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Failures of flexibility: How perceived control motivates the individualization of work-life conflict

Alison T. WYNN
Stanford University

Aliya Hamid RAO
Singapore Management University, aliyarao@smu.edu.sg

FAILURES OF FLEXIBILITY: HOW PERCEIVED CONTROL MOTIVATES THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF WORK–LIFE CONFLICT

ALISON T. WYNN AND ALIYA HAMID RAO*

Firms have increasingly used flexibility policies to facilitate work–life balance, yet existing research shows that employees are stigmatized for using these seemingly beneficial policies. In this article, the authors identify *perceived control*, that is, the sense of control employees feel they have over managing their work–life conflicts, as a key factor in their avoidance of flexibility policies. Through 50 in-depth interviews with management consultants from five firms, the authors find that employees frame managing their work–life conflicts as a test of their professional skills, emphasize their "natural" suitability for the consulting industry, use choice rhetoric to reframe oppressive work demands as personal choices, and accentuate their ability to exit the consulting industry if they are unable to manage their work–life balance independently. Empirically, this study provides a fuller explanation for the pervasive avoidance of flexibility policies and expands on prior explanations that focus on flexibility stigma.

Many companies, particularly in elite industries, have implemented innovative flexibility programs that offer a suite of options to reduce workload, change where and when work occurs, and accommodate employees' personal lives (McCracken 2000; Benko and Anderson 2010; Perlow 2012; Perlow and Kelly 2014). Yet, scholars find that workers often do not take advantage of these benefits. Scholars have typically attributed this to a pervasive cultural stigma (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Briscoe and Kellogg

2011; Kellogg 2011; Cech and Blair-Loy 2014; Munsch, Ridgeway, and Williams 2014; Albiston and O'Connor 2016), through which powerful norms that prioritize work over family and that require intensive work devotion persist (Allen 2001; Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002, 2004; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Wharton, Chivers, and Blair-Loy 2008; Kellogg 2011). However, this perspective overlooks employees' motivations *beyond* the flexibility stigma. Besides simply responding to the flexibility stigma, how do employees justify their avoidance of flexibility policies, and what framings do they draw upon to make sense of their decisions? This question is especially puzzling in the context of elite employees, who know about available flexibility policies and are skilled in organizational change, but who nevertheless avoid taking advantage of their companies' flexibility policies.

In this article, we identify a new mechanism underpinning the avoidance of flexibility policies among employees: perceived control. We define perceived control as the sense of control that employees feel over managing their work–life conflict. Perceived control can be understood as a facet of the broader concept of normative control. Organizations extract long hours from employees through a process of normative control (Burawoy 1979; Kunda 1992; Cooper 2000; Anteby 2008; Michel 2012; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates 2013). Prior research has suggested that, in successful normative control, employees often have a sense of autonomy and believe themselves to be in control over their own selves, careers, and lives (Kunda 1992; Michel 2012; Mazmanian et al. 2013). Yet, the *process* of how this sense of autonomy and control is achieved by employees in organizational contexts remains underdeveloped. The research on normative control has not fully explained how employees not only comply with ideal worker norms—including long working hours, travel for work, and extensive face time—but also keenly experience this compliance as providing a sense of autonomy.

In our study of management consulting, we find that perceived control shapes employees' preference to rely on themselves to manage any work–life challenges rather than to avail themselves of flexibility policies. Management consulting is an especially useful industry in which to study the motivations underlying employee avoidance of flexibility policies because the profession is characterized by intensive travel requirements and long hours, but also boasts some of the most innovative flexibility programs. Consulting firms spend considerable money, time, and resources designing and marketing flexibility programs, and consultants indicate substantial need for flexibility (Benko and Weisberg 2007; Perlow 2012; Reid 2015). In addition, consultants are trained in methods of achieving organizational change, and consulting firms take an active role in diffusing their models to other organizations (Kelly 2003). Yet, even an industry that both designs and champions policies to help employees reconcile the demands of their work with those of their personal lives fails to dislodge the flexibility stigma among its own workers. As elite workers skilled in organizational change,

management consultants should be well equipped to challenge the stigma identified by previous research. Yet, they do not. We examine why.

Using unique interview data with 50 management consultants, we find that in a context of constrained options in which employees are skeptical about the viability of flexibility programs, employees instead 1) glorify their work passion and suitability for a profession they view as requiring overwork; 2) emphasize their self-dependence and skill; and 3) use "choice" rhetoric. To gain and protect a sense of autonomy, or what we call "perceived control," consultants manage their work–life conflict individually and avoid flexibility policies.

We thus bridge two literatures on normative control and work–life conflict, and we identify a new mechanism that helps explain why consultants do not utilize available flexibility programs. In addition to flexibility stigma, we find that employees are deeply motivated to gain and maintain a sense of control over their work–life conflict. This objective leads employees to manage their work–life conflict on their own and without relying on available flexibility policies.

Flexibility Stigma and the Ideal Worker Norm

Organizations encourage workers to uphold the "ideal worker" norm, through which, particularly among professionals, employees are expected to prioritize work above all other responsibilities (Acker 1990; Williams 2000; Davies and Frink 2014). Based on a masculinized conception of workers as breadwinners without caregiving responsibilities, the ideal worker never takes time off for family responsibilities and remains constantly available (Cooper 2000; Williams 2000; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Albiston 2010; Kelly, Ammons, Chermak, and Moen 2010; Davies and Frink 2014). For high-status workers in particular, overwork and constant availability are common expectations and drivers of considerable psychological distress (Schieman, Glavin, and Milkie 2009; Perlow 2012; Cha 2013; Moen, Lam, Ammons, and Kelly 2013).

