

Paper title: Balancing academia and family life: The gendered strains and struggles between the UK and China compared

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore and compare academics' experiences of managing work-life balance (WLB) in the British and Chinese contexts. We have three specific purposes. Firstly, to investigate whether there are marked gender differences in either context, given female and male academics' work is considered fully comparable. Secondly, to examine contextual factors contributing to gender differences that influence and shape decisions in WLB and career paths. Thirdly, to explore the gendered consequences and implications.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A cross-national and multilevel analytical approach to WLB was chosen to unpick and explore gender and contextual differences and their influence on individual academics' coping strategies. To reflect the exploratory nature of uncovering individual experience and perceptions we used in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Thirty-seven academics participated in the study, comprised of eighteen participants from six universities in the UK and nineteen participants from six universities in China.

Findings – This study reveals gendered differences in both the British and Chinese contexts in three main aspects: sourcing support; managing emotions; and, making choices, but more distinct differences in the latter context. Most significantly, it highlights that individual academics' capacity in cultivating and employing coping strategies was shaped simultaneously by multi-layered factors at the country level, the HE institutional level and the individual academics' level.

Originality/values – Very few cross-cultural WLB studies explore gender differences. This cross-national comparative study is of particular value in making the 'invisible visible' in terms of the gendered nature of choices and decisions within the context of WLB. The study has significant implications for female academics exercising individual scope in carving out a career, and for academic managers and institutions, in terms of support, structure and policy.

Key words - gender, work-life balance, British academics, Chinese academics

Paper Type - Research paper

Word count (excluding table and references): 8388

Introduction

Issues of balancing work and life have gained increasing societal, organisational, individual, and scholarly attention as a result of several social trends – including the changing nature of gender roles, family structures, working conditions, and careers. This has led to an explosion of work-life balance (WLB) research over the last five decades (Powell et al., 2019). Research that has examined work-life interface issues such as work-family balance, conflict, facilitation, and enrichment across a range of occupations has flourished (Greenhaus & Powell, 2017). Nevertheless, there are limited cross-cultural comparative studies of WLB.

This comparative study makes a detailed examination of individual academics' experiences of managing WLB in China and the UK, with an emphasis on the exploration of gender and contextual differences and the subsequent implications for academic careers. Despite a few China-West comparative studies on work-life issues (see Ling & Powell, 2001; Lu et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2000), none studied the Higher Education (HE) sector with the exception of Ren & Caudle (2016), and very few cross-cultural WLB studies explore gender differences. Also, they examine these issues at the aggregate rather than individual level. In particular, research on WLB conducted in the Chinese HE context is scarce, although in contrast research in the UK HE sector is abundant (Ren & Caudle, 2016). Increasing such cross-cultural understanding is important for three reasons. Firstly, we can illuminate an understanding of a phenomenon by examining it in different settings. Secondly, comparative studies have the potential to uncover hidden assumptions that underpin choice and action. An absence of cross-cultural comparative studies exploring gender and contextual differences may lead to flawed assumptions about how females and males balance work and life in differing cultural settings. Thirdly, it offers insights to alternative ways of doing things.

The present study focuses on academia for three reasons. Firstly, the HE sectors in both the UK and China have undergone significant changes but occurring in divergent national contexts, which have affected academics' experiences in different and distinct ways. Investigation into the ways individual academics cope with work-life imbalance is developing rapidly (see Acker & Armenti, 2004; Fu & Shaffer, 2001; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Ren & Caudle, 2016). However, the role of gender in the assessment of WLB and its effects on academic careers has had less attention. Indeed, the literature examining changes in academic work is largely de-gendered (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Huppertz et al., 2019). Secondly, both male and female academics are highly likely to experience WLB issues, but female academics have cited family-related challenges that male academics generally do not, and women have reported to sacrifice more than men do (see Beddoes & Pawley, 2013; Fox et al., 2011; Huppertz et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2011; Thompson & Dey, 1998; Wilson, 2003). Finally, it remains important to examine the gendered differences in WLB at the occupational level. The recent investigation into WLB satisfaction undertaken by Dilmaghani & Tabvuma (2019) reveals mixed results, with positive and negative gender gaps, affected by type of occupation, and women employed in HE sectors were found to have low WLB satisfaction compared to their male counterparts.

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3 Thus, the present study aims to investigate whether there are marked gender
4 differences in each context given female and male academics' work is considered fully
5 comparable (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). On this basis, it intends to examine the
6 root causes of differences that influence and shape individual decisions in WLB and
7 career paths. A burgeoning body of research examines how employees' experience of
8 WLB is influenced and shaped by factors at the individual, organisational and state
9 levels (see Allen, 2001; Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Glavin & Schieman, 2012;
10 Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Nevertheless, the interaction among the three levels is
11 usually ignored (Ruppanner & Huffman, 2014). In the European context, Hobson et
12 al. (2011) develops a conceptual framework to include institutional, societal and
13 individual factors that shape people's choices of and capabilities for WLB. To further
14 such understanding in culturally diverse settings, we examine how multiple factors on
15 different levels may interactively influence individual academics' choice of coping
16 strategies and subsequently carving out their career paths in the British and Chinese
17 contexts.
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24 This qualitative study aims to address three research questions:

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27 Q1: Are there marked gender differences in academics' experiences of managing
28 WLB in both British and Chinese contexts?

29 Q2: What contextual factors have contributed to such gender differences?

30 Q3: What are the consequences and implications?
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33 This paper is structured as follows: firstly, we offer an overview of the British and
34 Chinese HE contexts. Then, the key literature concerning the notions of WLB and
35 gender is reviewed, followed with an in-depth commentary of the main multilevel
36 factors that influence WLB. Secondly, the research methodology is explained,
37 justified and critiqued. Thirdly, the qualitative findings are analysed thematically
38 followed by critical discussion. Finally, conclusions and implications are offered.
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42 **Research Context**

43 WLB is perceived as a choice and a personal responsibility (Caproni, 2004; Lewis,
44 2003; Lewis et al., 2007; Ren & Caudle, 2016). Nevertheless, both choices and capacity
45 to make choices are always contextually embedded and WLB is a social construct
46 (Drobnic & Guillen, 2011; Lewis & Giullari, 2005). As argued by Bradley (2007),
47 the most valuable way to explore any key concept is to locate it in the specific social
48 contexts in which it is operating. This section provides an overview of the changing
49 HE sectors in British and Chinese contexts in which this study took place.
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52 Dramatic changes in HE since the 1980s are asserted as a main cause for growing
53 WLB issues in the UK (Hunt, 2006). Changes in the policy environment: restructuring,
54 commercialisation, expansion in student numbers, and major funding reductions
55 (Kinman & Jones, 2008) have had a substantial impact on the context and content of
56 academic work (Thomas, 2013). Rising student expectations caused by policy
57 changes aimed at shifting the focus towards students being treated as fee paying
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3 consumers, have intensified the workloads of academics (UCU, 2016; Woodall et al.,
4 2014). Consequently, HE is increasingly viewed as a 'market commodity' (Lynch,
5 2015, p.190). There are implications both for the sustainability of universities and for
6 academics facing demands for greater accountability, value for money, efficiency and
7 quality (Thomas, 2013; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). The HE Employers Association
8 produced a set of guidelines to assist institutions to develop policies and practices in
9 support of flexible working and WLB arrangements (Manfredi & Holliday 2004), but
10 their effectiveness remains contested.

