


Living in a Culture of Overwork: An Ethnographic Study of Flexibility

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Abstract

This ethnographic study of women business owners questions whether the flexibility their occupation affords is truly an advantage to balancing work and other aspects of life. Drawing on Weber's ideal types of social action, our analysis suggests that flexibility favors work. Instrumental rationality is evidenced when the participants position their work patterns as a good use of time. We introduce the concept *working lightly* to show how they use affective and value rationalities as justifications for working during nonwork times (e.g., it's a way to feel good in the long run). We also develop the concept of *working lite*, which is when they invoke traditional rationality by melding habits associated with relaxation and work tasks (e.g., working while watching television). Finally, we show how our findings extend the critique of flexibility in the work-life literature.

Keywords

work-life balance, flexibility, women business owners, qualitative research, Max Weber

“I just have such a respect for my business that I don't intermingle it in with my life.”

—Leslie

“The week is the work week for me . . . [and the weekends] still feel like the weekends, even though I may be working.”

—Naomi

“[I]t is a concerted effort to not work on the weekend. We need to make a concerted effort to take this weekend off because we need to be fresher.”

—Wendy

Conditions in this postindustrial economy increasingly demand more commitment from workers (Perrons, 2003). In fact, workers themselves are reluctant to stop working and take time for their families or leisure (Hochschild, 1997; Kvande, 2009). The above epigraphs, taken from the ethnographic data for this article, epitomize a culture of overwork. The women's comments reveal an underlying assumption that work takes precedence. Good business means protecting it from other aspects of life. Weekends are now normal days to work. Taking time off is for the sake of returning fresher to work.

This privileging of remunerated activities and the business world over family, home, or leisure and all else has been previously documented. Runte and Mills (2004) conclude that within the discourse of work-family conflict, the work

domain intrudes on the needs of the family domain. Hochschild's (1997) discussion of the “time bind” demonstrates how working parents spend more and more time at work and seldom take advantage of family leave options offered by their workplaces. The economist Schor (1991) depicts a culture of overwork in which individuals are trapped in a work-and-spend cycle of putting in long hours to fuel consumerism. Furthermore, work has become so important that individuals often find it hard to distinguish when they are not working (Beatty & Torbert, 2003).

Flexible work arrangements exist as one supposed solution to the struggle individuals feel between work and non-work responsibilities (Desrochers & Sargent, 2004). We believe, however, that flexibility is unlikely to fulfill its promise as a solution to work-life balance. We argue that flexibility falls short as a strategy to balance because it assumes work and other aspects of life are equally valued in our culture. Fundamentally, flexible working arrangements fail to restructure the “organizational devaluation of family work” in contrast to paid work (Mirchandani, 2000, p. 173). As Mirchandani (2000) concludes, the workers themselves

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contribute to this cultural norm by putting more value on their paid endeavors to establish the legitimacy of their jobs.

Drawing on ethnographic data from the lives of 10 women business owners, our article demonstrates several strategies used to negotiate living in a culture of overwork. Owning a business allows these individuals the ability to challenge conventional work schedules in that they are not bound to the space and time of an employer. They have the relative “freedom” to control the way they work. Our interest is not in whether they do in fact work long hours (because they do—they are solely responsible for their businesses, and in many cases, their livelihood depends on its success); rather, it is in how they rationalize their decisions of when and how to do their work, and the practical implications of that understanding within the social context in which they live.

The work of German sociologist Max Weber informs our study. We apply his ideal types of rationality (i.e., instrumental, value, affective, and traditional) to explain patterns in these women’s work lives. We do want to note that we depart from his conclusion that instrumental rationality with its focus on productivity would become more dominant as capitalism developed and that the other types of rationality would drop away or exist only as abstractions. Instead, these women business owners use other types of rationality to soften the impact of instrumental rationality, and thus, their work, from encroaching on their nonwork lives. Ultimately, we demonstrate how they use value, affective, and traditional rationality to cope with the cultural pressures that place preeminence on working.

Our article proceeds over the following sections. First, we examine the literature on flexibility as a solution to work–family conflict and discuss how Weber’s ideal types of social action offer us a tool for examining our adaption to the cultural priority on work. Second, we offer a brief methodological section to explain how the ethnographic data for this study were collected. Third, we offer rich results that illustrate the ways that the women business owners respond and adapt to the demands of their never-ending jobs. Drawing from Weber, we analyze a variety of strategies they use to lighten the effect of work taking precedence in their lives. Specifically, we explore the moments in which they find themselves working during supposed nonwork times. We develop the concepts of “working lightly” as a mental strategy the participants use to rationalize working during off-time and “working lite” as a behavioral strategy to make it feel like not-work. Our discussion considers how our findings extend the critique of flexibility in the work-life literature.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frame

For three decades, critical management scholars have debated the public–private divide. Kanter (1977) deconstructed the idea of separate spheres as a myth. Underpinning

the divide is the belief that the ideal worker is ensconced in the public sphere. This ideal worker then can safely ignore the private sphere. The assumption is that this worker has a partner who can handle all family and personal responsibilities. The voluminous research on work–family balance and work–family conflict once focused more on the potential tensions between home and work life for women than for men. In the 1990s, work-life balance evolved as a metaphor for two reasons (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007). First, researchers wanted to move away from the implicit emphasis on women. Second, researchers wanted to acknowledge that not all workers have family obligations. More recently, some researchers examine flexible working instead of work–family balance or work–family conflict as a gender neutral framework for examining workplace policies (Smithson & Stokoe, 2008).