Although the ideal worker norm once meant that those who adhered to it would be rewarded by the organization, this relationship is more tenuous in our neoliberal context in which employment precarity is prevalent, even for elite professionals (Cooper 2014; Rao 2017a, 2017b). Writing about a one-way honor system, Pugh (2015) explained that employees feel they owe their employers intense work commitment but do not expect loyalty in return. Researchers have also documented that widely shared cultural ideologies prioritize company profit over worker entitlements, and the sanctity of companies' obligation to make money overshadows workers' needs and personal lives (Webber and Williams 2008; Albiston 2010; Moen et al. 2013; Pugh 2015). We add to this research by showing how the one-way honor system, while disempowering employees, appears to give employees a sense of

agency and control by creating a context in which employees commend themselves for individualizing work–life conflict.

Scholars have pointed to a prevailing cultural stigma against flexible work arrangements and those who use them (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Brescoll, Glass, and Sedlovskaya 2013; Munsch et al. 2014). Workers who deviate from the ideal worker norm face severe penalties and discrimination, resulting in fewer organizational rewards, such as pay and promotion (Judiesch and Lyness 1999; Cohen and Single 2001; Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Glass 2004; Rogier and Padgett 2004; Webber and Williams 2008; Briscoe and Kellogg 2011; Kmec, O'Connor, and Schieman 2014; Munsch et al. 2014).

Employees consequently fear using flexible work arrangements, even when such arrangements might help alleviate work–life conflicts (Allen 2001; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Wharton et al. 2008; Kellogg 2011). Workers struggle with using flexibility policies especially if they have heavy job demands and unsupportive work groups (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2004), or if they lack powerful supervisors to buffer them from the negative impacts of flexible policy use (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Briscoe and Kellogg 2011). Quantitative studies have also found a consistent negative effect of policy use on wage growth (Glass 2004), promotions and salary increases (Judiesch and Lyness 1999), and performance evaluations (Wharton, Chivers, and Blair-Loy 2008). Experimental studies have similarly suggested a systematic and consistent bias against people who use flexibility programs (Cohen and Single 2001; Rogier and Padgett 2004; Munsch et al. 2014). However, although studies have confirmed the time strain workers experience (Hochschild 1997; Jacobs and Gerson 2004), avoidance of using legal entitlements such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (Albiston 2010), and the emphasis on individual choice and responsibility in managing work–life conflicts (Stone 2007; Webber and Williams 2008; Pugh 2015), more qualitative research is needed to unpack the motivations and framings workers use when deciding whether to use available flexibility programs. Beyond simply responding to the existing stigma against flexibility, what discourses do workers use to interpret and justify their avoidance of flexibility policies? Do employees see their own rejection of flexibility policies as based solely in stigma avoidance, or are there other additional meanings they may derive from this rejection?

Below, we discuss research findings on the role of normative control in shaping employees' decisions, including those regarding work–life challenges, and we identify some key areas that require further empirical and theoretical development.

Normative Control and the Paradox of Autonomy

In a typical story of normative control, the organization deploys normative (ideological), bureaucratic (i.e., job design), technological, and identity

controls to coerce workers into activities or behaviors that disadvantage the individual while advantaging the company (Burawoy 1979; Kunda 1992). Normative control operates by instilling in employees a profound sense of personal commitment to the goals and values of the company (Kunda 1992; Cooper 2000). Employees engage in self-surveillance and monitor their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to align with company interests and incentives (Cooper 2000; Anteby 2008). Research on normative control in blue-collar occupations, for example, describes that in a context in which most of the workers have limited control, managerial discretion can be powerful in enabling constrained, or even exploited, workers to willingly participate in their own exploitation (Burawoy 1979; Anteby 2008). Scholars have also documented that overwork is not always exploitative. Hochschild (1997), for example, argued that work, indeed even overwork, can provide stimulation and respite from challenging home conditions.

In his classic ethnography of a manufacturing plant, Burawoy (1979) found that managers turned a blind eye to workers who sought to "make out" in the manufacturing plant he studied, whereby they manipulated their productivity, often producing surplus for the organization in the process. The process of "making out" gave workers a sense of control and autonomy over their work, even when they were often working more and producing more to the benefit of the company, not themselves. Anteby (2008) offered an understanding of normative control that highlighted the role of worker identity. He explained that not only do organizations want workers to adhere to an organizational identity (i.e., through normative control), but that often workers *too* desire the organizational identity.

Prior literature mentions that in the process of internalizing norms through which organizations can more easily control workers, employees experience a sense of control or autonomy (Kunda 1992; Michel 2012; Mazmanian et al. 2013). Yet, existing research does not fully explain the internal processes through which employees develop and maintain this sense of control, nor how this desire for a sense of control affects work–life outcomes, including use of flexibility policies. For example, in Kunda's study (1992: 187) of how high-tech employees develop an "organizational self" that aligns with the goals of the organization, he explained that employees both embrace and distance themselves from the role expectations imposed on them by the organization. Kunda wrote that workers attempt to "delineate and control the boundaries" of their organizational self and "maintain personal autonomy" (pp. 187, 215). Significantly, Kunda noted cognitive and affective distancing mechanisms whereby employees attempt to assert a sense of control. Yet, he focused on control over the employees'*organizational* self, or the part of the self associated with membership in the organization, broadly, while we focus on employees' attempts to avow a sense of control over their management of work–life conflict. Further, Kunda did not explore the consequences of this sense of control for work–life management.

