

Theorising Work-life Balance Endeavours as a Gendered Project of the Self

The Case of Senior Executives in Denmark

Adamson, Maria; Muhr, Sara Louise; Beauregard, Alexandra T.

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

Published in:

Human Relations

DOI:

[10.1177/00187267211073309](https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267211073309)

Publication date:

2023

License

Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):

Adamson, M., Muhr, S. L., & Beauregard, A. T. (2023). Theorising Work-life Balance Endeavours as a Gendered Project of the Self: The Case of Senior Executives in Denmark. *Human Relations*, 76(4), 629-654.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267211073309>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 04. Jul. 2025



Theorising work-life balance endeavours as a gendered project of the self: The case of senior executives in Denmark

Abstract: Recent work-life balance (WLB) studies offer considerable insight into the challenges and strategies of achieving WLB for senior managers. This study shifts the focus from asking *how* to asking *why* individuals are so invested in pursuing a particular kind of WLB. Analysing 62 life history interviews with male and female senior executives in Denmark, we develop the concept of *the gendered project of the self* to theorise WLB. We show how for the executives, WLB was not simply an instrumental process of time or role management; instead, pursuing WLB in a certain way was a key part of acquiring and maintaining a particular desired subjectivity or a sense of self as a better person, better worker, and better parent. We argue that theorising WLB as the gendered project of the self allows us to explicate the mechanisms through which gendered social and cultural expectations translate into how male and female executives can and want to pursue their WLB goals—firstly by driving one’s desire for WLB and, secondly, by shaping and restricting what is desired. In doing so we highlight the importance of scrutinising the role of broader WLB discourses in shaping the experience and uptake of organisational WLB policies.

Keywords: Work-life balance, work-family, project of the self, subjectivity, gender, top managers, executives

Introduction

Extensive research on work-life balance (WLB), particularly studies that focus on senior executives and elite professionals, show that ‘balance’ remains an intense and very gendered

struggle (e.g. Beigi et al., 2017; Blair-Loy, 2003; Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018; Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; Lupu et al., 2018; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015). Typically, research tends to focus on exploring *how* individuals, especially women, try to balance paid work and ‘non-work’ domains, approaching WLB as an issue of ‘personal control of time’ and juggling conflicting tasks or roles (Lewis et al., 2007: 361; Hughes and Silver, 2020). This has been useful in revealing different tactics and strategies individuals use in trying to achieve WLB, as well as various organisational, individual, and social factors that impede or enable this process. However, the question rarely posed is: *why* are individuals so invested in pursuing a particular kind of balance, and how might we theorise WLB to better understand what drives this quest? This question is important because evidence suggests that WLB may be more than simply a matter of adequate policy or individuals’ skill at juggling different demands. For instance, senior executives continue to struggle to achieve a desired balance despite having significant financial resources, work autonomy and flexibility; this is the case even in Nordic countries with the most extensive work and family legislation, policy provision, and socially normalised ideas of the *importance* of WLB (Hagqvist et al., 2020; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015). Interestingly, studies indicate that the very rhetoric of the *need* to have balance, prevalent in developed Western contexts, and the elusive ideal of not simply any, but a ‘felicitous’ balance promoted by elite celebrity executives (Rottenberg, 2014: 147), exert considerable pressure on senior managers (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Muhr et al., 2012)—a dynamic that is yet to be systematically incorporated into theorising WLB.

We argue that to understand what drives senior managers’ WLB efforts, we need to move away from viewing WLB as a technical matter of time, task, or role management, that is, what individuals *do*, and approach it as a process profoundly linked to the construction of one’s gendered subjectivity or sense of self, that is, who individuals feel they *are* or who they aspire

to be. To do this, this article draws on poststructuralist and feminist theorising (e.g. Ford, 2006) and develops the concept of the *gendered* ‘project of the self’ (Grey, 1994) as a way to theorise WLB endeavours. By gendered project of the self, we refer to a process of constant (re)creation and management of one’s subjectivity, one’s sense of self and relation to a gendered world (Weedon, 1987). We show the work of this concept in our analysis of WLB narratives of senior male and female executives in Denmark, a country consistently ranked by the World Economic Forum in the top three places with the best work-life balance (Charlton, 2019).

Drawing on 62 interviews, we show that WLB remained a salient issue for this cohort, but it was not one of juggling roles, time, or tasks. Instead, it was articulated as a continuous effort to construct a positive sense of self, a sense of becoming a ‘better’ person, a ‘better’ mother or a father, which drove this ongoing pursuit. We show how the meaning of ‘good’ WLB—shaped by social and cultural assumptions about gender, parenthood, and the virtue of balance— Influenced the kind of balanced self-project male and female executives were able *and willing* to fashion, with female executives’ projects being subject to much stronger disciplinary constraints. We advance WLB debates in several ways. By bringing together poststructuralist and feminist theorising of managerial identity, literature on the work-life interface, and research on gender and parenthood, we develop the concept of the project of the self as gendered, using it to better understand the tensions in senior executives’ pursuit of WLB. We suggest that this conception allows us to systematically explain not only how but also *why* individuals are invested in the pursuit of a particular kind of balance. It does so by explicating the mechanisms through which discourses about gender, work, and parenting translate into how male and female executives pursue their WLB projects: by driving one’s desire to have balance as well as shaping and restricting what kind of balance is desired. This offers a more nuanced explanation of the persistence of gendered discrepancies in the experiences and uptake of organisational WLB initiatives among senior managers and professionals, particularly in

contexts where both organisational and state WLB provision is extensive (Hagqvist et al., 2020; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015). The paper also extends the body of literature that advocates for a shift from thinking about WLB as individuals' efforts to manage conflicting domains or roles to exploring it as a social discourse that manages or governs individuals in constructing their subjectivity (Bloom, 2016; Ford and Collinson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2007; Muhr et al., 2012).

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section offers a discussion of the weaknesses of—and gaps in—the current theorising of work-life balance. We then explain how the concept of the gendered project of the self may help to overcome some of these issues. Following our methodology, the findings section shows how male and female executives construct themselves in a (gendered) WLB discourse. We conclude by highlighting the value of the proposed approach for theorising WLB.

Current theorising of WLB

The literature on the work-life interface is extensive, and there are multiple approaches to theorising WLB and its definitions (see Beigi et al. 2019; Kalliath and Brough, 2008; McMillan et al., 2011), including allocation of time devoted to multiple roles and tasks, perceived control over role demands, or satisfaction with occupying multiple roles. Notably, much early WLB research viewed 'work' and 'life' domains as dichotomous, with the latter typically construed as childcare and other family responsibilities. The dichotomous conception of 'work' and 'life' has been extensively critiqued (Eikhof et al., 2007; Cruz and Meisenback, 2018; Ozbilgin et al., 2011), but the legacy of this scholarship is a continued focus in literature underpinned by psychological theory on exploring strategies and tactics that individuals (mostly mothers) use to manage demands originating from these two different roles or domains, and/or organisational factors that impinge on this process (e.g., Allen et al., 2021; Allis and

O'Driscoll, 2008; de Araujo et al., 2015; Beigi et al., 2017; 2019; Fritz and van Kippenberg, 2018). Furthermore, a complementary strand of the work-life literature underpinned by sociological and other more critical approaches has demonstrated the importance of exploring how the agency around individuals' work-life strategies and decision-making is shaped and constrained by institutional factors, such as national economic context, legislation, and organisational policy and practice (Lewis et al., 2017; Lupu et al., 2018; Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017), as well as sociocultural factors, such as gendered roles and the primacy of the mothering role for women (Christopher, 2012; Gatrell, 2005; Gatrell et al., 2013; 2014; Miller, 2005). A frequent finding, for instance, is that female executives and elite professionals typically use the privilege of work autonomy and flexible hours to fit work around family, while male executives use these to work more (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerstel and Clawson, 2014; Wheatley, 2017). These studies highlight that social roles have an effect on one's WLB practices, but their broad focus still remains on *how* individuals *do* WLB, that is, juggling these different roles and domains.

