**Jack of all trades?**

**Involved father, ideal worker and caring husband**

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# **Abstract**

Men’s roles and behaviours in the home have evolved significantly over the last few decades. Involved ‘hands on’ fathers are much more prevalent. However, research on fathers and working men remains a neglected focus. Our paper seeks to render ‘working fathers’ more visible and provides insights into the work-life balance (WLB) experiences of professional men in a flexible and autonomous work role (academia). We interviewed fifteen male faculty members with pre-school and school-age children from three research-oriented European business schools. Our study identified three salient themes that emerged from how fathers talk about WLB – ‘mastering time’; ‘it’s all about being there’; and ‘performance pressures: imposition, compliance and choice’. We show how some fathers attempt to become ‘jack of all trades’ – an ‘involved father’, an ‘ideal worker’ and a ‘caring husband’ – and how some fathers adopt working practices that heighten their level of (self-produced) work life conflict.

**Keywords**

Men, fathers, work life balance, role, involvement, academia, time, presence, performance

**Introduction**

Societal trends – changes in gender roles, families, work and careers – have intensified work life balance (WLB) issues for men and women over the last decades (Powell et al., 2019; Gerson, 2011). Researchers have extensively investigated individuals’ WLB experience and coping strategies. Early research explored the types of conflict that arise, the difficulties of undertaking various (often competing) roles, as well as the organizational structures that support and constrain workers in balancing work and family. Later research explored the potential positive effects of combining work and family roles (Grzywacz and Butler 2005; Greenhaus and Powell 2006; McNall et al., 2010; Wayne et al., 2006). Such research challenges the idea of time and energy as scarce resources and considers the *enriching* or positive performance impact that can emanate from integrating work and family (Demerouti et al., 2012; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Ruderman et al., 2002)[[1]](#footnote-1).

While the above research has significantly contributed to our understanding of how individuals navigate their WLB, we identify two particular areas where more in-depth scholarship is warranted. First, work-family research has tended to focus on women’s experiences, with a historically strong emphasis on motherhood and women’s larger share of domestic responsibilities. Men’s roles and behaviours in the home are changing (Galinsky et al., 2011) and involved fathers have become more prevalent (Behson, 2015). Yet, research on fathers and working men remains a neglected focus (Burnett et al., 2013). In light of these changes, more detailed accounts of working fathers’ work life balance experiences are required.

Second, both streams of research referred to above – conflict and enrichment – largely focus on an individual’s objective assessments of balance (Greenhaus et al., 2003) and little attention has been paid to more broadly understanding how individuals *think* about the relationship between work and life (Leslie et al., 2019). Quantitative studies that focus on individuals’ objective assessments of WLB – time, involvement and satisfaction – fail to fully account for the complexity of their contextual and subjective experiences. More research is needed that explores and accounts for individuals’ subjective WLB experiences. In particular, in this study, we focus on how respondents themselves construe the conflict or enrichment that they experience.

 Empirically, our study focuses on men’s experience of WLB, in an attempt to render ‘working fathers’ more visible (Burnett et al., 2013: 643). We set out to address the research question: *How do professional working fathers construct their WLB experience, particularly in the context of a flexible work role?* We report findings on male academics who, theoretically, enjoy more freedom in terms of family involvement and managing their WLB than other male professionals.

**Theoretical Background**

*Work-life balance*

Role theory has informed much of the research on WLB, focusing on the conflicts that occur between work and other life roles (Powell et al., 2019). Work and family roles are often conceptualised as incompatible due to their competing responsibilities. Individuals experience role strain and role conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) as they navigate competing demands on their time and energy and attempt to juggle varying behavioral expectations.

 Increasingly, the potential for synergistic effects of combining work and family roles has been highlighted in the literature (Grzywacz and Butler 2005; Greenhaus and Powell 2006; McNall et al., 2010; Wayne et al., 2006). Individuals can gain an enhanced sense of security and personal fulfilment or reap efficiency gains from their multiple roles (Carlson et al., 2006). Similarly, positive affect in one domain can boost an individual’s emotional state when engaged in another domain. More recently, this expansionary perspective has been revisited and extended (Gerson, 2011; Bear, 2019), highlighting the various ways that engagement in multiple roles can enrich families, individuals and organizations. For example, parenthood has been shown to positively impact individuals’ time management and prioritization at work (Hardy et al., 2018).

Prior research on work-family conflict and enrichment in the context of parenthood has largely considered these issues from women’s perspectives. Recently, however, researchers have begun to explore working men’s attitudes towards, and involvement with, their children, theorizing varying fatherhood identities.

