely watching senior colleagues to get an indication of what work-life balance truly is in their organization. The results showed the influence a senior colleague can have on how the participants' idea of work-life balance is developed. This affected their current understanding as well as their future understanding.

In absence of direct mentions of supervisors influencing the participants' perceptions, the correlation between PSS and the results of the study are inconclusive. While senior colleagues were mentioned as leaders and managers, it is indeterminable if these senior colleagues held supervisor authority specifically over the participants or if they were simply known as managers and leaders within the organization. The ambiguity in the data surrounding the nature of their professional relationship with respect to authority is too high to draw direct connections to PSS as it is defined in section 2.5. These results do not fit with the theory that PSS can play a more vital role in organizational commitment.

5.6 Summary of our theoretical model

Central Themes	Summary
Perception of work-life balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the participant accepted their current situation became their explanation to what work-life balance meant to them now and in the future.
Stressors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work related stress dominated the participants' responses and they placed the responsibility on themselves to cope with the stress.
Managers as role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The organizational culture and how senior colleagues handled work-life balance became more important to the participants than work-life balance practices endorsed by the company. This also affected how they saw their future at the company.
Intrinsic motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants motivation was driven by coworker relationships and self development rather than monetary rewards or promotion.

Table 2. Summary of our theoretical model

Based on theories that made up the base factors influencing work-life balance, the initial framework (see Figure 2) provided a starting point to test the validity of the base factors. Upon conclusion of the data collection and analysis process, Figure 3 was developed based on the central and subthemes that came from the data. In our study, the central themes replace the initial theories as it became clear these were the more specific aspects determining the work-life balance for the participants. Stress and motivation remain from the initial framework, but a clearer picture of what those entailed was formed based on the subthemes. Perception of work-life balance and managers as role models replace career phase and organizational support. This is because the data revealed these two aspects were more significant to the participants. Table 2 contains a collection of experiences that have been summarized into its current form from the data analysed. Our theoretical model is an accurate representation of the results

generated from the seven participants of this study and provides a glimpse into how early career people enrolled in graduate programmes in Sweden experience, value and attempt to achieve work-life balance. These findings can aid in highlighting the necessity for organizations, managers and work-life balance researchers to understand the importance of early career people's perception towards work-life balance.

6.0 Conclusion

The study aimed to answer the research questions: *How do early career people in graduate programmes experience work-life balance at their current workplace and how do they value and achieve work-life balance?* By gathering early career people experiences, this study provides primary insight from an understudied career group in the field of work-life balance research. Employees from three large companies with graduate programmes operating in Sweden were interviewed to collect the first hand experiences. The results indicate that the participants value work-life balance through observing senior colleagues and then determining it may not align with their long term plans. It displays an understanding from the participants that they do value a work-life balance that works for them and they are able to seek it out as an aspect that dictates their decision on where to work. However, it is difficult to determine if they achieved work-life balance through their responses as the participants stressed they accept their current working conditions due in part to their situation as an early career person.

The data collected and analyzed shows a divide between how organizations endorse work-life balance and how the participants observe work-life balance. That disconnect creates ambiguity and compelled the participants to develop their perceptions of what work-life balance was at their current workplace. We had no expectations on what we would uncover when it came to the participants motivation to work but we were surprised to see an overwhelming response towards social interactions with colleagues driving the participants' motivation. Whether work-life balance is a way of mitigating the negative consequences of stress is indeterminable based on our results, but the data showed an overwhelming amount of prevalence of work-related stress. The participants felt a large amount of pressure to cope with the stress on an individual basis. A greater balance between work and life could lead to minimizing the effects of work-related stress. The concept of work-life balance is just that, balance, but in our participants' experiences, the work side was outweighing the life side.

6.1 Filling a knowledge gap

This study focuses on a knowledge gap in work-life balance research by concentrating on the experiences of early career people enrolled in graduate programmes. Early career people have not been given a voice when it comes to researching work-life balance. They have been excluded until now and constrained to have their work-life balance determined by others who do not share their current stage in life or career. Our results corroborate previous research in the field stating that work-life balance should be addressed on an individual basis due to the differing interpretations of it. This reinforces the need of our study because of the lack of understanding of early career people's experiences.

