Resisting working time regimes in consulting: the role of "conforming work"

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Résumé :

Cet article s'intéresse à l'intensité du travail dans des environnements de type professionnel à travers l'expérience d'individus bénéficiant d'arrangements organisationnels visant à accommoder leur équilibre de vie. Nous étudions le travail identitaire de 10 consultants bénéficiant de telles politiques, lesquels cherchent à gérer une tension entre déviance à la norme de disponibilité constante et leur volonté d'éviter toute stigmatisation. Nous montrons que leur discours est caractérisé par une forte ambivalence au sujet (1) de la porosité de la frontière qu'il doive établir entre leur vie privée et leur travail, (2) le degré de transparence qu'il doivent adopter au sujet de l'arrangement dont ils bénéficient et (3) combien cela les rend atypique. Nous appelons cette forme spécifique de travail identitaire le travail de conformation et discutons dans quelle mesure celui-ci questionne ou bien renforce les normes entourant les horaires de travail. Nous défendons l'idée qu'une approche dialectique du phénomène permet de saisir toutes les complexités de l'évolution des normes à l'échelle individuelle.

Mots-clés : équilibre de vie, travail identitaire, ambivalence, conformité, déviance

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INTRODUCTION

Professionals and other knowledge workers, such as accountants, lawyers, R&D engineers or consultants, have often been considered in traditional *job design* (or *redesign*) traditions as privileged given the level of discretion that characterises their work. In this tradition, autonomy is indeed seen as essential to the development of individual potential but also to motivation, satisfaction and performance at work. For example, following Karasek and Theorell's widely spread model highlighting factors of health and stress at work, occupations where psychological demands are high but so is decisional latitude are categorised as *active*, in other words as jobs that allow individuals to develop their skills and learn by giving them a lot of control over how to handle work demands (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). When jobs have such characteristics, they argue, workers tend not only to be more satisfied at work, but also to participate more in civic and social events in their private lives than others. In this tradition, professionals' working conditions are implicitly looked at as an ideal that other occupations need to be redesigned towards.

In contrast with this description, professions have recently been qualified as « extreme work » environments (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Granter et al. 2015). Extreme work, they explain, is characterised by an unpredictable and fast-paced flow of work, under tight deadlines, an inordinate scope of responsibility of high level, work-related events outside of regular work hours, high availability to clients, a large amount of travel and extended presence in the office. Some authors have distanced themselves from this initial understanding of extreme work by emphasising how difficult it is to define *extreme* in opposition to *normal* (Granter et al., 2015) and prefer to say that extreme environments are environments in which individuals have a strong sense of working pressure (Gascoigne et al., 2015; Roberts, 2007). They show the long hours and demanding role expectations faced by professionals do not derive from the nature of the work itself but rather from the occupational discourse on the ideal professional

(Gascoigne et al., 2015), which revolves around norms of constant availability and reactivity. Such discourses, they claim, used to be characteristic of professional or managerial jobs and are increasingly colonizing other organisations too, in which work is constantly intensifying (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Granter et al., 2015). A vast number of studies has aimed to explain this phenomenon and has emphasised the key role played by identity regulation in these settings and how it leads individuals to comply with this constructed ideal of professionalism (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson, 2004). Even though such working time regimes appear to be rather persistent, some firms have introduced work-life balance policies, which – even though they are not widely used (Kaiser et al., 2011) – question the possibility of an evolution of norms surrounding working hours in these environments. In this context, it appears necessary to investigate the way individuals who do use these various initiatives engage in identity work in order to understand whether their discourse challenges or reinforces norms surrounding working hours.

In this paper, we start by reviewing existing studies of working-time regimes in professional environments, which emphasize the role of identity regulation processes in the permanence of intense work routines. We show that, however, the vast majority of this literature does not investigate the experience of individuals who benefit from work-life balance policies and rather focuses only on understanding why so few professionals use them. We then detail our research design, revolving around in-depth interviews with 10 consultants benefitting or having benefitted from a wide range of work-life balance arrangements. We describe how their discourse is characterised by a strong ambivalence between deviance from the norm of constant availability and submission to it. We detail how this manifests itself on three main dimensions: whether professionals should maintain strict boundaries between their 'work' and their 'life'; how transparent they should be with others about the work-life balance arrangement they benefit from and how atypical this makes them. We call the dialectics between deviance and compliance "conforming work" and we discuss its implications for the permanence of the intense working-time regime at play in these environments.

SUBMISSION TO INTENSE WORKING TIME REGIMES IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Intensity of the work in contemporary organizations: the extreme case of consulting

Professional firms are often described as exemplary cases of extreme work environments (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Granter et al. 2015) and accounts of professionals working up to the point of exhaustion are indeed not lacking. In the 19th c. Cravath law firm – the ancestor of the modern professional service firm, in which the division of labour between partners and associates in an up-or-out system were implemented for the first time – stamina was already described as a central requirement for the job because of the "*pressure*" and the "*rugged character of the work*". Young recruits were typically told they needed to be in "*good shape*" and that they wouldn't get "*many long vacations*" (Swaine, 1946-48: p.3). There are also many records of partners suffering from "*overwork*" and needing to "*take long rests abroad*" (Swaine, 1946-48: p.361;475;490;659).

Over a century later, nothing seems to have changed and professionals are very frequently described as having "*workaholic tendencies*" (Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013: p.106), working over hours, as well as on weekends and holidays. In his seminal study of a major high-tech corporation, Kunda (1992: p.201-204) interviewed R&D professionals who claimed to work over twelve hours a day, explaining they were addicted to work and yet regretting that the firm had taken over their lives. Similar observations have since then been made among investment bankers (Michel, 2011), lawyers (Bacik et al. 2006; Rohde 2002; Williams 2002), accountants (Herrbach, 2001; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Grey, 1994; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000) or consultants (Whittle, 2005; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; Muhr et al., 2013; Perlow, 2012). This extreme work does not translate only into long working hours, but also into high levels of reactivity and flexibility due to a norm of constant availability resulting in a tendency to prioritise work over everything else (Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; Muhr et al., 2013; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Whittle, 2005). Professionals do so all the more than technology now enables them to remain available 24/7 through the use of a number of electronic devices (Mazmanian et al., 2013).

In order to sustain such a level of commitment, professionals submit their bodies to this very demanding work routine by subordinating everything they do (the sports they practice, their hobbies, the way they eat, their leisure time, etc.) to their performance at work, even – for a vast majority of them – when their body starts to break down (Michel, 2011; Costas et al. 2016). What is striking here is that professionals appear to submit to such intense working-time regimes all along their careers, even as they become partners (Lupu and Empson, 2015).