There is, however, a growing body of literature suggesting that it is also important to explore how the very discourses about work-life balance can shape the 'doing' of balance (Adamson, 2017; Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Fleetwood, 2007). In this respect, studies of senior managers and elite professionals reveal interesting dynamics. For instance, for low-paid precarious workers, long hours and lack of balance are typically a result of managing multiple jobs, rigid schedules and financial instability (Smith and McBride, 2021); yet, senior executives often experience a similar lack of balance, despite superior financial resources and flexibility (Annink, 2017). Studies that analyse discourses suggest that top managers lack balance because they internalise the 'ideal worker' discourse in creating their identity and thereby embrace long work hours and the prioritisation of work despite their relative advantage in terms of agency (Ford and Collingson, 2011; Hagqvist et al., 2020; Muhr et al., 2012; 2016). The acute personal

feelings of angst, guilt, and failure experienced particularly by senior female managers and professionals when they were unable to attain the ‘right’ balance (Borelli et al., 2017; Orgad, 2019) further point to the deep connection between WLB and identity.

Identity construction emerges as a key constituent of ‘doing’ WLB in Kristensen and Pedersen’s (2017) work, which draws upon the theory of individuation to conceptualise individuals’ efforts to achieve balance. They conceive of relationships between work and life as a continuous process of work-life problem resolution that individuals resolve on a daily basis, constantly moving from one form to another, and it is ‘the process of individuation *that forms* the individual’ (69, our emphasis), which begins to move away from viewing WLB as simply what we *do*. What remains unexplained is why individuals may focus on different problems, resolve issues in different ways, or strive for a particular kind of WLB. This theorising emphasises the ultimate fluidity of WLB decisions (and of individuals), suggesting that the ‘individuation of this or that employee’ is unique in each instance (Kristensen and Pedersen, 2017: 71). Yet, research clearly demonstrates that personal challenges and decisions around WLB tend to exhibit common patterns shaped by gender, class, and social and historical contexts (Beauregard et al., 2018; Holth et al., 2017). Hence, while linking WLB to the self, the individuation approach does not appear to systematically theorise the ways in which broader sociocultural expectations and power relations translate into personal WLB arrangements and what drives one’s desire for a particular kind of balance. Below, we argue that using the concept of the gendered project of the self (Grey, 1994) goes a step further to address the above shortcomings by theorising the process of WLB as part of the construction of one’s subjectivity.

Theorising WLB as a project of the self

The concept of the self as a project (Grey, 1994) can be understood as a process of continuous (re)creation and management of one's sense of self. It draws on Foucauldian theorising of power, discourse, and subjectivity where power is 'exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects' (Weedon, 1987: 113). Discourses govern conduct by 'working through our desires, aspirations, interests, and beliefs' (Dean, 2007: 11); the power here works not repressively but productively, through creating historically and culturally varied discursive 'truths' and making certain subject positions and practices of the self (e.g. being balanced) appealing (Foucault, 1982). Individuals then self-direct their conduct to attain the desired subjectivity through various techniques of self-improvement and self-management (Foucault, 1988). For instance, in the context of neoliberal flexible capitalism, individuals are increasingly urged to take charge of their 'do-it-yourself' biographical projects, become adaptable, and take responsibility for making the right choices to achieve the desired lifestyle (Beck, 1992; Brown, 2003; Scharff, 2015). Morality is closely linked to this endeavour, giving it its *drive*, as taking charge implies empowerment and brings one closer to the good feeling of becoming a virtuous neoliberal subject (Johnsen et al., 2009; Gill, 2017; Kelly, 2013). Thus, crafting the self becomes a project—a conception that is helpful in explaining both constraints—that is, what the available subject positions or desired ideals are, and the drive—that is, why individuals are invested in pursuing a particular kind of project.

An individual's project of the self is governed through a variety of sites and discourses (Grey, 1994). There is little doubt that contemporary discourses of WLB comprise one such site, working as a form of self-regulation (see Kelly, 2013). A pervasive emphasis of policy, research, and popular culture discourses on the importance and *necessity* of striving for work-life balance (Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis and Beauregard, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018) means that striving for WLB may no longer be a suggestion but an almost normative lifestyle regime. The

image of a ‘good’ employee who dedicates themselves to work alone seems to be giving way to the ideal of a well-balanced worker who experiences personal fulfilment both at work and at home (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Ford and Collinson, 2011). Having a ‘bad’, skewed, unhealthy balance is increasingly constructed as a failure of self-control and a sign of a mismanaged life (Brown, 2003; Caproni, 2004; Costea et al., 2008; Hatfield, 2015; Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). WLB then becomes a culturally constituted desire and a moral imperative (Bloom, 2016; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). This, of course, translates into one’s workplace experiences. Ford and Collinson (2011) illustrate how managers who work longer hours were extremely stressed by the perceived ‘need’ to have WLB and take time off work. Hence, we suggest that conceptualising the pursuit of WLB as the project of the self allows us to think about how enacting WLB in a certain way is not only about managing domains external to the self but also part of an ongoing complex process of constructing one’s sense of self, who we are or want to be. This surpasses issues linked to imagining WLB as management of conflicting or dichotomous domains; it also foregrounds the power of sociocultural assumptions about the virtue of balance, unearthing the mechanisms of self-governance through which cultural assumptions translate into an individual’s pursuit of WLB.

The gendered project of the balanced self

Grey’s (1994) original conceptualisation of the project of the self was gender neutral; however, as Ford (2006) succinctly pointed out, the construction of senior managerial identities is not neutral or informed by a single discourse, for example, that of leadership. She highlighted that discourses of leadership, gender, and identity are always complexly interrelated and argued that Grey’s concept of the project of the self did not account for gender differences and other discourses that may inform the construction of executives’ projects of the self. We build on this observation by Ford (2006) and argue that it is crucial to theorise the balanced project of

the self as always gendered. As we discuss below, the construction of what ‘good’ and desired WLB means for male and female executives varies; hence, the type of balanced self-project one may desire or how invested one is in its pursuit is inevitably shaped by these differences. One example of such differences is evident from research that highlights how cultural assumptions about gender have a significant impact on how motherhood and fatherhood identities may be enacted in relation to work (Christopher, 2012; Gatrell, 2005; 2013; Gatrell et al., 2013; 2014; Hennekam et al., 2019; Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019; Lott, 2020). For women, while they may still culturally derive their identity from motherhood (Ranson, 2012), the pervasive postfeminist discourses in Western societies have consolidated the almost unquestionable expectation that both career and family are a firm and necessary part of a progressive femininity (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009; Sørensen, 2017). The contemporary ideal is ‘combining motherhood with ... high-powered waged work as the primary basis for a woman’s sense of achievement, value and liberation’ (Orgad, 2017: 167). Alongside this, however, continuous construction of women as primary and ‘better’ (child)carers and moralistic demands of ‘good’ mothering (Christopher, 2012; Miller, 2005) put pressure on their pursuit of the ‘ideal’ of balance. As the ‘ideal worker’ norm—which regulates top managerial identities (requiring dedication to work)—intersects with norms of ‘good’ motherhood (requiring dedication to children), female executives continue to experience significant identity tensions despite more privileged access to financial resources or flexible working arrangements (Blair-Loy, 2003; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; Sierstad and Kirton, 2015).

Interestingly, recent WLB discourses perpetuated by elite female executives have started emphasising ‘the importance of well-roundedness, well-being and achieving a “felicitous” balance’ (Rottenberg, 2014: 147; 2018; Slaughter, 2012). Hence, the ‘ideal’ balance becomes about moving away from the ‘extremes’—that is, not a workaholic but still having significant

career ambitions, invested in good mothering but not a ‘helicopter’ super-mum (Adamson, 2017). The ideal of a balanced executive mother is firmly embedded in social perceptions, thus making it relatively prescriptive; for instance, studies show that female executives who have no family are rejected by younger women as good role models (Singh et al., 2006). The discursive ‘ideal’ of a ‘balanced working mother’ thus appears to have become more nuanced and, potentially, less attainable in practice. Yet, it retains a profound emotive appeal as it promises not only the virtue of becoming a better worker and mother but becoming happier (Rottenberg, 2018), thus driving women’s continuous pursuit of this elusive project (Cramer et al., 2019; Orgad, 2017; 2019).

As for men, work identity and the breadwinner role have traditionally been central to the construction of a masculine sense of self, but the construction of a ‘working father’ has also been slowly changing (Blithe, 2015; Hatfield, 2015; Madrid, 2017; Miller, 2010). Fatherhood is now starting to be articulated as an important part of men’s identities, including linking involved fatherhood to more virtuous masculinity, being ‘real men’ (Randles, 2018) and the emergence of new ideals of a ‘new dad’ who makes work adjustments to accommodate childcare and aspires to WLB (Kaufman, 2013). These changes are affecting senior male executives and elite professionals (Madrid, 2017; Morgenroth et al., 2020), especially in the Nordic context, including Denmark, where discourses of gender equality are highly prominent and normalised (Kangas et al., 2019; Merilainen et al., 2004; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013).