Relatedly, in developing a conceptualization of how normative controls are experienced as autonomous by elite workers, Michel (2012) focused on the specific issues of body and health to argue that bankers prioritize their work over their physical health. Although many of the bankers in her sample directly attributed their health problems to long hours, they simultaneously shrugged off their physical responses, describing it as their autonomous choice to privilege work rather than their physical health. Yet, Michel too did not explain the mechanism whereby bankers experience themselves as being primarily autonomous, despite the physical evidence to the contrary.

Finally, another related stream of research analyzed what it terms the "autonomy paradox" (Mazmanian et al. 2013: 1338). Mazmanian and colleagues, for example, described how mobile phones enable workers to be both more flexible and more constrained simultaneously. This study, too, is less able to shed light on the *mechanisms* through which workers develop and maintain a sense of autonomy in their work despite working "everywhere/all the time" instead of working "anywhere/anytime" (Mazmanian et al. 2013: 1338). Additionally, this prior research that mentions—but does not develop—the idea of a sense of employee autonomy also does not examine the consequences the sense of autonomy has on workers' work–life decisions, such as whether to make use of available flexibility policies or manage work–life conflict independently.

We expand on this research by identifying *perceived control* as a concept that encapsulates the control employees feel they have over balancing their lives and careers, even in a context in which their control is constrained. We parse out four distinct aspects of perceived control: viewing individual management of work–life conflict as a skill; essentializing suitability for the profession; using choice rhetoric; and accentuating the ultimate option to leave the company. We examine how the desire to maintain perceived control motivates employees to individualize work–life conflict and avoid using existing flexibility policies.[1] The concept of perceived control illuminates how, by complying with workplace behaviors commonly seen as exploitative of workers, workers experience a sense of autonomy and control over their work–life conflict. Whereas on the surface, flexibility policies would seem to provide workers an opportunity to seize additional material autonomy, workers instead *avoid* such policies and convince themselves of their own autonomy within a context of normative control. Our study is the first, to

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[1]Researchers have explored the concept of control perceptions in other forms. For example, Kelly, Moen, and Tranby (2011) discussed the importance of perceived schedule control to worker satisfaction and well-being. By contrast, our research does not focus on control over specific tasks or schedules, but instead looks at the perception of control employees have more broadly over their work and home lives, even in a context in which schedule control remains largely constrained by the company. Additionally, although existing research has mentioned the concept of autonomy, it has not theoretically developed the mechanisms through which employees develop a sense of control specifically over work–life management, as a facet of broader processes of organizational control over workers.

our knowledge, to examine how workers gain a sense of control over their lives and careers in a context of normative control by avoiding organizational flexibility offerings.

Thus, our article provides two main contributions. First, by bridging the literatures on normative control and flexibility stigma, we identify a more complete explanation for why workers avoid flexibility policies (shaped by a desire for perceived control). Second, we add to the literature on normative control by detailing the process through which employees actively develop a sense of control. While this sense of autonomy that employees achieve has been mentioned in prior research on normative control, *how* employees do so has thus far been under-theorized.

Case Study of the Management Consulting Industry

In the industry of management consulting, overwork and extensive travel are common aspects of a typical workweek (McCracken 2000; Perlow 2012; Reid 2015; Wynn 2018). Consulting illustrates an extreme job notorious for high work time demands that impede work–life balance (Vault 2002; Hewlett and Luce 2006; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). As an extreme case, consulting makes the empirical processes of interest to us—why consultants do not avail themselves of flexibility policies—more transparently observable, and so it is a useful industry in which to study norms of overwork and flexibility stigma.

Furthermore, consulting firms offer some of the most cutting-edge flexibility programs (Benko and Weisberg 2007; Benko and Anderson 2010; Perlow 2012), and they set the standard for best practices across many professional industries. Consulting firms offer many types of flexibility: For example, local, virtual, and/or internal projects offer consultants the opportunity to temporarily decrease their travel on particular projects. On a project-by-project basis, managers can also offer informal flexibility to their teams, such as permission to take time off for personal commitments. This ad hoc flexibility sometimes exists as part of formal programs executed by the company to provide managers with the tools and encouragement to offer flexibility on their teams. Consultants seeking a more long-term arrangement can transition to an internal position within the company, which involves leaving client service and working directly for the firm (for example, in human resources). Consultants can also decrease their hours through part-time or compressed workweeks, and they can take extended leaves of absence. Management consulting is thus an especially suitable industry to study, since the high demands for working, combined with ample flexibility policies, will render more transparent processes that may be otherwise obscured.

In addition to examining reactions to *formal* flexibility programs, interviews enable examination of *informal* types of flexibility, such as impromptu requests for personal time off between employees and their managers.

These types of flexible experiences can be difficult to capture in quantitative analyses but are a critical component of employees' everyday experiences of flexibility and work–life balance. Particularly in settings where employees work with multiple managers on a project basis, everyday flexibility is important to include in analyses of flexibility programs. In the consulting industry, some formal flexibility programs are even designed with this ad hoc nature in mind; managers can decide whether and how their teams will participate in the programs, and programs provide tools and rhetoric to structure informal conversations between individuals and their managers when employees request personal accommodations.

Furthermore, our study gives voice to populations often absent in discussions of flexibility—men and employees without children. Although flexibility may be associated most closely with mothers, emerging research suggests flexibility is a critical issue for other groups as well (see, e.g., Padavic, Ely, and Reid 2019).

