A CULTURE OF WORK-LIFE 'IMBALANCE' IN SINGAPORE

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Introduction

In a national report, it was estimated that the average Singaporean worked a total of 46.3 hours a week in 2008. This would roughly translate to an average of eight and a half hours of work every weekday, and four hours each weekend.[1] This may be viewed to be an extremely high average, especially in Europe where the highest average weekly workload was only 41.7 hours per week in Bulgaria and Romania, followed by 41.4 hours per week in the United Kingdom.[2] However, a Eurocentric viewpoint towards this issue of working hours would not be an adequate approach to this issue in Singapore, as understandings of work, life and temporality are subjectively shaped (Tijden & Dragstra 2007). A range of literature on working time and work-life balance is available to provide insight into this issue of working long hours, but there is a need to further understand how the ideas of work and work time have been constructed in relation to its context to better understand the complexities of time-discipline in Singapore (refer to Hochschild 1989; Hochschild 1997; Presser 2003; MacInnes 2005; Eikhof et al. 2007; Roberts 2007; O'Carroll 2008).

Despite the Employment Act in Singapore limiting official working hours to a maximum of 44 hours per week, the reality of working time is not as simple, as the labor union in Singapore is a relatively weak one and is almost non-present to make for much effective negotiations with regards to work conditions for the labor force.[3] This is further compiled with ideologies of pragmatism and instrumentalism which have created a 'normalization of long working hours', thus obstructing movements away from a work-intensive culture towards the supposedly idealized 'work-life' balance proclaimed in the work-life strategies adopted by the state since 2000. At first glance, it is easy to fall within a tendency to simply see the state's attempt at formulating work-life strategies as prioritizing a harmonized balance between life and work. It is tempting to view the implementation of work-life strategies as the state's resolution towards managing an

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1   (2008). *Singapore 2008: Statistical Highlights.* Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry: Republic of Singapore.

2   (4th September 2008) "UK Work Week Among EU's Longest" *BBC News. http://news.bbc. co.uk/2/hi/business/7598467.stm* Accessed on 4th April 2009.

3   The work union that exists in Singapore is a centralized one called the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC). NTUC exists under the domination of the Singapore Government, and functions more like a statutory board rather than a platform for representing the voices of the workers.

overly zealous population, and that the state is seeking to reinstate social solidarity and societal well-being. However, such an assumption would be superficial, and it would be problematic to simply view the state's action with regards to promoting strategies for work-life balance as a signifier of a welfare state. Instead, there is a need to further explore the position of the state, and further study the significance of its adoption of claims for work-life balance. An understanding of the embodied time-discipline would thus be an important component to further a more critical understanding of the work-life reality, and provide critical insights into the work-life strategies adopted by the State.

It would be much more appropriate to rethink the adoption of the work-life balance discourse as one which ties in strongly with the state's position on neoliberialism. With the dominance of the logic of pragmatism prioritizing economic growth and development, the work-life discourse acts to further entrench a 'communitarian' ideology which implicitly reinforces the neoliberal state's non-welfarist stand to disseminate economic and societal responsibilities back onto the employer, community, family and subsequently individual (Chua 1995). In positing the economic benefits of a happy and balanced worker, the state appears to be pushing for the responsibilities of proper time management for a healthy lifestyle back upon employers and individual workers.[4] According to Chua (1995: 210), "politically, this communitarianism makes it ideologically possible to rationalize the conflation of state/government/society, which in turn justifies state interventions in social life as pre-emptive measures for 'ensuring' the collective well-being". Such embodied time-discipline thus invokes the idea of governmentality, whereby time management is indoctrinated within the larger political and economic context as an individualized responsibility, and consequences of mismanagement of time become a reflexive personal issue rather than structural one (Miller & Rose 1990; Casey 1995; Binkley 2009).