6.2 Practical implications

Organizations can use our model (see Figure 3) as a guide when designing or modifying graduate programmes to better align them with the concerns of early career people to increase the effectiveness of the programme. Our findings display the participants had a difficult time seeing themselves in their organizations long term. Therefore, addressing and adapting work-life balance initiatives towards them may increase the chances of employee retention. Additionally, organizations are able to use our findings to understand the importance of stimulating early career people in a work environment driven by intrinsic motivation. These findings should not be used to undermine the effectiveness of reward systems such as promotions but more to highlight the importance of relationship building and learning opportunities.

Managers can also use the model as a tool to understand the influential role the work environment as well as themselves can have on framing early career people's perception around a healthy work-life balance. Managers are in a position to directly impact and reduce the negative consequences associated with a work dominated skewing of work-life balance. Our findings show the need for managers to be more aware of the unhealthy skewing towards the work side enabling them to both facilitate the early career peoples' work-life balance and minimize stress. However, the findings also show that the perception of work-life balance differs

by individual, meaning that a healthy work-life balance needs to be addressed on an individual basis. Managers need to be aware that it is individual and include that factor in their work-life balance practices to maximize its potential.

6.3 Limitations of study

Our study yielded a number of valuable insights, however it has some possible limitations which need to be addressed. When conducting qualitative research, and specifically interviews, it is difficult for a researcher to not be involved in the process (Willig, 2013). To ensure credibility in qualitative research, it is crucial for the researcher to be aware of reflexivity (Willig, 2013). Being aware of reflexivity during the process helped us understand our position in the study. Ultimately, this thesis is based on a personal interest of work-life balance. This could have guided us in what theories were chosen or what themes emerged during the analysis. However, this was dealt with by doing extensive research on the subject to base the analysis on a theoretical foundation and also coding the data individually to not affect each other. The analysis was also executed on a semantic level, meaning that we only analysed what the participants actually said (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

One limitation to this study is the sample size. There were seven participants that took part in the study, which makes it hard to get generalizable results across social settings. However, this was never the goal of this study. The objective of the study was to get a deeper insight in a particular setting to gather an understanding of how the participants experience work-life balance. A limitation linked to the participants is also how they got recruited to the study. We established contact with the managers who told us which participants were interested. This could have resulted in the managers choosing which participants they wanted in order to make a good impression for the company. Still, we were aware of this when performing the interviews. For example, we made sure to ensure the participants anonymity in the thesis and also asked them personal questions that did not require them to take a stand against their company. The similarity in responses across the participants from different companies may strengthen our argument that

the participants answered honestly and were not constrained by their company affiliation when answering the questions.

When it comes to qualitative research it is always a balance in the chosen method and what type of results it will generate (Willig, 2013). This study's epistemological position was critical realism, which guided this study in how we formulated the questions and how we analyzed the results. This means that another limitation to this study is that the answers to the interview questions are limited to the questions asked. This study took on a deductive approach when formulating interview questions where existing theories acted as a base for the data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is possible that a total inductive or abductive approach might have yielded other results.

Another limitation is how the theories regarding work-life balance are quite extensive in terms of possibilities for research, which concluded in us focusing our approach on specific theories in order to complete this thesis in the time period available. The limitation of this was that there were many aspects of work-life balance that did not get addressed.

Lastly, a limitation in this study was due to the Covid-19 pandemic worsening during the process of data collection. The outbreak made it difficult to reach out and recruit more participants to the study and also resulted in all the interviews being conducted over Google Hangouts. The interviews might have been different if they were done face-to-face allowing participants to potentially feel more comfortable. However, it could also be argued that doing the interviews digitally decreased the chances of us influencing the participants or revealing what we thought of their responses.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