Data and Methods

To examine these processes, the first author conducted 50 in-depth interviews with management consultants who live and/or work in the San Francisco Bay Area. (To increase the number of fathers in the sample, the researcher also conducted three interviews from the Atlanta area and one from the Washington, DC, area. Given the small number of cases from outside the Bay Area, there were no notable regional differences, though future research can explore this question.) The sampling frame consisted of management consultants who work for large, eminent consulting firms. All five firms have been recognized in lists of the most prestigious consulting firms by business press sources, such as *Forbes, Vault*, and *Business Insider*. Because most consultants travel frequently, the sample includes consultants who live in the Bay Area and work elsewhere during the week, as well as consultants who work in the Bay Area on weekdays and live elsewhere on weekends. To generate the sample, the first author used snowball sampling techniques, beginning with professional contacts in the consulting industry drawn from her prior experience working as a management consultant. She conducted the interviews between 2012 and 2014. More information about the data can be found in a recent article (Wynn 2018). Table 1 displays the demographic information of the sample.

Although the sample is not very racially diverse, it echoes the lack of diversity in the larger industry of consulting (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). In addition, the sample reflects that consultants tend to be young. Of all management consultants, 55% are 25 to 44 years old, and this percentage would be even higher if self-employed consultants, who tend to be older than salaried consultants, are removed from the sample (Wright 2012). All participants are also college-educated. Therefore, any generalizations of our

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample Participants

Variable	Raw counts	Percentage of sample (%)
Gender		
Women	30	60
Men	20	40
Race		
White	34	68
Asian	10	20
Black	2	4
Other	4	8
Marital status		
Single	23	46
Engaged	6	12
Married	21	42
Parental status		
No children	32	64
Pregnant	1	2
Parents	17	34
Mothers	8	16
Fathers	9	18
Age		
20s	20	40
30s	19	38
40s or older	7	14
Did not report[a]	4	8
Tenure in management consulting industry		
2 years or less	16	32
> 2 to 5 years	14	28
> 5 to 10 years	13	26
> 10 years	7	14

Notes: Data come from demographic surveys conducted after each interview and/or from information revealed during the interviews. Sample size = 50.
[a]Among those who did not report their age, two respondents are most likely over 40 years old, and two respondents are most likely under 40 years old.

findings to other populations must consider the theoretical implications of our sample's unique characteristics.

Interviews typically lasted one hour (ranging from 25 minutes to one hour and 33 minutes). Fifteen interviews were conducted by phone. (The first author agreed to conduct the interview by phone only if the interviewee was unable to schedule an in-person meeting.) Interviews were semi-structured; the interviewer covered an established range of topic areas and explored additional areas specific to each respondent. The interviewer typically began with the prompt, "Tell me what you've done since graduating college up through now." From there, she asked a range of questions about participants' work and home lives. The interview questions fell into three broad categories: career, company, and family responsibilities. Interviewees were asked about their current position, developing expertise, networking and mentorship, managing others, career paths, project staffing, company promotion and evaluation processes, activities outside of work, balancing

work with other responsibilities, perceived conflicts between work and non-work, ideal situations, and concerns for future work–life balance. The interviewer did not use a set ordering or a particular list of questions; rather, she tried as much as possible to follow the interviewees' train of thought and phrasing. This technique allowed us to gain a broad understanding of work ideologies without limiting the data collection to our own preconceived notions. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked participants to fill out a demographic sheet with additional questions about race, age, education level, marital and parental status, tenure in the job and industry, breaks in employment, and work/home locations.

We analyzed all interview data using a modified grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). When the first author began interviewing, she possessed some theoretical knowledge about flexibility and work–life balance in organizations, which informed the interview questions. However, we inductively allowed new themes to emerge from the data, and we maintained a continuous conversation between these emerging themes and our theoretical interpretations. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. (One interviewee declined to be audio recorded, so the interviewer took handwritten notes during the interview. All quotes used in the following analysis come from verbatim digitally recorded transcripts.) We conducted open coding to understand the diverse ways participants conceptualize work and flexibility, and we recoded the interviews using a focused coding method to note theoretically relevant patterns across interviews. Selected quotes are representative of key themes in the data and capture core theoretical conclusions that emerged from the interviews. To protect their privacy, we give participants pseudonyms and conceal company names and other identifying details in our analysis.

Results

Our data generated three main findings that pertain to perceived control. First, consultants in our sample tend to doubt that workplace policies can effectively solve work–life conflicts given the existing constraints. They believe the fundamental nature of the consulting industry is incompatible with flexibility. They are suspicious of one-size-fits-all flexibility policies and instead prefer to allow individuals to set their own boundaries and create their own sense of work–life fit. Second, consultants often value their independence, self-sufficiency, and skill in managing their own work–life conflict. They gain a sense of control by treating work–life conflict as a problem-solving exercise that highlights their skills in successfully resolving it, and so indicates their suitability for consulting. Third, consultants use the rhetoric of "choice" to claim a feeling of control over their competing work and personal lives. Despite this drive to maintain a sense of control through the individualization of work–life conflict, however, consultants often

appear to have trouble meeting their own needs in practice. In the following sections, we provide empirical data detailing each of these factors.

