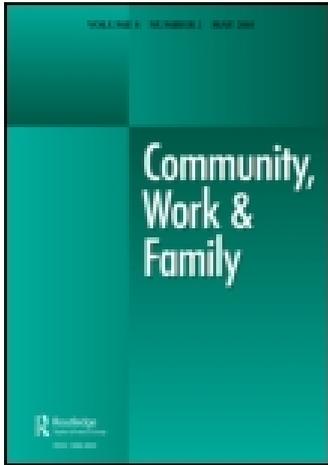


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Autonomy: the panacea for self-employed women's work-life balance?

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Autonomy: the panacea for self-employed women's work-life balance?

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This study aims to increase our knowledge of the work-life balance (WLB) of self-employed workers, a changing but often neglected group in work–family research. A growing number of women are starting their own business in order to combine paid work and family life. This interview study ($N=24$) examines how self-employed women with children feel they manage paid work and other life domains in the Netherlands. Autonomy appeared to be an important resource, allowing them to combine their work more easily with childcare, household duties, and social and personal life. However, the degree and nature of that autonomy and the ability to use it varied among the self-employed in this study owing to work-related factors such as sector, work location, employees, and years of experience. Another important resource leading to greater satisfaction with the WLB was the ability to define and reflect on personal goals in work and other life domains.

Keywords: self-employment; autonomy; work-life balance; the Netherlands

Este estudio pretende aumentar el conocimiento sobre el balance entre el trabajo y la vida de los trabajadores (los autónomos), un grupo variable y muchas veces abandonado en la investigación en lo relativo al trabajo – la familia. Especialmente las mujeres empiezan sus propias empresas para conciliar vida laboral y familiar. Este estudio con la ayuda de entrevistas ($N=24$) examina las experiencias de varias mujeres autónomas con hijos que organizan el trabajo remunerado con otros dominios de la vida en los Países Bajos. Resultaba que trabajar por cuenta propia es una solución para esas mujeres para combinar el trabajo con el cuidado de los niños, el manejo de la casa, la vida social y la vida privada. Sin embargo, en este estudio la medida y el tipo de la autonomía y la capacidad de utilizarlo varía. Está influido por factores relacionados con el tipo de trabajo como el sector, el lugar laboral, el personal contratado y los años de experiencia. Además, para las trabajadoras ha sido muy importante definir y reflejar los objetivos personales en el trabajo y en otros dominios de la vida para sentirse contentas con el balance ‘work – life.’

Palabras claves: trabajar por cuenta propia; autonomía; lo relativo al trabajo – la familia; los Países Bajos

Introduction

Self-employment has become an increasingly important source of jobs in the past 20 years. More and more women are starting up their own business (in 2009, 30.4% of self-employed in Europe were female, Holthuis & Pratt, 2010) and the option of

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combining work and family life is important to many. This is less so for men (Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Myrie & Daly, 2009; Tuttle & Garr, 2009). Self-employment offers autonomy and flexibility, increasing a person's ability to balance work, personal, and family life (Benz & Frey, 2003; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Prottas & Thompson, 2006). However, many self-employed persons also feel more engaged in their work because they are personally responsible for the survival of their enterprise. Greater engagement may be incompatible with other life domains that cannot be resolved by job or time/spatial autonomy. The benefits of autonomy may be offset by relatively longer and irregular work hours, more job insecurity and less social support (Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001). There is conflicting evidence regarding the relationship between the work-life balance (WLB) and self-employment, and more research is needed to understand the conditions that influence the WLB of the self-employed (Loscocco, 1997; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001).

The focus of this interview study is self-employed women with children in the Netherlands. It examines how self-employed women manage paid work and other life domains and the role of autonomy in this process. Self-employment is expected to provide a high degree of autonomy. The work–family literature views autonomy as an important resource in balancing work and personal life, alongside social support (Valcour, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004). Unlike employees, the self-employed do not have a contract specifying their work hours, days off, or pay. They ‘maintain economic activity which is outside any relation of subordination, under that individual's own responsibility, and in return for remuneration paid to that individual directly’ (Cadenau, 2008, p. 7). In general, the self-employed report having more job and time/spatial autonomy than employed workers (Taris, Geurts, Kompier, Lagerveld, & Blonk, 2008; Tuttle & Garr, 2009). However, the degree of autonomy may differ from one person to other. Self-employment covers a wide range of different contexts: business owners with employees, craft workers, traders, and farmers (who often work with family members), traditional ‘independent professionals,’ such as doctors and lawyers (who must meet specific requirements and comply with regulations), skilled workers in unregulated occupations, and workers in unskilled occupations (Pedersini & Coletto, 2010). So far, most researchers have treated the self-employed as a single group and paid little attention to the influence of the self-employment category or working conditions on the role of autonomy in balancing work and family life (Loscocco, 1997; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001).