Norms surrounding working hours at the heart of identity regulation

Professionals often claim to deliberately choose to work long hours, nights or weekends and to remain available over emails or over the phone (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Michel, 2011; Kunda, 1992; Mazmanian et al., 2013). They say they do so to better serve the client, or for the interest of the work and their will to have an exciting career. Some professionals even take pride in being able to endure such working conditions and value the machine-like professionals who can handle heavy workloads and pressure on a daily basis (Kunda, 1992; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). This is often referred to as the "*autonomy paradox*": professionals are rather autonomous (partners even more so) and yet submit themselves to very intense working time regimes, and claim to be doing so willingly (Michel, 2011; Lupu and Empson, 2015; Mazmanian et al., 2013).

Despite a discourse of free choice, the way professionals enact this intense working-time regime has instead often been attributed to the very pervasive modes of control at play within these organisations. These firms indeed need to display symbols of professionalism and expertise to impress clients on one side, and to attract and retain highly skilled professionals by providing them with an attractive elite organisational identity on the other (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, 2012; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Robertson and Swan, 2003). To achieve this, firms tend to rely on normative or socio-ideological forms of control, in other words they tend regulate identities in various ways (Kunda, 1992). Even though there is considerable variation in the elements put forward by firms' as distinctive elements of their prescribed identities (Alvesson and Empson, 2008; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006), we can still draw some common traits of the ideal professional worker: ambition, hard work, social skills, the ability to work in teams and endurance in particular (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Anderson-Gough et al., 2005; Meriläinen et al., 2004). This conception of the ideal professional worker is thought to encourage performance focused subjectivities, over-achievement and self-exploitation (Muhr et al., 2013; Alvesson, 2012). As a result, when professionals experience boredom due to the sometimes menial character of their actual work, it can trigger intense identity work (Costas & Kärreman, 2015).

This professional ideal is transmitted through HRM systems and processes on the one hand, and the discourse surrounding clients' expectations on the other. HRM is indeed described as carrying identity projects for individuals, in other words as a "*linking mechanism between organisational identity and individual identity regulation*" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007:

5

p.719). HRM, Alvesson and Kärreman go on to explain, generates normative ordering and provides meaning and instructions for individuals to follow. This starts even before individuals actually join the firm, through the recruitment process, which is described as a means for professional firms to both select applicants who appear most able to submit to expectations but also provides meaning regarding the prescribed subjectivity (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Armbrüster, 2004). Induction courses are then meant to push this process further by informing newcomers about what is considered correct socialising with both clients and colleagues (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). For example, Anderson-Gough et al. (2000) show how the induction courses received by trainees in the (then) Big 6 firms involve very concrete instructions regarding how they should dress and behave. The discourse these sessions rely on constructs *work* as a priority and *life* is systematically written out (it is never acknowledged unless evoked as a support for the career), which contributes to the shaping of professionals' priorities, later reinforced through socialisation. Through both recruitment processes and induction courses, professionals' subjectivities are *"prepared for work"* (Poulter and Land, 2008), or more precisely for *intense work*. The evaluation system, also, has been the object of much attention. Covaleski et al. (1998), for example, show how the management by objectives technique associated with the *up-or-out* system contributes to transform professionals into disciplined and even self-disciplining organisational members whose goals are aligned with those of the firm. Through her study of the development and mentoring practices at a global consultancy, Brunel (2008) adds that individuals internalise the idea that they are responsible of their own fate: the *up-or-out* system is perceived as providing everyone with the means to excel as a professional and any failure becomes a personal responsibility. This is reinforced by the fact that hours are long and thus interactions mostly with peers, which contributes to the exclusion of other points of reference (Poulter and Land, 2008).

This form of control is, in addition, often exercised *"in the name of the client"* (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000). Even though clients are constructed by professionals in diverse ways (Alvesson et al., 2009), clients' expectations are often invoked to legitimate a number of requirements (in particular in terms of working hours and reactivity), which are constructed as *"client-driven"* or in line with a *"professional ethic of behaviour"* during the induction, technical training sessions and on the job, through stories for example (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Poulter and Land, 2008). This results in a sacrificial understanding of professionalism (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000).

Understanding the permanence of working-time regimes by investigating processes of identity work

A number of studies have nonetheless pointed out that many professionals report to be dissatisfied with their work-life balance (Perlow, 2012; Perlow and Porter, 2009; Kaiser et al., 2011). As a result, as well as for reputation enhancing reasons, a number of firms have indeed implemented what can be broadly called "work-life balance policies", ranging from office days or office gyms to part-time work, sabbatical leaves or teleworking (Kaiser et al. 2011). However, existing studies show that these policies usually fail (in that they are not used) or are only offered to a marginal number of individuals that partners want to retain (Putnam, 2014; Kaiser, 2011; Litrico, 2011; Noury et al. 2017). Professionals themselves are often very pessimistic about the likely positive impact of work-life balance measures instilled at the corporate level (Pinnington and Sandberg, 2013). This even leads Kaiser et al. (2015: p.86) to conclude that "*work-life balance practices do not contribute to alleviating the work-life conflict in Professional Service Firms*".

This failure has mostly been attributed to a lack of managerial support, but can also be analysed from an identity work perspective (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). Watson (2008) defines identity work as the "*mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to term with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives*" (Watson, 2008: p.129). It is precisely that ability to come to terms with, contest and/or influence the prescribed identity that is of interest to us here. In this perspective, identity is conceptualised as the complex and multifaceted dynamics between identity regulation and resistance (Ybema et al. 2009). The initial purpose of studies of identity regulation and work was not to paint a totalising view of dominant discourses but rather to define identity work as a process in which the discourses at the heart of identity regulation are balanced with other elements of individuals' life histories, desires and aspirations or other socially available discourses (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Individuals engage in identity work on a daily basis in a routinized way to construct an understanding of their own self that is coherent, positively valued and relatively distinctive (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al. 2008). Yet

7

identity work becomes all the more intense that social interactions prompt such questioning and that a number of triggering events generate identity threats in the form of a risk of identity fragmentation or destabilisation (Thomas, 2009). This active crafting of the self can be triggered by changes such as work transitions or retirement for example (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2009), but also more broadly speaking any source of anxiety and self-doubt, any tension between who one believes to be and the description or expectations of others (Alvesson et al., 2008). This process of identity construction expresses itself through reflexive self-narratives, while being also interwoven in issues of self-presentation (Down & Reveley, 2009).

Costas and Kärreman (2015) have reviewed this literature and identified four outcomes of identity work: identification of course, but also dis-identification (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2000; Brown and Humphreys, 2006) – which is typically characterised by different forms of resistance and allows individuals to construct a back-stage to preserve what they consider to be their authentic-self; ambivalence (Pratt, 2000; Kunda, 1992) – which is characterised by the embracement of certain aspects of managerial discourse and the rejection of others; and self-alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009) – and is characterised by moments of awareness of the gap between the so-called authentic self and work practices.