Dismissing Workplace Policies for Improving Work–Life Balance

Assuming Work–Family Policies Are Not Conducive to Consulting as an Occupation

Participants commonly voiced the assumption that the rigid demands of consulting—such as travel and long hours—cannot be changed to accommodate work–life balance and flexibility. Rita, a high-level partner with grown children and who is a prominent member of her firm's women's initiative, stated, "I've been in enough different jobs to know that there's certain things that go with the job, and you can't really change it. You're never gonna have consulting and not have travel. Yeah [*Laughter*]." When the interviewer asked Rita about people who opt into the firm's existing flexibility programs that permit decreased travel, she replied, "Well, if it's gonna go on for long-term, I think I would ask the question, 'Is consulting for you?'" Here Rita espouses the assumption that flexibility is a short-term solution; she views consulting as an inflexible occupation for which traveling is endemic. By framing the demands of consulting as intrinsic to the profession, participants often viewed any work–life conflict as being rooted in issues of employees' individual suitability for consulting. Rita laments young men and women entering the consulting profession who become resentful when they discover the difficulty in balancing work and family: "It's like, 'Well this is what consulting is. We can't change what the profession is. If you want to consult, you have to understand what the trade-offs are.'" Although Rita herself abstained from traveling when her children were young, she does not view this arrangement as a sustainable expectation for most consultants. This view is perhaps surprising, as consultants routinely change organizations for a living and are experienced in methods of organizational change, yet they do not see consulting itself as changeable.

Brian, a single man who recently started consulting after graduating from business school, voiced his concerns about remaining in the consulting industry long-term:

> *Brian:* My concern with my current job is around the nature of a consultant rather than [my company] not being a good employer. I think [my company is] a fantastic employer.
> *Interviewer:* You said the problem is consulting as—
> *Brian:* As an industry, as a function, as a job in itself, yeah.
> *Interviewer:* Can you say more about why?
> *Brian:* I think it's the hours and the travel. That's really it. Just in general. [The flex program] does some really good things to make it easier, but I don't think it's something that will ever be easy.

Appreciative of his firm, Brian's concerns are based on what he implicitly sees as the unchangeable nature of consulting, which in his perception is characterized by long hours and travel.

Likewise, Jeanne, a 34-year-old mother, also worries that her reduced work schedule may be incompatible with the nature of consulting:

> I feel a little bit like I'm definitely swimming upstream or blazing a new trail or whatever euphemism you want to use for it, and I wonder if at some point I'm just gonna feel like it's not—I'm just tired of fighting the battle over and over again. . . . There are times when I think that I'm just trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. It just seems to me like, is this really something I want to spend my time and energy trying to do?

Jeanne questions her own suitability for consulting, viewing consulting itself as having immutable characteristics. Her discourse here (e.g., "swimming upstream," "fighting a battle," and "trying to fit a square peg into a round hole") obscures workers' ability to change occupational practices within consulting. Even though Jeanne does, in fact, use a flexible work arrangement, she feels this is not sustainable long-term. Flexibility programs may serve as a short-term stop-gap measure, but, according to many consultants in our sample, the nature of consulting prevents fundamental changes to the way work is structured.

The idea that work–life conflict is for individuals, not firms, to manage is reinforced starting in the earliest career stages. In the recruiting process itself, prospective consultants are told work–life balance is their responsibility—the firm can only do so much. Latoya, who often represents her company at university recruiting sessions, fields students' questions about work–life conflict in the following way:

> So, this is like the number one question that's asked when you go on campus for recruiting. "What is your take on work–life balance?" And I always pause and think: Okay. So when someone asks you that question, that is a personal thing to manage. Your work and your life, the firm cannot manage that for you. They may provide some resources and suggestions and strategies, but you need to be that person to manage that.

Latoya explicitly highlights that the firm's help in managing work–life balance is limited, and the onus falls on the individual consultants. Indeed, consultants express skepticism in the ability of work–life programs to play a key and long-term role in helping them manage their conflicts.

Rejection of "One-Size-Fits-All" Policies

Consultants believe that work–life conflicts take a plethora of forms and require varied solutions. Consequently, consultants are doubtful that any blanket program can provide adequate solutions for these varied conflicts. Ron, a 45-year-old father, explained,

> I feel like that it's about understanding and respecting difference and not trying to make one model that fits, that applies to every person universally. That's why when I hear of big programmatic solutions to work–life balance, I approach

> them with some suspicion. The reason I do that is because . . . everybody's recipe is different, and every person or couple's or parent's recipe has different ingredients and different cooking time and different size oven.

According to Ron, formal flexibility programs are suspect because they cannot adequately address the unique challenges of each consultant. Consultants express a lack of faith in available organizational solutions for flexibility. Participants, such as Ron, believe employees can best manage their own work–life situations.

Crystal, a 32-year-old single woman working on diversity issues for her firm, similarly dismisses the ability of an overarching program from the firm to accommodate the diversity of consultants' concerns. She said,

> What I want to do as a single person looks nothing like what Sally Jane wants to do as a new mother versus what Joe Shmo wants to do as a father of four. I think that there's no one definition, and to me it's a huge challenge. . . . It's hard to be everything and anything to everyone, right? I think it's the small things that matter and giving people a sense of control and whatnot.

Jeanne similarly remarked, "There's as many ways to make it work as there are different people."

Mary, a middle-aged mother who regularly advises other companies on how to design effective flexibility programs, also sees umbrella flexibility policies as potentially limiting and instead favors the individualized management of work–life conflict:

> What you do and how you do it, there's not only one way. That's the whole point. Everybody has an individual calculus. . . . There is no one-size-fits-all. There doesn't need to be. . . . Because once you accept that there's all kinds of ways things can get done, that opens up whole new possibilities.