Yet, the current discursive position of a new balanced working father appears to be less defined and more aspirational. While appreciated, childrearing is still not constructed as a ‘natural’ part of being a balanced man; rather, it is a positive choice or life ‘enrichment’ and a virtue as opposed to the moral obligation it represents for women (Hatfield, 2015: 25; Eräranta and Moisander, 2011). Hence, male managers often enjoy a ‘fatherhood premium’ as they are viewed positively when doing parenting, while women are typically at risk of a motherhood

penalty (Hodges and Budig, 2010; Luhr, 2020; Morgenroth et al., 2020). However, men who are perceived to have ‘too much’ family involvement continue to face social stigma and work penalties, which reduce the appeal of the new fathering ideal and continue to promote the message that an integral part of being a good father is supporting one’s children through work, while mothers then do mothering *and* work (Ranson, 2012). Even in the Nordic context, where the promotion of active fatherhood through policy has been very prominent, policies do not instantly change gendered cultural assumptions, and while, in theory, WLB policy may be equally available for ‘parents’, in practice, it is not available to fathers to the same degree (Børve and Bungum, 2015; Burnett et al., 2013; Choroszhewicz and Kay, 2020). Hence, the more ambiguous and aspirational nature of a new balanced father subject position may have implications for the ways in which male executives pursue their balanced project of the self. In summary, we conceptualise the pursuit of WLB as part of the gendered project of the self; this way of theorising it brings into focus how sociocultural constructions of gendered parenthood and managerial work norms intersect, creating discursive ‘options’ of desirable balance for male and female executives and how these translate into one’s WLB decisions. We further explicate the work of the concept in our analysis of the WLB struggles of Danish executives. However, before we proceed to the findings, we will first discuss our method.

Methodology

Denmark is known for being a welfare society with extensive family-friendly and flexible working structures. Parents in Denmark share 32 weeks of parental leave with full salary. On top of that, they have the right to an additional 46 weeks of statutory paid leave. However, despite the option to share parental leave, 94% of mothers use their right to parental leave, whereas only 24% of fathers use theirs (PLCGENC, 2012). In 2018, mothers took on average 298 days of parental leave, while fathers took on average 31 days¹. Once the leave has been

taken, Denmark offers good-quality and relatively cheap childcare (approximately 400€ a month for children below the age of 3 years and approximately 270€ a month for children between 3–6 years). The state also guarantees that all municipalities make day care available to all children from 9 months old. This makes it—structurally at least—much easier to be a parent and have a career at the same time. As with the rest of the Nordic countries, Denmark therefore has one of the highest concentrations of dual-earner families.

The empirical material for this paper consists of 62 interviews conducted with senior executives in 40 different organisations in Denmark. The broad aim of the study was to examine the interrelation of gendered careers and identities in senior leadership in a sample of companies that had signed the ‘Charter for more Women in Management’, a governmental initiative to encourage organisations to increase the number of women in their top management. The focus on these companies was due to the study’s intention to explore the experiences of senior executives in organisations that pledged and actively work on achieving gender diversity in their C-suite, and where WLB policies are not just nominal, but actively implemented. The focus on senior executives was because the project sought to understand how those who had actually ‘made it’ to the very top positions made sense of their journey to success. Approximately 85% of the organisations that had signed the Charter agreed to take part in our study, which was a mix of both large and small, as well as public and private companies. In the large organisations, the CEO and one other director were interviewed; in the small organisations, only the CEO was interviewed. As such, the number of organisations agreeing to be part of the study decided the sample size. We sought to achieve gender balance in the sample, but complete parity was not possible, as some of the organisations had no female executives at all. The final sample consisted of 25 female and 37 male executives. The number of interviews is on par with (and even exceeds) the typical sample size of similar studies of top tier executives (e.g. Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015). Our

interviewees were of relatively similar age (all respondents were between 40–55 years old) and family situation (all but one had one or more dependent children). Thus, given the length and depth of our interview design (discussed below), we believe we reached saturation in both interview cohorts, which was also clear as no new notable patterns were emerging by the end of our analysis. In line with our constructionist epistemology, we nonetheless do not intend to generalise the findings across the whole population of senior executives, but we deemed the sample sufficient in illustrating the common discursive patterns as discussed below.

To be able to capture the way the respondents experienced and made sense of their careers, all interviews were conducted using a life narrative approach (e.g. McAdams, 2012; Riessman, 2001), where the purpose is to let experiences important to an interviewee guide the interview. This type of interview was chosen to let gender enter the interviews in a more organic way and in ways that matter to interviewees, rather than asking directly about it. We expected this approach to reduce the instances of more formulaic or general answers about gender differences or the importance of organisational gender initiatives. Therefore, the interview protocol was only very loosely structured and initiated by one fixed question: ‘Can you explain how you ended up in this job?’ The rest were exploratory and follow-up questions such as: ‘What formed that decision?’, ‘How did that make you feel?’, ‘Could you give me an example of that?’, etc. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours (average of 2 hours), which is typical for this method, and generated rich and exhaustive career trajectory data. Such a loose interview structure and not prompting any WLB discussion was crucial, as we sought to move away from the typical analysis of WLB as strategies of managing ‘work’ and ‘life’; hence, it was important that no pre-determined way of discussing WLB or any pre-determined meanings of ‘work’, ‘life’ or ‘balance’ were imposed on the participants. Interestingly, even without prompting, WLB came up in *all* the interviews; however, not asking interviewees about *how* they managed it allowed us to see how they gave meaning to WLB in their lives in other ways.

Our analysis was structured in three phases. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Given the array of topics discussed in life-narrative interviews and their length (the body of data comprised over 2000 pages of text), the first stage was a pre-analysis that involved familiarisation with the data and coding WLB-related sections in a sample of interviews. In the first instance, this was done using latent codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) driven by our empirical focus on WLB and our theoretical construct; these included ‘(work-life) balance’, ‘self’, ‘flexibility’, ‘private life’, ‘home’, ‘children’, ‘husband’, ‘wife’, ‘parenting’, ‘spare time’, and ‘sport’. Further, several data-driven codes emerged at this stage: ‘workaholic’, ‘being myself’, ‘(good) mother’, ‘father’, and ‘whole person’. Together, these roughly covered the scope of WLB-related discussions, and the second analytical stage involved using these to identify and code WLB-relevant sections in the rest of the data. As the interviews were initially conducted in Danish, the Danish-speaking author led these first two stages. However, once the relevant sections of all interviews were identified, they were translated into English to enable all three authors to engage in the third and main stage of the analysis.

This stage was guided by our analytical focus to develop and explore how the ‘gendered project of the self’ conception worked. In developing the initial concept of self as a project, Grey (1994) did not employ any distinct analytical technique; in fact, within the Foucauldian framework that underpins the concept, there is no one specific method (Ahl, 2007), as there is no one universal truth or interpretation (Foucault, 1988). Hence, guided by our theoretical aim to unpack the work of broader WLB discourses in producing one’s subjectivity, our analytical procedure in the third stage of analysis was inspired by existing analyses of other ‘technologies of the self’ (Kelly, 2013; Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014; Scharff, 2015). It involved two intertwined processes: a) close-reading the WLB-related sections and noting discursive patterns of how WLB was discussed *in relation to* one’s subjectivity or sense of self; b) re-reading, noting the broader discursive ideals of balanced self, work, and parenting echoed in

these patterns, and identifying the actions of self-management and self-discipline produced by these. To ensure rigour in the analysis, each of the authors close read independently; however, consistent with our theoretical underpinning, we acknowledge that ours is only one possible way of interpreting the data. Two key tropes or types of discursive patterns emerged that characterised the typical way that WLB was discussed in relation to the self: 1) WLB and being a balanced person and 2) WLB and being a balanced parent—mother or father. Our data presentation is therefore structured accordingly below.