In looking at how work time has been constructed, this paper hopes to put across a clearer understanding of the larger social reality and provide a more in-depth and critical understanding of work-life complexities in Singapore. In order to engage the issue of work-life balance, it is not just about distinguishing between work time against non-work time as dichotomous or exclusionary, but they have to be understood and engaged as overlapping aspects of social life. In attempting to further an understanding of the complexities involved, this paper will adopt a qualitative approach to explore the social construction of time among young workers in middle management positions and the dominance of work time in Singapore. Through an examination of how time-discipline has been internalized by the middle management within a neoliberal context, this paper will argue that the adoption of the work-life balance strategies by the state is in fact a reiteration of its non-welfarist stand. This paper further argues that the work-life strategies acts to advance an ironic push of the social responsibilities of time management and personal well-being back onto the individuals and communities through the perpetuation of the communitarian ideology.

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4   Under the Ministry of Manpower, work-life strategies are targeted at the employer. Under the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports, the individual is supposed to maintain appropriate priority for both work and family through time management.

The Neoliberal State in Singapore

Neoliberalism has often been associated with the United States and the United Kingdom, and has been noted to "favor strong individual private property, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning market and free trade" (Harvey 2005: 64). Yet, it would not be appropriate to simply view neoliberalism as a unique phenomenon of the United States or the United Kingdom, as Asia has also increasingly come to embody neoliberalism in varying manners. Ong (2006:1) identifies this when she talks about neoliberialism and exception in how "Asian governments have selectively adopted neoliberal forms in creating economic zones and imposing market criteria on citizenship".

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Singapore underwent a 'second industrial revolution' where the state actively carried out economic reforms to emasculate the trade unions and established a centralized National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) (Rodan 1985). During this period, the state also went onto implement a corrective wage policy to "attract high-tech and high-value-added manufacturing and business service", and to deter labor-intensive industries (Yeung 2000: 142). In the 1990s, Singapore managed to further advance itself towards a post-industrial phase where it has come to position and market itself as a knowledge and service economy as its key economic strategy in the global economy (Liow 2009). Embedded within the shift is the rationale that for a small country such as Singapore to be able to prosper and for the sake of the well-being of Singaporeans, economic growth and development must be consistently focused upon.[5] The significance of neoliberalism became even more apparent after the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis, and as Yeung (2000: 155) would argue, there is the need to rethink the meaning of state and economy, and reposition Singapore within the neoliberal equation to "[re]conceptualize the state-economy relationship as a dialectical process of interdependence and interconnectedness". Accordingly, the state has adopted neoliberal practices of privileging market forces, and prioritizing economic development and growth. As noted by Harvey (2005: 3) who identifies the difference between the theory of neoliberialism versus its pragmatism, "in so far as neoliberialism values market exchange as 'an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human actions and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs', it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the market place".

Eventually, the neoliberal state in Singapore is most interested not in individual freedom but the facilitation of capital accumulation, where it has risen "out of the need to 'create a good business or investment climate' for capitalistic endeavor" (Harvey 2005: 70). The neoliberal state thus is not one of non-intervention, but one that seeks to open up opportunities for continuous capital accumulation within the global economy. In doing so, it has also inevitably shaped everyday life around values of economic pragmatism. This has led to what Ong (2006:13) mentions, that "neoliberialism is merely the most

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5   In terms of global ranking, Singapore is often listed in the top few spots for economic ranking, such as being the second most competitive economy in the world in 2008 and the world most cost competitive place for business in 2006. http://www.sedb.com/edb/sg/en_uk/ index/why_singapore/singapore_rankings.html. Accessed on 30th December, 2008.

recent development of such techniques that govern human life, that is, a governmentality that relies on market knowledge and calculations for a politics of subjection and subject making that continually places in question the political existence of modern beings".

With the success of the country's economic programme and development, the middle class in Singapore has also significantly expanded over the years and has became a significant group within the country (Chua and Tan 1999). The increasing affluence of the country has thus transformed Singapore into a consumer society, and created an increasingly homogenized material culture within everyday life. According to Chua (2000: 986), "national economic growth becomes meaningful in the everyday life of its people when it translates into expansions and improvements of people's life". The neoliberal logic has thus come to be internalized by the populace, and Singaporeans have increasingly come to shape their life in relation to pragmatism and consumerism. Accordingly, the culture of long working hours and work-life 'imbalance' can also be seen as a result of neoliberal governmentality where economic instrumentality has come to dominate the societal worldview.