This study aims to explore the way self-employed women in different work contexts experience their WLB and the role of autonomy therein. The participants worked in different sectors (training and development, business services, commercial services, and health care), and their self-employment category varies within those sectors (solo, small business owner with employees, or working with one or more business partners), work location and years of self-employment. We focus only on women because past research has shown that they tend to choose self-employment as a means of balancing work and other life domains (Rouse & Kitching, 2006; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). In the Netherlands, women still bear the main responsibility for childcare and household tasks, so finding a balance between paid work and care tasks is highly relevant for the self-employed women in our study (Peper, van Doorne-Huiskes, & den Dulk, 2005). All the participants were either co-habiting or married, had a working partner, and at least one child younger than 12 years. WLB is not only an important indicator of the

well-being of self-employed women, but also influences the survival of their business (Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Myrie & Daly, 2009; Williams, 2004).

So far, there has been little research into the way self-employed women perceive their WLB. Research on the WLB tends to focus on employees in large organizations (Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001). It is unclear whether these findings can be generalized to the self-employed because their work situation differs in many respects from employees. Research on female entrepreneurs, on the other hand, tends to focus on why they have become self-employed and less on how they balance work and personal life (Boden, 1999; Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Myrie & Daly, 2009; SER, 2010). By investigating the experiences of self-employed women, we shed light on how their specific work context shapes their WLB. We show that the degree and nature of autonomy varies between such women, that they do not always make successful use of their autonomy, and we explore why this is so. We explain why autonomy is not always positively related to a better WLB. Moreover, our findings reveal the importance of defining and reflecting on personal objectives in the work *and* other life domains. Below, we discuss our theoretical background and methodology and present our findings. We conclude the article with a discussion.

Theoretical background

Most self-employed persons start their own business because they want to earn a higher income and/or gain greater autonomy (Eurobarometer, 2009; Kelley, Singer, & Herrington, 2011). Some people are forced into self-employment because they lack alternatives, however (Tuttle & Garr, 2009). In Europe, 55% of the newly self-employed stated that they wanted a higher income and/or greater autonomy; 28% said they were forced into self-employment. The Eurobarometer survey shows that the vast majority of self-employed persons in Denmark and the Netherlands were acting on an opportunity (81 and 78%, respectively); this percentage was also remarkably high in Portugal (75%) (Eurobarometer, 2009; Kelley, Singer, & Herrington, 2011). In Estonia, Bulgaria, and Greece, only 36–39% of the self-employed were opportunity-driven (Eurobarometer, 2009). Research suggests that women who are voluntarily self-employed are more satisfied with their WLB than women who are forced into self-employment (Hughes, 2003).

The Netherlands has witnessed a recent increase in self-employed women. The increase is related to the introduction of various policy measures that try to stimulate self-employment, such as the introduction and intensifying of various tax deductions, the ability to keep unemployment benefits during the start-up phase, and the reduction of administrative burdens (Van Es & Van Vuuren, 2010). In 2010, 40% of new self-employed persons were women, compared to 31% in 2006 (Dutch Chamber of Commerce, 2010). Overall, 13.5% of the Dutch workforce is self-employed, with women accounting for 36%. This is similar to other northern European countries but lower than in southern or eastern Europe (Holthuis & Pratt, 2010). Dutch self-employed women tend to be concentrated in feminine sectors such as retail, health, and personal services (including well-being) (Cadenau, 2008). For many women, self-employment means having flexible work schedules (time and/or spatial autonomy), allowing them to remain active on the labor market and take care of children at the same time.

The ideology of motherhood is still deeply rooted in the Netherlands. Although the majority of women continue working after having children, most will not dispute that motherhood comes first and work must not interfere with their children's well-being. The motherhood culture is embedded in Dutch political and cultural history, but it is also sustained because most couples do not feel under pressure to maintain two full-time jobs (van Doorne-Huiskes & den Dulk, 2011). In fact, the one-and-a-half earner model, in which the father works full time and mother part time, is predominant among couples with children. Part-time employment is very common in the Netherlands, in particular among women. In 2010, 76.2% of the Dutch female working population worked part time (vs. 31.4% in Europe) (Eurostat, 2012). Of these, 31.5% cite childcare and household duties as the main motivation for working part time (vs. 4.2% of their male counterparts) (Statistics Netherlands, 2012). Part-time work is also common among self-employed persons without employees; 34% of self-employed persons in this category work part time (Statistics Netherlands, 2011). Working part time is a compromise between traditional and modern motherhood, allowing women to enjoy personal development while taking on much of the childcare themselves. This is also reflected in the part-time use of childcare facilities in the Netherlands (2–3 days week) (van Doorne-Huiskes & den Dulk, 2011). Hence, traditional gender patterns of labor division have not fundamentally changed in the Netherlands and affect the way self-employed women experience their WLB.

The term WLB is much debated and used in various ways (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska, 2009; Eikhof, Warhurst, & Haunchild, 2008; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006; Languilaire, 2009; Ransome, 2007). WLB often refers to a harmonious interface between different life domains, or '... a lack of conflict or interference between work and family roles' (Frone, 2003, p. 145). In this study, WLB is defined as the ability to meet personal objectives in both work and personal life (Campbell Clark, 2000, Greenhaus, Allen, & Spector, 2006). This definition acknowledges that the significance of work and personal life can differ between individuals and that private-life encompasses more than the family role alone (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011). We have chosen this definition because we wish to understand how women experience combining paid work and other life domains and the role of autonomy in that process. This implies that a subjective interpretation is useful.