A number of studies have taken an identity work perspective to understand the permanence of extreme working hours and have showed that, even when professionals dis-identify with the prescribed identity, it rarely leads to any disturbance of norms surrounding working hours. Whittle (2005), for example, shows how management consultants still perform their role as missionaries or preachers of flexibility, even though they are very critical about the way flexibility is practised in their own firm. Kosmala and Herrbach (2006) similarly argue that in spite of distancing, individuals need to maintain a positive image which leads them to engage in self-justification, especially by referring to the benefits of a career in their firm for their professional development. This is also in line with the findings of Poulter and Land (2008), whom show that even though newcomers are cynical about what they are told in their induction courses, they nonetheless perform the role of the engaged listener they are expected to enact. Following a different line and using a Lacanian approach, Muhr and Kirkegaard (2013) find that consultants' fantasies about off-work activities help them maintain an illusion of wholeness, of being more than just *company men and women*, which in the end contributes to reinforcing the intensiveness of their work schedule as they can fully direct their desires

8

towards work. Similarly, Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) argue that there is indeed resistance in consulting firms, but that it is systematically counter-resisted: in other words, whenever there is resistance in the form of a re-inscription of dominant discourses (in particular in their case through a discourse of "*the autonomous subject living a good life"*, revolving around the concepts of autonomy and work-life balance) it is systematically countered by the discourse of the elite professional (focusing instead on ambition, hard work, competence development and career). This can explain why, for Costas and Grey (2014), professionals tend to frame their desires of work-life balance in an imaginary future.

All these studies of identity work processes in professional firms contribute to understanding the permanence of intensive working time regimes and the little use of work-life balance policies. However, almost no study of the identity work of the few consultants who do use work-life balance measures exist and we have limited insights into the way they challenge existing working time regimes or are on the contrary on the verge of inevitable stigmatisation and exclusion from the system, while used as show-cases by their firms to communicate on their efforts to accommodate work-life balance. One notable exception is the work of Reid (2015), who studied how individuals who experienced conflict between expected and experienced identities due to an unwillingness to make work their primary commitment dealt with this situation. She showed how some of these consultants have attempted to modify the structure of their work (typically by limiting working after hours or by trying to work less than others, by making effort to work with accommodating colleagues or clients) rely on a repertoire of passing and revealing behaviours across various audiences, and how revealing it could lead to higher penalisation. She thus insists on the way most deviance is kept silenced and is mostly managed by individuals in the back stage. This paper is very useful in understanding the conflicts that individuals who do not identify with the prescribed identity can face, but it does not specifically focus on individuals who are identified as benefitting from specific arrangements and considered as deviating from the norm and have thus less margin in choosing to pass or reveal identity conflict. It does not investigate either contexts in which a certain willingness - at least in principle - to accommodate work-life balance demands is claimed, which can open up the space for different dynamics of identity work.

This is what we aim to investigate in this paper: How do individuals benefitting from work-life balance arrangements in extreme work environments engage in identity work and does it contribute to challenging or on the contrary reinforcing the norm of constant availability?

9

METHODS

Research design

In order to answer this question, we have studied the career stories of 10 consultants who benefit from specific work-life balance arrangements to better understand whether and how they can deviate from norms surrounding their working hours without being stigmatised.

As part of a broader study on work-life balance in consulting firms, 58 consultants at all levels of the hierarchy (working or having worked for 13 different firms) were interviewed in Paris. 10 consultants appeared to benefit from specific working conditions, allowing them – to some extent – to preserve their sense of work-life balance, which they spontaneously described as very counter-normative. As discussed in our literature review, work-life balance policies remain marginally used, which explains why we only met 10 individuals benefitting from them. Yet these 10 cases proved to be extremely rich to explore the dynamics of identity work at play when deviating from norms surrounding working hours. These arrangements were discussed with consultants themselves, but also with their colleagues, supervisors, partners and HR managers whenever possible. Ambivalence between accounts of counter-normative practices and compliance in discourse emerged inductively from the examination these specific cases, while looking for an element of surprise in the material (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). This ambivalence was surprising in two regards. First, given the dominance of critical accounts of consulting work in the literature and their insistence on conformity among this population, such accounts of counter-normativity in the interview material were not expected. Second, once these supposedly counter-normative practices had been evoked, we were expecting them to be followed by a rather critical or cynical discourse on norms and how things should be different, and not by a discourse very much in line with the prescribed identity.

We thus decided to analyse this ambivalence more thoroughly through the following steps:
(1) All the interviews in which counter-normative practices regarding work-life balance were evoked were identified (10 out of the 58). The choice was made here not to define what is or is not counter-normative and rather to focus on what participants themselves described as counter-normative.

(2) We then looked for patterns in consultants' discourse and identified three coding pairs accounting for a strong ambivalence between contesting the norm of constant availability and conforming to it:

- 'Refusal to sacrifice life over work' Vs. 'Willingness to compromise'
- 'Claim to be transparent about work-life balance arrangement' Vs. 'Trying to keep it invisible'
- 'Claim to be a pioneer' Vs. 'Claim to be a professional like all others'

Description of the participant base

The 10 consultants we met who were benefitting from specific idiosyncratic arrangements worked for 6 different firms and occupied positions ranging from senior consultant to partner. 8 of them were female consultants and only 2 were men. Below is a short overview of each individual case:

	Rank	Firm	Informal arrangement
Victoria	Senior Manager	Big Accountancy A	*Flexible working hours and limited travels* When she was a senior consultant, Victoria decided to take part in a theatre play with two rehearsals a week, requiring for her to leave the office at 6:30pm. She managed to make this practice accepted by her partners and colleagues. Then, after she got married and had her first child, she started leaving at 6pm every night, with the support of the HR director.
Violet	Senior Manager	Big Accountancy B	*Flexible working hours and part-time work* Violet started her career working in the audit department of Big Accountancy B abroad before she joined their consulting department, which involved a lot of travelling in Europe. She then had a child and concomitantly decided to go back to France and joined the consulting teams of the Paris office. She quit after less than a year because of the negative work-life balance (she says she was regularly working until 10pm). In order to retain her, she was offered to work half-time, which she accepted. After two years she was assigned a project that made it impossible to respect her part-time arrangement and she threatened to quit again. She was then offered to change services and has since then started working full-time again, with flexible hours, and ambitions to be co-opted partner soon.