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14 Since 1985, Chinese universities have experienced radical reforms intended to raise
15 educational quality and academic standing of HE institutions (Lai, 2010) in response to
16 evolving economic and social conditions and ambitions for developing world-class
17 universities (Ryan, 2010; Meng & Wang, 2018). Significant consequences include
18 rapid expansion of enrolments, structural reforms, transformation of curricula, and
19 increasing joint research and degree programmes (Min, 2004; Ryan, 2010). These
20 changes have taken place in a rapidly developing national economy and increasingly
21 competitive international arena (Min, 2004), resulting in long working hours, work
22 overload and intensification (Joplin et al., 2003; Xiao & Cooke, 2012). In particular,
23 the introduction of a new system of employment practices, including adopting
24 performance appraisal mechanisms and emphasising competition and rewards, has
25 posed new challenges for Chinese academics (Lai, 2010; Meng & Wang, 2018). In
26 the Chinese HE context, Fu & Shaffer (2001) reveal the factors from both work and
27 family mediating WLB and emphasise work-related factors as more influential. In
28 particular, onerous research targets, demands for professional development, and
29 administrative burdens have been confirmed as the most significant causes for
30 widespread occupational stress among Chinese academics across all disciplines (Meng
31 & Wang, 2018). Similar consequences identified in other studies include intensive
32 work pressure (Lai, 2010), psychological health issues (Gillespie et al., 2001; Hui &
33 Chan, 1996), and risk of burnout (Zhong et al., 2009).

40 41 **Literature Review**

42 Numerous definitions have been given to the term WLB but with significant variations
43 to their meaning (Dilmaghani & Tabvuma, 2019). The present study adopts the
44 position that WLB can be considered as a satisfactory level of involvement or 'fit'
45 between the multiple roles in a person's life (Hudson, 2005). It reflects an individual's
46 orientation across different life roles (Marks & MacDermid, 1996), and the extent to
47 which an individual is equally engaged in and satisfied with all life domains with a
48 minimum of role conflict (Clark, 2000; Greenhaus et al., 2003). This suggests that WLB
49 is not merely work-family balance. However, Greenhaus and Powell (2017, p.3)
50 emphasise that 'work and family are the two roles in many people's lives in which they
51 have the greatest amount of involvement and with which they identify the most'.
52 Indeed, the insights emerging from this study supports this view, with references to life
53 beyond academia most frequently being associated with family-related activities (e.g.
54 childcare, eldercare and housework). In the organisational context, the way to help
55 employees achieve WLB is to adopt "a two way process involving a consideration of
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3 the needs of employees as well as those of employers” stated by Lewis (2000, p.105)
4 who also suggested that paid work and personal life should be seen more as
5 complementary elements of a full life than as competing priorities. This optimum state
6 is, however, difficult to attain as will be demonstrated in the findings.
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8 WLB is often positioned as a gender-neutral concept that has challenged societally-
9 embedded beliefs that women’s place is at home and men’s is in paid work (Rapoport
10 et al., 2002). However, this has not changed the “reality of gendered spheres”. Instead,
11 gendered spheres are being exacerbated as global competition resulting in intensified
12 workloads has forced a retreat to traditional gender roles (Lewis et al., 2007, p363).
13 Thus, the role of gender in understanding both men and women’s experiences of WLB
14 and their individual choices of WLB strategy cannot be disregarded.
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16 The concept of gender has been much debated since the 1960s. Among various
17 interpretations, Ann Oakley’s (1970) view of gender as the social-cultural aspects of
18 being a man or woman and her introduction of linking gender to the theory of patriarchy,
19 remains influential in the feminist and sociological literature. In her seminal work
20 ‘Gender’, Bradley (2007) argues that the academic use of the term ‘gender’ has been
21 politically informed and developed in tandem with the activities of the feminist
22 movement. More importantly, she has critically compared and contrasted different
23 theoretical approaches to analysing gender. For example, gender is viewed by liberal
24 feminists as a form of discrimination practiced against individuals on the basis of sex.
25 Radical and Marxist feminists tend to analyse it as a structural base of inequality and
26 oppression. Post-structuralists and post modernists see it as a social category of
27 difference. For them, gender is more than biological difference, ‘it is the social
28 ordering of that difference’ (Marshall, 1994, p.112). One of the most influential
29 postmodern feminists, Judith Butler (1994), points out that gender should be seen as
30 ‘performance’. That is, people repeatedly ‘do gender’ in their daily lives by acting
31 out being a man or woman that creates an illusion of stability and fixity. Thus, gender
32 is not a fixed identity. Butler’s work has made an important contribution to recent
33 thinking about gender that recognises how individual women and men are actively
34 involved in ‘doing gender’. Nevertheless, what Butler and her followers ignored in their
35 work is a critical examination of the context which shapes and structures gender
36 relations (Bradley, 2007). The process of gendering, as Bradley (2007) suggests, is
37 operating at three levels – the micro-level that includes individual behaviour patterns,
38 the meso-level involving institutional processes, and the macro- or societal level. It
39 appears to us that gender can be seen as both category and structure, and more
40 importantly, as a dynamic construct contingent upon the context.
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51 **A multilevel analytical framework**

52 We argue that individual academics’ choices of coping strategy could not have evolved
53 accidentally. Instead, it has complex antecedents that intertwine in context that
54 require a variety of resources at different levels. Our review of the literature appears
55 to suggest that the inter-related factors on the macro, meso and micro levels would have
56 profound effects on individual academics’ experiences of WLB and their resolutions.
57 In the following, we aim to further explore WLB by examining several key multilevel
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factors through the lens of gender. They are: societal institutions and national cultures on the macro-level; organisational practices and academic work on the meso-level; and, family resources and individual choices on the micro-level.