The literature on flexible work arrangements exists as a subset of the work-life balance literature. The vast majority of this research focuses on the employer–employee situation. Flexibility in the workplace manifests in a variety of arrangements that transcend time and/or space. Workers can change their schedules to allow a more compressed workweek in which they work longer hours over several days to reach a full-time schedule. Or, workers can put in slightly more hours one week and less the following week to achieve a certain number of hours over a pay period. Flextime allows workers to vary their start and stop times bound by a core period where they are expected to be at work. Job sharing is a way of allowing two workers to combine their part-time efforts in fulfilling the demands of a full-time position. Telecommuting allows workers to work part-time or full-time out of their homes (or in cafes, rented spaces closer to their homes, etc.) rather than in an office setting.

Many studies have included flexible work arrangements as a variable that leads to positive outcomes for employees and employers such as increased job satisfaction (Richman, Civian, Shannon, Hill, & Brennan, 2008; Scandura & Lankau, 1997), increased organizational commitment (Pratt & Rosa, 2003; Scandura & Lankau, 1997), and higher retention rates (Richman et al., 2008). In fact, Gajendran and Harrison’s (2007) meta-analysis found that telecommuting had a positive effect on perceived autonomy, work–family balance, job satisfaction, performance, turnover intent, and role stress.

Roberts (2008), however, argues that flexibility suits employers more than employees. For example, a study at IBM found that employees with high perceived job flexibility were willing to put in about eight extra hours weekly before reporting significant increases in work–family conflict than those individuals without perceived flexibility (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001). Thus, flexibility encouraged workers to ultimately work more hours. In fact, the advent of telecommuting was initially seen as a way to rescue employees from the rigidity of bureaucracies

(Mirchandani, 2000) and a promising way for employees to establish balance with their work and home lives (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Telecommuting was touted as a solution to reduce commuting time and optimize productivity by avoiding the distractions of the workplace. Ideally, a worker who accomplishes the tasks set for the day could work fewer hours. Instead, most employees end up working additional hours due to the high priority they place on their work, their difficulties in imposing clear demarcations between work and nonwork time, and an increase in the expectations from their managers (Johnson, Andrey, & Shaw, 2007; Mirchandani, 1999, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Tietze & Musson, 2003).

Furthermore, some employees report that employers may doubt their commitment to the organization and career ambition, which can negatively affect salary, promotion, and retention (Almer, Cohen, & Single, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Mirchandani, 2000). Towers, Duxbury, Higgins, and Thomas (2006) couched the ability to work outside the office as a “dual-edged sword” (p. 593) that provides flexibility, but leads to more incursion of work into family time, thus benefiting the employer more than the employee. As found in Mirchandani (2000), “individual flexibility coupled with organizational rigidity translates into extraordinarily long workdays” (p. 173).

Our study differs from the above studies in several ways. First, the above studies focus on individuals who are bound by the employee–employer relationship. Our sample allows us to study flexibility in the context of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship has been positioned as a way, for women in particular, to have perhaps the ultimate flexibility to balance work responsibilities and caring responsibilities (Daniel, 2004; DeMartino & Barbato, 2003). A *Time Magazine* cover article about well-educated women leaving high-profile jobs to stay home with their children offered the following caption: She “misses working but not the stress and may start her own business when she feels like returning to work so she can have the flexibility she needs” (Wallis, 2004, p. 55). Because entrepreneurs are not bound by an employer, the promise is that they will gain the freedom to organize their business policies, practices, and non-work activities as they choose.

Second, many of the studies on flexibility engage with boundary theory (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Boundary theory offers models for how individuals conceptualize borders between home and work or between different roles in their lives (worker, partner, or parent). Such micro-level studies offer an individual level of analysis and in so doing tend to avoid explanations of how changes in the political economy affect workers’ outlooks. For example, Nippert-Eng (1996) describes the visible yet highly symbolic ways people separate the objects, people, activities, and thoughts in daily life into “home” and “work.” More recently, Kreiner and colleagues (2009) document how

individuals manage to segment or integrate a work–home boundary through behavioral, temporal, physical, and communicative tactics. These studies postulate when conflicts will arise and offer solutions toward gaining a work-life balance (Clark 2000). Our study diverges from boundary theory research in that we are not as optimistic that such a balance can be achieved in our sociocultural context. We turn to Max Weber’s ideal types of social action as a model for how individuals adapt to a culture in which work is preeminent.

Weber’s Ideal Types of Social Action

Weber (1905/1992) espoused in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that instrumental rationality lies at the foundation of Western society’s capitalist imperative. In *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1922/1978), he sketched out his four ideal types of social action: instrumental, value, affective, and traditional. Zweckrationalität or instrumental rationality translates to a quest for efficiency, an outcome that can be tangibly measured in terms of reproducible results. Instrumental rationality is deeply embedded into Weber’s conception of bureaucracy where he prioritizes calculability and formalization, and attempts to routinize impersonality. By removing essential aspects of humanity from the most rational type of social action, his ideal types set up a dichotomy between actions that are chosen based on the means, the end, and the potential results, and the less rational actions that are selected for a particular value or emotion.