11

Alice	Manager	Finance Consulting	*Flexible working hours and teleworking* Alice's husband lives away from Paris for work and already did when she started working for Finance Consulting. Once she was promoted Manager, she felt she could ask her coach and partners to allow her some flexibility in her working hours so she could move in with her husband and take the train early in the morning and in the evening (she arrives around 10am and leaves the office around 7pm). She has also negotiated to be able to work from home once a week to make this routine sustainable.
Ann	Senior Manager	Finance Consulting	*Flexible working hours and limited travels* After she had her first child, Vanessa decided to she would leave the office at 7pm and avoid projects, which involve business trips as much as possible. She managed to obtain the support of some partners to do so.
Elizabeth	Senior Consultant	Finance Consulting	*Sabbatical, part time work and teleworking* After a couple of years in Finance Consulting, Elizabeth shared with her partners her wish to take a sabbatical leave of three months to conduct a voluntary project abroad. The date was chosen according to project constraints and, in exchange, the firm funded her entire project. She then came back but, after a few months, decided she wanted to leave again but for a longer period of time. She was ready to resign but her partners offered her to work part-time and at a distance (3 days a week on average, which can vary according to project needs, which means that she can dedicate 2 days a week to her NGO). She has been doing so for two years.
Amy	Manager	Management Consulting	*Flexible working hours and limited travels* Amy was a senior consultant when she had her son. After coming back from maternity leave she asked her partners if she could be exempted from projects requiring traveling. In parallel, since her son is in school, she has started leaving at 6pm several times a week to pick him up in the evening.
Damian	Senior Manager	Management Consulting	*Flexible working hours* Damian was already a Senior Manager at Management Consulting when his wife asked him to work less and be home on time for dinner. Since then, he has decided to leave the office at 8pm at the latest and is struggling to make this accepted by his colleagues.
David	Partner	Management Consulting	*Annualised part time work* When David joined his firm, he was a senior consultant and did not have children yet. Still, he negotiated during the recruitment process

			to be allowed – once he would have children – to take time off to be with them. This very informal arrangement involved taking unpaid days off, which David directly negotiated with his clients. Once his children were all in school, he went back to a more traditional rhythm and has since become a Partner at his firm.
Rachel	Senior Consultant	Strategy Consulting A	*Flexible working hours* Rachel, right from her first year at the firm, tried to find ways to combine her intense sport practice with work. She usually tends to come into the office later than others (around 9:30am) because she says she has noticed it was harder to preserve that time in the evening, but this is something she negotiates with project managers at the start of each project.
Rose	Senior Manager	Strategy Consulting B	*Flexible working hours and part-time work* Rose had been working for her consultancy for several years already when she started contemplating completing a Ph.D. She started by enrolling into a Masters programme during which she was working part-time four days a week. She struggled to combine both but obtained her diploma and went back to consulting full-time. Then, after a couple of years, she decided to pursue a Ph.D and found an agreement with her firm to work two days a month to maintain the relationship with the firm while spending most of her time on her academic project. She then had her first child and, as she went back to working fully for the firm, she negotiated to do so on a part-time basis, which fluctuated for the next few years between three and four days a week. She is now working three days a week and – at the time of our interview – was a candidate for partnership.

Table 1: description of the work-life balance arrangements negotiated by participants

These arrangements are best qualified as idiosyncratic in that they are usually very informal and negotiated on an individual basis to take into account the specific circumstances of a particular consultant (typically to accommodate family life, but also in some instances to allow some consultants to pursue a hobby like theatre or sports; to help them carry out voluntary work; or fulfil academic ambitions on the side of project work). These arrangements range from sabbatical leaves, which are relatively easy for partners to grant given the project-based nature of the work, to more complex arrangements involving the amendment of existing rules and procedures such as a limited travel policy for consultants (often mothers) with young children for example or part-time schemes.

FINDINGS

The discourse of consultants who benefit from work-life balance arrangements is characterised by a strong ambivalence expressed through the confrontation of a claim of deviance with attempts to conform to the ideal professional described earlier. This ambivalence concerns three main dilemmas: whether professionals should maintain strict boundaries between their 'work' and their 'life'; how transparent they should be with others about the work-life balance arrangement they benefit from and how atypical this makes them.

'Refusal to sacrifice life over work' Vs. 'Willingness to compromise'

All the participants have in common that they express a strong refusal to sacrifice what they refer to as their "life" - meaning most often their family, but also their friends or hobbies – for their career advancement. They very frequently explain that they love their jobs and have no desire to leave their firm or even the consulting industry more broadly, but that they are not willing to stay at any cost:

> It's a rule I have set for myself and if it doesn't work out anymore I will leave. It's my personal and familial convictions, I am married to my wife, we have three children, I am not married to my firm. (…) We are not machines, we are not animals, we are 150 consultants so it should be manageable. There's a lot of work, sure, but we should be able to organise ourselves to make it sustainable.
>
> Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting

> Some things were much more important than work. I was told I was promoted just before my wedding, so I got married and got pregnant so they could ask me whatever they wanted, I didn't care one bit. (…) So I thought: I'm going to stay but I won't change. If they ever ask me to do things differently, not necessarily to do more, but differently, I won't fight. I will take my things and go. I won't have any regret, I will be disappointed of course, but I will leave, I won't sacrifice anything to stay.
>
> Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B

Some would consider becoming partners if they can preserve their work-life balance arrangement, but others explain feeling that they either would not like to do partners' jobs or

that they do not envy their work-life balance and would rather stay in a senior role. However, all express a wish to remain consultants.

Some of them explain that they have had such priorities since they started their job as a consultant, and for others, priorities shifted after their children were born. Like Damian, they often argue that they are not "machines", that they are precisely "human" and as such need to rest and have time for themselves.

They also tend to downplay the importance of their consulting job and its social impact, typically by comparing it to other professions such as medicine to present the norm of constant availability as absurd and legitimate their standpoint on work-life balance:

> Even if work isn't finished it can wait. This way I can spend the evening with my boyfriend, see friends. Work can wait. We have to remember we're not talking about human lives here!
>
> Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting A

> Even if you have to cut a meeting short, and continue the following day… in the end what difference does it make? We don't save lives! That's one of the advantages of our job, we're all interchangeable. We're not astronauts, nor mathematicians, anyone can do the same job. Maybe differently, but it will be done. So it doesn't change anything.
>
> Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy A

Part of this discourse revolves around the idea that the norm of constant availability is incompatible with being a good parent and being there for one's children. This explains why they present themselves as having set a particular boundary (whether a time when they need to be back home, travelling abroad for a certain period of time or working on the weekend for example), and being very strict in making that boundary accepted by partners and clients (see table 2).

At the same time, no matter how much they insist on how strict they are about the respect of the work-life balance arrangement, these consultants all insist on their ability to compromise.