Findings: Constructing a good, well-balanced self

Becoming a better self through the right balance

Generally, without being prompted, all our interviewees engaged in consideration of the difficulties of balancing work and life at an optimal level. It was clear from the way they talked about it and why it was important that WLB was more than a technical exercise of juggling various activities or roles but something that deeply resonated at a much more personal level. Interviewees typically discussed the importance of balance in relation to self and personality:

[Achieving] WLB means a lot for your possibilities of being *a whole person*²; one who is much more than just someone working here. (Anna)

Anna linked achieving WLB to becoming a ‘whole’ person, not just one-sided, not just a worker; the connotation clearly implies that being ‘whole’ is better and preferable, and this desire to become a better version of oneself seemed to direct Anna’s effort to work on WLB.

As Peter remarked:

The most important thing—regardless of whether one is a man or a woman—is to achieve a reasonable balance. And that is not only important because of the balance itself but because it reflects *honesty* and personality. (Peter)

He interpreted balance not simply as a practical matter but linked it to honesty and authenticity, which implies morality as one would potentially become a *better* self (Brown, 2003). Not having WLB was perceived negatively. Maria linked a lack of WLB to not being able to be herself:

So, within the last year and a half, it has become very visible to me [that work has taken up too much of my time]. If I do not address this now, *I will not be me* anymore, and it will not be fun to be with me. Then, I'm just a caregiver and mom, not a friend, not an interesting person, not even a good wife... So far, my career has been characterised by no time to think, no time to be me... I feel completely like a shell with no proper content. All the things that make a good person in society ...So I'm trying to get back [to balance]. I must have room for creating myself as a whole human being.

Maria clearly stated that not being able to have a 'correct' WLB meant that she was not herself; she lacked aspects of her personality that she thought comprise 'a good person'. Echoing the mismanaged life and the virtue of balance discourse (Brown, 2003), she clearly appeared frustrated at the inability to achieve this so far, and this was why she was actively taking action to redress the situation. Having the 'right' kind of WLB was often linked to being in (self)control, echoing the neoliberal rhetoric of the enterprising self and the morality of taking responsibility for their choices (Grey, 1994; Kelly, 2013). The ability to be in control through achieving balance therefore offered a sense of feeling good:

I am really good at saying 'no' and getting things to balance. Of course, there are periods that require a couple of days with evening work. But that's not a problem... It's all about finding what's optimal for you... I know what I can handle, I know my capacity. (David)

David clearly felt the sense of achievement that came from the feeling of 'knowing' himself, his capacities and limits—and being able to manage them accordingly.

Interestingly, in many cases, self-control was not about working harder, but about being able not to work too much—and being comfortable with that:

Balance is difficult. It is ok to lie down on the sofa on a Sunday and take a nap without having a guilty conscience... Last year, I had a period where I was really under a lot of pressure. We had a huge project and I had to force myself to gear down [this year]. So, I am trying not to work evenings and weekends and take a few days off—and feel good about it. (Charlotte)

It is difficult to achieve balance, but it is necessary. I see some workaholics in here. And when they experience disappointments at work, it shakes them at a deeply fundamental level. I, on the other hand, would perceive the same issues as disappointing or annoying, but I would never take it personally. I have other things in my life that matter to me. You need to have other things in your life to be able to manage work... (Karl)

In the first quotation, Charlotte's sense of achievement was that she was able to feel good about not working, the difficulty of which somewhat reflects the top managerial culture of work dedication that encourages (and requires) work intensity (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hagqvist et al., 2020). The pursuit of balance, however, is not simply in the name of having a good life but also becoming a better employee-self. This was illustrated by Karl's quote, in which he clearly constructed the 'workaholic' as someone who—because of the lack of balance—was not able to handle work situations properly; as he explained later, '*they are* nothing but work'. Preventing oneself from becoming an unbalanced workaholic was seen as a more virtuous alternative, echoing the current discourses of a good worker being 'balanced' (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Johnsen et al., 2009). The above quotations show how the dominant discourses of the importance and virtue of WLB drive one's desire to pursue a particular kind of balanced self-project as well as shape what is desirable. This powerful imperative is reflected in the fact

that our interviewees were striving for WLB *even* when a lack of it was not experienced as problematic:

One has to be both authentic and professional, which is difficult when work consumes all of your life. At one point, I continued to work from home after I left the office and didn't stop until 10–11 o'clock in the evening. I did not see any friends... so I had to stop and say it's over. I forced myself to not be dictated by work, but then again, I don't know why because I had a good life, I liked my work. (Michael)

Interestingly, Michael here did not stop himself from overworking to devote more time to other activities outside work; in fact, the quote indicates uncertainty in what prompted his decision, as he suggested that *he liked* his workaholic lifestyle. His action to 'stop himself' from overworking seemed to be driven by the feeling that he needed to change to become more authentic, which he clearly viewed as a good thing and which can be achieved through pursuing better WLB. Accounts such as this demonstrate the productive power of normative discourses of what 'good' balance means, as the desire for this ideal balance translates into one's actions and drives self-discipline. Hence, one's decisions of how to manage work and other commitments was not simply a technical exercise that resolved a conflict or time or roles but was part of the process of constructing a particular project of a better, balanced self.

The feminine project of the balanced self: A balanced executive mother

Achieving what one perceived to be the 'right' balance allowed our respondents to have a sense of self-worth and virtue. Yet, it was clear from the interviews that what constituted the 'right' balance was gendered. Female executives' explanations of their WLB strategies and why they sought to 'do' WLB in a certain way were shaped by their perceptions of the meaning of and desire to be a 'good mother'—a construction circumscribed by a range of ideas about appropriate ways of balancing work and family:

I never want to be like that [not having time with family], because that would make me miserable... I don't want to wake up one morning when I'm 60 or something and regret the decisions I have made. So, I spend a lot of energy asking my kids whether they think I am away too much. I want to be their mother. (Louise)

I started by facing the prejudices about mothering and thought to myself, 'how much can I allow myself to work and still be a good mother? Do I have to pick up [my kids] every day? Is it okay to have help around the house, is it okay to have an au pair? ... I do pick up my kids once in a while and I do actually feel that I am a mother who prioritises my kids, and I am present in their lives. But at the same time, I have a really, really good job... (Sarah)

As the quotes indicate, being a 'good mother' necessitated spending a certain amount of time with children and family members. The desire to achieve WLB here was not simply a technical matter of juggling one's time commitments; rather, how these commitments were balanced clearly fed into the sense of self as a good mother. The close relation to the sense of self manifested in very emotive discussions about the effort to strike the right balance—especially given competing definitions of what a well-balanced self-project means for women:

We have a society that quickly questions whether you're a 'real' woman [if you work]. I get many blaming looks from other mothers at my kids' school over something as banal as the fact that I never sign up for baking the cakes or never join the party committee. [Other mothers] stress to me: 'I really enjoy being at home', 'I really enjoy my children'... All of what they say is simply just another way of saying 'we really don't think you're a good mother'. (Elisabeth)

There is also the other side of the utopian 'right' balance. I have a friend who is a stay-at-home mum, and she is met with the same social shaming, just from the other side so to speak. People think, 'Why are you at home? Don't you have the skills to have a job?',

whereas I am met with ‘How can you be away so much from your family?’ We kind of represent the two outer poles, and we’re both met with a lot of judgment because we’re not right in the perfect middle. (Julie)

Motherhood was clearly seen as a highly valourised part of the balanced and meaningful project of the self for women (Christopher, 2012). Yet, the quotations clearly reflect the contemporary expectation that a balanced project of the self for women means being a good mother and also having an executive career (Adamson, 2017; Orgad, 2019; Rottenberg, 2018). The ideal of what the ‘right’ balance was, on the one hand, seemed clear to participants (it’s a perfect middle) but was elusive, on the other hand, necessitating the need for constant monitoring of the amount of work and care one needed to do to achieve it. While acknowledging that this pursuit may be utopic, there was still a desire to try to do it ‘right’, as the balanced project was about who they are or want to be—a pursuit that women were not prepared to give up:

Way too often, women tell their children that they are sorry that they have to work this much. But if they do that, children grow up knowing that mom was not around much—and that she was sad to be at work. But I am not sad to be at work; I love my work. So, I tell my children. ‘I know I’m away a lot, but I love my work, I love what I do. I, of course, love you too, and I want to be able to do both’. In that way, my children grow up knowing that work can be fun and that I enjoy it, that it is an important part of who I am—even though it means spending a lot of time away from them. (Barbara)

Barbara here constructed a more ‘balanced’ view of being a good working mother, which involved a balanced combination of work and care, echoing the current expectations of women to draw their sense of self from successfully balancing the two ideals (Orgad, 2017; 2018; Rottenberg, 2014). Furthermore, reflecting the discourses of self-responsibility for one’s life choices (Grey, 1994; Gill, 2017), there was an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility for certain WLB decisions, despite acknowledging the broader constraints:

You have to decide not to care about what other people think about you. I have been very conscious about prioritising my career, and that means that I cannot pick up my kids early. I am also older than the other moms, as I've prioritised my work over having children in my 20s and 30s. One has to make a decision and then stick to it and ignore the criticism. But regardless of how much I try to ignore the criticism, it does affect me.