Employees view work–life balance as a unique problem best managed individually by each employee. The participants in this sample are thus quite dismissive of the ability of any company policy to enable consultants to better balance their unique work–life concerns.

"Imaginary Dependents": Drawing Your Own Boundaries

Perhaps in part because blanket flexibility programs are viewed with suspicion by consultants, some firms offer programs that encourage consultants to draw their own boundaries between work and personal life. One such program, which team managers can opt into at their discretion, allows team members to designate something in their personal lives they want to carve out time for—such as athletics or family commitments. Team members are then encouraged to treat these commitments as if they are imaginary dependents (e.g., children, elders requiring care, pets, and so on). Interviewees noted with humor, however, that their imaginary dependents

often symbolically "died" when they were unable to take time off as agreed. John, a 36-year-old father, said,

> We have this concept of [an imaginary dependent], which I think is kind of a funny concept. It's basically to say it's not just fathers that should be allowed to draw those boundaries. Everyone should be allowed to have [an imaginary dependent]. It's like it's a well-worn term in the company. I don't think we execute on it particularly well. . . . If you don't have that forcing function of a real [dependent], or [an imaginary dependent] that really matters to you, it's hard to draw that line. . . . Our [imaginary dependents] die. [*Laughter*] We have this [imaginary dependent] health monitor, and all the [imaginary dependents] were dead. [*Laughter*] I don't know. I feel like it's something to talk about, but we don't. I don't know, like our follow-through is not complete. It's sort of, when push comes to shove, the [imaginary dependents] die. If we have the luxury of having an easier [project], then our [imaginary dependents] live, but it doesn't have anything to do with the [imaginary dependent]. . . . It would be tough to say that there are things that are done consistently by the firm.

Here, the imaginary dependent approach encourages employees to set their own boundaries, rather than providing a consistent organizational policy protecting work–life balance. Ironically, as John points out, these boundaries appear ineffective in producing the work–life balance that consultants determine for themselves. Michael, a 34-year-old father, too feels the imaginary dependent approach is rather ineffective in enabling employees to protect work–life balance:

> You track [imaginary dependents], and it's always a postmortem. "Oh, my [imaginary dependent] died." . . . You actually track it with a little survey, and then the next team [meeting], you have to like, "Three out of four team members have a dead [imaginary dependent.]" Of course, we'd never do that with a real [dependent].

Such policies—implemented at the team level and meant to encourage employees to set their own boundaries between work and personal life— were common across firms, although firms often had different names for the policies themselves. Consultants are thus encouraged to view it as their own responsibility—separate from organizational policies—to carve out time for personal needs and police boundaries between work and personal life.

Professional Skills and "Natural" Abilities

Consultants reformulate the constraints imposed on them by the consulting profession in terms that glorify their passion for their work and underline their ability to manage their time, as well as others' expectations, to their own benefit. Consultants highlight their ability to skillfully master these deep challenges intrinsic to their profession. In so doing, consultants gain a sense of control. Ironically, this process occurs in a context in which the

characteristics of their work often diminish their control, especially over their non-work lives.

The "Skill" of Managing Work–Life Constraints

For our participants, managing their work–life conflict themselves was both a reflection of their skill and a source of control. Ron voiced this perception of control explicitly. At the end of the interview, when asked if he had any additional comments to share, he stated,

> Well, I just feel like, it's not about balance. It's about fit, and everyone's fit is different. I think it's about maybe just having the discipline to identify what's important in your life and establishing boundaries around those important items and then defending those fearlessly and limitlessly. I feel like if I can do that no matter what those priorities are and how they shift over time, *it gives me a sense of control.* It gives me a sense of there's a plan that I'm following. (emphasis added)

Managing his work–life conflict is value-laden for Ron, and he sees it as demonstrating his "discipline." When the interviewer probed further, questioning why this gives Ron a sense of control, he replied,

> It gives me a sense of control because I've invested time in myself and in my family and in my plan. I've invested time in building a plan, and it sounds so unemotional, but there's a great deal of emotion that goes into these decisions and weights and priorities. It just makes it easier. It makes it easier when I'm faced with distractions or options or challenges.

For Ron, building a customized plan himself helps maintain his sense of control. He continued,

> In terms of the control, I make the plan. I establish the priorities. I weighted those priorities. I distribute my time, and I do it without regard for consequence because my definition of success is greater than any one of those criteria. It's a combination of that criteria. If I have control over the criteria, I have control over the weight. I have control over all of that. I'm able—I feel very much in control.

Focusing on his own work–life balance allows Ron to explicitly weigh his priorities—whether work or outside work—and develop plans to balance as he sees fit. Rather than viewing himself as simply responding to an external set of criteria, Ron redefines the criteria for success in his own life and reframes external constraints as part of his personal "plan." This sense of control vested in emphasizing his individual "plan" and "priorities" operates as a powerful motivator for Ron. He becomes an active agent in his own work–life management rather than a victim of circumstance.

Consultants in our sample often described making tough decisions that involved adhering to the extensive demands of consulting, especially regarding long hours and frequent travel, akin to a professional skill or ability. For

example, according to Crystal, who currently works for her firm on diversity issues,

> There are demands, and we're in a very, very demanding career, and can you have everything? No. Are there tough decisions? Absolutely. Right? Have I missed things that I probably wouldn't have liked to have missed? Absolutely. Right? . . . It's a career decision. It's a life decision. It is not an easy one.