Macro-level

At a country's macro-level context, institutional settings in which people and their social positions are located (Bourdieu, 1977) construct individual options and preferences for reconciling family and employment (Folbre, 1994). On the one hand, societal institutions in the modern world remain structured around the 'separate spheres' model in which wives care for household activities and husbands act as breadwinners (Cha, 2010; Hochschild, 1989; Moen & Roehling, 2005). On the other hand, due to forces of globalisation women have been increasingly moving into arenas 'which have previously been confined to men. That is crucial to an understanding of the decline of traditional gender norms' (McNay, 2000, p. 26). This change creates a potentially 'emancipatory' situation for the restructuring of gender relations (ibid), which in turn influences people's perceptions and choices of WLB approaches. Government policy towards women, work and childcare leads to cross-national differences in terms of WLB strategies (Crompton et al., 2005; Windebank, 2001). However, the coping strategies individuals prefer are not static but shaped by shifts in economic opportunities and cultural values in their country (Hobson et al., 2011).

Despite globalisation facilitating a WLB discourse in diverse cultural contexts, WLB is not culture free (Lewis et al., 2007). Cultural differences play an important role in understanding WLB practices in non-Western contexts (Lu et al., 2010). Beşpınar (2010) argues that evaluating coping strategies through a Western cultural lens ignores the contextual meaning of their acts and does not fully explain WLB issues in the Chinese context (Ling & Powell, 2001; Ren & Foster, 2011). Western solutions to WLB exported to developing countries are sometimes considered in conflict with local cultural values (Lewis et al., 2007). In contrast, Hill et al. (2004) argue for a transportable rather than a culturally specific work-life interface model suggesting convergence in WLB perceived and experienced by employees from both individualist and collectivist countries.

Meso-level

Changing macro-level factors have shaped various organisational approaches to coping with work-life imbalance in different nations (Joplin et al. 2003). In countries where women have higher status and/or relevant legislation is in place, organisations are more likely to implement family-friendly initiatives (Ruppner & Huffman, 2012). However, this conflicts with an assumption that 'ideal workers' in modern workplaces will fully devote themselves to work without the burden of family obligations (Mason et al., 2013), which is well reflected in academia as academics are more committed to career than most professionals (Jacobs, 2004; Misra et al., 2012), with consequent implications for WLB. Whilst academic work provides a great deal of flexibility and autonomy that supposedly facilitates WLB (Damaske et al., 2014; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008), its open-ended nature (Wortman et

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3 al., 1991) and growing, often conflicting, expectations, pressures and demands are
4 challenging academics (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Chandler et al., 2000; Deem, 2003;
5 Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Menzies & Newson, 2008; Ylijoki, 2013). High levels of
6 commitment, long working hours and constant work demands have eroded time and
7 energy for personal life and leisure (Lewis, 2003) creating blurred work-life boundaries
8 and work-family conflict (Damaske et al., 2014).
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11 Further, research shows that family-friendly practices are gendered (Burnett et al.,
12 2010; Lewis et al., 2007). The role of organisations in exacerbating or alleviating
13 gender inequality is highlighted in Brady's (2009) theory of institutionalised politics as
14 well as other work (see Hobson, 2011; Moen, 2015; Mun and Brinton, 2015). In her
15 study of gendering in organisations, Acker (1990, p.146) interprets a gendered
16 organisation as the one in which 'advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control,
17 action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a
18 distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine'. Such changing nature
19 of work and gendered organisational practices influence employees' agency to develop
20 choices of WLB strategy (Lewis et al., 2007) and are often regarded as bringing both
21 advantages and disadvantages (Fleetwood, 2007). Whilst employees may consider
22 some practices as 'empowering', others are considered as limiting agency in balancing
23 work and life, especially for women. Women's use of flexible working may be
24 negatively perceived at work (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016; Joshi et al., 2015) and usually
25 results in less favourable career prospects than men (Halvorsen, 2002). Thus,
26 organisational context may act to sustain gender inequality at work.
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32 33 *Micro-level*

34 Individual resources and choices are shaped by both broad institutional and socio-
35 cultural contexts and specific, individual family contexts in which WLB decisions are
36 made and remade over the life course (Fagan, 2001; Yee Kan, 2007). The family as the
37 primary socialising unit determines each member's social practice, defines their duties,
38 and affects their perceptions (Uppalury & Racherla, 2014). Therefore, the family is
39 considered a "constitutive element within the habitus" (McNay, 2000, p.62). Family
40 support networks have become an important WLB resource as a result of a dramatic
41 rise in female participation in the workforce coupled with a definite preference for full-
42 time employment in China. Despite Europe having three policy areas to support WLB
43 – flexibility, rights to reduce hours, and parental leave – such flexibility does not
44 necessarily translate into individual agency for WLB because of constraints from a
45 range of individual factors (Hobson et al., 2011). These include gender, age, income
46 and partner's resources. In particular, partner support, either instrumentally or
47 emotionally, or both, has been found to influence their partner's experience of juggling
48 family and job responsibilities considerably (Bröckel, 2018). Women usually feel
49 lonely or stressed when such support is not available (Hennekam et al., 2019).
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52 Compared to men, women who have strong career aspirations are more vulnerable
53 to work-family conflict once they enter parenthood (Hennekam et al., 2019). This is
54 due mainly to traditional gender roles in the home. Men tend to have more sources of
55 household support which benefits their career, largely due to women's greater
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commitment to parenting and housework even when holding full-time jobs (Gaskell et al., 2004; Leonard, 2003; Morrison et al., 2011; Nikunen, 2012; Thompson & Dey, 1998). As revealed by Huppertz et al. (2019), the family context can exacerbate women's experience in academia and academics who are also mothers in particular struggle to cope with the competing demands of work and home. To achieve career success, more women than men choose to minimise or conceal family commitment through behaviours such as delaying childbirth, prioritising work once they have children, and discounting organisational WLB options (Bardoel et al., 2011; Drago, 2007; Fujimoto et al., 2012). With less ability to separate the work-life boundary than their male counterparts, career women usually engage in reactive role coping behaviours (Kossek et al., 1999).

Methodology

This empirical study aimed to develop insights related to British and Chinese academics' experiences of WLB. Thus, we pursued a comparative design to provide for analysis which could tease out both similarities and distinctions between strategies adopted by individual academics in the British and Chinese HE contexts. We were particularly concerned to facilitate making the 'invisible visible'. That is, in the analysis, to be in a position to surface influences which may be regarded as so 'usual' they do not ordinarily attract attention. For example, in this study, we identified, the availability of part-time working arrangements in the UK and the availability of familial childcare support in China.