Value, affective, and traditional ideal types are in Weber’s thinking less rational. He construes actions that are selected based on values or ends without concern for the potential consequences as *wert-rationalität*. Value or expressive rationality is concerned with the intrinsic meaning of the activity, whereas affective rationality is related to a particular emotion or passion. For example, educators may be motivated to teach beyond the fact that having a job pays the bills (instrumental), to reasons that include being a teacher makes a difference to society (value) and/or because they are passionate about helping kids learn (affective). Likewise, lawyers may enjoy their work not only because of its high salary (instrumental) but also because they believe in justice (value) or are thrilled by a good argument (affective). Frankly, for the purpose of our study, it is rather difficult to separate value from affective rationality. If someone works hard partially because they are passionate about their job, then they are doing it for intrinsic reasons while receiving positive emotional feelings as a result, thus making it analytically difficult to distinguish between them. Weber was the first to say ideal types are constructs and that, in reality, it is hard to find types of social action that fit only one ideal type. In this study, we focus on how the participants internalize the importance of work in their lives and highlight the creative ways they deal with work’s encroachment onto other daily activities. Thus, in our

analysis, the empirical overlap of value and affective rationalities underscore how intrinsic motivation and enjoying work help individuals cope with challenging jobs.

The last ideal type, traditional, relates to customs or habits. For instance, the idea that Saturday and Sunday compose a weekend, which is a time set aside for leisure instead of work, has become a custom in many industrialized countries. Furthermore, the separation of certain activities as part of leisure instead of work becomes habit. For example, checking email on a smartphone during a family dinner would be considered to be inappropriate.

In this article, we agree with Weber that instrumental rationality remains the driving force for measuring our days in terms of our productivity. However, rather than seeing the other types of rationality as fading into the background of life, we show how the participants use value, affective, and traditional rationality to shore up or solidify their overall commitment to means-end rationality. Specifically, we develop two strategies used by these women to cope with the overarching impact of their work on their lives: (a) “working lightly” is the mental work they do to justify working during ordinarily nonwork times and (b) “working lite” is when they change what used to be home routines to incorporate certain work tasks so that it feels less like they are working during supposed nonwork times. Our focus is not on the blurring of boundaries between work and home, but on how the culture of overwork affects the various justifications and methods they develop in an attempt to relax the hold work has on their lives.

Our contribution to the study of flexibility is both contextual and methodological. Nomothetically, we are building concepts that when combined with Weberian analyses spotlight the larger sociocultural context in which work infuses our lives. Methodologically, we are notable for our ethnographic approach. In our review of the literature, almost the entirety of the literature on flexibility is survey or interview research. When organizational researchers rely on quantifying measures of balance and using survey results to get at questions such as life satisfaction, they risk missing the complexity of the problems that affect individuals’ lives. Individuals may say that they benefit from flexible work arrangements and that such arrangements decrease issues in their work–family conflicts. These studies, however, neither offer a complex depiction of individuals’ daily struggles negotiating work with nonwork responsibilities nor acknowledge the overall propensity in our society to place preeminence on work.

Method

As scholars of organization studies and organizational sociology whose offices share the same floor, we have many hallway conversations that often gravitate toward questions of work-life balance (both as a research subject and as a personal/professional experience). Although the data in this

study were analyzed by both of us, Kristina, the first author, gathered it as part of a larger project on women entrepreneurs. Her project relied on an interpretive approach. Researchers drawing from this perspective are concerned with how social reality is constructed, accomplished, and sustained (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). To examine the contradictions and tensions of everyday life, Kristina applied an ethnomethodological lens. Ethnomethodology, or the detailed study of everyday life, is “the most analytically radical and empirically productive” method for unraveling the processes that underlie the social construction of reality (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 488). She used this lens to investigate the practices and discourses embedded in the lives and work of 10 female business owners (defined as owning at least 51% of the business and being involved in the daily activities).

The sampling approach used in this study was purposive sampling (also known as criterion based). The objective of purposive sampling is to choose “information-rich cases” from which the researcher can learn in depth about the phenomenon under study (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The purpose of the research was not to examine an exhaustive set of women business owners but to gain considerable insight into the way some lived their lives. Thus, Kristina chose a sample size of 10, providing an array of life situations. To locate the sample, Kristina compiled a list of women business owners from several sources: the state small business development center, colleagues, friends, women business owner organizations and directories, newspaper articles and advertisements, community members, and participants.

The final sample consisted of women who resided in different towns and cities in the northeastern part of the United States. Seven of the ten women lived with male partners; six of these were married. One woman lived with a female partner, and two were without partners at the time. Six women had children; four still had children living at home. In addition, these women had responsibilities for elderly parents and pets. Nine of the women were Caucasian, and one was African American. Their businesses ranged from a gift basket designer and personal organizer to a management consultant and a construction representative. Four owned retail stores, where the majority of their work took place. Six worked primarily from their homes. Nine out of ten ran their businesses as their full-time jobs.

The women in this study allowed Kristina to shadow them from dawn until beyond dusk over a 1-week period each. She entered their lives as their day began, sometimes as early as 7:00 a.m., and remained until late in the evening, occasionally past 10:00 p.m. She spent between 28 and 57 hr with each woman. In an effort to capture the complexity of their work lives, she accompanied them from 8 to 12 hr a day, with some days as long as 14 hr. In total, she completed 465 hr of observation over 56 contact days between October 2004 and April 2005.