Looking ahead we recommend that future research builds on our conclusions and digs deeper into early career people as an important focus of work-life balance research. A lot of previous research is rightfully concerned with important aspects like family balance and long term

employees. However, it could be argued there would not have to be so many attempts to study and fix work-life balance for employees with families and established employees if organizations understood how early career people are experiencing it. Understanding and addressing the work-life balance issue before it can become a larger issue internally could be a strategy moving forward for organizations and create a foundation of what a good work-life balance is for early career people to build from. To accomplish this we suggest increasing the sample size of participants from different companies and gathering the perspectives from managers who are in charge of the development and implementation of graduate programmes. This could highlight the divide between what organizations endorse as work-life balance towards what early career people actually experience as work-life balance. Highlighting the disconnect could aid in reducing it, thereby making it mutually beneficial for both parties moving forward. Also, while we used graduate programmes as the study scope it does not capture all early career people. Because of this, a future study could focus on early career people who chose a different path to start their career and add their experiences with work life balance to our results. For example, early career people who entered the labour market directly after finishing high school or university.

An unexpected possibility for future research based on our findings include looking into how coworker relationships affect work motivation, especially in early career people. As intrinsic motivation was paramount in the participants, it would serve a purpose in work-life balance research to further understand the degree of correlation between the social aspect of coworker relationships to work motivation in early career people.

Lastly, the Covid-19 pandemic happening in 2020 presents an opportunity for future work-life balance research due to the necessary and sudden change in the way people were working. Our research began to explore the potential impact Covid-19 might have on future work-life balance. Forthcoming work-life balance research could build on our findings to determine if what the participants predicted actually ends up happening or if work-life balance will need to be reassessed as organizations allow working from home to become a part of societal norm.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Before the interview starts; *Background Information*

- Age, Gender, Previous education, Current Position ← to describe sample
- Current life situation (Married? Family?)

Work-life balance

Have you heard of the concept of work-life balance? Can you explain what work-life balance is to you?

- Give us an example of work-life balance that you have experienced?
- *Get an insight of how they see work-life balance*

How many hours are you expected to work each day/week?

Follow-up questions

- How many hours would you say you actually work each day/week?
- How much do your work hours affect your life outside of work?
- How comfortable are you with the amount of hours you work?

Do you feel like you are living to work or working to live?

- Why?

What is important to you in your life right now?

Follow-up questions

- How much time would you say you can put into the important things in your life?
- Do you have more or less time now as a full-time worker than when you did as a student?
- *Get an understanding of their 'career phase'*

What are your expectations of work-life balance in the future?

- *Possible career phase aspiration*

Organizational support

Do you think work-life balance is something the company endorses?

Follow-up questions;

- Yes, explain how?
 - Do you have an example of when they endorsed it?
- No, why?
 - Would you like them to/ do you think it is important? How would you like them to endorse work-life balance?

Do you feel like it is the management's responsibility or your responsibility to have a work-life balance?

- Why?

Do you see a future at the company?

- Yes, tell us why? Are there any specific aspects that the company provides?
- No, why not? What could the company do to make you want to stay?

Have you had any conversations about your future with the company?

Follow-up questions:

- Yes, what did you feel after the conversations?
- No, do you want to have them? What would you ask?

What would you tell your manager that would improve your life?

- If you were your manager, what would you do to improve your employees' lives?

Motivation

What motivates you to go to work each day?

- *To see if intrinsic, extrinsic or interactive motivation*

How challenging is your work?

Follow-up questions:

- What do you do at work that makes you happy?
- What do you dislike about your work?

Have you ever turned down a task or project?

Follow-up:

- Can you give us an example of why?
- Is it difficult to turn down a task/project?

How much responsibility do you feel in setting your work-life balance?

Stress

What causes you stress?

- If they cannot answer; think about work and outside work, are there aspects that stresses you?

What did/do you do to reduce that stress?

Have you or anyone around you taken sick leave?

- What do you think about people who take sick leave?

Are you worried about having to take sick leave due to stress?

- Yes, why are you worried about it?
- No, can you explain further why?

What is the environment of the programme?

- *To get an insight if the environment of the programme could cause stress*

What expectations were communicated to you about being in the programme?

Do you regret joining the programme?

- *To see if expectations are met, if they are happy in their current 'career phase'*

Added questions about Covid-19:

Has Covid-19 affected your work-life balance now?

Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic will affect the work-life balance in the future?

- In that case, how?