Participants comprised 37 academics, comprising 18 from six universities in the UK and 19 from six universities in China, with 11 female interviewees in each context, collected over the course of five years between 2013 – 2017. A blend of snowball (chain-referral) and convenience sampling techniques were used (Miles et al., 1994). Participation was by 'self-nomination' in response to our invitations to participate. The invitations, including a brief overview of the study, were distributed via email within twelve universities, which spanned across a number of young and old institutions, as well as diverse geographic locations, in both countries. We recognise we cannot know in what way the individuals who agreed to participate differ from those who did not respond to the invitation. Thus, we recognise there is bias in the selection to those interested in either the topic or work-life balance. The socio-demographic details collected from each interviewee are shown in Table 1.

[Table 1 INSERT HERE]

We chose in-depth semi-structured interviews as reflecting the exploratory nature of uncovering individual experience and perceptions. In-depth interviews can be valuable in exploring cultural issues (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Thein et al., 2006). This interviewing approach provided flexibility in terms of questions and prompts (Berg, 2009) as we sought to understand both the strategies and the intertwining nature of factors shaping the choice of coping strategies. The interview

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3 was designed to explore perceptions of the experience of WLB from an empathetic
4 standpoint (Fontana & Frey, 2008). It solicited narratives (Czarniawska, 2004) of
5 interviewee's experiences and personal stories, along with insights in to how they
6 attempted to create a WLB that was acceptable, or otherwise, to their circumstances.
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8 Ethical approval for the study was secured by the employing institution. All
9 participants were made aware of the purpose of the study, with the participant
10 information including the right to withdraw their participation at any time. To protect
11 anonymity of the participants, individuals are only identified by defining characteristics
12 relevant to the nature of the study. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes,
13 during which detailed hand-written notes were made including capturing quotes in
14 response to the interview prompts. The questions and prompts were devised in
15 English and Chinese, with the interviews conducted in English in the UK and in Chinese
16 in China (with some participants responding in English). Transcriptions were always
17 made within twenty-four hours, with the Chinese translated into English by us.
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19 Our initial analysis sought to develop an understanding of the individual experience
20 and coping strategies. We used thematic analysis, intent on surfacing emergent
21 analytical themes through an inductive, open-coding approach. This builds on the
22 tradition of grounded theory (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and does not impose a priori
23 hypotheses (Rallis & Rossman, 2003), although we recognise we were familiar with
24 ideas from the literature. We concentrated on themes related to: (1) the overall
25 experience of balancing work and life in both contexts; and (2) contextual and gender
26 differences in individual coping. Responses to these themes were then grouped and
27 compared by us together, developing rich insights into similarities and differences
28 between female and male academics in both contexts through a number of iterations.
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30 Attention was paid to the validity, confirmability and dependability of our study as
31 a way of enhancing the rigour and coherence of our research (Burr, 2015). Validity is
32 concerned with the integrity of conclusions that are generated (Bell et al., 2019). In
33 order to ensure the interview data in our research study are accurate and credible,
34 interviewees were asked for permission to contact them by email or telephone with
35 follow up questions or to clarify specific points. Furthermore, we continued to read
36 and re-read the transcripts and themes, discussing them together and in particular
37 unpacking the individual, institutional and societal factors. In terms of dependability
38 and confirmability, we developed this through the depth of enquiry and richness of
39 evidence. These discussions took place over a number of weeks, which enabled us to
40 develop consensus about what seemed most salient in response to the research questions
41 and where we needed to return to interviewees to check our interpretation or to further
42 clarify their position.
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44 In terms of limitations, we acknowledge subjectivity related to an empathetic
45 (Fontana & Frey, 2008) interviewing approach. Along with this, our experiences of
46 working in HE in both contexts can be said to reflect a position of "engaged subjectivity"
47 (Dhamoon, 2011, p.239) resulting in some shared experiences and observations. We
48 were alert to this during our analysis and discussed it between ourselves to remain
49 authentic to the accounts of our interviewees. In addition, we do not intend to generalise
50 from these accounts, rather to offer perspectives that are "characteristic of the whole"
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(Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.43), and we present indicative vignettes from the interviews to illustrate individual's experiences of WLB along with their coping strategies.

Findings

Overview of WLB Experiences

Our interviews reveal significant contextual differences in the WLB experiences of academics. The nineteen Chinese academics described their experiences of WLB as demonstrating a clear gender division. Nine out of eleven female academics reported "satisfied", "happy", or "little conflict", whilst seven out of eight male academics reported "unbalanced", "dissatisfied" or "difficult". Women attributed a balanced life to flexibility and freedom of academic work. A female professor with six-months experience as a visiting scholar at a British university explained:

I am fairly happy with my life and I have maintained a good WLB ... I teach only half of the term ... we don't have so many meetings, emails and admin work as you [British academics] during a term. Unlike your students, our students usually contact their advisors, not academic staff, for most issues. I supervise several postgraduates and PhD students. We would have a couple of meetings to discuss their plans or progress at the beginning of each term, and then they seem happy to carry on by themselves. With less disruption, I can focus more on my own research and spend plenty of time looking after my daughter and helping with her learning. This job suits me! (Chinese Female professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Men's difficulty in achieving a balance resulted from being career-orientated:

I have a long-term career goal to be a permanent professor. So, my working life is much busier, and I have to socialise with research funding providers having tea or dinner together, often beyond the working hours. Sometimes I need to write papers on weekends. (Chinese Male associate professor, 35-49, married without children)

British academics had markedly different WLB stories. Fourteen out of eighteen reported an imbalanced life and generally described their situation as "not easy", "suffering", "no balance", or even "no life". Regardless of gender, British academics experienced a greater struggle to balance work and life. This supports the conclusion drawn by Kinman and Jones (2008) that the WLB satisfaction was generally poor among British academics. Long working hours, undertaking a multiplicity of tasks and blurred work-life boundaries were regarded as the main causes of work-life imbalance:

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3 The volume of e-mail is incredible! An additional pressure is that I am
4 the contact for students on international placements. They will contact
5 me in an urgent or important situation, such as a robbery or medical
6 incident. This means I am more vigilant than I might otherwise be.
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8 (British male lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)
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11 Given the type of career i.e. teaching/research and also life projects such
12 as gardening/managing distant farmland, it is difficult to know where
13 the work-life edges are. These career/life projects are ones where 'one
14 can never do enough, there is always more one can do' so boundaries
15 are blurred. (British female senior lecturer, 50+, in long-term
16 relationship)
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20 Flexibility in academia had differing consequences in each context. On the one hand,
21 it granted great autonomy to Chinese female academics who could manage family
22 commitments alongside work commitments, and to Chinese male academics who could
23 devote themselves fully to careers. On the other hand, it prolonged working hours and
24 intensified work-family conflict for British academics regardless of gender.
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28 When it comes to organisational WLB policies and practices, there are also marked
29 contextual differences. British academics confirmed the existence of WLB related
30 policies and they had either attended employer-initiated workshops related to WLB (for
31 example, stress and time-management training) or elicited ideas from institution-wide
32 WLB practices, despite mixed opinions as to how useful they were. However, the
33 majority of Chinese academics indicated relevant policies were not available and WLB
34 was a personal decision:
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38 No policy. The organisation is not responsible for balancing your work
39 and life. It depends on your own choice, for example, how ambitious
40 you are. (Chinese female professor, 35-49, married with one child)
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44 Legislation and organisational policies were viewed as empowering British academics
45 to make much more diverse choices in terms of their contractual arrangements.
46 Negotiating with management regarding workload was a favoured strategy:
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49 I was initially scheduled to do some evening sessions for adult learners,
50 but I need to spend evening time with my son. I negotiated with the
51 course director who agreed I could teach daytimes only. (British female
52 lecturer, 21-34, married with one child)
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55 Work rearrangement was often initiated by the academics themselves in British
56 universities. This was unusual in Chinese institutions where employer-initiated
57 arrangements, such as rearranging timetables for staff to undertake research appeared
58 more common. Half of the British academics used part-time working as their key
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3 coping strategy. By contrast, Chinese academics viewed job security as crucial.
4 Academics on part-time or non-permanent contracts were not considered as core
5 employees:
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9 • Over 95% of academics at our university are working full-time. Nobody
10 really wants to work part-time which is seen to be inferior and insecure.
11 (Chinese female professor, 35-49, married with one child)
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13 14 Personal coping strategies

15 The interview accounts highlight how women's strategies differed from those adopted
16 by their male counterparts. Further, a much more marked gender difference is found
17 in the Chinese than in the British context in the three aspects, namely, sourcing support,
18 managing emotions, and making choices.
19

20 21 *Sourcing Support*

22 Relying on family networks for assistance to achieve WLB was the most common
23 approach adopted by Chinese academics. Our study finds that voluntary and constant
24 grandparent support in childcare is normal, which was particularly noted by Chinese
25 women:
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29 When I was doing a PhD while working full-time, my daughter was still
30 a baby. My husband was busy and had limited time for household chores.
31 My life was chaotic. Later, my parents' arrival was like 'sending
32 charcoal in snowy weather' [giving timely assistance]. (Chinese female
33 professor, 35-49, married with one child)
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37 Children and childcare (where they existed) were scarcely mentioned by Chinese male
38 academics although frequently talked about throughout the interviews with Chinese
39 female academics. It seems that women's role in the home has changed little during
40 the past decade. The advent of the revision to China's one-child policy in 2016 has
41 brought little ease to Chinese women. Instead, this would put a strain on women
42 because of aggregated caring responsibilities. Even with readily accessible support
43 for childcare, the implicit assumption is for women to shoulder the bulk of
44 responsibility for raising children or at least, the role of chief organiser. Further, the
45 ending of the policy may further exacerbate this tension for Chinese female academics
46 due to its negative implications for gender roles. British academics were less able to
47 secure support from extended family on an on-going basis. Sharing family
48 responsibility with their partner was seen to be helpful particularly by women, and paid
49 childcare services were cited as a source of care provision, although considered
50 expensive in the UK:
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55 We send our child to nursery three days per week. Although costly, it
56 has freed up lots of time for me to concentrate on my work. My husband
57 and I usually share housework, and actually, he takes and picks [up] our
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3 child from nursery more often than me because he works locally.
4 (British female lecturer, 21-34, married with one child)
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7 Support from partners was perceived to be important and to enhance contentment with
8 WLB by both British and Chinese academics. Whilst British academics cited both
9 emotional and physical support from their partners, Chinese female academics
10 emphasised emotional over practical support from their husbands. Damaske et al.
11 (2014) observe that cultural norms continue to demand a time-intensive devotion of
12 academics to work but are also shifting to expect an increased participation at home,
13 especially for fathers, which is little evidenced in the Chinese context in this study as
14 many Chinese male academics reported that they rarely engaged with house chores,
15 instead investing time into pursuing their career with the rationale that this would create
16 a more favourable environment for their family:
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21 ... I think it is still quite common that men are career-orientated, and
22 women are family-centred in this society. (Chinese male associate
23 professor, 35-49, married with one child)
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27 Despite a dramatic increase of career women in China, a gendered ideology that
28 associates women with domestic labour and men with a role of main breadwinner
29 persists, especially in the mind-set of men. Such gender difference was not evident
30 among British female academics, at least on the surface. However, acknowledging an
31 appreciation for their partners' help in housework and/or childcare suggests that the
32 burden remains with women.
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36 *Managing emotions*

37 Academics increasingly considered effective time and emotion management as
38 techniques to mitigate imbalance and learn to live with an inherent dissatisfaction (Ren
39 & Caudle, 2016). In this study, managing emotions was a preferred coping strategy
40 for female rather than male academics in both contexts, although differences remained
41 in how emotion was managed. For British female academics, maintaining a positive
42 outlook was considered useful. One strategy was to recognise that "all things pass" and
43 "putting things into perspective". Expressing (negative) emotions and to "vent my
44 anger to my husband" was another strategy. Some British male academics admitted
45 they redefined their mind-set, for instance curtailing perfectionist behaviours and re-
46 considering their roles beyond the work context were considered to improve WLB. A
47 male professor described his identity as being multifaceted, saying "I'm only a
48 professor at work".
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53 For their Chinese counterparts, the approach appeared to be suppression or self-
54 control. One interviewee said, "as an adult, you have to cope!". Chinese academics
55 ascribed this to being raised in such a social environment, particularly influenced by
56 their parents. Chinese society traditionally socialises children to control impulse
57 responses (Ho, 1994), and moderating and controlling emotions is considered essential
58 to mental and physical health (Koo, 1976). As a result, keeping an inner peace of
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3 mind to achieve harmony, a traditional Confucian tenet, remains prevalent. This was
4 also seen as the key to maintain a balanced life.
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7 *Making choices*