Kristina incorporated standard ethnographic techniques of fieldwork whereby activities were observed and documented by note taking in a small notebook, complemented by audiotape recording of semistructured interviews to get background information, informal open-ended interviews to clarify observations, and on-the-spot conversations. Kristina manually transcribed each audiotape and typed up all her field notes to develop a more comprehensive picture of each woman's everyday life during her observation periods. To code the data, she followed Esterberg's (2001) advice on becoming "intimate" with the data. This two-step process utilizes open-coding to identify broad categories of interest from a careful perusal of all the data, followed by "focused coding," in which she reread all the data while concentrating on the key themes identified in open-coding. To assist in the laborious task of data management, Atlas.ti, a software-based qualitative data analysis program, was used to store, hand code, and retrieve the data.

Pamela, the second author, became intimate with the project as she reviewed various chapters of Kristina's dissertation. Through these conversations, the idea for a critical appraisal of flexibility arose. We returned to the data and analyzed together the codes of interest. Below, we present the results of our analysis.

Results

The Never-Ending Workweek

The participants talked often of feeling stressed or fatigued by trying to navigate the vortex of demands of work and all else. Take these explicit examples of feeling pulled between work and the rest of their lives:

Gail: I have conflicting goals—spend more time at my business and spend more time with my family.

Joan: I just want to be doing both at the same time and it's not possible.

In fact, Kristina heard over and over from the women expressions of feeling that they work too much—too many hours, too many days—often at the expense of their families and personal lives. For example, Sarah, when talking about trying to "stay out of [her home] office on weekends," admits she is often "unsuccessful." Furthermore, she describes having an "agreement with herself" to be at her desk no later than 9:00 a.m. to start her workday. Kristina asks then if she has a matching agreement for a time to end her workday. She responds, "To end my work? No, I don't. That's my growing edge to, when to close my office and that's the challenge, is closing the office." Her response points toward the extent to which work is the fulcrum of her life.

Similarly, the women express the struggle they feel about work overtaking their lives. Emily, who runs a children's

party business, describes a feeling of imbalance while talking about "work-life balance" when she admits, "I still need more downtime, more relaxing time for me, for me alone, for me and my husband alone, and then time for all of us with the kids." Perhaps Jodi summarizes it best when she describes the irony of how her work affects the quantity and quality of the time she spends with her children: "I sell educational toys. How often do I take time to play with my kids? I check email. I make phone calls. My kids play around me. It's terrible."

No doubt there are times when the women are unable to stop working because they are consumed by too many deadlines. However, over and over in the women's comments, we see the underpinning of the assumption that work should take precedence over all else. Take these three examples. First, Naomi notes that she is currently struggling to "have downtime without feeling guilty." She continues, "It's hard to relax because I know that there are some things in that office that I should be doing." She concludes, "It can't always be work, work, work. There has to be balance between personal and work. But I feel guilty [when I'm not working]." Second, Wendy says, "You have to be very regimented in how you structure your day and your week. Otherwise, you see my problem is that I'm always guilty if I don't accomplish stuff that is business." Finally, Joan, who normally leaves her office around 6:00 p.m., off-handedly comments on the one day she leaves early to have dinner with a family member who lives an hour away, "I'm not going to feel guilty for leaving at four."

The commonality in these examples is the feeling of guilt for not working. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>), guilt is the fact or state of having "committed a breach of conduct" or "offense." These feelings of guilt expressed above are quite interesting because of the context in which they are taking place. As business owners, they have the relative freedom to set their own schedules and work patterns in that they are not accountable to a manager or boss. Therefore, in this case, the object of guilt is work itself. Thus, underpinning these expressions of guilt is the assumption that work takes priority over all other responsibilities. This understanding explains why they feel badly about the times they are not working. We will see below how the participants try to reduce the discord they feel about work dominating their lives through justifications based on Weber's instrumental rationality.

Instrumental Rationality in a Culture of Overwork

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how instrumental rationality dominates the participants' thinking about the work-life balance. As argued earlier, literature on entrepreneurship offers business ownership as a way for women to balance work and the rest of life through the flexibility it provides. The participants in our sample loudly

echo this belief. For instance, Wendy, when describing how she decided to start her own business after feeling overworked by previous employers, sees self-employment as an optimistic “life balancing exercise.” In fact, all of the participants, when asked about the advantages of owning their own business, answer in terms of the freedom to make their own schedule and the ability to control their time. For example, Emily notes, “I get to have the schedule I’ve always wanted.” Leslie states, “I have the ability to tailor my schedule.” Joan responds, “The benefit is if I didn’t want to come in today, I didn’t have to come in today. If I want to stay home and do nothing or work at home, I could have.” Perhaps Gail summarizes it most succinctly when she says, “I can put a sign on the door that says, ‘Gone Golfing’.”

These quotes suggest that business ownership offers the participants the ability to control when they work and when they do not work. Although the women often talk specifically about the freedom they have to design their work around the demands of their “private” lives, when discussing flexibility, we see that it is often bound by concerns over instrumental rationality.

Jodi, for example, sells educational products through home parties, which she believes allows her flexibility to balance work and family. In her words,

It’s a flexible business, so you can sort of work your business around your family. I can work my parties the best days for me. Like I don’t do any on Tuesdays because it is my night for Pilates [an exercise class]. But I also do all my conference calls [for the educational products business] on Tuesday nights [after Pilates] because I know I won’t have parties.