Refusal to sacrifice life over work	Willingness to compromise
I love my job but I am not willing to sacrifice everything. For example, my family lives abroad so once a month either they come or I go. I can cancel once, but if I have to cancel twice, I will quit! Also I go to the gym every	I have cancelled sometimes, it has happened. You need to be flexible. This is what we are paid for after all! You have to make some effort. Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting A

morning. So I never come into the office before 9:30, it's my thing, I need it. I always tell the team in the beginning of a project so we can find solutions for it to work. You need to be really clear on what you will never compromise on. Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting A	
I fight with others, because a lot of people like to talk, etc. And I say 'we have a meeting from 7 to 8pm. At 8pm I am gone.' It's a little extreme, it annoys them. But it allows me to have dinner at home systematically. I have dinner with my wife every night and I manage to see the kids 3 nights out of 5 during the week. Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting	I think it's easy to find things to do not to come home early, to come back after children are bathed and all. You can organise yourself differently. We have all the technologies that allow us to turn the computer on from home, to have dinner, see your children, and then turn the computer on again from home. Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting
I went abroad with the firm, but I had my son who was very young, so I worked on a 60% basis. (…) It really challenges the model, 60% of what? We are evaluated with a gauss curve, so I'm compared with two other colleagues who work 90h a week, whose wives don't work and say yes to everything and me I say no. Rose, Senior Manager, Strategy Consulting B	Consulting is a job that you cannot do unless you do it fully. You're either completely in or completely out. It's hard to be moderated. (…) You have to know that 60%, it doesn't mean 40 hours a week. But I buy myself some flexibility for the evenings and the weekends. Rose, Senior Manager, Strategy Consulting B
I live one hour and a half away from Paris by train, so I arrive in the morning around 9:20am and I have to leave at 7pm to take the train at 7:50pm, and for it to be sustainable, I have one day of teleworking a week. No one else is doing that. Never before, never since. Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting	"I thought I had to have one day of teleworking a week, ideally it's Wednesday because it allows me to have a break from the train in the middle of the week. But if it doesn't work it can also be Tuesday or Thursday and if it doesn't work again, Monday or Friday. And there are some weeks when I can't take it at all. But mostly it works out! (…) And we anticipate. If we anticipate there's going to be a lot of work on a project and it requires my presence, I can take a hotel, and I work late nights with the team! But it's not frequent, it's very rare. And I can work again in the evening, I always work in the train anyway, if I have to work all the time I work all the time." Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting

Table 2: illustrative quotes

They claim that in order to ensure that quality and client delivery do not suffer the consequences of their own personal constraints they need to be flexible and willing to make compromises. They all acknowledge that "*flexibility*" is "*part of the job*", "*what clients expect*" or "*what they pay for*".

You have to be flexible, that's what we're paid for. So you have to make some effort sometimes. But for it to be sustainable, you also need to be really clear on what you will never compromise on.

Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting A

As a consequence, they often provide striking examples of times when they have accepted to make such a compromise and let go of their strict boundary between work and life. David, for example, explained having taken most school holidays off when his children were young, and yet having accepted to be there for clients when absolutely required for the sake of the project. This is, he went on to explain, what led him to cancel his Christmas vacation one year, because if he had not, the deadlines of the project would not have been met. Similarly, Ann explained being willing to work late nights a few days in a row for the sake of projects; Victoria explained always ensuring she has a "*plan B*" in case any last minute trip comes up and Alice explained being willing to book a hotel to work late nights in Paris when required for her projects.

I can connect to the network, I have everything I need at home, everyone does. (…) But when there's a rush, you need to know… Typically with my current project… I haven't seen my children much in the past 10 days, but I knew it. That's what makes it work. At some point if I always say "at 7pm I'm done", deadlines will not be met. If I hadn't stayed later the past 10 days, we wouldn't have handed out a good report to the client.

Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting

At the same time, I try not to be stubborn. Sometimes I have to be reactive. I anticipate, I tell a friend that I may have to travel for example, I activate plan B and that's it. You need a good organisation.

Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B

They also very often express being willing work again in the evening, after their children are in bed, or working in transport or on weekends. By doing so, they insist on how they would never let their personal life come in the way of the quality of the service nor rely on their team members to do the work for them.

'Claim to be transparent about your WLB arrangement' Vs. 'Trying to keep WLB arrangement invisible'

17

As a consequence of their refusal to sacrifice their personal life over their career, consultants explain having had to negotiate their work-life balance arrangements which remain mostly informal and are often tailored to their specific situation. They often emphasize how they have always received very positive evaluations or have even been identified as "*high-potentials*", are very visible inside their firms, which they say gave them the legitimacy and the leverage to ask for specific arrangements:

> I am what they call a "Baby Accountancy B". That means I started there, I have seen the younger consultants join the firm, I trained them because I am in charge of that, I run the introductory seminar when they join, I am very visible. So I have a real support from the teams, and the HR director is not stupid, he knows that whatever they do for me will be very visible.
>
> Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B

They also often insist on how extensively they have performed their role as a consultant before (having travelled a lot, worked on difficult projects), which – for them – legitimates that they have somehow earned the right to some kind of special treatment now, because they have already proved themselves enough and have the appropriate management role:

> Some people say you shouldn't have a special treatment because you have kids. When I came back from maternity leave I asked not to travel, but I had been travelling non-stop for three years before that! I've done my share!
>
> Amy, Manager, Management Consulting

> Before you're Manager, you don't have control over your schedule. Your schedule depends on the schedule of your n+1 (…) you need to tell the team everything you're doing, if you have a train, a dentist appointment, you need to tell everything and anyway you have no time. (…) But once you're Manager, you're more in control and anyway you have a moral contract with the partner and the client and as long as you deliver, it doesn't matter how.
>
> Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting

They explain having negotiated these arrangements in various ways: sometimes through their "coach" (a more senior consultant in a career counselling role), through the partner they directly work with or even through the HR director. They explain needing the active support of colleagues, partners or even clients to sustain their arrangements and to make sure they are

18

assigned projects that fit their constraints and avoid stigmatisation in the evaluation and promotion processes:

> It works because people are very understanding. We had a job not long ago for which there was a weekly call at 6:30pm. I leave the office at 7pm, so it's a bit difficult for me. And the partner basically said: "you say hello, if you have something to say you say it and at 7pm you leave and I take the rest of the call."
>
> Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting

As a result, they express being very transparent with all these actors, both partners and clients, as to the nature of their arrangements and of their personal constraints. They explain not only having set clear boundaries, but also having made that very explicit to partners and clients, no matter the risk of stigmatization. Victoria, for example, reported meeting with clients in the beginning of projects to tell them about her personal constraints and that she cannot stay later than 5pm, even if that means taking the risk that they will one day call the partner to complain. This actually happened to another one of the consultants we interviewed, who explained having received the protection of the partners on the project because they knew the quality of her work:

> It happened once two years ago, a client kicked me out of a project. I refused to be available from 7am to midnight, so he kicked me out. I was protected because I knew people who knew the quality of my work, but I don't think it could have happened twice in a row.
>
> Rose, Senior Manager, Strategy Consulting B

For Ann, who explains systematically telling the partners she works with that she cannot stay later than 7pm, this has meant facing conflicts with some of the partners of the firm, that she no longer works with:

> It has been a little difficult at first because here, normal working hours are more like… people leave at around 8:30 or 9pm. So it's been a bit difficult with some partners because they tend to come at 6:45pm so say 'ok, let's check the report', and I have to say 'well I have to go', 'really? you can't stay? Where is your husband?' so I have to say 'yes he is here, but I want to see my children and the report is only due in three days'. So it's been a little tough at first! But in the end partners who do not accept it… well I just don't work with them anymore.
>
> Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting

To some extent, this transparency that they emphasise implies that they have always disclosed their constraints and that it was partners' responsibility to accept the situation, that they do not impose their situation on others and that they are actively looking for solutions to avoid any disturbance of project work; which contributes to legitimizing it.