Contextualizing Working Time in Singapore

With the shift towards a post-industrial phase, the focus has also since moved towards the quality and not just the quantity of labor and this has acted to adjust the nature of work from one which was largely time-oriented towards one which is highly task-oriented (Westenholz 2006). Ironically, this shift does not simply equate to more leisure time but reinforces a paradoxical rhetoric that 'work can never be finished'. This is what Ciulla (2000) means as the notion of economic competitiveness sets in a vicious cycle whereby the endless pursuit of excellence in relation to perceived economic ends only sets forth the means to do so without the end in actual sight. With the embedding of instrumental rationality where efficiency and pragmatism are highly valued, work has essentially become an integral component of Singapore society. The need to spend more time on work has since become normalized within Singaporeans' sense of self as defined by materialism and economic rationality (Chua 2003).

In 2000, a Committee on Work-Life Strategy was set up by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), Singapore Workforce Development Agency (SWDA), Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) and National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) to 'solve' the problem of 'work-life imbalance'. The focus of the work-life strategies in Singapore largely advocates the need for workers to have a balance between work and life in order to maintain a healthy and productive workforce.[6] However, actual changes or improvements have been minimal as weekly average working hours have only decreased by less than an hour over the past eight years.[7] Furthermore, such a decrease

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6 (2009). *Work-life Harmony Strategy*. Ministry of Manpower. http://www.mom.gov.sg/ publish/momportal/en/communities/workplace_standards/work-life_harmony/About_Work-Life_Harmony.html. Accessed on 3rd April 2009.

7 (2009). *Hours Worked*. Ministry of Manpower. http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/ en/communities/others/mrsd/statistics/Hours_Worked.html. Accessed on 4th April 2009.

can be seen to be largely insignificant, as what matters even more are the informal hours that Singaporeans have come to spend on work or work-related activities.

The intensification of the work life is more significant for those working in sectors that are engaged in the knowledge economy where the nature of work has shifted from being time-based towards task-based. Such a shift towards a tasked-based form inevitably furthered the enhancement of a normalized obsession with work, as the new agenda is not to spend a fixed amount of time on work, but to spend as much time as it needed to complete the task at hand. Also, despite official records of average weekly working hours, many of those in the middle management positions are often working many more hours with no official overtime pay, or they are simply bringing work home. A more in-depth analysis of the national average weekly working hours of 46.3 hours/week in 2008 would further show that the average weekly working hours for construction, manufacturing and administration & support service sectors are at about eight to ten hours more than those from the financial services, professional services and information & communication sectors. Despite working longer official hours, the average monthly nominal earnings per employee of those working in the construction, manufacturing and administration & support sectors are much lower than those in the financial services, professional services and information & communications sectors (refer to Table 1).

Table 1

Manpower and Wage Statistic by Industry in 2008. *Source: Ministry of Manpower: Central Provident Fund Board and Labor Force Survey*

Industry	Average weekly total hours worked per employee (hours)	Average weekly paid hours worked per employee (hours)	Average weekly paid overtime hours worked per employee (hours)	Average monthly norminal earning per employee (dollars)
Manufacturing	57.2	50.2	7.0	3,955
Construction	60.0	52.4	7.6	2,861
Administration/Support	54.0	48.8	5.2	2,418
Financial Services	42.0	41.7	0.3	7,153
Information/Communications	42.2	41.8	0.4	5,304
Professional Services	46.4	44.1	2.3	5,004

At first glance, this might seem to be a classed phenomenon where certain types of labor are valued over others, and the tendency would be to focus on the income inequality as a point of contention. Such an engagement is not wrong but it would be fallacious to

simply gloss over the middle class as a unit of analysis within the neoliberal framework, as this would deny a more critical engagement of the larger reality of working time, especially for those in the financial services, professional services and information and communications sectors.