The theoretical framework most widely used to analyze whether workers have a satisfactory WLB is the resources–demands approach (Valcour, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004). This approach generally assumes that people need resources to meet their work and household demands. When resources lag behind the demands made on workers in various life domains, they may experience tension and feelings of stress and these are likely to affect their perceived WLB (Moen & Chermack, 2005; den Dulk et al., 2011). Job autonomy and social support are thought to be important resources for avoiding tensions between life domains (Valcour, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004). In this study, we specifically look at the role of autonomy.

Traditionally, autonomy is defined as the freedom and discretion to decide when, where, and how a job should be carried out (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Autonomy is often measured by job autonomy and time/spatial autonomy. Job autonomy means the opportunity to learn new things, job creativity, fewer repetitive tasks, the freedom to decide how to do a job and what it involves, and inventiveness. Time/spatial autonomy is the freedom to decide *when* and *where* to do one's job (Pisljar, van der Lippe, & den Dulk, 2011) and to adjust work hours and work location to one's private life.

According to recent contradictory findings regarding the role of autonomy, however, the freedom to decide how, when, and where to do a job does not necessarily lead to a better WLB. Large-scale research showed that employees with higher levels of autonomy experienced more rather than less work-home interference (Drobnič & Guillén Rodríguez, 2011; Schieman, Milkie, & Galvin, 2009). Drobnič and Guillén Rodríguez (2011) suggest that workers are not always able to use their autonomy and that more research is needed. A qualitative study on self-employed women provides an excellent opportunity to study whether and how working conditions influence the way autonomy affects WLB experiences.

We also investigate whether self-employed women experience similar levels of job and time/spatial autonomy or whether they vary in that respect. As argued before, most studies do not look at the differences between groups of self-employed, even though self-employment covers a wide range of different contexts (Pedersini & Coletto, 2010). In this study, we take the heterogeneity of self-employment into account when examining the degree and nature of perceived autonomy.

Scholars also argue that self-employed persons meet heavier demands (greater work engagement and longer working hours) than employees because they are personally responsible for the survival of their company. Hundley (2001) argues that the stakes for the self-employed vary; he found that although they may have, on average, made a larger financial and psychological investment in their business, the size of the stake varies widely, ranging from nearly everything (such as the entrepreneur who backs a single product) to almost nothing (such as the professional who can easily switch to organizational work). This is supported by Prottas and Thompson (2006), who found that independent contractors and small business owners differed in the way they used their autonomy: the greater pressure associated with small business ownership appeared to detract from the advantages of autonomy. Independent contractors were better able to benefit from greater autonomy. In our study, we will explore how the ability to use autonomy to reach a good WLB varies across sectors and self-employment category.

Research among employees who telework further suggests that the influence of autonomy is not only related to work pressure, but also to the ability to set goals and priorities (Fenner & Renn, 2010). We found that the latter is also important in achieving a good WLB. Setting goals and priorities is part of time management, that is, the ability to schedule, plan and organize activities (MacAn, 1994). Fenner and Renn (2010) found that employees who set goals and priorities on a daily basis are better able to avoid tensions between life domains than employees without time management skills. In the latter case, the freedom to decide when and where to work often resulted in more rather than less work-family conflict.

To summarize, most workers become self-employed because they gain autonomy and flexibility, allowing them to balance work and personal life (Benz & Frey, 2003; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Prottas & Thompson, 2006). Self-employed persons should therefore be able to meet personal goals in both their work and personal life relatively easily. However, recent literature suggests that job and time/spatial autonomy does not necessarily lead to a better WLB (Drobnič & Guillén Rodríguez, 2011; Schieman et al., 2009). In addition, little attention has been given to variance within the group of self-employed persons and the conditions that might influence their ability to use autonomy. In this study, we explore the different roles of autonomy in balancing work and private-life across sector and self-employment category.

Method

Procedure

Since the aim of the study was to understand the opinions, interpretations, and subjective experiences of self-employed women regarding their WLB, an explorative approach was considered appropriate. A semi-structured questionnaire was constructed based on the sensitizing concepts in the literature. To do justice to the variance among self-employed women, we selected 24 women who work in different sectors and who vary in self-employment category, work location, and years of self-employment. Because we were interested in the influence of women's work situation on their perceived WLB, we limited variation in the home situation by selecting only women who lived together or were married, had a working partner, and at least one child younger than 12 years.

Participants

Participants were recruited in four sectors: training and development, business services, commercial services, and health care. These sectors were chosen because data show they are the most popular among Dutch self-employed women (Dutch Chamber of Commerce, 2010).

Six women were initially selected: a solo self-employed woman, a small employer, and a business partner, working either from home or outside the home and varying in sector and years of self-employment. After interviewing these six women, we invited other women to participate in our study and received 50 responses. Women working in training and development and in business services responded to a notice placed on an online platform for self-employed women (1000 members). Women working in health care responded to an online notice disseminated by their professional associations on the social media site LinkedIn. Women working in commercial services were more difficult to reach and were recruited by the snowball method, starting with our own network. Of all the women who responded to our notices, we selected those who responded first and met our sampling criteria. All the women selected were willing to participate; none declined. Within the four sectors, variation was ensured by selecting women with differing work locations, with and without employees, and differing years of experience.