Presenting consulting as unchangeable, Crystal explained how individuals must take control and make their own "tough decisions." Her use of the word "tough" and her statement that these work–life decisions are not "easy" imply that successful work–life management seems a reflection of the individual's skill and ability.

For example, James, a 40-year-old father, claimed that achieving work–life balance is "part of the overall craft [of consulting]." Continuing, James explained how consultants can approach this issue as they would a challenge in the workplace, providing examples of how consultants can strategize to manage their various commitments: "You need to . . . set even guardrails and boundaries or something like, 'I wanna have family dinner, every night I'm at home.' Whatever it is, and then you schedule your day around it." He continued, "Also, put vacation on the calendar early on, because . . . then you might be able to manage it better." In this way, consultants identify time management in service of achieving work–life balance as a skill or "craft," which they can cultivate and control. As James said, "You need experience, in order to get [work–family balance] right."

In this vein, consultants implement practices that hold themselves accountable for managing work–life conflict. Taylor, a 33-year-old single woman, drew an analogy between committing to personal life priorities in the same way that serious runners commit to marathon training:

> I'm a big believer in the only way you're gonna run a marathon is if you tell everyone you're gonna run a marathon. Then they're like, "How's the training going?" You're like, "Shoot, didn't do it today. I gotta go do it." Same thing with this.

This comparison paints work–life balance as an individual sport, through which consultants can emphasize their high skill level, rather than a responsibility of the firm to help manage.

Whereas previous research on elite workers has explored how their professional identity values and enforces overwork (e.g., Kunda 1992; Cooper 2000; Moen et al. 2013), we add to this research by conceptually developing how elite workers also view managing work–life conflict independently, without the help of the larger organization, as an important skill. In addition to reaffirming a positive identity by conforming to the organizational role through long hours, as found in existing research (e.g., Kunda 1992; Kellogg 2011), consultants also emphasize their self-dependence in setting their own boundaries and "making tough decisions." Rather than simply

emphasizing their adherence to the professional role, as part of a team, they instead paint their careers as self-fashioned, even though their behavior suggests they do indeed conform to the overwork norms of their companies and the larger industry. In much the same way they value their professional skills, consultants essentially treat work–life conflict akin to a professional problem-solving exercise. Successfully exercising their professional skills in the context of individually managing their work–life balance, consultants experience a sense of control.

Essentializing Suitability for the Profession

Participants perceive consulting to be a demanding, high-status profession—for which only the best workers are suitable. In this section, we elaborate on how consultants use the discourse of their *natural* suitability to contend with the extreme demands of consulting. This rhetoric of natural suitability obscures issues of work–life conflict by framing overwork as characteristic of consultants and minimizing the role of how consulting as a profession is structured. Emphasizing individual, seemingly inherent, traits, the notion of natural suitability for consulting provides a sense of control.

John stated, "I've got a constitution that's a little bit—unfortunately, I think I have a very high capacity for lots of work." John frames his ability to comply with the extensive demands of consulting as a natural attribute or "constitution." Though he uses the word "unfortunately," the subtext indicates he values his ability to overwork. The language of naturalness that John uses is a way of essentializing individual suitability for consulting. This emphasis on naturalness frames overwork as inevitable; expecting the firm to manage work–life conflict makes little sense in this context.

Speaking of a difficult project that required extensive travel for half a year, Stacy, a 28-year-old pregnant woman, also referenced her ability to manage it because, "I have a naturally positive attitude." After describing consultants as inherently possessing traits that match the unalterable demands of consulting, Stacy then explained how she used her *natural* abilities to exercise control and discretion over a project in order to make it manageable:

> I was on a [food and beverage industry project] for a year and going to [the Southwest] four days a week, for six months, I think. On the surface, you might say that's not sustainable. But . . . I was super interested in [the project]. I loved my team. . . . I think I'm pretty good at . . . knowing exactly what I need to do and what I don't need to do.

Here, Stacy highlights her own capacity to individually manage her time as a skill that she can deploy in prioritizing tasks. This, for her, renders a potentially unsustainable experience into a sustainable one. Participants in our sample prize a narrative of self-dependence and an innate ability to weather extreme job conditions.

Similarly, Taylor emphasized consultants' innate abilities to meet the profession's extreme demands, saying,

> We hire for a certain type of person. We call them insecure overachievers. . . . When you look at who works here, that is who it is. You wanna get the A on the paper. We all came from that kind of mindset in school. This is, in some ways, a replication of that. Nobody's telling you that you have to give the client the A-plus versus the A-minus, but you want to. Even within [our company], you've got the baseline of just really smart, overachieving people.

She explicitly located the desire to overwork internally rather than externally. These narratives of internal desire shroud the organizational expectation of overwork which, as we will see in a later section, becomes most apparent when consultants express a desire *not* to overwork.

This framing of overwork risks painting those who prioritize family over work as less suited for consulting. Recall Jeanne, who worried that her reduced work schedule was incompatible with the fundamental nature of consulting. "Any kind of high-performing culture, I think, is such that it's a little bit scary to admit that something else matters to you more than work," she said. According to Gavin, a 36-year-old father, "I think the culture is such that people will think if I [use the flex program], it's because I'm not committed." In a context in which their control over work–life concerns is quite constrained, glorifying work passion, skill in managing work–life conflict individually, and natural suitability for consulting become crucial means through which consultants can retain a sense of control over their work–life issues. Whereas prior research has found that elite professional identities often enshrine long hours as a core value and stigmatize flexibility (Kunda 1992; Cooper 2000; Kellogg 2011; Moen et al. 2013), we additionally find that this professional identity emphasizes the discourse of employees' control over their work–life situations and thereby contributes to the individualization of work–life conflict.