Under The Employment Act in Singapore, workers are officially protected to work no more than 44 hours in a week, and any work done over that limit has to be accounted for with overtime payment.[8] This is however bounded by the condition that employees are not earning more than S$2000 monthly or if they are 'workmen' that they are not earning more than S$4500 monthly.[9] What this means is that those in the middle management and earning above S$2000 monthly are not eligible for overtime payment, and official records of working time would only take into account official working hours, thus keeping their official average weekly working hours at below 44 hours/ week. However, this does not mean that life is easy for this group, with short working hours and relatively high income. The reality is that they often work long hours, and they even go to the extent of bringing work back home without official overtime payment. In a *Business Times Singapore* survey, it was showed that Singapore's bankers are actually working up to 55 hours every week, which is significantly above the official 44 hours.[10] The concern here is one which seeks to move beyond mere official statistics to better understand how those in middle management positions have come to internalize a neoliberal time-discipline where work has come to dominate their worldview. Many scholars have argued that it is important to avoid a simplistic acceptance of time as a taken for granted absolute, and to look deeper at how time has been socially constructed to better understand subsequent social realities and societal relations (Elias 1992; Adam 1995; Westenholz 2006; Eikhof et al. 2007; Roberts 2007).

Understanding Social Time, Studying Working Time

In order to better understand the situation of the state's work-life balancing act, insight into the social construction of time is crucial to understanding how work time has become normalized. Elias (1992) believes that the 'dominant time' within each society is one that is important and relevant to the particular social context. In industrialized societies, 'clock time', with its regularity and consistency became the dominant construction of time as it appeared to be rational, both in its scientific construction of reality and subsequent probability towards efficiency. The measurability and calculability of clock

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8   (2009). *Hours of Work and Overtime: The Employment Act.* Ministry of Manpower. http:// www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/workplace_standards/employment_ standards/the_employment_act/Hours_of_Work_and_Overtime.html. Accessed on 30th April 2009.

9   'Workmen' is an official term used in the Employment Act and Workmen Compensation Act. According to the definition in the Workmen Compensation Act, a workman is defined as a person who is engaged in either manual labor regardless of how much he earns, or non-manual labor where his monthly earning do not exceed $1600.

10 Kok, Charmian. (30th June 2007). "Singapore Bankers Work Longest Hours: Survey" *Business Times Singapore*. Singapore Press Holdings.

time highly facilitates the development of capitalism, further enhancing its dominance as it becomes increasingly normalized, naturalized and de-contextualized into an inevitable normality embedded within the collective social consciousness (Adam 1995).

Within such societies, time is often seen as an uncontrollable reality which appears as a dominant standalone factor of life; there tends to be a fallacy of believing time to be an obvious and unchangeable reality, with mechanical timepieces conceived as the only means of representation (Thompson 1967). However, to invariably adopt clock time as the only form of time would be a hindrance to a holistic understanding of the larger social reality. In order to better understand society, it is necessary to move beyond that boundary to deconstruct time as we know it, and to transcend the taken-for-granted. As Adam (1995: 6) suggests, in "bring(ing) the taken-for-granted to the forefront of our attention, the spell of the clock time is broken … the invisible is given form". Understanding how time is socially constructed and how society exists within a particular temporal-scape would help provide new understandings and further insights into the larger picture of social relations and social issues (Moore 1963).

Adam (1995: 21) argues that "the existence of clock time, no matter how dominant, does not obliterate the rich source of local, idiosyncratic and context dependent time awareness which are rooted in the social and organic rhythms of everyday life". In recognizing time as a social phenomenon, it is thus important to accept and understand that the coherence of time in shaping everyday life within a society exists only because it has come to appear as being meaningful to the individuals within the society. Time is socially constructed within the "specific human ability to work on the experience of change, to react, to organize and confer meanings on the experience" (Tabboni 2001: 7). Therefore, an integral part to understanding time is to understand its symbolic connotation as time exists insofar as people hold it as meaningful. Subsequently, what is crucial here is how meaningful work time has been created and normalized with time-discipline being instilled through the normalization of work time as part of a larger understanding of one's life-world (Casey 1995).