What we see in her explanation is the idea of fitting her business around her family comes full circle to fitting one part of her business in around another. Ultimately, she is juggling the multiple demands of her business, not her family.

Similarly, Rebecca, owner of a fast food restaurant, slips from talking about scheduling her time around her family to scheduling her time around her business. In this quote, she is trying to emphasize the flexibility in her work schedule:

I can pick and choose my hours to do the running, or if Tina [her daughter] doesn’t have school, say tomorrow, I could stay and do a lot more work tonight and then have tomorrow off. I mean Wednesdays I can’t take off though . . . bad example. But I can pre-plan or work around almost anything. So, that’s a huge advantage.

Interestingly, what happens is that she remembers mid-thought that she cannot take off a Wednesday. Wednesdays marked the weekly deadline for submitting payroll information,

completing inventory for the weekly order, and sending reports to headquarters. In the end, work inhibits her freedom to make her own schedule. Furthermore, it is clear that her ability to take a day off requires that she stay late at work the previous night. Thus, the supposed flexibility to care for her family does not allow her to sacrifice any of her work obligations.

Likewise, Sarah, the management consultant, feels that having flexibility requires a one-for-one trade in terms of time invested in both spheres. In a discussion about distractions when working from a home office, Kristina asks, “How do you get distracted?” Sarah responds,

I guess I don’t get too distracted in the winter. In the summer I do with my garden. And what I try to do is to balance, like the walk with Carla. It is reasonable to think that if I am having a half an hour for lunch to go and take a half hour, 40 minute walk.

Kristina clarifies, “Meaning if you were working in an organization you would be given an hour,” and Sarah finishes,

Yeah, I have to remind myself of that. On the other hand, later on today I’ll get a chiropractic appointment and I’ll do my nails. That may be before five o’clock, although not always. So, I try to put myself into that mind-set of recognizing what of my tasks are in fact work-related, income-generating, forwarding the business and what is not. Because it is very easy [to think], I’m in Townsville, I can go shopping at the Townsville Market, that’s fine, but I’m going to have to work ‘til 10 o’clock tonight.

Again, the flexibility her occupation affords favors work accomplishments. Furthermore, Sarah’s enumeration of these tasks as relevant to earning income and moving the business forward perfectly exemplify instrumental rationality and its focus on means-ends outcomes.

Wendy, the construction consultant, also struggles with taking time away from her work tasks to take a walk during her predefined working hours. She says,

When I am arguing with myself, when I’d like to go for a walk, “well, last night I put a couple of hours in so let’s cut us some slack and take a walk.” There’s that negotiation, when you’re negotiating with the little voice in your mind that says, “Hey, wait a minute, you’re supposed to be working,” and you say, “Yeah, but I did spend some time last night.”

For Wendy to feel all right about time off to exercise, she feels the need to justify that she worked extra hours the previous night. Both Sarah and Wendy’s quotes demonstrate the exhausting consternation they feel about taking time during “work time” to not work. The justifications they both use focus on time banking that favors work.

Last, this quote from Leslie, who runs her promotional products business from an office building, shows the inflexibility of flexibility. She notes,

There are times when I think on a Tuesday afternoon there is no reason I can't get up and go home and do all this laundry I have, but I don't do it because I feel a responsibility and, you know, my commitment is to the business and that's what I should be doing. And I really think that is important to do.

Her understanding that caring work is antithetical to her commitment to business illustrates that work has pre-eminence over all else in life, the basis of instrumental rationality.

Taking the above quotes together, flexibility is often positioned as a way to not work during normal work times to attend to nonwork responsibilities. It is clear that the women appreciate and experience such flexibility, but it is not enough to resolve their feelings of work-life conflict. Despite this supposed flexibility, the women nearly all felt bound to work during regular business hours. They talked of the flexibility to take time off for caregiving activities (whether for self or others), but immediately recapitulated by claiming they would make up the work time during nonwork times. Returning to Weber, the women's understanding of work-life balance follows a prioritization driven by instrumental rationality. Their daily schedules are dominated by work with a focus on work outcomes (e.g., meetings, reports, income generation), at the expense of caring outcomes (e.g., taking a walk, grocery shopping, or doing laundry).

The next section of the article illuminates how the participants use other types of rationality to justify their working patterns and try to feel better about work taking precedence in their lives. We first introduce the concept of "working lightly," which combines Weber's ideal types of value and affective rationality. Later, we delve into "working lite," which relates to Weber's notion of traditional rationality.

Working Lightly: Making Overworking Feel Better

We created the concept of "working lightly" to contextualize the times the women find themselves working during their predefined nonwork times and the mental effort exercised to feel better about it. In this section, we show how both value and affective rationality are used as salves to soften the hardship of working during the participants' predefined nonwork time. We offer examples of how the participants justify working into the evenings after already working all day or working on the weekends after working a full week in terms of the subjective meanings they attach to this behavior.

Affective rationality pervades their understanding of the attachment to work. The women display a positive emotional

attachment to their drive to work. Furthermore, they explain their working patterns as an expression of value rationality in either (a) their commitment to their businesses or (b) in terms of feelings of satisfaction. It is hard to tease out the supposed separation between affective and value rationality in these examples; Weber does argue that these ideal types can and do often overlap empirically. Value rationality gets at feelings of satisfaction and commitment to a job. If we view our job as central to our identity, then we will get intrinsic joy out of thinking we do that job well. A person can validate his or her identity and gain personal satisfaction from conflating their job with "this is who I am, and this is what I do." When you feel this high level of personal commitment to your business, it becomes very easy to willingly succumb to working all the time.