I also feel like I have to pick them up early once in a while and be 100% mum. (Mette)

Although Mette clearly challenged the social criticism of prioritising work over family for women, her emotional response indicates that she still subjected herself to certain expectations, feeling that her individual project diverged from the ideal. In deploying certain WLB strategies (picking children up early), she thus contributed to making her project of the balanced self more socially acceptable. The pressure to be balanced in a particular way often produced a combination of anxiety and frustration—and the feeling of resistance:

We have had cleaners, nannies, and au-pairs. And there we have had to shut our ears to all the people saying that they feel bad for the children. Most parents we have met in the kindergarten or at the school, etc., have had the attitude of: 'Isn't it wrong that it is the au-pair picking them up again? Where is the mother? Couldn't she make more of an effort?' And there I have had to be pretty stern about the fact that my children are equally happy that I am home a little later in the afternoon, because when I'm home, the house is clean and the clothes are washed, so I can be with my kids. (Lis)

While Lis did not question the core importance of 'motherhood' as part of a balanced female subjectivity, she refused the more 'intense' version of it (Miller, 2005; Christopher, 2012), which allowed her to craft a balanced project that felt more do-able while still in keeping with who she felt she was. Yet, the quote still shows the need to justify 'diverging' projects. Thus, the balancing strategies and tactics used by our respondents varied, but were typically driven by a desire to achieve a particular positive sense of self through getting the balance right. It

was the elusive nature of this ideal that resulted in frustration rather than the participants' ability or inability to control or manage their time per se. Becoming balanced in the 'right way' therefore had very high stakes—in that pursuit, the women had to 'prove' they were worthy (Blithe, 2015), showing how social control and the gendered nature of work and social role expectations translate directly into self-control. The strong disciplining nature of the project was also clear from the fact that WLB discussions for our female interviewees were highly emotive (while male accounts were much less emotionally charged, as we discuss below), indicating that it was not just about instrumental process or situational decisions regarding time and task management but the process that had meaning, as it held the promise of becoming a better self.

The masculine project of the balanced self – Still a more balanced worker?

The construction of the gendered project of the self for men was, predictably, different in terms of the kind of balance to which they aspired. In fact, many male participants never had to think much about what balance meant for them:

It's kind of a given. I can feel if I have too much to do. Or when there is need for an extra effort, I know that beforehand. So, you should probably rather ask my wife. I feel I can relax, but I can also work on a holiday or a day off or two.... That's part of the job. That's how it is when you have such a job. (Robert)

I haven't been home much.... And the last couple of years I have had to explain to my kids why I haven't been home much. I, of course, also have to talk to their mother about it, but she is used to it, so it's more the children that need to have it explained. (Steffen)

Robert had never thought that WLB was a big deal—an account common among our male interviewees—and his sense of self and self-esteem seems to be firmly rooted in his work, which, as he clearly indicated, he did well. Steffen acknowledged that he might have been

working too much, but he did not seem to try to actively redress the lack of fathering on his part; rather, he focused on explaining it to his children. While both of these men had to account for prioritising work to some extent, compared to similar accounts of women, this apparent imbalance often did not seem to create a sense that it made them worse fathers; hence, there was often no urge to actively seek to engage more in fathering. This is not surprising; as previously discussed, while men are increasingly encouraged to be ‘involved fathers’ and partners (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017; Kaufman, 2013), being a worker and a breadwinner still allows them to create a satisfactory sense of a good and worthy self (Blithe, 2015; Williams, 2008). In fact, there was a sense that being a more involved father or trying to pursue such balance may result in problems, as it threatened one’s perception as a dedicated worker:

There have been plenty of situations where it has been really difficult for me to say no, to say ‘I can’t take that meeting, as I have to pick up my children’. Some people try... but if I finally do [leave work early to pick up children], I think I’ll say something else, like ‘I have a medical appointment or a customer meeting’. (Christian)

Christian hid the fact that he attended to his children and found it more socially appropriate to give a different excuse, echoing research findings that men encounter hostile attitudes in and outside work when being seen as ‘overly’ involved in the home sphere (Gatrell et al., 2014; Ralph, 2016). Although the fathering role was clearly important to Christian, he did not perceive it as a legitimate enough part of his public project of the self.

Some men in our sample seemed to commit to more ‘fathering’ and household responsibilities, but the extent to which this has become a routine or firm part of the masculine project of a balanced executive self is questionable:

When I had my youngest child, I did something pretty groundbreaking when I took three months’ parental leave. I was part of senior management, and it had never happened before. At first, people almost did not believe it. [Some] said absolutely

explicitly: What are you thinking?! Men and parental leave?!... Of course, my case is rather special; it is not something many other men have done. However, we do have a deputy chief executive who has just become a father who had three months of parental leave, and of course I stressed to him that I had parental leave with my youngest and I praised that he did it too. (Lars)

Hence, compared to women for whom the pursuit of WLB seemed to be a way of managing the tension between the two subject positions of being a good mother and a good manager, being a father and taking responsibility for care work did not appear to be a strong element of a masculine project of a balanced self. Being a good father did not necessarily require having a balance between work and non-work; instead, it was a bonus, a sign of a very progressive self:

I would like to turn out different from my own father. That is, I want to be there for my kids. [...] So, one thing is sure: if we have children, my priorities will change. Of course, I can't say that with certainty... But I would really like to be different from my own father... So I could very well imagine that I took a year or two of parental leave and dedicate the time to being with my children. (John)

John's account was clearly more emotionally charged, as doing WLB differently (e.g. taking leave to be with his children) would mean a deeper personal commitment to becoming a better, more progressive self and father, different from his own father. Such accounts were less common than those of mothers, but there were a few, which indicated that even instrumental strategies to appear balanced resulted in men being perceived as a better, more relatable person:

A little while back, I had a late meeting and so did my wife, and as she is in a shared office space. I drove home and picked up the children and placed them here on the sofa in my office while I had my meeting. I got a lot of positive feedback for that. So I now sometimes use it strategically to make me more human. I am very tall and can be

perceived as rather brutal, so it makes me more ‘whole’ to show that I know when one [child] has to pee and when the other one is hungry and having all the Tupperware boxes with me. (Erik)

Erik’s account echoes studies showing that when men are more engaged in pursuing WLB, it is often met with approval and enthusiasm (Hatfield, 2015; Hodges and Budig, 2010). It also highlights that even in a Danish context, where policy and public rhetoric about men’s involvement is prominent, involved fatherhood is only starting to be a part of the balanced project of the self for men. The weaker link between the ideal of involved fatherhood and men’s sense of self meant that male executives were not overly invested in actively trying to pursue balance by taking on more caring responsibilities. The drive was there, as it made them better, but action was not urgent because there was little to jeopardise in becoming a ‘bad’ father. Interestingly, there were two areas of non-work activities mentioned mostly by men that seemed to matter to their sense of being balanced selves on par with (if not sometimes more than) becoming more involved fathers: sports and the importance of sociality. Sports came up very often as a crucial aspect of feeling like a whole person:

It is very important for me to prioritise my exercise and stay fit. I swim, climb, and bike, and being able to do so is a great part of *who I am*. When I am too busy at work and have to deprioritise sports, it’s like losing a bit of myself. (Jacob)

I love active holidays, such as hiking, biking, surfing, and whatever the family allows, but it is even more important for me to stay active on a daily basis. So, even though I go through very busy weeks, I force myself to go for a run or go to the gym on a regular basis. If I don’t exercise, I easily lose my ability to focus and then can’t perform as much at work. So, when I take time away from work to exercise, I actually get better and more efficient at work. (Emil)

Emil's account exemplified a rather typical sentiment where doing sports was linked not only to becoming a better and more balanced self but also to being a better worker. This was interesting, as there were no similar articulations of losing a part of who they were by not having enough time for their family. This focus on fitness potentially echoes sparse but growing suggestions that the discourses of professional ideals increasingly incorporate bodily fitness as a 'fit body' is seen as a characteristic of a 'fit mind', constructions that are particularly relevant for masculinity constructions (Loehr and Schwartz, 2001; Riach and Cutcher, 2014). Although not as recurrent in the data as sport activities, other non-work activities that men discussed when talking about WLB were adventures, personal projects of interest, or, often, both. Kasper described how such non-work activities allowed him to 'hold on' to himself as a person:

Sometimes, I just need to do something completely different from my work to not lose myself as a person. It can just be wearing sweatpants for a week, not being in a suit and spending time with the friends I have... It can also be going to Brazil to photograph monkeys for a month. Sometimes, I just need to do something completely different to be able to feel [like] myself.