8 In response to significant life events such as marriage or having a child, it is usually the
9 female academics that redefined their mind-set. This includes adjusting career
10 expectations as indicated by some Chinese female academics. Reducing the desire for
11 promotion and forgoing career advancement opportunities, often considered as personal
12 compromise or sacrifice with little or no choice, also featured as WLB strategies. As
13 consistently demonstrated in the literature, it is most often Chinese women who
14 redefine their personal roles that involves lowering their career ambition and making
15 adjustments to their family and personal lives (Lo et al., 2003; Moen & Yu, 2000; Ng
16 et al., 2002). For example:
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22 He is a loyal husband but very macho [male chauvinist] and career-
23 orientated. He often says his career is crucial to our family life as well
24 as his own status. Chinese society still agrees that the man's career is the
25 foremost one and women should take care of home and men. I love my
26 job and hope to advance my career, but I need to devote most of my time
27 to our son's education. (Chinese female lecturer, 35-49, married with
28 one child)
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32 The principle of 'work first' was followed exclusively by Chinese male academics,
33 which echoes Gaskell et al.'s (2004) finding that Chinese male academics are more
34 ambitious than female. Prioritising work over family life was so ingrained in the
35 mind-set that one male associate professor, despite his new wife's protestations,
36 forwent the ten days marriage leave allowance. Chinese male academics actively
37 made significant sacrifices in their personal life to achieve career goals, which is rarely
38 an approach adopted by British male academics.
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41 Both male and female British academics considered family life as equal to, or more
42 important than, their academic pursuits. They frequently talked about 'switching-off'
43 to separate work and family life, designing their own 'rules' such as "avoiding viewing
44 emails during the weekends", and "leaving work at work". For them, WLB means
45 having weekends and/or evenings free for family and setting up and sticking to the 'no
46 work' policy beyond contracted, or at least self-imposed, working hours.
47 Nevertheless, significant life events such as having a child were considered to affect
48 WLB.
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52 *Consequences for Career*

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54 The study establishes that individual academics' orientation to work and life roles had
55 a primary impact on their career. The pressure to publish and achieve required
56 research output was an additional challenge in both contexts. Failure to publish means
57 'perish' (Neil, 2008). Under the new employment reform, one of the key HE reforms
58 in China, academics are pressured to increase their productivity measured by quantity
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3 of publications and research funds (Lai, 2010). A Chinese male associate professor
4 described an acute pressure to earn “milk powder money” following the arrival of his
5 daughter only three months prior to our meeting. He asserted the necessity for him to
6 work even harder in a labour market where the “employer chooses you, not you who
7 chooses the employer”. He conveyed a sense of ‘impending disaster’ if he didn’t
8 continue delivering the required performance, asserting “if you are unemployed, your
9 life is over!”. Another explained:

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14 This is the reality you face. At this research-led prestigious university, you won’t
15 have a chance to progress unless you focus on research and publish in
16 internationally influential journals. (Chinese male associate professor, 35-49,
17 married with a child)
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19
20 Whilst both male and female academics were facing challenges at work, there is an
21 evident gender divide. Women, not men, emphasised marriage, and particularly
22 childcare, led to shifting their focus from career to family. Consequently, both British
23 and Chinese female academics reported slow career progression or career stagnation
24 due mainly to the three main reasons – including work-family conflict, target-driven
25 performance management and gendered organisational practices. Some
26 representative responses included:
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30 My research output and quality has reduced, but I have to prioritise
31 childcare over career development. A child’s education depends mainly
32 on a mother’s time and effort. I don’t want my son to lose at the starting
33 line. (Chinese female associate professor, 21-34, married with one child)
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37 I have been perceived as research non-active. Each academic staff has
38 to get four articles published in 3-star or above journals. I have two
39 articles accepted, but I still failed to meet the target and subsequently
40 punished by doubling my teaching load. What’s worse, my research
41 funding has been frozen. My mentor has not helped me much and he
42 seems not bothered ... I feel I’m not part of his ‘network’. To avoid
43 being punished again, I have to work harder which means I have to
44 reduce the time spent with the family. (British female lecturer, 35-49,
45 married with two children)
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50 The management has set publication targets for academics - to publish
51 two articles in core Chinese journals within three years. This is very
52 challenging as I already work at full capacity including 16 hours
53 teaching each week and student management. (Chinese female associate
54 professor, 35-49, married without children)
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3 My mentor has not helped me much and he seems not bothered ... I feel
4 I'm not part of his network." (British female lecturer, 35-49, married
5 with two children)
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8 • It is difficult in a somewhat male-dominated discipline. No matter how
9 ambitious you are, you are still seen as a woman with major family
10 responsibilities. (Chinese female associate professor, 35-49, married
11 with one child)
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15 Compounding these difficulties, changes in the HE context considered by British
16 female interviewees as detrimental, led to the adoption of multifarious approaches. A
17 female senior lecturer cited "increasing workloads, burgeoning administrative work,
18 pointless bureaucracy" along with "cultures of bullying and harassment" and "intrusive
19 and authoritarian management" as evidence of deteriorating conditions in UK HE.
20 Male academics were also aware of the situation:
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24 My workload is overwhelming! Forget about research, I do not have
25 time for it. I am now in charge of two new postgraduate courses... The
26 department is facing teaching staff shortages but has no plan to address
27 this issue. This is frustrating! (British male senior lecturer, 35-49, single)
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31 Consequently, the requirements caused academics to look for the most effective ways,
32 such as networking by attending conferences and socialising with gatekeepers of
33 research funds. This has led to not only a lack of serious concentration on the quality
34 of both teaching and research, but also the popularity of networking and socialising in
35 academia especially among men, who often form an 'old boys network' (Davidson &
36 Burke, 2000) or a 'brotherhood' which pushes women out (Ramohai, 2019). Some
37 British and Chinese female academics indicated they were excluded due to their
38 perceived dominant role at home and structural barriers that denied them access to
39 professional academic networking. This is particularly evident amongst Chinese female
40 academics, who attached overriding importance to their children's education for which
41 they were willing to sacrifice career opportunities and make relentless efforts to provide
42 parental guidance and supervision.
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49 Discussion