*Fatherhood*

Men may be cast as ‘manly’, ‘involved’ or ‘ambiguous’ fathers (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Gatrell et al., 2015; Ladge et al., 2015). *Manly fathers* are typically the main breadwinner and their spouse is homemaker and primary caregiver. They consider the physical care of pre-school-age children as the responsibility of mothers and these fathers are distant symbolic role models to their children. The male-breadwinner discourse emphasizes the responsibility of a good father to ‘provide for his family financially’ (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011: 510).

Increasingly today, fathers are becoming more involved in childcare and in raising their children (Behson, 2015; Cooklin, et al., 2016). The *involved father* sees his responsibilities as extending beyond breadwinning, and instead he seeks to become more directly involved in nurturing and caring for his children (Milkie et al., 2009). Today’s involved father is typically part of a ‘dual-earner/dual-career family’ (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011: 518) where childcare responsibilities are shared, and partners are ‘breadsharers’ (Reid, 2018). These fathers engage in shared parenting and have a continuous practical involvement in their child’s day-to-day activities and caring needs. However, the male breadwinner discourse remains a strong and pervasive force in the workplace (Mescher et al., 2010), suggesting impending challenges for contemporary working men with young families who wish to play the part of involved fathers. Hence, the rising popularity of the ‘involved father’ discourse may imply tensions for men as they manage their WLB experience. However, recent work by Ladge et al. (2015) suggests that involved fathers experience greater work-family enrichment and job satisfaction and less work-family conflict.

 Somewhere in between the breadwinning manly fathers and the breadsharing involved fathers lies the ‘ambiguous father’ (Ladge et al., 2015). These men may desire to be more involved, and in some cases enact this involvement, but still very much define themselves based on traditional views of fathering in the context of their organizations and careers. Essentially, although these fathers may espouse a desire to be more ‘hands-on’ as parents, organizational cultures and rigid structures cause them to compromise these desires and traditional fathering ultimately governs their work and family-related behaviours (Ladge et al., 2015). The centrality of work and career in men’s lives makes it more difficult for their ‘care-giving ambitions’ to be realized (Bear, 2019). The continued prevalence of the ‘ideal worker’ norm – where organizational subjects are highly mobile, devoted to their organization and unquestionably available (Acker, 1990) – is particularly strong for men and does little to facilitate change.

*Flexible work arrangements*

Within both the conflict and expansionary/enrichment streams of literature, researchers have pointed to contextual factors that impact an individual’s WLB. Certain jobs and professions provide workers with more freedom than others and enable them to manage the conflicting demands presented by family and work (Moen and Dempster-McClain, 1987). Job type characteristics (i.e. flexibility, personal control) certainly shape an individual’s experience of the work family nexus (O’Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005) but organizational structures and cultures also play an important role in shaping an employee’s WLB experience. Many organizations put flexible work arrangements in place to mitigate work-family conflict experienced by employees. Periodic and daily flextime, time-off, leaves and sabbaticals are commonplace initiatives for organizations seeking to attract, retain and promote professionals (Galinsky et al., 2011). Such initiatives enable the flexibility that modern day families need (Gerson, 2011). Organizations with cultures that support the uptake of such initiatives, reap the benefits of staff members who are highly engaged, exhibit low turnover and have low levels of psychological strain (Timms et al., 2014). For Gerson (2016), when workers can avail of such flexibility, the persistent gender divide – that sees both men and women forced into roles at home and in the workplace that are not their preferred options – can begin to erode.

Research findings, however, reveal tensions and contradictions in the ways that employees, managers and organizations develop, enact and respond to flexibility initiatives. Putting family-friendly organizational policies in place does not always change social attitudes and behaviours (Burnett et al., 2013). Indeed, there is still a stigma associated with men using family-friendly policies (Sallee, 2012). While men value work flexibility they may be reluctant to seek it because of fears of stigmatization (Vandello et al., 2013).

 In sum, prior research points to work life conflict and enrichment as objective, identifiable ‘givens’ that can be compared among different profiles of individuals. Research on fathers and working men has remained a neglected focus (Burnett et al., 2013) and little is known about the work life balance experience of professional men. This is surprising given that contemporary fathers spend more time with their children and increasingly reject the traditional ‘male breadwinner’ gender role (Galinsky et al., 2011; Behson, 2015). Flexible work environments – facilitating spatial and temporal flexibility - can accommodate adaptation and fluidity in household arrangements (Gerson, 2011; 2016), thus defying traditional gendered norms and enabling shifts in gender roles as required. However, gendered norms for men, and stigmatisation, affect their uptake of formal flexible work arrangements (Vandello et al., 2013). Workplace structures and professional norms thus impact the enactment of fatherhood (Ladge et al, 2015).