However, at the same time, there were many accounts of consultants trying to keep their work-life balance arrangement as invisible as possible.

Claim to be transparent about WLB arrangement	Trying to keep WLB arrangement invisible
I asked to work part-time when I had my son. (…) One week out of two, when I have him, I can organise myself to pick him up from school. That means I leave at 5pm, which is very early I have to say! (…) Some partners are very traditional, so it's a real challenge because you risk being ill-perceived. And they say 'When I was your age I didn't say anything'. But you have to know your limits and make them accepted. Violet, Senior Manager, Big Accountancy A	Sometimes you have to say you 'I have a meeting' rather than 'I work part-time'. You shouldn't claim it too much. Violet, Senior Manager, Big Accountancy A
I used to take my son to school in the mornings and my husband would pick him up in the evenings. So he thought I was the one always leaving him! It was a big drama, I was sick about it. He wouldn't talk to me anymore, he didn't want to see me, he didn't want to be in my arms! He only wanted his father. So I leave at 6pm… This is really early! But I am very transparent! Sometimes I ask my boss and I just work from home, there's no problem for him. Amy, Manager, Management Consulting	There's no problem for my boss, but for others… they don't know what I do from home. They don't know if I open my computer again and work from there. Exemplarity is a big question in consulting. But even if I have to hide in the office and take the back stairs when I leave, I pick him up. Amy, Manager, Management Consulting
Some clients are still shocked when they learn I leave at 5 :30pm. I see it. For example right now I'm on a project, in the beginning I took the time to meet with the client to explain transparently the situation. He was telling me he came to the office very early in the morning and I had to explain 'I can be here early in the mornings after I drop my kid to kindergarden but in the evenings don't count on me. I say it with a smile, but I'm honest at least. And if he is not happy he can call the partner and kick me out of the project.	When I schedule meetings, instead of saying 'I am available on Thursday afternoon', I say 'I am available between 2pm and 5pm'. It's not a problem for anyone, it's just a matter of coordination. But it doesn't change anything. When there's something urgent to deal with, I propose to meet over lunch. It happened just last week. Some people wanted to meet in the evening between 7 and 8pm. I said 'What's the point ? Let's meet tomorrow over lunch.' And it works fine. (…) and when I'm assigned a project that doesn't allow me to see my daughter before she

Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B	goes to bed, I can do it once, twice, but not three times, so I won't do it. But I don't say it like that, I say 'Did you see that X is available as well? Maybe he's better for the project'. Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B
I talked about it, at some point I wanted to have children and I put my career on stand-by a little, I did the minimum not to be fired by the client. It's a choice I made. Then I couldn't expect to have the highest pay rise and a crazy bonus. I was quite honest with myself. David, Partner, Management Consulting	When you are a consultant it's impossible to say that you will never be available on Wednesdays or Fridays, it's impossible. You can't arrive and tell your client you're working part-time, you can't bring this constraint with you (…) but during school holidays well… everything slows down anyway, so if they take time off, the basic rule is to align yourself on the clients, on the holidays they take. Because in the end it's easier for them, if you say 'I take three weeks off at the same time as you", well it's easier for him. David, Partner, Management Consulting

Table 3 : illustrative quotes

First, as explained before, most of these consultants have arrangements that are very informal: they either revolve around flexible hours, or teleworking, which is not always a formal policy offered by their firm, as in the case of Victoria who says that she is not sure she is covered by her insurance when she works from home. Even David, who worked on an annual part-time scheme for years, did not have a formal mention of it in his contract and simply took unpaid days off when he wanted to spend more time at home. The informal character of these arrangements allows them to some extent to avoid being stigmatised and to be immediately left on the side of the road to partnership. Some of them, like Rose, David or Violet, have even alternated periods of time with work-life balance arrangements (in their case part-time work), with periods without, without damage for their careers so far, since both were – at the time of our interviews – candidates for partnership.

> It wasn't always appropriate to say "I work 80% of the time", it wasn't official. I wasn't going to arrive at the clients' and bring him that constraint. It's not the best way to be seen in a positive light.
>
> David, Partner, Management Consulting

Consultants actually explain having negotiated their arrangements in a non-vindictive way, "*naively*". They do not identify as resisters, as the fact that Ann refuses to refer to herself as a "*trade-unionist*" or that Victoria says she was "*not militant*" illustrates, for instance.

In parallel, participants also explain that – as much as they are willing to be open about their situation and their personal constraints – they are aware that in some instances it is better to simply hide them to avoid unnecessary occurrences of the need for self-justification. This is what leads Violet and Victoria, for instance, to explain that it is better to avoid explaining why they cannot make late meetings and simply offer other more convenient slots, or even lie about it by saying that the slot is already taken by another meeting. For David, even though he had always been transparent with the partners of his firm, this had more to do with avoiding to explain the situation to his client by trying to align his time off with his clients' to make it work. In many instances, consultants explain trying to anticipate to avoid these situations in which they have to hide their constraints, especially by influencing the project assignment process so that these problems are avoided.

'Claim to be a pioneer' Vs. 'Claim to be a professional like any other'

Our participants all present themselves as unique cases in their firms. They emphasise how atypical their situation is in their consultancy and how much they deviate from the norm of constant availability. They insist on being "*the only one*", the "*first one*" doing what they do. They also highlight the gap with other consultants' practices to emphasize how deviant they are from the norm of constant availability, for example by explaining that their situation is "*rare*", "*atypical*" or "*uncommon*".

> My trajectory isn't very classical. I have started by leaving for a voluntary project for three months. (…) and then I came back and worked for a foreign office of the firm for six months (…) and then, and that's where my trajectory becomes very atypical, I went back to South America and I am working for the firm three days a week from there.
>
> Elizabeth, Senior Consultant, Finance Consulting

Some of them even clearly refer to themselves as '*pioneers*' for opening the way for others to follow their example, and that expression was also used by other consultants when talking about them. They explain having had to invent new ways of enacting their role without any

pre-existing role model. Ann, for example, explains how there were first very few women among partners who could serve as role models; while Victoria explains that none of the female partners benefit from any kind of arrangement, that they hire nannies to take care of their children until they come home and that they even explicitly discouraged her to pick up her daughter from school:

> The worst thing was, when I came back from maternity leave, two women who said… one said 'so you're going to look for a job elsewhere?' (…) and the other said 'so you found a nanny?' and I said 'no, my daughter is going to the day care' and she replied 'no, but you found a nanny to pick her up?' 'no, actually no, I'm gonna go myself' and she said, completely relaxed, 'Victoria, don't drive yourself crazy! You take a nanny, she picks up your daughter, she feeds her, puts her to bed, you come back you're all set!' (…) So it was really hard because I realised that perhaps the model wasn't ready to absorb this.
>
> <div align="right">Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy A</div>

Ann even mentions the influence of the male partners' work routine on their perception of the legitimacy of her work-life balance arrangement. Here, again, these consultants present themselves in a heroic light through stories in which they have to fight against norms in their industry in order to do what they think is best for their family.