For Kasper, focusing on work alone seemed to mean a loss of his sense of being a whole self; hence, adventures restored this balance. Similarly, engaging in charitable activities was discussed by male executives as important to their 'good balanced self' project—which mostly meant better workers. Mark, for instance, talked about how important it was for him that his company allowed him to go on long trips to take part in development projects:

I have been on several small projects already, and I can't wait to go again. Last time, I went to Uganda to take part in a Red Cross project on water supplies. It gives me so much energy to be able to do this, and it makes my life become much more meaningful. I am very grateful that my organisation lets me do this, but on the other hand, it also benefits them. Although, in principle, I go as a private person, I am always an employee,

so it of course also benefits their CSR agenda that they can run a story about me being there. I don't mind; they are the ones that make it possible for me to keep being this version of me, even though I have a career.

Overall, most of our male participants talked about WLB as being very important. However, as their work identity remained key to maintaining a positive sense of self, other subject positions, such as 'good father', 'athlete', 'friend', or 'citizen', seemed to add to the sense of positivity rather than take away from it. Less conflict and tension meant that there was less self-pressure to actively monitor the prioritisation of work over family, and the desire to pursue WLB was not as acute for men as it was for women. Furthermore, a satisfactory balanced project of the self could also clearly be achieved through ways other than taking on a more active fathering role, for example, through doing charity, sports, having a hobby, and so on. Hence, the balanced project of the self for men encompassed a wider range of meaningful activities and possibilities than for women, and any change seemed to be a bonus.

Discussion

This article set out to explore how we might theorise WLB in ways that enable us to better understand not only *how* senior executives manage their WLB (in terms of strategies and tactics) but *why* they pursue a particular kind of balance and what drives this pursuit. Drawing on poststructuralist and feminist theorising of (managerial) identity construction, literature on the work-life interface, and research on gender and parenthood, we proposed to theorise WLB endeavours of senior executives through the concept of the *gendered* project of the self. Drawing on the analysis of 62 interviews with Danish senior executives, we showed how theorising WLB as part of the gendered project of the self allows us to go beyond seeing WLB as a process of juggling work and non-work domains to seeing it as part of constructing a positive sense of self as good and balanced workers, mothers, and fathers.

The first contribution that this paper makes is extending Grey's (1994) original concept by theorising the project of the self *as gendered*. Building on Ford's (2006) critique, which problematised the absence of gender in the original concept, we bring together research that explores the changing construction of motherhood and fatherhood identities (Børve and Bungum, 2015; Burnett et al., 2013; Christopher, 2012; Hatfield, 2015; Miller, 2005; 2010; Ranson, 2012), the intersection of parenting and managerial identities (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Gatrell, 2005; 2013; Gatrell et al., 2013; 2014; Hennekam et al., 2019), and the gendered discursive constructions of balance (Adamson, 2017; Orgad, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018) to show that the construction of 'good' and desirable balance between work and non-work is, inevitably, gendered and, therefore, so is the project of the balanced self. Analysing WLB in this way extends the insights of existing WLB research, highlighting the importance of gender roles in shaping the work and WLB experiences of male and female managers (Gatrell, 2005; 2013; Gatrell et al., 2013; 2014; Hennekam et al., 2019; Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019; Lott, 2020). This allowed us to systematically theorise how gendered meanings translate into personal actions through the productive power of WLB discourses that govern our subjectivities.

We have argued that the discursive options of the ideal balance for women executives are both circumscribed (working mother is the 'default' option) and complex (not just any balance is good but a 'felicitous' one). For female executives, the 'right' balance inevitably involved grappling with the balance of 'good worker' and 'good mother' ideals, as deriving a fully positive sense of self from only one seems no longer possible in contemporary discourses of gender (Adamson, 2017; Rottenberg, 2019). This means that the pressure and drive to pursue a balanced self-project for women is high, as the whole of their subjectivity of a good working mother is at stake if the efforts to achieve the 'right' balance fail. This may, therefore, explain why other research finds that women in professional and managerial careers experience acute

feelings of guilt, angst, and failure if they are unable to achieve the desired WLB (Borelli et al., 2017; Orgad, 2019).

In the case of male executives, despite some changes in expectations, work remained a key area where men derive a sense of self. The ideals of a balanced masculine self are less prescriptive and more aspirational, meaning that pursuing a balanced father project or other ways of becoming more balanced (e.g. through doing sports or hobbies) only add to, rather than take away from, the positive sense of self. Male executives' project of the self also encompasses a wider range of potentially meaningful activities than it does for female executives. As a result, there is less preoccupation with and less pressure to engage in self-disciplining in terms of carving out time for family or constantly looking for a better balance. However, the shifting discourse of a good worker as 'balanced' (Bloom, 2016) seems to be taking hold on male executives and leading them to consider working fewer hours. This means that even in contexts where social and organisational policy provisions appear equally accessible, engagement with these may remain different, driven by gendered ideals of balance. Gendering the concept of the project of the self allowed us to address our main purpose with this paper, which was to shift the focus from asking *how* individuals pursue work-life balance to theorising *why* they are invested in pursuing a particular kind of balance. The concept of the gendered project allowed us to answer this by linking WLB pursuit to the construction of one's subjectivity, to think of how employing particular WLB strategies and tactics contributes to and constructs a particular sense of self. This then is the starting point of our second contribution, as this perspective enabled us to focus on explicating how intersecting social expectations about gender, balance, work, and parenting translate differently into men's and women's pursuit of WLB projects: first, by shaping one's desire for balance (through making 'good balance' appealing), and second, by delineating the kind of balance that is desired (a construction that was clearly gendered).

As we have shown, adopting a good balance is linked to morality, a possibility of becoming a better self or parent. For instance, we showed that even when some executives were ultimately content or did not mind their overwork and lack of balance, the moral appeal to still have the ‘right’ WLB was *why* they made decisions to alter their behaviour and working patterns, as this made them feel like they were becoming a better person. The stronger the desire, the stronger the drive and investment in self-discipline and change. The strength of desire is gendered; as we explained above, there was more at stake for women than for men, motivating them to put more effort into the continuous pursuit of balance. Hence, we complement the existing literature that reveals various strategies and tactics that senior executives use to achieve work-life balance (Blair-Loy, 2003; Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2018; Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015) by showing the power of the WLB discourse itself to shape one’s actions and the desire to employ particular kinds of strategies. Viewing WLB pursuit not simply as a matter of task-management but as an endeavour linked to one’s subjectivity or sense of self explains why striving for the (rather elusive) ‘right’ WLB remains an ongoing and emotive struggle even among top executives who possess significant financial resources and job flexibility to help achieve balance, and even in contexts such as Denmark, with extensive WLB and gender equality policies and WLB legislation (Hagqvist et al., 2020; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; Seierstad and Kirton, 2015).

Theorising executives’ WLB endeavours through the concept of the gendered project of the self has also enabled us to ask broader questions about the social significance of WLB discourses. Building on research that highlights the significance of discourses of balance to shape the way we live our lives (Bloom, 2016; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Ford and Collinson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2007; Muhr et al., 2012), we showed how and why WLB discourses can be productive in creating and empowering the desire to pursue projects of the self that are more balanced and may somewhat challenge ideals of overwork as well as some

gendered ideals of parenting. However, there is also a cautionary tale that seems to emerge from our analysis. While the intended goal of the ever-growing WLB policies and discourses is typically on creating positive change, for instance, through enabling well-being or enabling people to enjoy more time with family, our analysis indicates that there may come a point where the ongoing dominance of WLB discourses backfire in the absence of change to the gendered ideal worker norm. Almost two decades ago, Caproni (2004) argued that not only did emerging popular discourses of WLB draw on the individualistic assumption of agency and choice and missed out on structural constraints that shape one's choices, but the ambivalence and lack of predictability in life also meant that these discourses were potentially 'advising us to achieve the unachievable' (214). Our analysis demonstrates how the persistence of the ideal worker norm alongside strong discursive pressure to chase an ever-evolving ideal of felicitous WLB may, indeed, turn this pursuit of balance from a process that benefits male and female executives to an end in itself, becoming ever more oppressive and generating feelings of guilt and discontent. We have also shown, however, that this potentially adverse pressure of WLB discourses is affecting mainly executive women, thus adding to the tally of gendered difficulties on their path to the top.