In this study, we ask: how do professional working fathers construct their work life balance experience? We examine fathers’ experience of WLB in a flexible and autonomous work role where constraints (workplaces structures and professional norms) are arguably lower – academia. Academia is a particularly interesting context for work life studies, given that it is, as Wilton and Ross (2017: 67) suggest, ‘a job that never really stops’ but at the same time, a job that offers considerable autonomy and flexibility (Hardy et al., 2018). Individuals have considerable scope in how they plan their time and manage the intensity of their work. Furthermore, in academia, due to the nature of the job, availing of flexibility for family reasons – be it temporal or spatial – may not always be directly visible.

**Method**

We adopted a qualitative methodology to explore working fathers ‘lived experiences’ (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Between June 2015 and December 2016, we interviewed fifteen male faculty members from three research-oriented European business schools (two in France and one in Ireland – referred to as FBS1, FBS2 and IBS1)[[2]](#footnote-2). We sought out permanent faculty who had been employed by the school for at least two years; who held both a teaching and research mandate; and had at least one dependent child under 10 years of age. We interviewed men with pre-school and school-age children to gain insight into their WLB experiences, during what is often acknowledged to be a particularly challenging time for parents. Our sample participants were aged between 35 and 57 years, with an average age of 41 years. All fathers were married or co-habiting with a mix of single career, dual career and career-job couple configurations. The participants’ profiles can be found in Table 1. Interviews were semi-structured and explored participants’ family status and childcare arrangements, how they define WLB, how they think and feel about their own WLB, how they feel about their work performance and whether they think gender plays a role in the work-life experience.

**Table 1. Participants’ profiles**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Father** | **Age** | **Children** | **School** | **Position** | **Partner’s Occupation / Working Arrangements** | **Couple Configuration/Father’s Role** |
| Alfred | 37 | 3 | FBS 1 | Assistant Professor | Senior Project Manager (four days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Simpson | 38 | 3 | FBS 1 | Assistant Professor | Therapist; coach; writer (freelance)(five days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Paul | 38 | 1 | FBS 1 | Assistant Professor | Housewife/TrainerWorks from home, with exception of one week each month when she travels for work | Dual career/Breadsharer  |
| Bob | 42 | 2 | FBS 1 | Associate Professor | HR Director (five days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Liam | 41 | 3 | FBS 1 | Associate Professor | Housewife | Single career/Breadwinner |
| Bryan | 37 | 3 | FBS 2 | Assistant Professor | Housewife | Single career/Breadwinner |
| Sam | 37 | 1 | FBS 2 | Associate Professor | Housewife | Single career/Breadwinner |
| James | 57 | 1 | IBS1 | Assistant Professor | Academic (five days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Charlie | 47 | 1 | IBS1 | Assistant Professor | Academic (five days a week) | Dual careerBreadsharer |
| Seán | 42 | 2 | IBS1 | Assistant Professor | Housewife/Book-keeper (part-time) | Career-Job/Breadwinner |
| Aidan | 35 | 1 | IBS1 | Associate Professor | Quality Assurance Manager (four days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Thomas | 38 | 2 | IBS1 | Associate Professor | School Teacher (five days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Adam | 38 | 3 | IBS1 | Associate Professor | Actuary (three days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Ben | 49 | 1 | IBS1 | Professor | Academic (5 days a week) | Dual career/Breadsharer |
| Matthew | 39 | 1 | IBS1 | Full Professor | Housewife | Single career/Breadwinner |

 All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data analysis was composed of three main rounds. In the first round of analysis, we employed line by line open coding (Charmaz, 2006) and coded participants talk of their WLB experience. We compared and contrasted experiences within single respondent accounts as well as across accounts. We then engaged in focused coding, where we used the most significant and frequent codes to sift through the large amounts of data gathered. We identified broad themes that appeared to capture the breadth of WLB experiences of the fathers in our study. We were loosely guided by Braun and Clark’s (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis that allowed us to identify, analyze and report patterns within our data. In the second round of data analysis, we returned to our transcripts and sought to build a detailed case narrative of each father. We coded participants’ accounts of their interactions with their children, their daily childcare arrangements and responsibilities, as well as their aspirations or ideals on parenting. We used these codes to develop memos (Charmaz, 2006) in the style of mini-case narratives that summarized the unique profile of each father, taking account of their daily childcare arrangements, household situations (breadsharer / breadwinner) and parenting ideals. We positioned them on a continuum with respect to the extent of their involvement as fathers (manly fathers to involved fathers). In the final round of data analysis, we returned to the three themes on WLB we had synthesized and sought to explore how the different profiles of fathers (manly fathers; sole breadwinners; involved fathers; breadsharers) might lend more insights into their experiences, paying attention to tensions and contradictions in their accounts.