Methodology

To better study work and time, Hassard (2001) argues that a qualitative approach would be vital to further an understanding of the assumed quantitative construction of time. It is important to understand the structuring of time in terms of the social experiences that affect it, as such time-structuring is vital and deterministic in subsequent handling of "environmental uncertainty, conflicts over activities and the allocation of scarce resources" of modern capitalism (Hassard 2001: 37). The understanding of work time as a social construct should not be a dichotomy between work time and non-work time but an identification of the relationship within a larger and more complex agglomeration of the social life. Thus, a qualitative approach would allow for a more in-depth understanding of how work time becomes constitutive of everyday lives and provide the necessary empirical data to better understand how individuals come to construct their work-life reality (Casey 1995).

To carry out a qualitative analysis of work time relations in Singapore, in-depth semi-structured interview was chosen as the main method for data collection as it allows for an interactive engagement with interviewees about their everyday life. Amidst prior structuring of possible questions, a benefit of semi-structured interviews is the way in which it allows for further probing into other possible aspects of the respondent's everyday life that might contribute to their larger understanding of their work and their time usage (Mason 2002; Babbie 2004). Such understandings would be vital for further explorations of how the interviewees would spend their time, and the experiences and feelings invoked within and associated with their understandings of everyday time.

This paper will focus on those in middle management positions in the financial services, professional services and communications & information sectors as they have been identified earlier as the group which are most affected, but are not properly captured and taken into consideration by the whole work-life balance scheme in Singapore. For a further insight into the work time relation in Singapore, purposive sampling was adopted to gather interviewees who are located in the mentioned occupations as they are the ones who are not being paid overtime but are continuing to work long hours. This paper does not aim to generalize the data as representative of the whole of Singapore, but will focus on this particular group of workers who have become increasingly prominent with a lifestyle and career that is relatively widely sought after.[11]

For purposive sampling, the sample size is decided upon when there is saturation in the data collected and no more new data can be generated. Thus, this study deals with 30 interviewees, half of which are males and the other half are females, between the ages of 21 to 35. The interviewees belong to a segment where they are at relatively early stages of their careers within junior management positions in financial institutions, private organizations and public institutions, and have the higher tendency to spend long hours on their work. The notion of normalized working long hours without overtime pay is especially common among this age group in the middle management position as they are seeking to build up their career, and striving for advancement up the corporate ladder. Gender differences could possibly be a point of concern but this is not going to be highlighted here as that is not the aim of this paper. This is not a claim that gender has become irrelevant amidst the recent focus given to it in related literature, but the focus of this paper is inclined towards the normalization of long working hours, and the embodiment of a neoliberal time-discipline among young working adults in middle management positions.

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11 Singapore has been claimed to be a predominantly middle class society by both Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Mentor Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Chua 1998). In reality, this may not be the case but it is undeniable that despite discrepancies, a large portion of Singaporeans, regardless of class position, are increasingly taking on middle class values and aspiring towards middle class.

Data and Analysis

Normalizing Working Long Hours

Despite the Employment Act stipulating an official working hours of 44 hours per week, the reality is that many workers are actually working up to fifty or sixty hours per week, and this is not even taking into account work that is brought home. What makes this even more significant is that those employed in middle-management positions are often not paid for the extra hours spent at work. However, this appears to be common among the interviewees and they even justify such long hours at work as 'normal' and regard not doing so as possibly problematic.

> "It is not that I want to work till so late but I have no choice. There are so many things to do. If I were to stop work at five and go home, I would never be able to finish my work and this would jeopardize my career."
>
> Thirty-one year old operations manager

> "We do not get OT (overtime) pay. It is part of the requirement of the work… nowadays, jobs are very demanding. You need to know everything and do everything. If not then you are out…"
>
> Thirty-two year old manager

None of the interviewees considered working overtime as additional work; instead, they deem it as an essential part of their job-scope. There was a common consensus that one would prefer to have more free time, but what is of concern is that their work is not simply time-oriented as the focus has shifted towards a renewed attention on task-orientation (Westenholz 2006). What is dominant is not just the physical indoctrination of the clock or working hours but the internalization of work time as the dominant time (Adam 1995). The attribution of meanings onto time spent on working can be understood as an explicit disciplining of the body (Foucault, 1979). Time-discipline, in relation to the larger pragmatic inclination of the state where work is normalized as part of one's worldview, is now internalized and embodied by the interviewees.

