

A Response to Joan Kofodimos

Paula J. Caproni

University of Michigan

Although I hadn't thought of it at the time I wrote my critique of the work/life balance literature, I agree with Kofodimos that my reading and interpretation of her book were influenced by my own mastery-oriented lenses. I certainly did not pursue an MBA and a Ph.D. and end up on the Michigan Business School faculty without a pronounced tendency toward mastery. Undoubtedly, these lenses make me react more strongly—both more positively and more critically—than most people toward her book and the work/life balance literature in general.

For example, I feel very strongly about Kofodimos's theory about the "spiraling cycle of imbalance" that she describes in her article, "Why Executives Lose Their Balance" (1990), as well as in her book, *Balancing Act* (1993). It is one of the most insightful and compassionate theories I've read in the work/life balance literature. Indeed, for 5 years I've been ending my MBA managerial skills courses with a module called "Crafting a Life," and I always begin this module with a presentation and discussion of Kofodimos's theory about how the search for mastery at the expense of intimacy too often results in negative consequences for individual and organizational well-being. I truly believe that Kofodimos's research in this area has changed the life course of many of the students in my classes and my own life course as well.

Just as my mastery-oriented lenses help me appreciate, in a very deep way, both the beauty and usefulness of this theory, these same lenses (together with my feminist and critical lenses) make me frustrated and grumpy when I encounter popular and scholarly discourse that makes one's life and life choices appear less ambiguous and unpredictable than they actually are and that treat balance as more desirable and attainable than it actually is for many people. As I noted in my article, my concern is that such discourse perpetuates yet another achievement-oriented, idealized image—that of the balanced individual who can graciously have it all.

Kofodimos, in doing her research and writing her book, faced a particularly difficult dilemma: how to inspire mastery-oriented individuals to think critically about their lives and consider making changes that could enrich their lives. One could argue quite reasonably that using the language of goals, strategies, and action plans that is so much a part of modern organizational life is a useful means by which to inspire critical thought and personal change because it is a language that is familiar and credible to mastery-oriented organizational men and women. Simply stated, it may make sense to help people find their way out of a mastery-oriented life by encouraging them to use the language and tools they already have.

But one could also argue quite reasonably that suggesting to mastery-oriented individuals that they should identify clear goals (despite the very natural and unavoidable human tendency toward ambivalence), develop concrete strategies, and systematically move toward their goals (despite the unpredictable twists and turns that will undoubtedly come their way) may perpetuate rather than alleviate their mastery-oriented tendencies. Using such language to inspire mastery-oriented individuals to reflect on and change their lives is a bit like suggesting to alcoholics that they sit down and have a drink while thinking about how they might stop drinking. The recommended solution becomes part of the problem.

I know, of course, that these interpretations were never Kofodimos's intent, but that is the beauty and bane of the written word. Once written and made public for others to read, one's words become community property, open to negotiation and renegotiation throughout the passage of time, experience, and culture. In my view, interpreting a text from a different vantage point is different from misreading that text. I have no doubt that, like Kofodimos, I will read her book and the literature on work/life balance, as well as my critique of this literature, differently as I go through my own life stages. What is even more important to me is that our children will try to make sense of what Kofodimos and I are trying to say about our lives as they attempt to better understand—and live—their own lives. I hope our words will be helpful to them.

I am thankful that the paper on which my article, "Work/Life Balance: You Can't Get There From Here" (Caproni, 1997 [this issue]), was based has been well received by many of those who have read it. I am even more thankful that scholars and practitioners such as Joan Kofodimos were courageous enough to address the issue of work/life balance long before it was fashionable to do so, before such discussions were considered interesting journalism, and when doing such research was not seen as a career-enhancing choice. Many men, women, children, and organizations have benefited from their efforts. I most certainly have.

REFERENCES

- Caproni, P. (1997). Work/life balance: You can't get there from here. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 33(1), 46-56.
- Kofodimos, J. (1990, Summer). Why executives lose their balance. *Organizational Dynamics*, pp. 58-73.
- Kofodimos, J. (1993). *Balancing act: How managers can integrate successful careers and fulfilling personal lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.