In our sample, 14 of the women worked at home and 10 had an office at another location. Nine women were solo self-employed, three has employees, nine had a business partner, and three worked within a shared business venture. A shared business venture consists of three or more owners with shared responsibilities. In our study, this differs from self-employed with employees (single owner) and business partner (two owners with shared responsibilities). The women's years of self-employment ranged from 1 to 19 years. Fourteen women in our sample were main breadwinners; 10 women had a spouse who earned a similar or the main household income. Table 1 summarizes the participants' background information. In the interview invitation, women were asked to think beforehand about their priorities in work and private life. This was done to enhance the richness of the interview data.

Table 1. Profile of participants.

No	Name	Sector	Office location	Bread winner	Type of self-employment	Years SE
1	AS	Coach work-life balance	At home	Yes	3 Employees	8
2	IS	Personal coach and trainer	At home	Yes	Business partner	11
3	LK	Personal coach and owner coach network	At home	No	Business partner	10
4	JW	Spiritual coach	At home	Yes	Solo	4
5	GD	Coach mothers working at home	At home	No	Solo	12
6	YB	Coach for mothers looking for balance	At home	No	Solo	1
7	AZ	Two clothes shops	Outside	Yes	6 Employees	19
8	EC	Beauty salon, shop, and singing practice	At home	Yes	Spouse, 1 trainee	8
9	CS	Fitness club	At home	No	Business partner (sister); 6 employees	5
10	RB	Yoga school	Outside	No	Solo	6
11	LA	Restaurant and hotel chain	Outside	Yes	Spouse, 60 employees	11
12	IO	Café and restaurant	Outside	Yes	Business partner, 60 employees	2
13	HG	Secretary services	Outside	No	Business partner	5
14	MFB	Text writing and communication	At home	No	Solo	2
15	IH	Tax consultant	At home	No	Solo	1
16	GB	Recruitment agency	Outside	Yes	2 Employees	10
17	TT	Owner online network for self-employed	At home	Yes	Business partner	2
18	AE	Collection agency	Outside	Yes	Shared business venture (4 partners), 100 employees	10
19	RB	Birth attendant	Outside	Yes	Shared business venture (4 partners)	9
20	CK	Maternity nurse	Outside	No	Solo	5
21	AR	Speech therapist	At home	No	Solo	1
22	HB	Specialized childcare	At home	Yes	Solo	5
23	AB	Psychiatry	At home	Yes	Business partner	1
24	RB	General practitioner	Outside	Yes	Shared business venture (3 partners)	5

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through audio-taped interviews, lasting approximately 1.5 hours. The interviews took place between January and March 2011 at the women's offices or homes all around the Netherlands. The interviews covered several topics related to work-life experiences. First, respondents were asked to describe their life domains, consisting of work, family, social, and personal (Languilaire, 2009). Second, we

explained our definition of WLB as the ability to meet personal objectives in both work and personal life (Campbell Clark, 2000; Greenhaus et al., 2006). We asked women how conscious they were of that balance and how they perceived this process. Third, we asked them what helped them to maintain a good WLB (resources) and what restrictions they encountered (demands).

After transcribing the interviews, we initially used open coding to detect and identify data relevant to the research question. As the study progressed, coding focused on confirming, elaborating, and validating relationships between categories and the theory as a whole. After completing open coding, autonomy appeared to be a useful concept to understand women's success in meeting various role demands. We verified this in the final 10 interviews, which led to a more specific understanding of the role of autonomy in combining personal life and paid work. Axial coding categorization was used to categorize autonomy by job, spatial, and time. This was followed by selective coding, which involved looking for connections between categories and developing the framework for the emerging theory. Selective coding revealed, for example, that the degree and type of autonomy was influenced mainly by conditions related to sector and self-employment category. We found no further conditions in the final interviews to explain the influence of autonomy on work-life experiences. We had reached saturation point and could end the process of data collection (Boeije, 2010).

Findings

This study began as an exploration of how self-employed women manage paid work and other life domains. Early in the interviews, the importance of autonomy became evident. Participants said that the freedom to decide when, where, and how to work enhanced their WLB. However, self-employment was no guarantee of autonomy. The degree of freedom women experienced was influenced by their environment, the work context being our main interest in this study. We found that self-employed women in the same sector largely work under comparable conditions and experience similar work demands that affect their job and time/spatial autonomy (compare Bailyn, 2006). We will therefore begin by describing women's WLB experiences per sector (training and development, business services, commercial services, and health care). We will then focus on the role of autonomy and how it is shaped by different working conditions. Finally, we will discuss factors that influence the ability to use autonomy to achieve a good WLB.

Women's work-life experiences per sector

Training and development

Women working in training and development appeared to be more satisfied with their WLB than the women interviewed in other sectors. They were aware of their WLB and generally able to meet their personal objectives in work and other life domains. For these women, discovering personal goals is part of their job; they help others define life ends. They wanted to 'practice what they preach' and spent a lot of time on self-development outside and during work time. They used coaching techniques to improve their awareness of their own WLB, for example, looking at

their lives objectively, writing down their work and private goals, creating a vision board, making a wish list, and defining targets such as paying a minimum of three visits to the theater a year. They also reflected systematically on how they spent their energy during and at the end of the day: 'I'm continuously aware of how I feel. If I don't feel well, I look for the cause. I check whether I'm still working toward my goal.' (JW, coach)

All the women working in training and development had an office at home. Half worked solo and used this space to receive clients. The other half worked with a business partner, employed personnel, or worked with other self-employed persons and used external locations for their coaching sessions. Because, such sessions mainly took place during the evenings, these women were able to take care of their children at home during the day. The main difficulty cited by women working in training and development was 'feeling that their work was never done.' This made it difficult for them to meet objectives in their private life.