Take, for example, Sarah's justification for the weekend:

Kristina: Do you ever not come in here [in your home office] in a day?

Sarah: On the weekends, I will try to stay out of my office. I'm not real successful.

Kristina: Why say a weekend versus a Wednesday?

Sarah: Well, I do look to . . . I guess there is some value for me to having routine because I can more easily give myself permission to enjoy cleaning my house on the weekend. Whereas during the week, unless it is in the evening, it feels like, okay, it is too easy to go and clean the house rather than write a book proposal or do some work, so I try to segment my work-personal life creating those kinds of things. I would say that most weeks, I work 6 days a week. And sometimes, I work on 7 days and just don't, or not full days, *or I give myself the sense that I don't have to work today, I'm doing it because I really want to or I'm preparing for the week, and it feels better to do it now than some other time.* My preferred mode would be to work 4 days a week (laugh) . . . frankly, and I think by segmenting, it's more likely I can have that work-life balance, rather than doing a little bit of work every day. There's real value in having time off. (Italics added)

Kristina: But that doesn't necessarily happen?

Sarah: Not here.

Despite trying not to work on the weekends, she feels relieved by what she accomplishes for her business. We see that in Sarah's case, her passion for her work is motivating her to give herself permission to work 7 days a week (value rationality). She couches her work on the weekend as preparation for the week instead of simply doing more work, and states she is working more because it will allow her to feel better (affective rationality).

During the shadow week, Naomi, the personal organizer who works out of an office in her home, talks often about working on the weekends. In fact, she worked 16 hr over the

weekend after a full week of work. She justifies the fact that she spent the weekend mostly working, by saying, "Knowing that I did that and what I got accomplished is actually a huge help for me." She explained, "I feel better about not having all that stuff spread out in the bedroom. I know that I am in a better place." Instead of seeing working all weekend as draining, her positive spin on working to get her to a "better place" is using affective rationality to contextualize her commitment to the work.

Leslie, the promotional products business owner, also justifies working into the evening after a full day at her office in terms of feeling passionate about her work. She offers, "I want to do it, but I never feel as though I have to do it. I think that is part of the way you have to be if you want to have a successful business." In another discussion Leslie portrays her use of evenings or weekends at home to plan business strategies: "But that's fun. It's kind of playing." This combination of seeing value in the work she does and being passionate about it combines Weber's affective and value-oriented ideal types.

We developed the concept of working lightly to highlight the ways individuals rationalize working during ordinarily nonwork times. Ultimately, by couching the tendency to work on evenings and weekends in terms of how good it feels or how fun it is instead of how exhausting it is, they try to temper the preeminence work has in their lives. Instead of being worn down by the amount of effort they put into their jobs, they focus on how useful or pleasurable the extra work is. Working lightly aids in softening the hold that work has on their lives. In the next section, we explore how the participants engage in methods of working to make it seem less like one is actually working.

Working Lite: Making It Feel Like Not-Work

This section examines another strategy for making work feel less of a burden. We call this strategy "working lite," which we define as working during nonwork times in a manner that makes it feel like one is not actually working. We found that the participants use different methods to sustain the definition of nonwork time when what they do is continue to work. Sometimes, their actions are a conscious effort to work during nonwork time. Occasionally, they do not even realize that they are still working. Working lite invokes Weber's ideal type of traditional action in that they are incorporating habits that we usually associate with time off from work as elements that accompany specific work tasks. These workers redefine their habits to soften the blow of working during their predefined nonwork time by making specific work tasks feel more akin to time spent relaxing.

One example of working lite includes working on tasks that are deemed as less taxing. For example, Wendy, the construction consultant, returns to her email at about 9:00 p.m. on a week night. She has already worked all day, attended an

evening meeting, and watched a bit of television. In response to an email from a contractor, she says, "No, we're not opening that tonight. We will deal with that tomorrow when we are fresh." She adds, "At 10 o'clock at night, or 6 o'clock, I'm not going to open something that I think I am going to have to put a lot of energy in to take care of, and that I am going to have to think about all night." However, she does open an email about a project that she does not "think will be much work." In the end, by opening the "lighter email" she is willing to do some work during these nonwork hours. Engaging in the less taxing task during her predefined nonwork times allows her to sustain her belief that traditionally one relaxes before bed.

Another method to make overworking feel more relaxing is simply to change the beverage of choice. In this case, Sarah, the management consultant, switches both her beverage and her conceptualization of her tasks. One evening, after having spent the day working, Sarah offers Kristina a glass of wine around 5:30 p.m., commenting, "It's off-time." Yet she spends her evening continuing to work in her home office. Her tasks included organizing, typing contacts into the computer, and filing, tasks she, in an earlier conversation, calls "non-income producing." Focusing on tasks that do not bring in revenue, and thus require less energy, at the same time as drinking a glass of wine, makes it feel more relaxing and less like her 8-hr workday is turning into a 10-hr workday.

Drinking wine is seen by others as a way to relax while continuing to work into the evening. Leslie, the promotional products business owner, notes, "It's not unusual for me to take a bunch of trade magazines at home at night, pour a glass of wine, and just sit and read them." In another conversation, Leslie again links relaxing to reading work-related magazines or books. She offers a list of what she reads prior to going to sleep at night: "A novel, business books, the newspaper, Best Business, the industry trade magazines, a self-help book." Most of this list is reading that relates to her work. In essence, she is working in bed.