Conclusion

Current conceptualisations of WLB are multiple, but most are constructed to underpin research that focuses on identifying strategies of balancing or factors that impede or enable this activity. While such research addresses the question of 'how', it leaves open the question of why individuals, in our case male and female executives, invest somewhat differing effort and emotion in the pursuit of a particular kind of WLB. We introduce a fresh perspective on how individuals incorporate and manage various work and non-work activities through viewing them as contributing to the process of constructing one's subjectivity, a sense of who we are.

Our analysis showed how the pursuit of a balanced project of the self was profoundly embedded in the social context, shaped by historical and contextual ideals and fantasies of what was constructed as good and desirable balance. The core of our argument has also been that the balanced project of the self is always gendered and that men's projects may be wider and involve less self-discipline than that of women. We speculate that this may potentially add difficulties to how women navigate executive careers, but further studies should explore executive father's WLB projects in more depth as well as what this way of viewing WLB may show regarding theorising both male and female executive's career progression.

We have particularly shown how WLB is formed by intersecting discourses around parenting, balance, and work. However, while gender and parenting identities were salient in our sample of highly privileged elite executives, we recognise that other characteristics may inform how or why we can and wish to pursue a particular WLB project. We agree with Özbilgin et al. (2011), who highlighted a need to explore how various social divisions intersect in structuring one's experience of doing WLB. Future research needs to explore how the project of the self may be classed or racialised and the extent to which the concept is useful in teasing out these nuances about how different dimensions of diversity structure one's WLB pursuit.

Finally, as was clear from our analysis, contemporary discursive definitions of WLB continue to concentrate on paid work and family as the two areas of critical importance, 'squeezing' out other meaningful pursuits such as friendships or leisure (particularly for women) and narrowly focusing on the care of the self but only with a view to making the subject better fit to attend to the 'main' function of work. Yet, it is also clear that there is some disruptive potential as individuals aspire to change their projects and, as Weedon (1987: 125) noted, while the subject 'is socially constructed in discursive practices, she nonetheless exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash

between contradictory subject positions and practices’. Future studies theorising WLB as the gendered project of the self should explore this potential for resistance in greater depth.

Notes

1. See Statistics Denmark for further detail: <https://www.dst.dk/en>. Additionally, as this paper was being finalised, the EU was pushing Denmark towards a more equally distributed leave, resulting in a larger number of weeks earmarked for a parent not giving birth to the child. This will most likely have an influence on how parental leave is both distributed and utilized from 2022.
2. When presenting quotes in the analysis, we use italics to reflect how we as authors highlight certain words or phrases rather than reflecting the interviewees’ emphasis.

References

- Adamson M (2017) Postfeminism, neoliberalism and a ‘successfully’ balanced femininity in celebrity CEO autobiographies. *Gender, Work & Organization* 24(3): 314–27.
- Ahl, H. (2007) A Foucauldian framework for discourse analysis. In Neergaard, H. and Ulhoi, J.P. (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Entrepreneurship*, pp. 216–52. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Allen TD, Merlo K, Lawrence RC, Slutsky J and Gray CE (2021) Boundary management and work: Nonwork balance while working from home. *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 70(1): 60–84.
- Allis P and O’Driscoll M (2008) Positive effects of nonwork-to-work facilitation on well-being in work, family and personal domains. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23(3): 273–91.

- Annink A (2017) From social support to capabilities for the work-life balance of independent professionals. *Journal of Management and Organization* 23(2): 258–76.
- Beauregard TA, Basile KA and Thompson CA (2018) Organizational culture in the context of national culture. In: Johnson R, Shen W, Shockley KM (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of the Global Work-Family Interface*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 555–69.
- Blair-Loy, M. (2003). *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*. Harvard University Press.
- Beck U (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. 2nd ed. London: Sage
- Beigi M, Wang J and Arthur MB (2017) Work-family interface in the context of career success: A qualitative inquiry. *Human Relations* 70(9): 1091–1114.
- Beigi M, Shirmohammadi M and Otaie L (2019) Half a century of work-nonwork interface research: A review and taxonomy of terminologies. *Applied Psychology* 68(3): 449–78.
- Blithe SJ (2015) *Gender Equality and Work-Life Balance: Glass Handcuffs and Working Men in the U.S.* New York: Routledge.
- Bloom P (2016) Work as the contemporary limit of life: Capitalism, the death drive, and the lethal fantasy of ‘work-life balance’. *Organization* 23(4): 588–606.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Brown W (2003) Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event* 7(1), [doi:10.1353/tae.2003.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2003.0020).
- Burnett SB, Gatrell CJ, Cooper CL and Sparrow P (2013) Fathers at work: A ghost in the organizational machine. *Gender, Work & Organization* 20(6): 632–46.
- Børve HE and Bungum B (2015) Norwegian working fathers in global working life. *Gender, Work & Organization* 22(4): 309–23.

- Caproni, PJ (2004) Work/life balance. You can't get there from here. *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 40(2): 208–18.
- Cederström C and Spicer A (2015) *The Wellness Syndrome*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Charlton, E (2019) Revealed: The Countries with the Best Work-life balance. World Economic Forum, 8th of October. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/10/countries-work-play-life-balance-stress-netherlands/>
- Christopher K (2012) Extensive mothering: Employed mothers' constructions of the good mother. *Gender & Society* 26(1): 73–96.
- Choroszewicz M and Kay F (2020) The use of mobile technologies for work-to-family boundary permeability: The case of Finnish and Canadian male lawyers. *Human Relations* 73(10): 1388–1414.
- Costea B, Crump N and Amiridis K (2008) Managerialism, the therapeutic habitus, and the self in contemporary organizing. *Human Relations* 61(5): 661–85.
- Cramer R, Alexander-Floyd N and Means T (2019) Balance is a fallacy: Striving for and supporting a life with integrity. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52(1): 35–38.
- Cruz D and Meisenback R (2018) Expanding role boundary management theory: How volunteering highlights contextually shifting strategies and collapsing work-life role boundaries. *Human Relations* 71(2): 182–205.
- de Araujo BFVB, Tureta CA and de Araujo DAVB (2015) How do working mothers negotiate the work-home interface? *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 30: 565–81.
- Eikhof DR, Warhurst C, and Haunschild A (2007) What work, what life, what balance? Critical reflections on the work-life balance debate. *Employee Relations* 29(4): 325–33.
- Eräranta K and Moisander J (2011) Psychological regimes of truth and father identity: Challenges for work/life integration. *Organization Studies* 32(4): 509–26.

- Fleetwood S (2007) Why work-life balance now? *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 18(3): 387–400.
- Ford J (2006) Discourses of Leadership: Gender, Identity and Contradiction in a UK Public Sector Organization *Leadership* 2(1): 77–99.
- Ford J and Collinson D (2011) In search of the perfect manager? Work-life balance and managerial work. *Work, Employment and Society* 25(2): 257–73.
- Foucault M (1982) The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry* 8(4): 777–95.
- Foucault M (1988) Technologies of the self. In: Martin LH, Gutman H, Hutton PH (eds) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock, 16–49.
- Fritz C and Van Knippenberg D (2018) Gender and leadership aspiration: The impact of work–life initiatives. *Human Resource Management* 57(4): 855–68.
- Gatrell CJ (2005) *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Gatrell CJ (2013) Maternal body work: How women managers and professionals negotiate pregnancy and new motherhood at work. *Human Relations* 66(5): 621–44.
- Gatrell CJ and Cooper CL (2016) A sense of entitlement? Fathers, mothers and organizational support for family and career. *Community, Work & Family* 19(2): 134–47.
- Gatrell CJ, Burnett SB, Cooper CL and Sparrow P (2014) Parents, perceptions and belonging: Exploring flexible working among UK fathers and mothers. *British Journal of Management* 25(3): 473–87.
- Gatrell CJ, Burnett SB, Cooper CL and Sparrow P (2013) Work-life balance and parenthood: A comparative review of definitions, equity and enrichment. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 15(3): 300–16.
- Gill R (2017) The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20(6): 606–26.