**Findings**

From our analysis of participants’ narratives around their WLB, three clear themes emerged from their accounts.

*Mastering time (or time mastering me?)*

Our first theme, ‘mastering time’, emerged from our participants’ keen awareness of time and how they use it across multiple domains. Their narratives make repeated reference to the need to allocate, optimize and preserve time. While some participants talk of how fatherhood has led them to improve their time management skills, boosting their efficiency at work, others evoke the all-consuming nature of academia and delineate a harried, ‘time poor’ existence.

 Participants evoke a controlled and carefully planned approach to how one allocates their time. For example, Bob talks about ‘*finding the time somehow in meeting several objectives: family objectives, work objectives even leisure time for yourself*’. Simpson also stresses a planned and strategic approach to time usage: *‘you need to organize yourself to get your work done and you need to organize yourself to have family time and there’s the household’.*  Many involved fathers talk of how they have had to enhance their organization and efficiency levels since having children. They do so by more actively managing their time at work. Aidan notes that: *‘….what has changed is that I’m using my time more wisely, so I think I’ve become a bit better at time management’.*  Becoming a father enables one to be more focused while at work. For Thomas and Charlie, it is more about work efficiency given their time constraints: *‘….before I had kids probably I had some bad work habits in that I would waste time or be inefficient or unproductive…..I’m a bit more focused now when I know I’ve got that limited amount of time….’* (Thomas)*;* ‘*The time that you spend in here [at work] is more intense than it used to be*’ (Charlie). These fathers signpost fatherhood as a welcome imposition to render them more organized at work.

Some fathers evoke their explicit efforts to protect family time. Ben explains how he would ‘*read a lot at home’* and needs ‘*thinking time’* for research but also needs to maintain ‘*a reasonable presence time*’ with his son. For Adam, fatherhood has been beneficial with respect to how he uses his time: ‘*If anything, it [having a family] could encourage you I suppose in some ways….do it as best you can, as early as you can, to get that time with them’* [children]). While time is important to all participants, not all fathers explicitly strive to maximize *family* time. Liam, a manly father, is the sole breadwinner in his household and he is very cognizant of how he spends his time, but does not feel a personal pull to spending more time with his family. If Liam reduces the time he spends working, it is because his wife prods him to do so. He trades off being less responsive on his emails in order to ‘get some balance’ (or rather to placate his wife).

The working fathers in our sample differed significantly in the extent to which they feel time-poor. As to be expected, stay-at-home spouses as well as extended family or good after-school supports can ease the tension. For example, Matthew’s wife looks after their child full-time. He reflects ‘*I very much enjoy being totally absorbed in my work for many hours and I can still do that of course…’*. James benefits from the family support that their live-in grandmother provides. He explains how she ‘*pretty much decided that her job was going to be to take care of [daughter]. And we went from a situation where we would have been pretty much hands on 24 hours a day to a situation now where we can do our work and select our time when we need to be with [daughter]*’. However, having a stay-at-home spouse does not buffer Sam, Bryan or Seán from their feeling of never having enough time. For Bryan, he recounts how he feels like he is on a constant ‘*hamster wheel*’. He refers to the omni-presence of work in an academic’s life as a given: ‘*we’re always on the job, when you sleep, when you go travelling, when you’re on holidays,…on weekends’*. For Sam, it is not easy to be the involved father he wants to be whilst also fulfilling the role of sole breadwinner. He attests that: ‘*you can’t do everything that you would like or in the speed that you would like. You need to accept that. It is frustrating, it’s tough, definitely. That’s life…’.* Seánis also the main earner in his household and struggles with the time he spends away from family. He recounts how he orchestrates his teaching schedule so that additional teaching work he takes on off-campus involves ‘*only one course or two courses over a very short period of time’* in order to minimize the length of timehe is away from the family.