Business services

Like the women working in training and development, those working in business services were aware of their WLB. Their business was often a means of self-development. They frequently had a detailed business plan and had also defined important values in their private life. They used to-do lists and tried to manage their time between work and private life as effectively as possible. Like the women in training and development, then, they used work skills to achieve not only their work goals, but also their private goals. We can view this as an example of work-to-family enrichment, in which work skills contribute to the quality of life in the private domain (Greenhaus & Powel, 2006).

The women working in business services found their WLB satisfactory. As key demands, they listed meetings in the evenings, lack of time to implement all their ideas, paperwork, and employee and client expectations. In their private life, they found it difficult to combine their work with their partner's job, with their desire to spend more time with the family, and with taking care of their children and other family members such as their parents.

Commercial services

All the women working in commercial services had employees and four of them also worked with a business partner; in two cases, this was also their spouse. While the previous two categories of women often worked part time, all the interviewees in commercial services worked full time or more. They were or wanted to be the main breadwinner and wanted career success; they focused mainly on results, power, challenges, and financial rewards:

I enjoy seeing my business flourish. I like to work, but as an entrepreneur I take a lot of risks. I have 60 employees who all want to earn a decent living. I know I'm responsible for that. But, I'm not dissatisfied with my salary. (IO, commercial services)

Women working in commercial services were less aware of how they managed their work and private demands. They reacted more than acted:

If I don't feel guilty, then it's ok. If I'm already gone when my children wake up and come back after they go to bed for a few weeks, then I feel guilty. If I feel guilty enough, I know it's time to rebalance and make some choices. (IO, commercial services)

In general, the women we spoke appeared to be the least satisfied with their WLB. They felt they were unable to achieve their objectives in their personal life and often felt guilty about not spending enough time with their children, partner, and family. They also reported a heavy workload, which they attributed to the economic crisis, increasing customer demands and travel time.

Health care

Women working in health care had different work goals than the other women interviewed. They mainly wanted to take care of others: 'If a woman is in need, in a delivery, someone needs to go. And if they call me and say the situation is urgent, I don't turn them down. That's the Mother Theresa in me' (CK, health care).

Women working in health care appeared to be sensitive to their WLB and relatively highly satisfied with it. They did not think up strategies or write plans, but often took time to reflect on their WLB. Sharing their thoughts and perceptions with others, such as their partners or colleagues, also helped these women define and meet their personal goals:

Then it's like: what if we do this, how would that be? We come up with scenarios. If we do this, it would affect the children that way, and do we want that? I don't write our scenarios down. We talk about it once a month. (RB, health care)

The main demands they mentioned were working when friends and family have time off, emotional events at work that preoccupied them in their free time, and time pressure. The women we spoke also reported struggling with feelings of perfectionism and guilt toward friends and family. All worked full time at patients' homes or at a doctor's practice. They often had a spouse who worked at home or had a flexible job and took care of the children when they were at work.

Autonomy

Autonomy generally appeared to be an important motive for self-employment. Women working in training and development started their own business mainly to gain more time autonomy. They also gained spatial autonomy because all had an office at home. Women working in health care had more job autonomy in self-employment because they were not under the time pressure that they would have felt working for an organization. They were therefore able to pay more attention to their patients, which increased their job satisfaction. For women working in health care and commercial services, job autonomy was more important than time/spatial autonomy. Women working in commercial services wanted to 'live their dream' and be creative. They also found it important to work independently, the main motivation for those working in business services too.

All the participants noted the importance of autonomy in setting and achieving goals that would bring them satisfaction in all life domains. Almost all the women in

this study said that they felt in charge of their life. They felt responsible for the choices they made at work and in private life, and accepted the outcomes of those choices. In their view, autonomy means freedom of choice:

I'm the director of my life. Every moment I'm able to choose. Even if I let myself be influenced by others, it's still my choice. Sometimes I'm aware of that when it happens, and then I ask myself: do I really want this? (HB, health care)

This definition follows Benz and Frey (2003), who found that people appreciate autonomy because they are free to select and complete tasks. However, the women in this study varied in their perceived degree of job and time/spatial flexibility depending on conditions related to their sector and self-employment category. We will discuss these context factors next.

Sector-related differences in autonomy

The women interviewed experienced autonomy in their jobs because they were able to do work they liked. However, those in the health sector felt their job autonomy was threatened by economic austerity and a greater emphasis on performance in their sector. They had to help more clients in the same time span, increasing their workload and producing a negative atmosphere. They felt tension between wanting to help clients – often their main reason for working in health care – and meeting performance indicators. Although self-employed, they felt less autonomy in their work because they had to comply with rules and general guidelines in their sector.