For some, this absence of role model is seen as a resource for to negotiate the conditions of adaptation of the work-time regime. Ann, for example, explains this is precisely what enabled her to invent her own rules according to her own constraints while she would have had to conform to the norm already set by someone else if she had had other examples of mothers wanting to adapt existing working-time regimes to their situation. For others, though, this absence of role models is acknowledged in a more negative way – as in the case of Victoria in the quote above for example – since it appears to prevent consultants from benefitting from the support of other women and having to legitimate their practice by themselves, sometimes even against the example of other more experienced women.

They also often compare themselves to consultants who have left for work-life balance reasons to emphasize how courageous they have been:

> Some women just leave. There's one that is leaving now, I just found out, she told me 'I can't do it anymore'. And only now she's asking how I make it work. It's funny. She came to me to

say 'But how do you do it? How do you organize yourself? Do you have a nanny?'. 'No, I don't have a nanny'. 'Really?' They all end up leaving.

Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy A

Yet, in parallel, as much as they explain being a special case in their firms, they also claim to be a professional like others, that their situation doesn't differentiate them from other consultants and that they perform just as well.

Claim to be a pioneer	Claim to be a professional like others
I don't live in Paris. So I have to take an early train to arrive at 9:30 and leave at 7pm. (…) And for it to work, I need to work from home one day a week. No one else is doing that. Never before, never since. But we thought we would give it a try. (Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting)	I work, I mean sometimes I rework from home in the evening. Anyway I always work in the train, if I have to work all the time, I work all the time. Everybody is quite surprised; it's going very very well. (…) In the beginning I felt like when I was teleworking I had to be reachable all the time. If I went to the kitchen to make myself a coffee and I missed a call, I felt terrible. But now I work from home and I do the same work or even better. Everyone knows it and no one is asking questions. They see no difference in the quality of my work nor in the way teams work when I supervise them. That it's even good for the team sometimes when the manager is away, that they have to learn to self-organize. Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting
I decided that I would leave work at 7pm to pick up my children from the nanny. (…) I was the first one to do something like that. There are three or four of us now, but I was the first to have a child, which allowed me to define my own boundaries. And if you look at the partners, there are few women, and when partners' wives work, they are either at home or are working girls who hire nanny after nanny and have actively chosen to come back home at 9:30 or 10pm every night. (…) Partners' life doesn't excite me enough to make me think I want to put everything aside to have their life. (Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)	I organize myself. I have intense days, no time for personal business. I don't send personal e-mails, I don't have personal phone calls. There must be 10 minutes during the day when I am not working. I have always had very condensed days and I've always liked to leave at 8 or 8 :30. Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting
My friends have quit as soon as they have had their baby. And I have met people that said « there is no reason to treat people differently depending on their personal situation ». Some people believe you shouldn't get any special treatment. So when I came back from maternity leave and asked not to travel, I was made clear that this was a very	People don't know what I do at home! They don't know I turn on my computer again and I keep working! (…) In people's mind someone who works well is someone who works a lot. But it's completely stupid! There's a question of proactivity! We all know people who stay late but spend all day chatting. (…) Me, from time to time at the lunch

big favour. (Amy, Manager, Management Consulting)	break I have a sandwich in front of my computer. I have an ability to concentrate that allows me to work a lot over a short period of time. I don't see why I should stay later if I am done and I can be with my family. (Amy, Manager, Management Consulting)
The HR director told me: someone who doesn't have a nanny to take care of their child in the evening, that doesn't exist here. And I have to say I think he is right… This model doesn't exit. That's why, when I got back from maternity leave so many people told me « it's not going to work ! » because no one else is doing it. Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B	In the end, even at the clients', no one cares when I close my computer at 5:45pm and say 'I'm sorry I have to go'. The first time I thought 'I'm going to be told off, I'm going to be told off' but in the end it makes absolutely no difference. People think 'wait, it's true that time is running out, we are not being efficient right now, we need to get back on track.' (…) and even the client found it great! He said to me 'My wife is very happy because I come back home earlier'. It's crazy, he is happy his consultant leaves early! He is happy because he is more efficient and he can go home early. Victoria, Manager, Big Accountancy B

Table 4 : illustrative quotes

They start by claiming that their work-life balance arrangement has absolutely no impact on project work, that it "*doesn't change anything*". Sometimes, like Victoria, they even explain that they were already doing very well before without working more and that they see no reason why this should change. Clients, they say, understand their situation, partners see no impact on quality and colleagues' workload did not increase. They also claim that, even though they benefit from a certain work-life balance arrangement, this does not mean that they don't put in the work, but that they do it differently (whether in a different place or at a different time that suits them better):

> You have to understand that 60% doesn't mean I work 40 hours a week. But you buy yourself some flexibility for the evenings and the weekend. People told me "But you don't work on a 60% basis!", but it allowed me to have some flexibility.
>
> Rose, Senior Manager, Strategy Consulting B

They account for it by presenting themselves has having very much all the characteristics expected from a professional, beyond their work-life balance arrangement: they are energetic, proactive, daring, courageous, organized, efficient, have stamina, etc. (see table 4 for examples). They even claim that having a work-life balance arrangement makes them better professionals because they need to be better organized, more focused, dedicated and dynamic.

25

> To be able to deal with a part-time arrangement, you need to be organised, flexible, communicate, anticipate, make efforts. (…) You need to send people back to their own responsibilities. We have an image of consultants who cannot say a word about anything, but if you pressure your employees, there's a real risk they will break down or leave. You need to think about long term well-being. You need to manage it, in the interest of the client. There can be emergencies sometimes, but then you need to negotiate the perimeter, do the minimum

> Violet, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting

By arguing this, not only do consultants state that their work-life balance arrangement has had no impact on the quality of their work, but that it has even made them better at their jobs and that, in the end, if others stay so late it is only because they engage in impression management or because they are inefficient and take personal time off during work. Some of them even go on to explain that the norm of constant availability goes against the interest of the client in the sense that reactivity and quality do not always go hand in hand.

Consultants thus define consulting services as primarily focused on quality (instead of reactivity and flexibility), which enables them to justify that if the budget is insufficient to reach expectations because it doesn't allow partners to staff the team appropriately (and thus increases the workload) or if the deadline is too tight, they need to negotiate with the partners or directly with the client to either increase the size of the team or to reduce the scope of the project or postpone the deadline.