- Grey C (1994) Career as a project of the self and labour process discipline. *Sociology* 28(2): 479–97.
- Guillaume C and Pochic S (2009) What would you sacrifice? Access to top management and the work–life balance. *Gender, Work & Organization* 16(1): 14–36.
- Hagqvist E, Vinberg S, Tritter JQ, Wall E and Landstad BJ (2020) The same, only different: Doing management in the intersection between work and private life for men and women in small–scale enterprises. *Work, Employment and Society* 34(2): 262–80.
- Hatfield EF (2015) Valuing work, valuing family: A comparison of ‘balance’ discourse targeting mothers and fathers. In: Martinez AR, Miller LJ (eds) *Gender in a Transitional Era: Changes and Challenges*. London: Lexington Books, 21–40.
- Hennekam S, Syed J, Ali F and Dumazert JP (2019) A multilevel perspective of the identity transition to motherhood. *Gender, Work & Organization* 26(7): 915–33.
- Hodges MJ and Budig MJ (2010) Who gets the daddy bonus? Organizational hegemonic masculinity and the impact of fatherhood on earnings. *Gender & Society* 24(6): 717–45.
- Holth L, Bergman A and MacKenzie R (2017) Gender, availability and dual emancipation in the Swedish ICT sector. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(2): 230–47.
- Hughes KD and Silver WA (2020) Beyond time-binds: Rethinking work–family dynamics for a mobile world. *Human Relations* 73(7): 924–52.
- Huopalainen AS and Satama ST (2019) Mothers and researchers in the making: Negotiating ‘new’ motherhood within the ‘new’ academia. *Human Relations* 72(1): 98–121.
- Johansson T and Andreasson J (2017) *Fatherhood in Transition: Masculinity, Identity and Everyday Life*. London: Palgrave. Macmillan.
- Johnsen R, Muhr SL and Pedersen M (2009) The frantic gesture of interpassivity: Maintaining the separation between the corporate and authentic self. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 22(2): 202–13.

- Kalliath T and Brough P (2008) Work-life balance: A review of the meaning of the balance construct. *Journal of Management and Organization*, 14(3): 323–27.
- Kangas E, Lämsä AM and Jyrkinen M (2019) Is fatherhood allowed? Media discourses of fatherhood in organizational life. *Gender, Work & Organization* 26(10): 1433–50.
- Kaufman G (2013) *Superdads: How Fathers Balance Work and Family in the 21st Century*. New York: NYU Press.
- Kelly MG (2013) Foucault, subjectivity, and technologies of the self. In Falzon C, O’Leary T, Sawicki J (eds) *A Companion to Foucault*. London: Wiley, 510–25.
- Kristensen AR and Pedersen M (2017) ‘I wish I could work in my spare time’: Simondon and the individuation of work-life balance. *Culture and Organization* 23(1): 67–79.
- Lewis S, Gambles R, and Rapoport R (2007) The constraints of a ‘work-life balance’ approach: An international perspective. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 18: 360–73.
- Lewis S, Anderson D, Lyonette C, Payne N and Wood S (2017) Public sector austerity cuts in Britain and the changing discourse of work–life balance. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(4): 586–604.
- Lewis S and Beauregard TA (2018) Meanings of work-life balance. In: Johnson R, Shen W, Shockley KM (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of the Global Work-Family Interface*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 720–32.
- Loehr J and Schwartz T (2001) The making of a corporate athlete. *Harvard Business Review* 79(1): 120–8.
- Lott Y (2020) Is maternal labor market re-entry after childbirth facilitated by mothers’ and partners’ flextime? *Human Relations* 73(8): 1106–28.
- Luhr S (2020) Signalling parenthood: Managing the motherhood penalty and fatherhood premium in the U.S. service sector. *Gender & Society* 34(2): 259–83.

- Lupu I, Spence C and Empson L (2018) When the past comes back to haunt you: The enduring influence of upbringing on the work-family decisions of professional parents. *Human Relations* 71(2): 155–81.
- Madrid S (2017) The good night kiss: Fatherhood among corporate managers and the reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity in Chile. *Norma* 12(3–4): 240–55.
- McAdams DP (2012) Exploring psychological themes through life narrative accounts. In: Holstein JA, Gubrium JF (eds) *Varieties of Narrative Analysis*. London: Sage, 15–32.
- McRobbie A (2009) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.
- Meriläinen S, Tienari J, Thomas R and Davies A (2004) Management consultant talk: A cross-cultural comparison of normalizing discourse and resistance. *Organization* 11(4): 539–64.
- Miller T (2005) *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller T (2010) *Making Sense of Fatherhood: Gender, Caring and Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgenroth T, Ryan MK and Sønderlund AL (2020) Think Manager–Think Parent? Investigating the fatherhood advantage and the motherhood penalty using the Think Manager–Think Male paradigm. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 51(3): 237–47.
- Muhr SL, Pedersen M and Alvesson M (2012) Workload, aspiration, and fun: Problems of balancing self-exploitation and self-exploration in work life. In: Holmqvist M, Spicer A (eds) *Managing 'Human Resources' by Exploiting and Exploring People's Potentials* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 37). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 193–220.
- Muhr SL and Kirkegaard L (2013) The dream consultant: Productive fantasies at work. *Culture and Organization* 19(2): 105–23.

- Ollier-Malaterre A and Foucreault A (2017) Cross-national work-life research: Cultural and structural impacts for individuals and organizations. *Journal of Management* 43(1): 111–36.
- Orgad S (2017) The cruel optimism of the good wife: The fantastic working mother on the fantastical treadmill. *Television & New Media* 18(2): 165–83.
- Orgad S (2019) *Heading Home: Motherhood, work, and the Failed Promise of Equality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Özbilgin MF, Beauregard TA, Tatli A and Bell MP (2011) Work-life, diversity and intersectionality: A critical review and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 13(2): 177–98.
- PLCGENC: Parental leave, childcare and gender equality in the Nordic countries. By Norden. Available from:
http://ffdd.ru/activity/attach/information/182/parental_leave_childcare_and_gender_equality_in_the_nordic_countries.pdf
- Ralph D (2016) 'Who should do the caring'? Involved fatherhood and ambivalent gendered moral rationalities among cohabiting/married Irish parents. *Community, Work & Family* 19(1): 63–79.
- Randles J (2018) “Manning up” to be a good father: Hybrid fatherhood, masculinity, and U.S. responsible fatherhood policy. *Gender & Society* 32(4): 516–39.
- Riach K and Cutcher L (2014) Built to last: Ageing, class and the masculine body in a UK hedge fund. *Work, Employment and Society* 28(5): 771–87.
- Riessman CK (2001) Analysis of personal narratives. In: Gubrium JF, Holstein JA (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research*. London: Sage, 695–710.
- Ranson G (2012) Men, paid employment and family responsibilities: Conceptualizing the ‘working father’. *Gender, Work & Organization* 19(6): 741–61.

- Rottenberg C (2014) Happiness and the liberal imagination: How superwoman became balanced. *Feminist Studies* 40(1): 144–68.
- Rottenberg C (2018) *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salmenniemi S and Vorona M (2014) Reading self-help literature in Russia: Governmentality, psychology and subjectivity. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 65(1): 43–62.
- Scharff, C (2015) The psychic life of neoliberalism: Mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity. *Theory, Culture & Society* 33(6): 107–122.
- Seierstad C and Kirton G (2015) Having it all? Women in high commitment careers and work–life balance in Norway. *Gender, Work & Organization* 22(4): 390–404.
- Singh V, Vinnicombe S and James K (2006) Constructing a professional identity: How young female managers use role models. *Women in Management Review* 21(1): 67–81.
- Slaughter AM (2012) Why women still can't have it all. *The Atlantic*, July/August. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>
- Smith A and McBride J (2021) 'Working to live, not living to work': Low-paid multiple employment and work–life articulation. *Work, Employment and Society* 35(2): 256–76.
- Sørensen SØ (2017) The performativity of choice: Postfeminist perspectives on work-life balance. *Gender, Work & Organization* 24(3): 297–313.
- Weedon C (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralism Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Willig, C. (2013) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: McGraw Hill/Open University Press.