The prevailing work time regime in a sector influences women's time autonomy. The women working in commercial services ran businesses with set working hours. However, they did not see this as restricting their time autonomy. They all had employees, which allowed them to choose their own work hours. Because they did not have close or personal relationships with clients, they did not need to be present at the business all the time. Women working in health care experienced less time autonomy because their work hours were irregular and determined by their clients. It could be difficult for them to attend a party on weekends or schedule an appointment several weeks in advance because they did not know whether they had to work.

Women working in health care also felt constraints on their time autonomy because of their responsibilities toward their clients. Their clients' well-being was their top priority:

You can't say: 'Ok, I'm done, I'm going home so I can be on time for dinner'. You stay. Eventually, when the child is born, it gives me so much energy that it's all worth it, but at that moment . . . But it is what it is. In health care you work with human beings, you can't walk out whenever you want. (RB, health care)

Client expectations and responsibilities toward clients influenced women's job and time autonomy in other sectors too. Women working in training and development and in business services felt they had the greatest time autonomy because they could plan their appointments. However, sometimes they too felt constrained due to last-minute client expectations, specific wishes, or deadlines:

I find it difficult that my clients are women. They always say ‘Yes, but . . .’. Just count how many times women say ‘yes, but . . .’, you’ll be astonished. There’s always something that needs to be changed. At the last minute, of course. (HG, business service)

Another client expectation affecting the job autonomy of self-employed women is the use of social media. Whereas women working in training and development and business services thought social media and the Internet helped them find customers and keep their network up to date, women working in commercial services and health care considered them a ‘waste of time.’ They felt pressured to create a website and communicate with potential clients using Twitter or other social media tools. Some women found mobile devices to be practical, while others felt constrained by the pressure to be accessible at all times:

I have to use it, but I find Twitter so stupid, such a waste of time. Get a life, do something useful. My employees do it for me and on weekends I sometimes tweet from home. We cannot not do it, people need to be able to find us on the internet. (IO, commercial services)

The nature of the job influences women’s spatial autonomy. Women working in commercial services had to be available to clients and had an office or store outside their homes. They were positive about the separate location because they liked keeping their work and private-life separate. The only negative aspect mentioned was travel time. They tried to keep this as short as possible, finding it a ‘waste of time.’ Absence of travel time was the main reason women in business services worked from home, although they thought a separate office would look more professional. Women working in health care mainly worked outside the home; their spatial autonomy was limited, but they felt positive about keeping work and home separate.

Summarizing, the self-employed women in this study differ in the degree of job and time/spatial autonomy. Overall, women in health care felt they had the least autonomy; the nature of their work limited their time/spatial autonomy, and their job autonomy is declining because of growing work pressure due to austerity measures and higher performance targets in the health sector.

Self-employment category and autonomy

We made a distinction in this study between self-employed women who work solo, with a business partner, with their spouse, in a shared business venture, and who have employees. The type and degree of autonomy varied among these categories, as we explain below.

Working solo: freedom but no support

A third of the women interviewed worked solo, mainly as coaches or in health care. Many of them were not the main breadwinner but had a partner who was. They felt less stress about their income. They often chose to work independently because they wanted flexible work hours. This allowed them to combine work and childcare, which is important to them. Some who worked at home found it hard to avoid distraction, for example, when their children wanted attention or household chores needed to be done. Their spatial autonomy was sometimes limited by their financial

situation, because they could not afford a separate office or because of restricted childcare options. However, most women appreciated being able to do chores in between and not spending time traveling. They felt comfortable in their own environment. 'I love being able to drink my own coffee. Wherever I go, I'm always disgusted by the coffee. And another plus: I don't have to tell anyone about my weekend on Monday morning, wonderful!' (LK, coach).

The downside of working solo was not being able to discuss and review their work with others. They missed having social support at work (Taris et al., 2008). Insecurities about projects or decisions sometimes made them feel limited. To compensate for the lack of support at work, women attended network meetings or used social media such as Twitter and LinkedIn. In short, solo self-employed women enjoy autonomy on the one hand but feel they lack social support on the other.

Working with a business partner: adjusting time schedules to find support

Women who worked with a business partner, often in business or commercial services, said they appreciated the stability, getting feedback from their partner, being kept sharp and focused, and the inspiration. They felt braver in a team and sharing responsibilities, which gave them a sense of job autonomy. However, most partners found it difficult to meet regularly owing to their different time schedules.

The women who worked with their spouse struggled with their WLB. Although their spouses shared responsibilities and they felt supported in the work and family domains, their work dominated their private life. Conversations were mainly about their work, even at home, running the risk that they would become business partners rather than life partners. 'My spouse was focused on the business, which made me feel alone. I did not feel that we were raising a family together . . . we were running a business' (LA, commercial services).

Women working in a shared business venture also experienced a relatively high degree of autonomy because they were able to change work schedules and discuss important issues with their business partners. 'We discuss how we manage at home, and at work. We talk about it, give examples. And two of my partners are single, so that's nice – they can always change schedules' (RB, health care).

The women working in a shared business venture experienced less time autonomy because they had to meet, adjust their schedules, and work together more often. However, they felt they had more autonomy than working in an organization because they could change their schedule more easily. Summarizing, self-employed women with a business partner felt supported in their job. They experienced job autonomy, although time autonomy was somewhat restricted because they had to meet their partners regularly. Women who worked with their spouse felt that work dominated other life domains.