Some fathers mention how they find it difficult to set aside time for their relationships and themselves. Paul expressed concern about finding time for his relationship with his wife: *‘….babies take a lot of time and so we don’t make any plans anymore and we both seem to enjoy less the time we spend together….’* and he expressed dissatisfaction with the current balance between his ‘*professional life, family life and own life, like ‘couple life*’. Engaging in leisure or physical activity is something that is difficult to factor in. Aidan feels that academics ‘*don’t pay enough attention to*’ physical exercise. He explains: *‘….the personal side of it is the side that’s the most difficult to try and find any time for yourself’*. In sum, while some participants appear to be keen to ‘master’ time, others appear to be mastered by it – yet accept its consequences.

*It’s all about being there (really?)*

All participants remark on how they avail of the flexibility their job affords to facilitate family life. This involves choosing when they work (temporal flexibility) and where they work (spatial flexibility). However, not all fathers necessarily avail of this flexibility to the same degree or for the same reasons. Many fathers talk about how they can come home to actively look after the children – play with them, give them an evening bath or feed them. Some refer to how they manage their schedule around their children’s needs, both physical (e.g. caring for a sick child) and social (e.g. tending to after-school activities). In some cases, a spouse’s schedule prompted their presence in the home. While for others, they are deeply aware of their parental obligation (‘*the feeling of being responsible for a kid in the end is something that you cannot let go’*, Bob).

Fathers differ, however, in their perception of an acceptable degree of presence for their children and the family more generally. For Bryan and Liam (both sole breadwinners), the temporal flexibility that academia affords them was touted as an advantage they occasionally leveraged when they needed to ‘help’ their spouse out with childcare. Both of these fathers also evoke the physical separation from their families that they impose on themselves in order to get work done (i.e. Bryan spending weeks at a time away from the family and Liam building a place in the basement to work). Both Bryan and Liam consider their absence as necessary and do not appear to miss their family involvement. For other fathers - in apparently similar household situations i.e. single earner/main breadwinner - such as Sam and Seán) with more involved fathering ideals, temporal and spatial work flexibility is represented as problematic. Sam, for example, stresses the importance of parental presence in the context of a child’s development (‘*if you choose not to be there, there is an empty space somewhere that’s created I think for the child’*). He remarks how it is ‘bad for everyone’ if he is not around to put his son to bed:

*‘otherwise he doesn’t sleep so it’s bad for everyone so I prefer to do that, and it’s good also for me as a father, I like it very much’ (Sam).*

It is noteworthy that for some fathers, while the possibility of working from home allows them to ‘be around’, they are not necessarily actively taking care of their children while they are at home. These fathers often have a spouse who takes up the larger care of the children or have another family member or childminder on hand to provide support. Matthew, for example, explains how working from home allows him to ‘*come down [from the home office in the attic] and keep an eye on things*’.Spatial flexibility – working from various locations (at home, on holiday) – is depicted as a beneficial compromise for both fathers and the family. However, to a certain extent, these fathers masquerade presence with their children – while they are physically present at home, they are not actively engaging or connecting with their children while there. Spatial flexibility is also presented as problematic though, as in the case of Adam, when his parents-in-law wonder why they are looking after the children if he is ‘there’ [at home]: ‘*They’re [grandparents] generally able to take them [children], but that in itself can be awkward because if I’m working at home, it’s a question….well you’re at home, why aren’t you taking them? (laughs)*’.

The notion of ‘really’ being there – or quality presence – was something that certain fathers flagged as a real concern.As Aidan explains, *‘….if you’re grappling with a research question or with a problem, you’re definitely going to carry that home with you….and I think that can sometimes be over-bearing….’* (Aidan). Indeed, more involved fathers are conscious of how not being cognitively ‘there’ can really impact on quality family time. As Sam explains:

*‘But the key problem I think is to be present, it’s very easy to be working twenty-four hours a day because you never disconnect from your work, so that has been a tough challenge to be present in everything you do. That has been my challenge…..’.*

Apart from the desire to be more present for their children, the need to be present for their spouses and to ‘mind’ their (couple) relationship is a preoccupation of many fathers. Bob notes other colleagues and friends who did not pay sufficient attention to their WLB and who paid a steep price as a result (divorce). In Simpson’s case, he remarks how the combined demands of setting up a home, having children and building a career can be ‘*too much*’. He stressed how he and his wife make sure they have time to communicate properly over the course of the week i.e. scheduling regular evening Skype calls when he is not at home. Equally,Seán, Sam and Matthew express a concern for their stay-at-home spouse’s needs. While Seán and Matthew are both concerned about their physical presence at home (‘*I have to go home at some stage because it’s just not fair on my wife*’, Seán), Sam is more concerned about his wife’s own development outside the home (‘*she needs to develop herself also’*, Sam).