Internalizing Time-Discipline in Singapore

In 1999, the State officially announced its shift towards a knowledge based economy when the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) launched the Manpower 21 Plan (M21).[12] Pragmatically, it was deemed a necessary move in order to maintain Singapore's global competitive edge as neighboring developing countries had been industrializing rapidly, and were providing much cheaper labor which was more attractive to investors. With the State's discourse of a 'learning society' within a 'knowledge economy' where the focus is on developments in the production of knowledge and service economy, Singapore's

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12 (1999). *Launch of ManPower 21 Plan*. Ministry of Manpower. http://www. mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/press_room/press_releases/1999/19990831-LaunchOfManpower21Plan.html. Accessed on 25th February, 2009.

economic focus shifted from an industrial one towards a post-industrial one. In its strive to become a global centre for international business and research and development, the neoliberal state also consistently reiterated the significance of economic growth and development as critical for the country, and brought forth a constant reiteration of the need for Singaporeans to consistently upgrade their skills, learn new knowledge and adopt innovative and creative mindsets (Chuan and Tan 1999; Yeung 2000). This brought instrumentality to a new height as attention was placed upon the need to maximize time usage through constant innovations and upgrading of skills and knowledge. Such an attitude towards 'life-long learning' can be seen in such a response:

> "I got plans to maybe take a part time course or a part time diploma … to better make use of my time and learn something which will be useful for my career in the future. Everything now is changing so fast. If you do not keep up and get the necessary qualification, you will be left behind…."
>
> Twenty-eight year old sales director

As Singapore transits from a manufacturing-intensive economy towards a knowledge-based economy, the demand on work also shifted towards one which focuses on the amount of work done and not just the amount of time spent at work (O'Carroll 2008). There is no longer the need to record 'time-in' or 'time-out' from work as time-discipline is now internalized. Workers are working more to meet expectations as competition has become an increasingly dominating characteristic of their everyday lives.

> "There's no way I can keep up my work if I leave (work) at five. It is normal to stay back to work till 7 or 8 plus everyday… Even when I go home, I will still have to do work on my laptop…if I cannot finish, it will affect my appraisal and eventually my bonuses and promotions…"
>
> Twenty-six year old auditor

> "We sat down with our direct superiors at the start of the year and plan out a work appraisal which would eventually affect how we are evaluated and decide our promotion chances and year-end bonus… Even though we are told that we have a say in it, it is still largely dependent on the supervisor who have their belief about how much we should be delivering and believe me, their standard are not that realistic."
>
> Thirty year old marketing manager

> "During the day, I will be out looking for sales… when I'm back home at night, I will work on sales proposals and internet bidding quotations… it is very competitive and you have to work hard if you want to do well out there…"
>
> Thirty-four year old sales director

Long working hours have become the norm for Singaporeans, especially those who are just starting out in middle management positions as competition is high alongside ideologies of meritocracy and pragmatism which have seeped into their life since young (Chua 2003). Increasingly, the distinction between work and non-work time has gotten blurred and understandings of non-work time have also come to be seen as inseparable from that of work time. It is no longer simply external forces that regulate one's working time but the internalization of the importance of maximizing time usage as ideologies of meritocracy, pragmatism and instrumental rationality pervade the social life of these workers in Singapore.