Self-employed with personnel

A third of the women had employees. They felt in charge of their business; they were 'the boss.' Women business owners need personnel to expand their business, but having employees is a huge responsibility. These women felt that they needed to 'carry the load,' inspire others, and maintain a good atmosphere and pleasant relations at work. They often felt that their employees were not flexible, which limited

their personal time autonomy. Employees often had certain expectations concerning job content, which felt restrictive. Some women preferred working with other self-employed persons in a network because they found others like them intrinsically more motivated to work hard.

Between autonomy and responsibility

Although a self-employed person's work context may give them autonomy, autonomy does not guarantee a better WLB (Burchell, 2002; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). We found that the ability to use autonomy to achieve a good WLB was restricted by heavy workloads and responsibility for the survival of the business.

Being the breadwinner

We found that women who were not breadwinners, often the solo workers, were better able to benefit from autonomy than women who earned the main income. Those women who were the main breadwinner felt responsible for supporting the family. They could not take breaks whenever they liked because they 'needed to earn their keep.' Almost all breadwinners felt a certain amount of tension between wanting to earn (more) money and spending (more) time with their family. They had the opportunity to spend a maximum amount of time on their business, which satisfied them because it allowed them to turn their ideas into reality. However, they also felt guilty toward their spouse and children for not spending enough time with them:

We are always looking for balance. I have my own business, which takes a lot of time and energy. But my spouse is always there for the children. It would be impossible if he worked as well or if I had another job. Our income would not be high enough. We choose not to send our children to day care, which means I have to work more. (RB, health care)

Responsibility for the success of the business

According to Brindley (2005), it is well established that women have an aversion to risk-taking. That may well be related to a short time horizon, with mothers seeking to generate immediate income from entrepreneurship while nurturing long-term aspirations for their careers. Risk aversion means that 'convenience entrepreneurs' (i.e., entrepreneurs motivated by the flexibility of operating their business around other life pursuits) make a low debt investment but compensate with high personal investment (Jayawarna, Rouse, & Kitching, 2011). In our study, however, the women working in commercial services are an exception. They did invest in their business (they owned a shop, a fitness club, or a restaurant), which affected their WLB. They worked longer hours and felt more responsible for the survival of the business.

Breadwinners in our study felt more stress and had a heavier workload because they ran a business and wanted to take care of their family. However, all the women in this study, whether they were breadwinners or invested a lot in their business, felt responsible for the success of their enterprise. They felt time pressure because they wanted to work hard on their business but also needed time to meet their private-life goals. They felt guilty toward family and friends and often felt that 'their work was

never done.’ However, although under time pressure, they were generally satisfied with their WLB. In most cases they were able to use their autonomy to help balance work and family life thanks to two ‘success factors’: setting goals and priorities and gaining self-confidence through experience.

Feeling balanced

Goals and priorities

According to Campbell Clark (2000), the WLB depends on how individuals manage the boundaries between work and life. She assumes that they are aware of the domains and the demands of their role. We found that only women working in training and development and in business services were conscious of their WLB. All the self-employed women we interviewed claimed that balance is about managing boundaries but starts with an awareness of life domains, goals, and priorities:

By thinking about my feelings and incentives I have become increasingly convinced of my vision. It would benefit me to write down my motives; right now they are not really clear to me. And the clearer they are, the better I’m able to prioritize. (AR, health care)

In line with Fenner and Renn (2010), we found that women who were aware of their goals and priorities at work *and* in their personal life were more capable of using job and time/spatial autonomy to meet their priorities. The more aware women were of their goals in work and life domains, the better they were able to handle the demands made on them, and the more content they felt. Women working in training and development were most aware of their goals, because they applied concepts from their own practice. This is an example of work-to-family enrichment: women’s private-life benefited from skills learned at work (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Women working in business services planned their goals and targets systematically. Women working in both these sectors often reflected on their personal goals, for example, by discussing them with others or by spending quality time alone. Women working in health care were sensitive to their feelings of WLB satisfaction, and reflected on them by talking to their partner, family and friends. Women working in commercial services were very work oriented but less aware of their personal life goals and their WLB. On top of their heavy workloads and responsibility for the business, they found it difficult use their autonomy to balance work and personal life.

Confidence as a resource

One of the criteria on which we selected the women in this study was number of years of self-employment. In general, the longer women had run their own business, the more problems they had faced, and the more they had learned. Their experience had brought them such skills as delegating, communicating, maintaining their boundaries, flexibility, acceptance, and reflection. ‘You become more capable. Things I find normal now would have kept me awake all night. I would make plans, but I didn’t know how they would turn out. In the beginning everything was exciting’ (RD, commercial service).

The more experienced women in this study knew better what was important for their business. They were better at giving instructions. They were also more aware of

their personal goals in private life, especially if they had experienced burn-out, health problems, divorce, or a difficult pregnancy. The experience women gained in their work related to their experience in life. Both types of experience together gave them an important resource: confidence. Trusting that things would turn out all right made them more likely to use their autonomy:

Faith. It helps me let go of something for a moment. I don't have to deal with it right now, I don't have to call right back, respond to an email, face the problem right now. I've had so many difficulties, but I still have a fantastic life. Experience taught me to trust life. What happens to me now will be useful later, although I don't know exactly how. (IS, coach)

In summary, two important factors that allow self-employed women to benefit from job and time/spatial autonomy are the ability to set goals and priorities in both work and personal life and the self-confidence that comes with the years.