Naomi, the professional organizer, reports that she often finds herself "doing some type of work instead of trying to relax." But when she does "relax" she chooses magazines such as *Real Simple* or *Martha Stewart*. Whereas these titles would be light reading for some people, Naomi runs an organizing business. She spends hours, often on the weekends, cutting out articles from magazines and putting them into binders for her clients to use.

Working with the television on in the background is another common method of working lite. Leslie offers the following account of her attempt to separate work and home. In her words,

I don't think I do it consciously. I think it just kind of is, I think I just have such a respect for my business that I don't intermingle it in with my life. I will bring things home. I will bring work home sometimes. For instance, if I am trying to figure out

a year-to-date budget, I won't take the time during work to do that. I'll bring it home at night or Saturday. Or if I want to develop a new survey, it's probably something I won't do at work. I'll do that on a Saturday or a Sunday. I'll go up and turn on 60 Minutes and kind of jot down some ideas. So that's the way I keep it separate.

Leslie has carefully demarcated which tasks she deems appropriate for doing at home, possibly while watching television. Her list of tasks differs from the filing by Sarah and the reading work-oriented magazines by Naomi in that she seems to be doing more substantial tasks that possibly are easier to complete without the distractions of the workplace. Although she expresses reluctance to bring work home in her desire to keep the spheres separate, she makes concessions and sacrifices time at home for doing more work. In addition, her ranking of certain activities as appropriate for work at home gets at traditional rationality in redefining the habits we develop concerning what it means to be working or not.

Invoking Weber's ideal type of traditional action, we see how the participants use "after hours" habits and behaviors as a strategy to lighten the reality that they continue to work into the evening or on the weekend. In some cases, they use a glass of wine or watching television to help make it feel like not-work. In other cases, they engage in activities they consider to be less consuming, almost not work, to sustain the definition of nonwork time. Working lite then is an attempt at mellowing work so it feels more like time off.

Discussion

Our study exists as a counterpart to the vast literature on flexibility. Much of this literature offers flexible schedules or the ability to work out of one's home as advantages for workers (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Richman et al., 2008; Scandura & Lankau, 1997). A growing subset of the flexibility studies, mostly from outside of the United States, is critical of this strategy for solving the dilemmas of work-life balance (e.g., Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, 2008; Kvande, 2009; Mirchandani, 2000; Wharton, 1994). One Canadian study of home-based work claims that this practice is stressful and anxiety provoking for workers (Mirchandani, 2000). Norwegian research on fathers found that flexible working hours consistently led to these men working more (Kvande, 2009). A study of U.S. women realtors revealed that their work was organized around the demands of their clients more than those of their families (Wharton, 1994). Thus, these critical studies emphasize the inability of flexible schedules to change the ultimate problem—the prevailing cultural pressures that validate work above the other components of our lives.

Our study adds to the critique of flexibility by its specific focus on the culture of overwork. We do so by examining the

ways individuals adapt to living in a culture that places precedence on working. We first established the tensions the participants feel between the need to work and desire to spend more time with their families or relaxing. We moved from discussing Weber's notion of instrumental rationality and its focus on means-end production to how the participants use additional types of social action to soften the blow of the culture of overwork. Specifically, we explored the moments in which the participants find themselves working during supposed nonwork times. We found that they use affective and value rationalities as justifications for working again in the evening or continuing to work on the weekend. We developed the concept of "working lightly" as the mental strategy the participants use to rationalize working during off-time. Occasionally, they invoke traditional rationalities by melding habits associated with relaxation with specific work tasks. We developed the concept "working lite" as the behavioral strategy that is used to make these times feel like not-work—that is, the situational choice to work in a more relaxed manner, such as while watching television or imbibing alcohol. We argue the participants use these various methods to rationalize working beyond the expectations of a typical workweek.

Our results are indeed equivocal about the advantages of a flexible schedule for the participants. We saw that when the participants took time off during ordinary work hours to attend to nonwork-related responsibilities, they felt obligated to work more prior to the break or make up the time afterward. Flexibility is only an advantage if it sometimes enables a person to sacrifice work activities to nonwork obligations; otherwise, the imbalance always favors working more. When work becomes the fulcrum around which lives are organized, family, home, leisure, and all else are subordinated. As our analysis shows, individuals arrange their schedules to accommodate work, prepare to return to work, or to work leisurely during supposed free time. Wharton (1994) argues that reorganization of the structure of work and/or family must occur to alleviate stresses on workers. The solution is not simply shifting the allotted time between these realms—that is, having a flexible schedule. The answer lies in rethinking our often unnoticed privileging of work.

To explain the process of internalizing the supremacy of work in our study, we invoked Weber's ideal types of social action: instrumental, value, affective, and traditional. For Weber, instrumental rationality was closely allied with the development of formal organizations and bureaucratic control. This means-end rationality leads us to focus on efficiency and to measure the productivity of our actions. Our data contain many references to instrumental rationality. The participants weigh decisions about home-work balance by prioritizing work assignments in terms of giving income-generating activities the highest priority, which echoes the obsession with efficiency in the business world. Interestingly, Beatty and Torbert (2003) argue that this fixation on efficiency

has also seeped into the modern development of leisure. Despite being overworked and overwhelmed by the pace of life, we can feel we “have leisure” by doing it more efficiently. For example, Robinson and Godbey (1997) discuss “time deepening” (as cited in Beatty and Torbert 2003, p. 241) leisure in which people multitask leisure activities such as watching a television show with subtitles while making a phone call. In our study, we invoked “working lite” to categorize the times the participants multitasked to make working feel more like leisure. In fact, they often did not recognize as work the times when they worked while doing other things, such as sipping wine in one hand and filing papers with the other.