Ideological Indoctrination of Time Management

The normalization of work time governing the everyday life can be seen largely as a result of the state's neoliberal discourse which plays up the potential vulnerability of Singapore's small size and lack of natural resources, while shifting attention to human resources and prioritizing labor as the crucial element of Singapore's economy (Hill & Lian 1995). The idea of time as a scarce resource tends to be re-emphasized in Singapore alongside the focus placed upon materialistic status and well-being. Even the logic behind the work-life strategies is one which identifies the benefits of work-life balance in an economic sense that increases the productivity of the worker. The Minister for Community Development and Sports, Dr Yaccob Ibrahim, reiterated the pragmatism of work-life balance strategies as economically rational when he noted that "the average return (of adopting work-life balance strategy) was $1.68 per dollar spent".[13] This tends to lead Singaporeans onto a path that is increasingly subjugated by instrumental concerns, thus creating a hectic attitude towards work with the idealization of life as maximization of time usage. In this case, time acts as an ideological tool as Singaporeans have come to be indoctrinated from young, through socializing agents such as family, friends, school and media, with the importance of adhering to an awareness of time management (Zerubavel 1981).[14]

"Everyone have the same amount of time every day, even though the pace of life is very fast, it eventually depends on how you manage your time. If I have a lot of work to do, then I will just have to sacrifice my personal time, maybe sleep less or watch less TV and use the time to do work… if you manage your time properly, things will work out somehow."

Thirty year old banker

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13 Speech by Dr Yaccob Ibrahim, Minister for Community Development and Sports at the Seminar on "Work-Life Practices and the Buisness Bottomline". http://app.mcys.gov.sg/WEB/corp_speech_story.asp?szMod=corp&szSubMod=speech&qid=562. Accessed on 12th May, 2010.

14 In a news article, the issue of loitering youths showed the concern of youths being out late and admirations were given to the State and the police force in helping enforce discipline through warning letters to parents of these 'loitering' youths. (Liam, Alex. (17th February 2008). 'Dear Parents, Your Child Was Found Loitering' *The Strait Times*. Singapore Press Holdings Limited.)

In promoting 'personal work-life effectiveness', the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports also went on to note that "time is a finite resource".[15] The message put forth is one which denotes that it is up to the individual to decide what their priorities are and take the necessary steps towards making it work best for themselves and those around them. With the hype on work and instrumental rationality, time thus comes to embrace an ideological indoctrination which promotes efficiency and efficacy that invariably inculcates a culture of competitiveness (Anderson 1974). Alongside normalization of work time, what is significant is the subsequent normalization of time management. Time management works to the benefit of capitalism as efficiency and effectiveness are maximized, and individuals are entrusted with the responsibility to spend their time appropriately (O'Carroll 2008). Within this context, the idea of work-life is one which pertains strongly to neoliberal practices which emphasize the importance of individual freedom in relations to economic well-being. This thus leads to the reinforcement of a larger ideological frame which places responsibilities back upon individuals to take charge of their own lives.

> "After work? … usually by the time I reach home it's already late, so I will usually have my dinner and rest for a while, maybe watch some TV and finish up some work for the next day…."
>
> Twenty-five year old assistant manager

Such a notion of time management tends to benefit the state and capitalists, as individuals who are unable to keep up with the pace of life and handle the stress are more likely to attribute blame upon themselves than they would to the structure or the system (Jessop 1987). With attention thrust onto efficiency and productivity, time in its commoditized form is especially held dearly by the middle-management, where the implicit understanding is that the inability to maximize time usage would subject one to potentially compromise their economic and material well-being.

As such, the responsibility of maximizing time usage is heavily tasked upon the individuals, not just at work but in their everyday lives as well. Subsequently, Singaporeans are given an increasingly daunting task of juggling their work time and non-work time in order to maintain a balance in their social life. It is however pertinent to note that work and non-work time cannot simply treated as a mere binary, but has to be understood as overlapping aspects of social life. Impacts of construction of time on society are dynamic, and as opposed to Brannen's (2005) claim about the impacts of work on family, it is insufficient to adopt a simple spill-over effect analysis as other factors such as the effects of the State and capitalism on time need to be taken into account as well. As in Singapore, work time is socially constructed within the larger political and economic frameworks that propagate work as an implicit part of one's larger worldview.