DISCUSSION

Dialectics of conforming work

Our findings show the way consultants who negotiate work-life balance arrangements of various kinds are confronted with paradoxical injunctions emanating from societal discourses that are very difficult to combine. On one side, there is an injunction to be a good professional

and a performing consultant, which as we discussed in the literature review, implies being flexible, available, committed and reactive (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Alvesson, 2001; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013); and on the other side an injunction to live a full and good life and to be a good parent (and often more particularly to be a good mother), which implies prioritising personal commitments over work and dedicating time to oneself or one's children (Blair-Loy, 2003). The participants appear to be seduced by both discourses, to ambition to "succeed" in their personal and professional lives, which explains their ambivalent response in terms of identity work: even if they have decided to negotiate specific arrangements in order to accommodate their personal lives as much as possible, they do not want these arrangements to impact their reputation and their careers and thus want them to remain as invisible as possible, unless they can use them to be seen in a positive light. In addition, one of the specificities of project work is that consultants need to legitimate their working arrangement constantly as they go on to work with new partners, new colleagues and new clients, with different budget and time constraints. As a consequence, the sustainability of their arrangement is never fully acquired and they regularly need to enrol a number of actors within their firms and outside, especially when they work on client site. As a consequence, there is a need for these consultants to display signs of conformity to expectations all the more that their arrangement is considered as atypical or counter-normative.

We label "conforming work" this particular form of ambivalence triggered by the tension between deviance and the perceived need to conform to certain norms, in this case to the norm of constant availability. Conforming work is characterised as much by the claim of deviance than the conform discourse that it is entangled with, since the need to provide an appearance of submission to the norm is rendered necessary by the perception of the deviant character of the practice in the first place. For this reason, conforming work is best defined as a dialectic relationship between deviating and conforming, between identification and dis-identification with the prescribed professional identity.

Using a Lacanian approach, Muhr and Kirkegaard (2013) found that consultants' fantasies about off-work activities help them maintain an illusion of wholeness, of being more than just *company men and women*, which in turn contributes to reinforcing the intensiveness of their work schedule as they can fully direct their desires towards work. Similarly, Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) argue that the discourse of *the autonomous subject living a good life*, revolving around the concepts of autonomy and work-life balance, is systematically counter-

27

resisted by the discourse of the elite professional focusing instead on ambition, hard work, competence development and career. What was unravelled here and conceptualised as "conforming work" is to some extent the reversed phenomenon: it is the work-life balance discourse associated with the arrangements consultants have made to accommodate their personal life that is systematically associated with a discourse in line with the professional ideal of commitment, flexibility and constant availability. These attempts to conform in discourse all the more that one's practices are perceived as counter-normative can explain why very few accounts of resistance, beyond irony, cynicism and humour, can be found in the literature since it contributes to rendering these accounts – even though limited in numbers – somehow invisible.

Between the contestation and the reinforcement of working time regimes

In many ways, the discourse of the consultants we interviewed is contesting the norm of permanent availability: they discuss its legitimacy by questioning the social role played by consultants, by arguing that consultants are inter-changeable and by claiming that their personal life is more important than work, even when it's a job they enjoy very much and want to keep doing. They also argue that their refusal to submit fully to the norm of constant availability has had no impact on the quality of their work nor on client satisfaction. Even if they explain that they have faced some difficulties to legitimize their practice with certain partners and certain clients, they present themselves as success cases and role models for others who might want to follow their example. They even go as far as to argue that their deviance from the norm of constant availability, which they find absurd, has made them even better professionals who focus on the essentials of service work in the sole interest of the client. Some other, younger, consultants did acknowledge that the example of these consultants benefitting from work-life balance arrangements made them believe that they could at least try to combine their consulting job with having a family, even if they were afraid that the number of arrangements that the partners could tolerate would have a limit. As a result, the conforming discourse of these consultants contributes, to some extent, to legitimizing a practice otherwise considered inappropriate and influencing social discourses regarding what it is to be a good professional.

Yet, at the same time, the consultants we interviewed, by depicting themselves as a special case, by emphasizing how unique they are and how much they have had to fight to make their arrangements accepted, also make it harder for others to identify with them. They indeed often explain how good they are at their job and that it is the reason why they succeed to conciliate everything. In parallel, by also subscribing to the image of the ideal professional that is focused, energetic, dedicated and has stamina, and by emphasizing how much they are willing to make compromise to continue to enact this ideal, they contribute to reinforcing its legitimacy.

This is why we argue that investigating the dialectics of conforming work further can help advance our understanding the complexities of changing norms surrounding working hours in contemporary organizations, beyond binary oppositions such as 'conformity' vs. 'deviance' 'compliance' vs. 'resistance'; 'identification vs. dis-identification' or 'pass' vs. 'reveal'. Our study sheds light on the existence of a 'grey zone' in which individuals neither fully comply with nor resist norms, characterised by ambivalence, in which the decision to pass or to reveal deviance is not clear cut. We believe it is this 'grey zone' that dialectics of conforming work can contribute to grasp.

CONCLUSION

Through the in-depth analysis of 10 individual cases of consultants benefitting or having benefitted from specific work-life balance arrangements, we have shed light on a strong ambivalence in their discourse between the contestation and conformation to the norm of constant availability. This dialectic relationship between deviance and conformity expresses itself on three issues: whether these consultants should draw clear boundaries between their work and lives or not, how transparent they should be about their work-life balance arrangements and how atypical this makes them. We have proposed to label this specific form of identity work "conforming work", and have argued that this concept can help better understand the ambivalent dynamics at play at the individual level and the complexities of change regarding contemporary working time regimes.

This study opens up the space for further investigations. First, following participants over time would provide considerable insights into the evolution these individual dynamics and the extent to which they challenge or on the contrary reinforce existing working time regimes. In particular: will these consultants manage to become partners or are their work-life balance

arrangements temporary in nature, forcing them to either go back to the normalised career track if they want to progress or to leave the firm? If they do find ways to make their arrangements accepted in the longer term and to become partners, it would be very interesting to explore the impact that these potentially new role models have on the organisation of professional work and norms surrounding working hours, since our findings draw contradictory conclusions in this respect so far. Finally, it would also be helpful to enrich our conception of conforming work by investigating the forms it can take when contesting other types of norms in the organisation. There were, in particular, many occurrences of similar quotes in our material from consultants who deviated from the norms regarding project assignment. In consultancies where generalist skills were favoured and consultants were not welcome to display any preference regarding either the sector of the clients they would work for, or the topic of the project they would be assigned, some consultants nonetheless appeared to try to increase their control over the staffing process while engaging in conforming work in order to avoid stigmatisation. In this respect, conforming work could also contribute to enriching our understanding of the complex individual dynamics surrounding specialisation and boredom in professional work, and resistance to norms, beyond the sole issue of working time regimes.

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