*Performance pressures: imposition, compliance and choice*

Many participants refer to the intrinsic value they derive from striving to achieve their own (often ambitious) personal objectives. When reflecting on why he got into academia, Matthew explains: ‘*It was the pursuit of quality without a doubt, you know, so that’s definitely what keeps me going…’.* Many participants also refer to the high work performance standards they are expected (or expect themselves) to obtain and how they manage these expectations. One strong sub-theme relates to autonomy, where fathers emphasize the self-directed and internally driven nature of the academic role. They maintain that they are effectively their ‘*own boss*’ (Aidan) and they ‘*manage themselves’* (Matthew). Both Thomas and James suggest that any perceived pressure that academics might feel is created internally: ‘*the pressure comes, for a lot of people, from within… to do an extra article or to push something a bit further*’ (Thomas); ‘*the pressure is interior – competition is not with others, it’s with myself’* (James). The participants’ emphasize how it is they that exert pressure on themselves to be responsive and reactive workers.

 Participants talked of how the demands of fatherhood (particularly with young children) impacted their performance. Paul referred to the difficulty of maintaining performance while being sleep deprived: ‘*That adaptation has been rough, one of the impacts that this had on me was a productivity crisis*’. Paul depicts the challenge of building one’s career while the children are young as a universal one for those at his life stage: ‘*it's when you are in your thirties and forties that you need to build your career and that's also at that moment that….you've got the kids*’. Others report how they have less time for conferences(i.e.Bob – *‘before I became a father I went to conferences far more often…’* and Sam ‘*I go to less conferences (now),…it is painful to be away from my son*’)*.* We note divergence in how these fathers accept an eventual productivity change. Charlie describes how his university’s demanding promotions criteria are no longer within his reach: *‘….if you were to achieve the kind of promotion criteria that they talk about in their official promotion criteria, you would have to be working 60 hours a week….it might have been possible before [son], but it’s certainly not possible anymore’*. A number of fathers tend to view research as the ‘arbitrary’ component of their role. The amount of effort they exert is a matter of personal choice and family is given priority. Aidan, for example, explains ‘*I can* *detach myself from it and say, okay I’m not just gonna, you know, take up the fifth research project now, I’m just going to finish what I have and take it a bit easier and it’s still going to be okay”.* These fathers view themselves as free to lower their level of work-effort intensity to accommodate family demands. Simpson explains how the research autonomy he holds enables him to escape the continuous performance ‘*pressure*’ that characterizes private industry. Bob talks of how the autonomous nature of the job allows academics to ease off on work effort and work performance at certain periods of their (family) lives. There is a certain degree of acceptance that because they are now fathers, they can no longer meet their school’s demands in terms of productivity. Alfred reflects how the ‘*time horizon might have changed*’ in terms of achieving career objectives and that fewer publications is a possible outcome, but that such ‘*losses*’ are worth it. Simpson adopts a relaxed approach to the reduced productivity that involved fatherhood implies, conceding that academics ‘*have the pressure to perform’* but also acknowledges that they *‘have the choice not to fully comply*’. Indeed, these fathers accept that a certain level of scaling back either in their work (i.e. by lowering their research objectives) or their family life is necessary. Bryan chose the latter option (scaling back on family), spending long periods away from home in order to advance his career. He appears to be over-whelmed by the sheer breadth of work demands, emphasizing what ‘you have to’ do but insists that he does not ‘*mind working a lot*’. Meanwhile Sam, also the main breadwinner in his family, strives to ‘do it all’, emphasizing what he ‘wants’ to achieve at work, how he ‘needs’ to be both a good performer to get that as well the need to be responsive to his family’s needs:

‘*You want to perform academically, you want to keep your job and get promoted sometime, so you need to show performance. At the same time you need to have balance’.*

**Discussion**

Our study explored how fathers in professional, flexible and autonomous work roles, experience their WLB and we identified three salient themes that emerged from our participants’ talk of WLB – time, presence and performance pressures.

In our first theme, participants evoked their relationship with time since becoming fathers. In line with the work of Hardy et al. (2018), some fathers in our study talk about how fatherhood has positively impacted on their time management and prioritization at work. However, while some fathers evoked how they had learned to make better use of time, others struggled and emphasized how acutely time poor they felt. Fathers in our study place significant value on their time and, ultimately, see it as their responsibility to manage it in the best way possible so as to maximize the time available for work, family and other dimensions of their lives. This aligns with prior research that underscores professionals’ engagement in ‘time work’ as an (individual) response to the stress of their work and their acceptance that work intrudes into personal and family time, including evenings, weekends and vacations (Moen et al., 2013). Fathers in our study refer to the considerable time demands placed on them in the context of promotions criteria (particularly around the pressure to publish) and this regularly requires them to work well in excess of the normal working week. Indeed, the long hours of academia have been well documented elsewhere ('*a good, successful academic ... requires a day to have 48 hours not 24*': Knights and Clarke, 2014: 342). For some participants in our study, they report having limited personal time for physical activity and sport as well as their personal relationships. Hence, in line with prior research, we find that professionals who can adopt flexible working practices to help them better manage their WLB actually experience increased intensification of work and end up working extended hours (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Putnam et al., 2014).