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15 "Promoting Personal Work-Life Effectiveness". http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/faml_workharmony.asp. Accessed on 12th May, 2010.

Contradictions of Work-Life Strategies

Work-life balance tends to be portrayed as a simple ideal which can be attained though efforts to balance work and life, but the State's attempt to rectify the perceived disequilibrium in work-life balance through pro-family and pro-communal policies is often misleading. The rationale behind such strategies at promoting work-life balance in Singapore tends to be centered largely upon a neoliberal logic, and is often more concerned with capital accumulation rather than individuals' well-being (Harvey 2005). Reasons noted for promoting work-life balance is often based upon an economic rationale noting the higher productivity of a happy and balanced worker. On one hand, employers are being rallied to implement work-life programmes at workplace to improve worker's productivity; on the other hand, the individuals are being tasked to be responsible for their own time management and finding support from their employer, community, family and friends.[16] Such notions invariably represent the communitarian ideology where the focus is turned to the community, family and employer to facilitate economic development. The underlying concern is not about the welfare of the society but about depicting the individual as being responsible for their own well-being, and portraying communitarian means as the solutions.

In turn, there is an ironic twist whereby the increasing attention placed upon status attainment and increasing standard of living implicit within the State's work-life strategies tends to push for an increased normalization of work. This reiterates the conflation of work and non-work time where the implicit understanding is that work is necessarily for a certain standard of living, and that balancing of work with life is more of a personal issue. As noted within the work-life strategies, the tagline was one which states that it is "YOU, Your Value, Your Priority, You Choice". Such an understanding has thus invariably been internalized, where it is particularly salient among the interviewees as this group of Singaporeans is not so readily embracing any actual work-life balance at this early stage of their career. Instead, their undertaking of pragmatism and instrumental rationality tends to constrain them within the need to prioritize their work interests which have been shaped as crucial to the development and growth of Singapore and of themselves, thus pushing them further within the conditions of work and employment (Chua 2000). Singapore's neoliberal developments alongside the propagation of the communitarian ideology has thus led to a case where time-discipline as internalized by individuals has come to prevent any clear distinctions between self, life and work.

Within the social consciousness attuned towards instrumental rationality which glorifies the economic realm, individuals are finding it harder to spend less time on work (Wilkinson 2001). Time-discipline becomes an embodiment of the everyday life. Increasingly, the normalization of work time within the commoditization process means that people are able to reconcile the lack of time in other spheres of life with their constructed reality of the importance of work towards fulfilling materialistic needs

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16 "Your Support through your work life journey". http://fcd.ecitizen.gov.sg/
    FamilyNCommunitySupport/PersonalWorkLifeEffectiveness/SupportThroughWorkLife/.
    Accessed on 12th May, 2010.

(Chua 2003). Young Singaporeans in middle management positions are spending most of their time at work despite policies in place that appear to promote spending time outside of work. Even when they seem to spend lesser hours at the workplace, they would often end up bringing their work home and continue to work beyond the official paid hours. Ironically, parts of the work-life strategies that are implemented now simply mean that they have more flexibility to bring work back home.

Conclusion

In understanding how work time has been normalized among young working adults in middle management positions, this paper has attempted to shed further light on the complexity of work and life issues in Singapore. Work-life strategies adopted by the state are underpinned by developmentalism and pragmatism, and compounded by the normalization of working time. The implementation of work-life strategies in Singapore is rooted within the logic of the neoliberal capitalism, and is more interested in governing a population that has come to be increasingly pragmatic and instrumental. The result is that the work-life strategies adopted by the state in Singapore does not actually deal with any actual notions of work-life balance as the internalization of a sense of time-discipline with regards to work simply further entrenches work as an essential part of their lives. Instead, the work-life strategies end up with ironic reinforcements of the 'work-life imbalance' by redirecting social responsibilities upon individuals and communities. Notions of flexibility within the state's interpretation of the work-life strategies under such a neoliberal context actually act to further the work ethics, where even the constitution of 'life' has become an aspect governed by the subsequent embodiment of time-discipline within neoliberal capitalism.

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