50 Our study demonstrates that British and Chinese academics differed in their experiences
51 of WLB. This manifests itself as gendered differences in individual academics' coping
52 strategies, which is consistent with the existing claim that women worldwide tend to
53 develop different coping strategies from men (Bray et al., 2001; Fielden & Davidson,
54 1999; Jennings & McDougald, 2007). We also found a much more marked gender
55 difference in the Chinese than in the British context in terms of sourcing support,
56 managing emotions, and making choices. More significantly, the findings reveal that
57 such gender differences in WLB were induced by the factors and their interplay on the
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3 three levels as depicted in Figure 1. This also led to divergent career paths between
4 male and female academics in both contexts.
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7 **[Figure 1 INSERT HERE]**
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10 At the country level, first of all, differing political-legal frameworks accounted for the
11 divergence between the two contexts. Formal structural influences appeared to be
12 greater for British rather than Chinese academics. In the UK, employees who have
13 worked for their employers for 26 weeks have a statutory right to request flexible
14 working. WLB is considered an important characteristic of being an 'employer of
15 choice' (Gifford, 2007). In China, however, there is less interest in WLB and limited
16 government-initiated intervention. Under the new two-child policy, the Chinese
17 government no longer provides welfare benefits such as childcare subsidies or publicly
18 funded kindergartens which may result in decreasing employment rates and earnings of
19 working mothers compared to fathers (Qian & Jin, 2018). It is also worth noting that
20 despite WLB policies in the UK, the emphasis remains with adults making personal
21 decisions (Lewis & Campbell, 2007). Secondly, socio-cultural values, including
22 different conceptions of WLB, changing status of men and women, and deeply
23 embedded values and beliefs both constrained and enabled individual capacity. Our
24 study shows that the term 'WLB' is used differently in the UK and China. In the UK,
25 the term describes prioritising and separating work and life, and in China, it describes
26 harmony and integration. This concurs with Russell (2008) in finding little evidence
27 of Western solutions being adopted in China. Chinese academics tended to accept
28 work-life imbalance as a 'fact of life' without feeling a need for the organisation to
29 address it, instead utilising resources at societal and individual levels. Employment of
30 domestic labour and drawing on family networks for support appear to play a key role
31 in the personal coping process in of Chinese academics. This also reflects a strong
32 collectivist orientation. In contrast, the diverse coping approaches adopted by British
33 academics align with an individualistic orientation. Emotion management was
34 identified as a coping strategy by both groups. Whilst open expression was seen
35 useful by British academics, suppressing emotion was perceived to be culturally
36 appropriate by Chinese academics. This accords with Russell & Yik (1996) and Soto
37 et al. (2005), who suggest that greater emotional moderation and control is valued in
38 Chinese culture. Furthermore, traditional norms surrounding women's responsibility
39 for home and childcare appeared more deeply embedded in the Chinese than the British
40 context. Chinese men tend to hold a less egalitarian attitude than women (Tu & Chang,
41 2000). The Confucian doctrine that 'the best virtue of women is being an ideal wife
42 subordinating to her husband' at least continues in part in modern China. There are
43 no exceptions for well-educated female academics who have to perform the roles of
44 partner, mother and carer. This is reflected in other collectivist cultures (see Uppalury
45 & Racherla, 2014). Despite the prevailing dual-career and dual-income family model
46 in China, it is believed that men should take more responsibility for earning money and
47 creating wealth for the family. Consequently, confirming the findings of Chandra
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3 (2012) and Xiao and Cooke (2012), home responsibilities and childcare continue to
4 disproportionately fall upon women who also work full-time.

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6 At the HE institutional level, organisational practices and academic labour demand
7 emerged as themes within the interview accounts. British academics took advantage
8 of organisational flexible-working arrangements and/or WLB programmes, rarely
9 available to Chinese academics. Chinese universities did not have any formal WLB
10 policies and seemed less receptive to flexible working arrangements. Consequently,
11 WLB discourse usually resonates at the personal level and coping strategies are
12 predominantly individually driven. For both groups of academics, their options of
13 coping strategies are also constrained by the structural conditions of their work, such
14 as escalating job demands no longer bound by time or space, and changing
15 organisational working culture which encourages the competitive production of
16 research outputs as evidenced in both our study and existing studies (see Huppatz et al.,
17 2019). Fierce competition in academia, sophisticated technology and challenging
18 research projects, along with time constraints in managing the three-fold academic
19 functions of teaching, research and services (Ismail & Rasdi, 2007) is particularly
20 evident in the British context. Indeed, British academics have been found to work
21 over 50 hours during a typical week, struggling with excessive and unmanageable
22 workloads (UCU, 2016). In our study, few gender differences in terms of coping
23 strategies were surfaced in the British context. However, the UK academic
24 environment is found to have a strong gender divide (Fletcher et al., 2007). Despite
25 the continuing growth in the number of women working in UK HE, they still tend to be
26 underrepresented in the higher grades within universities (Locke & Bennion, 2010).
27 Coping with increasing academic labour demands including teaching, research,
28 administration and even student recruitment has disadvantaged women. In both
29 contexts, research and publication was a key indicator in the performance management
30 of academics, and male academics seemed to perform better than their female
31 counterparts. The growing competition and 'publish or perish' culture in academia
32 (Fanelli, 2010) thus poses an additional strain on women who are often marginalised
33 from mainstream academic circles partially aggravated by the "structural male
34 dominance of academia" (Ismail & Rasdi, 2007, p.157). It seems that in our study
35 that regardless of context female academics were disadvantaged in career development.

36
37 At the academics' level, there is evidence of both female and male academics
38 negotiating desirable and significant personal and/or family resources in pursuit of
39 WLB. Consistent with previous research (Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Ren & Foster, 2011;
40 Xiao & Cooke, 2012), the study finds that grandparent support with childcare, less-
41 readily available to the British academics, but considered as normal in China. With
42 familial support widely available and some degree of informal organisational assistance,
43 Chinese female academics had greater capabilities to maintain a balanced life than their
44 British counterparts. Partner support was also seen to improve WLB experiences by
45 both British and Chinese academics, which is congruent with previous studies (Aryee
46 et al., 1999; Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983; Bröckel, 2018;
47 Hennekam et al., 2019; Lo et al., 2003; Ren & Foster, 2011). At this level, another
48 influential factor is that of personal career aspirations. Research conducted in the
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Western context shows that male academics continue to place work ahead of family commitments (Damaske et al., 2014) since they have more control over their own time and more ability to divide their time between family and work than their female counterparts (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). This is little evidenced in the British context in our study. But it is certainly evident that ambitious Chinese male academics were more willing to tolerate work-life imbalance. This suggests the traditional Chinese work ethic, in which career achievement is privileged over family life or leisure, prevails. This also may also account for Chinese male academics overwhelmingly reporting work pressure and an imbalanced life. On the other hand, most Chinese female academics privileged home and family roles, sometimes a choice whilst at other times a cultural expectation. Nonetheless, unequal family responsibilities was recognised by female academics in both contexts as constituting the main obstacles to their WLB and career development. This concurs with what Kinman and Jones (2008) found that female academics were disproportionately affected by the complexities of juggling between childcare and an academic career. Career-oriented men and women differ in negotiating their roles, with women considering themselves as juggling a variety of roles whilst men focus on their careers (Emslie & Hunt, 2009).

Conclusions and implications

This study highlights the importance of critically examining contextual factors in order to better comprehend gender differences in WLB and implications for careers. Six multilevel factors – including political-legal frameworks and socio-cultural values at the country level, organisational practices and academic labour demand at the HE institutional level, and individual/family resources and personal career aspirations at the academics' level – and their constant intertwining were found to shape individual academics' choices of WLB strategy which in turn, resulted in diverging career paths.