In our second theme, fathers talked of presence, emphasizing how ‘being there’ for their children and their partner or spouse is important. Presence – its meaning and significance – has multiple interpretations. Some refer to their physical presence in the home, lauding the temporal and spatial flexibility of their job. However, physical presence does not necessarily imply active, hands-on fathering, although some fathers sought to emphasize the practical caregiving they were involved in. Others spoke of the need to ‘really be there’, remarking how an academic’s need for reflection means that it can be difficult to be cognitively present when at home or with family. The costly consequences of ‘not being there’ – for one’s spouse or for the family – are hinted at. While men may not be judged as much as women are on their devotion to family (Blair Loy, 2003), some men judge themselves. In line with recent research (Padavic et al., 2019), mens’ feelings of guilt around spending time away from their family surfaced as unconscious emotional conflict rather than an outright admission.

Finally, we identified a third theme where fathers’ talk of performance expectations and evoke the autonomy that academia implies in managing these expectations. The academic role involves multiple (sometimes conflicting) demands and responsibilities (teaching, research, administration) and a failure to meet these demands can often result in academics feeling somewhat anxious and insecure (Clarke et al., 2012). While some fathers emphasize how the autonomy of the role enables them to do less in certain areas (e.g. accepting lower standards of research performance), others struggle to do this, emphasizing their heightened need to achieve promotion and provide for their families. Fathers with direct care ambitions (Bear, 2019) and ‘breadsharing’ ideals (Reid, 2018) had an accepting approach to an eventual ‘scale back’ (Moen et al., 2013) of their research. However, those fathers who aspire to directly meet the needs of others (physically), but found themselves in breadwinner roles, experienced mental anguish and physical distress/fatigue as they sought to perform in both domains.

Interestingly, contextual or family circumstances did not explain all divergence. We observed how fathers in seemingly similar contextual circumstances (i.e. Bryan and Sam who are both breadwinners) experienced performance expectations very differently. Their ideologies of fatherhood are important here in explaining the conflict they both felt (Bryan aligns as a manly father, Sam as an involved father). Both experienced extreme stress and pressure, but for Bryan this was work-related, while for Sam it was both home and work-related. Our findings here resonate with recent work that points to the importance of considering personal WLB ideologies (Leslie et al., 2019) as well as individuals’ caregiving ambitions (Bear, 2019) when considering work life conflict experiences.

One striking feature across the three themes is the extent fathers perceive themselves as active agents in control of their own working lives and the conflict they experience. Some participants construct fatherhood as beneficial to their work lives and emphasize how it rendered them more organized and efficient. Others bemoan how they have no time for themselves, and feel like they are constantly struggling to keep up (Bryan’s ‘hamster wheel’ is one particularly strong image here). Fathers vary in their perceived levels of acceptable presence. While for some being home is sufficient, others struggle with the need to ‘be in the moment’ and evoke how difficult that can sometimes be. While some are willing to accept trade-offs (reduced productivity for quality family time or reduced family involvement for reactivity and work intensity), others place themselves under extreme pressure to deliver as both involved fathers and ideal workers (and in some cases as caring husbands). The fathers in our sample do not openly claim to suffer considerable conflict or tension, yet guilt and anguish is evident in their narratives. Many fathers take their suffering as a given. Some under-sell their own suffering and accentuate their wives difficulties (Bob, Sam, Seán).

Our analysis highlights how working fathers experience internal dissonance because of incompatible dominant societal logics to which they are exposed (involved father versus ideal worker) and which sees them struggling to ‘have it all’ (Gerson, 2016; Ladge et al., 2015). Our findings are novel in that they show how the pressures fathers feel (or not) can be a response to personal routines and practices they themselves have put in place. Such routines and practices vary across home and work domains: being there for the bedtime story; working extra hours to fulfill their provider role or ‘saying no to that fifth research project’. Organizational and cultural norms are commonly evoked as placing constraints on men seeking to be more involved fathers (Ladge et al., 2015). Our findings highlight how professional working fathers individualize the problems they experience and fail to voice their struggles. Their reactions reflect their consideration that these are ‘private troubles requiring private solutions’ (Moen et al., 2013: 101) and echo the resounding masculine norm of ‘showing no weakness’ that is inherent in contemporary organizations (Berdahl et al., 2018: 424).