Discussion

This study describes the role of autonomy as an important resource used by Dutch self-employed women to balance their work and personal life. Our findings confirm previous research that a high level of autonomy helps people realize their personal ends in work and private life. In addition, the study shows that self-employed women are a heterogeneous group with different levels and types of autonomy. Not only is the nature of the work relevant, but also the prevailing work time regime and client expectations. Women working in health care are particularly restricted in their job and time/spatial autonomy compared to women working in the other sectors investigated.

In addition to variation in the level and nature of autonomy, our findings indicate that self-employed women are not always able to use autonomy successfully. We found both constraining and stimulating factors that explain why autonomy is not always positively related to WLB. First, a heavy workload can result in time pressure that cannot be resolved by autonomy, simply because there are only 24 hours in a day. In our study, only a few women working in commercial services felt that such heavy demands prevented them from reaching goals in their private life. This might be more salient in contexts in which part-time work is less common as it is in the Netherlands.

Second, feeling responsible for the survival of the business can lead to greater work engagement and feeling pressured. This was especially true of women who were breadwinners or running a greater financial risk owing to their investment (Jayawarna, Rouse, & Kitching, 2011). In our study, these women worked mainly in commercial services. Many of our interviewees were not the main breadwinner, making it easier for them to use their autonomy and adapt their hours to their care responsibilities at home. This is common in the Netherlands, where many women work to supplement the household income and are not economically independent; their male partners bear the main responsibility for supporting the family (van Doorne-Huiskes & den Dulk, 2011).

Two conditions had a positive effect on the way women used their autonomy: self-confidence and the ability to set goals and priorities in both work and personal

life. The longer they were self-employed, the more stressful situations they had encountered, and the more confident they were in using autonomy to suit their own aims and wishes. Our study also shows how important it is for the self-employed to define and reflect on personal objectives in work and other life domains in order to increase satisfaction with their WLB. Reflection offers direction and the ability to set priorities. This may be even more important for self-employed persons than for the employees studied by Fenner and Renn (2010), because the self-employed must set their own business goals, which are often related to their personal goals. Campbell Clark (2000) assumes that individuals are aware of their personal ends in work and private life, and just need to find the appropriate resources to fulfill them. We found that self-employed women are not always aware of their personal ends, especially not in private life. Awareness of their life goals helped them manage work and personal life and use autonomy effectively. A lack of such awareness might explain why in some cases, autonomy does not lead to a good WLB.

In this study, women working in training and development and in business services were aware of their goals and personal aims across life domains. They used skills gained in their work to reflect on their goals and priorities in both their work and personal life. The enrichment perspective maintains that experience gained in one's work role generates resources that may be used profitably in other life roles, thereby enhancing the quality of life (Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). This conclusion should be treated with caution, however, since women who enjoy spending time reflecting and formulating goals in life may also be more likely to work as a coach or in training and business services. The interviewees working in training and development may have also been trained to answer questions about their WLB. They had backgrounds in psychology or coaching and would have been trained to ask questions themselves. Some were also familiar with literature on WLB, which might have led to unconsciously biased answers. However, our study shows that reflection on the WLB also occurs among women working in other sectors, although sometimes to a lesser extent.

Alongside sector, gender roles also influence how the self-employed perceive work, family, social, and personal life. As explained earlier, women often start their own business so that they can balance work and family life, whereas men's reasons for becoming self-employed show little association with their parental status (Boden, 1999). In our data, we noted a traditional gender role division of tasks. The self-employed women in our study felt responsible for giving their children a safe, structured, open and honest environment and wanted to provide much of the care themselves, even though this restricted their effective working hours. Like many women employed by organizations in the Netherlands, the self-employed in this study often limited their work hours to allow them to combine work and childcare. This is a typical Dutch pattern and might be less prevalent in countries in which part-time work is less common.

This study only investigated self-employed women working in typically female sectors. Future research should extend this study by including self-employed men in order to examine whether similar mechanisms play a role. As they are more often responsible for the household income, men may struggle more with heavy workloads and a high level of work engagement, making it less likely that they will use autonomy to improve their WLB. Male-dominated sectors may also be less

concerned about WLB issues, decreasing the amount of time/spatial autonomy that a man can use to adjust work to his family or personal life.

Our study has three main practical implications. First, social support is an important resource for the self-employed; solo self-employed persons in particular lack social support in their work. This finding could be used by local governments to support business networks in order to encourage entrepreneurship. The self-employed could be encouraged to connect to such networks in order to gain more support. Second, new self-employed persons should be aware that the job and time/spatial autonomy gained through self-employment is not always a panacea for WLB. Information on how the self-employment category – solo self-employed, shared business venture, having employees or not – and the employment sector itself influences their WLB should be disseminated, for instance by the Chamber of Commerce via websites and workshops. Finally, the observation that setting goals and priorities is important in finding a good WLB can be used to develop training for the self-employed. In order to benefit from time/spatial autonomy, they should not only set goals and priorities for their business, but also in their personal life.

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