Comparing the two contexts, there was greater political-legal influence on British than Chinese academics, but social-cultural values impacted more directly on Chinese than British academics. The increasingly competitive HE institutional environment in both contexts was perceived to have detrimental effects on academics. For individual academics, whilst it is quite clear that the availability of individual/family resources determined their experiences of WLB in both contexts, personal career aspirations appeared to be more influential to the Chinese than British academics. Most significantly, we have found that the coping strategies adopted by male and female academics differed with a much more marked gender difference in the Chinese than the British context.

Gender, as a lived socio-cultural phenomenon, permeates the three levels and plays a core part in analysing the root causes of men and women's experiences of WLB. We offer three concluding observations and their implications:

Firstly, individual academics' choices and decisions were made as a result of persistent gendered assumptions in society and in workplaces. This echoes Moen (2015, p.177) who argues that individual choices are constrained by "social relationships and institutional arrangements that reproduce gendered choices and inequalities in people's lives, at work and at home". This gender inequality reflects

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3 constraints at the political and societal level, demands and expectations at the workplace,
4 and economic pressures at the household level (Hobson, 2011). This is particularly
5 acute in the Chinese context due to a greater perceived economic responsibility for
6 family upon Chinese men, as well as to the centuries-old patriarchal, gendered roles in
7 the Chinese society. Looking ahead, the two-child policy may exacerbate a vicious
8 circle of gender inequality with women having fewer resources and diminishing
9 bargaining power in the labour markets (Qian & Jin, 2018). Chinese companies have
10 been reported to avoid hiring young women because of reluctance to pay for multiple
11 episodes of maternity leave (The Economist, 2018).
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15 Secondly, the flexibility and freedom of academia afforded academics scope to
16 exercise personal agency in terms of coping strategies. Interestingly, this has different
17 consequences for each context and each gender. For British academics, this flexibility
18 did not improve their WLB. Instead, it often led them to feel trapped between the ‘two
19 greedy institutions’ - the family and the university (Currie et al., 2000; Devine et al.,
20 2011). For Chinese female academics, this flexibility legitimised and accentuated
21 their chief role at home. Nevertheless, by taking advantage of readily available
22 family/social support and few non-academic demands they appeared to avoid feeling
23 trapped in quite the same way and considered their WLB as acceptable. This reasserts
24 that individual choice, shaped by the socio-cultural norms and organisational practices,
25 can both prevent and promote gains in women’s agency in the context of WLB. For
26 Chinese male academics, flexibility and mobility at work means greater agency to make
27 better and more effective choices of their work and career pursuits than their female
28 counterparts.
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33 Thirdly, in both contexts, gendered career paths were obvious. They were
34 fostered by individual behaviours as well as being institutionally embedded. For some
35 academics, especially male academics, intensified academic labour, which led to a
36 work-life imbalance, appears to be self-imposed and based on individual’s career
37 aspirations. For others, especially female academics, this was seen as the outcome of
38 structural constraints under the expectations of universities as well as cultural barriers
39 in progressing within academia. Both groups of women were experiencing a non-
40 linear, challenging career path with slower progression and fewer career achievements
41 in comparison to their male counterparts. This has wider implications for female
42 academics carving out a career in academia amongst their many other roles. As
43 Dickens (1998) and Doherty & Manfredi (2006) point out, associating organisational
44 commitment with long working hours, often necessary for career progression, operates
45 as indirect gender discrimination. Marketisation of HE emphasising performativity
46 and outputs, leads to intensification and pressure that disproportionately impacts female
47 academics (Asirvatham & Humphries, 2019). Both negative stereotypes and feelings
48 of powerlessness can reduce women’s performance. Huppertz et al. (2019) suggest that
49 women can compete with men for top positions in academia only when women release
50 themselves from caring duties. Nowadays, it seems easier to choose to be single or
51 childless, ‘but once the choice to have children is made, the old processes of gendering
52 set in once again’ (Bradley, 2007, p.136).
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3 Political-legal changes alone would be inadequate. As Bradley (2007, p.199)
4 states, 'a broader social movement is needed, which keeps up the struggle to change
5 'hearts and minds''. Turning to practice, greater gender equality could be promoted
6 through networking that influences career advancement in academia (Acker, 2006),
7 such as women's committees and collaborative research, to confront the structural
8 barriers that denied them access to professional academic networking (Ismail & Rasdi,
9 2007; Asirvatham & Humphries, 2019). Women's collective and more focused
10 activity can bring about transformation, but progress can be limited by the institutional
11 environment. Therefore, there seems a significant role for institutions in terms of
12 providing structural scaffolding that can empower women. To support female
13 colleagues in developing their professional identity and greater self-confidence an
14 effective mentoring system could be established. Further, identifying female role
15 models who do not submit to prevailing norms may make women feel more comfortable
16 challenging those norms.

17
18 We view our study as contributing to understanding the lived experience of
19 academics seeking to balance work and life in culturally diverse contexts. We have
20 achieved this through a comparative analytical approach to uncover the intertwining
21 nature of the factors in the country, HE institutional and individual academics' levels.
22 These contextual factors have contributed to the gendered nature of choices and
23 decisions made in WLB and careers. Future research could explore how individuals can
24 reflexively examine their ingrained beliefs and assumptions to enhance their individual
25 and collective capacity in regard to WLB and career choices.

26 27 28 **Acknowledgments**

29 We would like to thank the academics in British and Chinese universities who
30 participated in this study to contribute their valued thoughts and reflections. In
31 particular, for so generously giving their discretionary time to talk about the positive
32 and challenging experiences of balancing life and work. We would also like to thank
33 the reviewers for their helpful and detailed comments which have enabled us to develop
34 the paper.

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Table 1 Interviewee Background

<i>Country</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Relationship status (including children)</i>	<i>Academic role</i>	<i>Institutional orientation</i>	<i>Length of service</i>
China	Female: 11 Male: 8	21-34: 7 35-49: 12	Single: 3 Married with child(ren): 12 Married without children: 4	Lecturer: 10 Associate professor: 7 Professor: 2	Research intensive: 9 Teaching intensive: 10	Ranging from 2 to 23 years
UK	Female: 11 Male: 7	21-34: 4 35-49: 13 50+: 1	Single: 2 Long term relationship: 6 Married with child(ren): 8 Married without children: 2	Lecturer: 9 Senior lecturer: 7 Reader: 1 Professor: 1	Research intensive: 11 Teaching intensive: 7	Ranging from 3 to 25 years

Figure 1 The interplay of multilevel factors leading to gendered differences in WLB and career paths

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