We contribute to the WLB literature by further exploring the gendered nature of work intensity and overwork. Men today are more likely to seek a more involved, hands-on presence as fathers (Behson, 2015; Galinsky et al., 2011). The extant literature emphasizes workplace flexibility as a way to erode and circumvent traditional gendered norms that align men with the public (work) sphere and women with the private (family/domestic) sphere. Indeed, workplace flexibility is proposed as a way to enable men to play a more active role in the home while remaining devoted workers, effectively ‘doing it all’ (Gerson, 2016). However, in professional and managerial workplaces, men often prove their masculinity by working long days (Trimble O’Connor, 2013), with the potential consequence that fatigue impacts on fathering and ‘its interface with work demands’ (Giallo et al., 2013: 43). It has also been argued that men experience some unease around how extended working hours place a degree of strain on their family (Padavic et al., 2019). In the context of academia, flexibility is a commonly cited benefit (Wilton and Ross, 2017). Research and travel for conferences, for instance, may be sacrificed as part of an individual’s effort to maintain a balance between work and family demands (Wilton and Ross, 2017). Faculty often feel they are expected to work far more hours than the typical working week, thereby necessitating evening and weekend working and consequently increasing the degree of strain experienced (Sallee, 2012). Our findings reveal how flexibility and autonomy in the professional role can actually facilitate the ‘over-work’ of involved fathers. They avail of the temporal and spatial flexibility their job offers to ensure an active presence at home. However, this does not automatically imply that they reduce their productivity and performance expectations.

Second, we contribute to the WLB literature by pinpointing how attention must be directed at how individuals subjectively construct the ‘conflict’ they experience. While research on work-family conflict and enrichment has enhanced our understanding of how individuals navigate their WLB, this work largely focuses on an individual’s objective assessment of balance in the work life domains (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Subjective assessments of balance have not received the same degree of attention. Yet, this kind of assessment of one’s WLB is necessary as it allows for the context to be taken account of and has the potential to be particularly insightful. Extant research focuses on how organizational structures and cultures constrain men seeking to be active and hands-on fathers (Ladge et al., 2015; Sallee, 2012). Changing organisational structures and cultures is key to reducing work family conflict. However, our findings reveal how even in apparently flexible and autonomous work roles, fathers still experience conflict. We believe that our findings shine a spotlight on the kinds of working practices created and enacted by employees themselves that can potentially lead to increased levels of (self-produced) work life conflict. Given the nature of academic work – flexible and autonomous – we would have expected fathers in our study who desired to be more involved fathers to be free to do so. While some (such as Simpson) ‘choose not to comply’ to performance pressures, and instead to be an active, involved father, others do not assume this choice. Indeed for some, they feel a new intense need to ‘provide’ as fathers (Bear, 2019).

To conclude, we observed how some fathers strive to ‘do it all’ (Gerson, 2016), fulfilling their role as provider, being actively involved in their child’s development and being attentive to the needs of their spouse. Some fathers attempt to become ‘jack of all trades’ and try to fulfill a variety of roles, including ‘involved father’, ‘ideal worker’ and ‘caring husband’. In doing so they suffer the consequences of over-stretching themselves, both physically and mentally, and experience considerable fatigue and distress (something that is often unseen). Fathers also suffer work family conflict, as well as guilt and pain at losing out on family time, but this is a less often heard narrative (Padavic et al., 2019). The hegemony of the work life narrative as an issue that impacts mainly women (Padavic et al., 2019) means that fathers often downplay their own suffering. In bringing these issues to the surface, we respond to calls to render fathers’ experiences in the workplace more visible (Burnett et al., 2013). Finally, we observed fathers who, even when given the choice, did not always avail of the temporal and spatial flexibility that academia affords them to spend more time with their families. Indeed, their chosen working practices may contribute or heighten the level of (self-produced) work life conflict they experience.

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1. We use the term ‘work-life balance’ to better capture the experiences of working professionals in the various domains of their lives, not just work and family (e.g. leisure and personal relationships). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. True to the international mobility associated with academia, our respondents were made up of numerous nationalities i.e. there were not just French and Irish nationalities in our sample. Hence, we do not explore or consider the context of national culture here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)