The participants’ explanations for the times they continue to work during nonwork hours are fascinating. Value, affective, and traditional rationalities underlie their justifications of why they work so hard. The women justify continuing to work during the evenings or weekends in terms of their commitment to their business and the importance of their job within their life. They position their work patterns as a way to feel good in the long run, as a good use of time or even fun. Situating their work as playful helps them justify doing it during their scheduled nonwork time. Recall Leslie who stated, “I want to do it, but I never feel as though I have to do it. I think that is part of the way you have to be if you want to have a successful business.” Thus, this drive to work hard makes the hard work they do not seem driven entirely by instrumental rationality. Gregg’s (2011) examination of new media technologies also found that the workers willingly toiled extra hours at home for which they were not always paid because of the fulfillment and satisfaction they received from their positions. Gregg argues for reversing the effect of new technologies on rising workloads.

We located one qualitative study by Roberts (2008) that finds that flexibility succeeds in helping workers prioritize their personal lives. Roberts reconceptualizes flexibility as “customization” to describe employees’ strategies in striving toward a work-life balance. Her research documents employees prioritizing personal responsibilities in setting weekly work hours. She claims that many of her participants were successful in revaluing their personal lives over their professional lives and thus rejected the predominance of the culture of work.

By using Weber’s theory of social action to inform our article, we are moving from an individual analysis of workers’ motivations to a more macro-level synthesis of how business owners operate within a sociocultural context. Weber offers us a particularly pessimistic view of bureaucratization to go along with his four types of social action. He wrote at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution with grave concern that the spirit of capitalism and the control of bureaucracies over our lives would render us trapped in iron cages. Certainly, one way to feel better about one’s place in a bureaucracy is to gain a position of authority, which is what these business owners have done. In addition, some of these

business owners have distanced themselves from bureaucracies by running their own small business. Regardless, these owners interact daily with people entrenched in large bureaucracies, and express similar complaints about the demands of their workload that are usually associated with bureaucracies. In sum, the participants are certainly tired by the demands on their lives but characterize their tendency to work hard in largely positive emotional terms. To gain perspective over the hold that instrumental rationality has on their lives, they use value, affective, and traditional rationalities, thus softening the bars of the iron cage.

Our ethnographic study enables us to offer rich data about both what the participants say about their work, and what was revealed through shadowing their work lives over the course of a week. Combining field notes with interview data enables us to offer a more complete picture of the strategies these business owners use to cope with the demands of their work. We follow researchers like Tietze and Musson (2003) and Gregg (2011) who spent time with workers in their workplaces, which sometimes were their homes. Habits like “working lite” may not be divulged through interviews. When Kristina is offered a glass of wine because it is “off-time” despite the fact that her participant continues to file, researchers become privy to patterns that observation readily reveals. Although ethnographic research is time-consuming, we would like to see more management scholars take up this method for examining how workers negotiate flexibility (e.g., see Darrah, Freeman, & English-Lueck, 2007, for an interesting study on work and family out of the field of anthropology).

Our study, however, has limitations. We might argue that many of us, regardless of our professions or place in a workplace hierarchy, struggle to adapt to a cultural preeminence on work; however, our data focuses on entrepreneurs so we are not able to make this generalization. Furthermore, we cannot say if entrepreneurs are more likely than employees who are bound by the employer/employee relationship to use these strategies to soften the impact of work dominating life. Although our focus is on the strategies used to soften the overarching impact of living in a work-obsessed culture, another limitation of our study is that we did not specifically quantify, beyond that their jobs were full-time, how many hours they worked, worked lite, or engaged in nonwork activities.

Several further limitations of our research may offer fruitful avenues for future research. For example, we do not explicitly study gender, despite the reality that this study is of only female business owners; here, we stand apart from the many studies that focus on gender and flexibility, primarily on female employees. We are not claiming that one gender is more likely than the other to utilize these strategies and are not inclined to make such gendered generalizations. Our current research is similarly narrow in not examining class, race, or sexual orientation in detail. In fact, we were unable

to locate any study on workplace flexibility that focused on sexual orientation. We heartily endorse the need for more workplace studies that explicitly examine sexual orientation, race (Kamenou, 2008), class (Lautsch & Scully, 2007), and gender (Mirchandani, 1999; Wharton, 1994). Furthermore, intersectionality ought to drive our research by encouraging us to study social forces together. Our current tendency to isolate race, gender, or class as a variable diminishes what we can learn from our data.

Kanter (1977) was one of the first scholars to expose the myth of separate worlds between work and nonwork. Life is much too complex for such a simplistic understanding. Our study shows how these spheres are socially constructed and constantly contested (Cohen, Duberly, & Musson, 2009; Lewis et al., 2007), taking a more holistic view of work life (Eikhof, Warhurst, & Haunschild, 2007). We hope that the rich experiences of the women in our study make management scholars more cognizant of the complexities of living a life in a culture of overwork.

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