Using Choice Rhetoric to Explain Work–Life Management

An overwhelming 90% of consultants in our sample used choice rhetoric (i.e., words such as "choice," "tradeoffs," "priorities," "personal decision," "compromises," "taking initiative," or "personal struggle") when describing their work and family situations. We find that choice rhetoric allows consultants to 1) convince themselves their current situations accurately reflect their own preferences, and 2) emphasize the option to leave the firm if work–life conflict becomes untenable. Through these psychological strategies, choice rhetoric enables consultants to reconcile their work–life conflicts; however, the rhetoric of choice cannot always withstand severe constraints. Employees occasionally recognize cracks in the facade of control.

Transforming Limitations into Choices

James uses choice rhetoric to comfort himself when considering the vacations he has cancelled because of work demands. After James told an anecdote about cancelling a family vacation, the interviewer asked how that impacted his family. He replied,

> Yeah, obviously, not great. Well, I think it's these types of choices. I think that the key thing is that you make them deliberately. . . . Focus on it as if it is a choice and not a must. Yeah, if you say, "Hey, yeah, this is obviously not good. That sucks, but I have the choice to work here, and do this or not. What do I want to do? Do I wanna help here and support and continue my career?" . . . Sometimes, it's maybe the wiser choice—or not *wiser*. It's basically a *deliberate* choice, that you say, "Okay, I sacrifice family time because I see an opportunity to make a career advancement, for example, or win the client," or whatever it is.

For James, this "deliberate choice" is a career strategy. Note that, for James, choosing *not* to cancel the family vacation would have meant not advancing his career. In effect, James transforms a "must" into a "choice" as a way to feel better about the sacrifices he has made.

Employees who follow the opposite prioritization, choosing family over work, also employ choice rhetoric in similar ways. Jeanne describes her disappointment in making career tradeoffs to spend more time with family, and she uses choice rhetoric to comfort herself:

> On the promotion piece, like definitely, it sucks to watch people who started after me now be [upper-level], and I'm [mid-level]. But I just—that is a little hard on my ego for sure, but I think—I just try to remind myself that that's the way it is, not because I'm not capable, but because *I made different choices*, and I chose to do something different. I don't know. (emphasis added)

By reaffirming her sense of control over her own life, Jeanne justifies the sacrifices to her career. In essence, though, she lets the company off the hook. Rather than holding the company responsible for limiting her options, she celebrates the options that *are* available to her and tries to take pride in her prioritization of family.

By comparing the experiences of James and Jeanne, we see that consultants use choice rhetoric similarly regardless of whether they are conforming to or contradicting ideal worker norms pervasive in their industry. Despite the costs experienced in either case (e.g., damaged relationships or stalled career progress), both employees emphasize their individual agency in prioritizing their professional or personal lives. Choice rhetoric provides a sense of control by enabling consultants to see their decisions as reflecting their preferences rather than as responses to impositions from their firms.

When Rhetoric Meets Reality

Fractures in the perception of control are occasionally revealed. Stacy realized how little control she actually had when she was unable to prevent being staffed on a stressful project while seven-months pregnant:

> The past two months, I got put on this [tech project], and I was really, really not excited about it at all, and tried to do whatever I could to not be put on it. I was not able to achieve that, so I think there's an illusion of control that's not really there. [*Laughs*]. I was really worried about it. It sounded like a very bad setup for being seven- or eight-months pregnant, and a super stressful [project].

When asked why she was staffed on this project despite her objections, she replied,

> According to the staffing manager, I was the only option, which always feels weird when they say that because I just don't think that's true. My argument was like, "Well, what if I go to my doctor and tell her I'm feeling terrible, and she can put me on functional disability earlier. Then you'll find another option for this [project]." Like, "It's not set in stone." . . . [My staffing manager] was like, "That's your decision. My job is to maximize both people and client outcomes, and I can't willingly put this other alternative person on this [project]. I just know it's gonna not turn out well for the client."

Stacy threatened to make use of the flexible options entitled to her (i.e., asking her doctor to put her on functional disability, which would require a formal response from the company), and her staffing manager responded with choice rhetoric ("that's your decision"), ultimately handing responsibility for managing work–life conflict back to Stacy. We saw earlier that Stacy used the discourse of her *natural* ability to manage seemingly impossible work demands. In the case of this particular project, though, we see that Stacy was not really given a viable choice by her staffing manager even though the staffing manager tried to frame it as a choice. In the end, Stacy agreed to join this project despite her concerns about the impact to her pregnancy and well-being.

Stacy's experiences also reflect larger patterns by gender and parental status. As found in a recent study (Wynn 2018), the perception of control is particularly difficult for mothers to maintain relative to other groups. The article finds that, since mothers often bear primary responsibility for coordinating child care even while working in such a high-intensity job, they tend to be most aware of how work demands could drastically alter their work–life arrangements. This awareness makes protecting a sense of control over their work–life situations more difficult. Fathers and employees without children often have the social supports necessary to meet shifting work demands adequately, even if they experience other emotional consequences as a result.

That said, fathers and employees without children are by no means exempt from seeing cracks in the facade of perceived control. Rodrigo, a 32-year-old new father, was trying to manage fatherhood as well as the demands of consulting. Wanting to scale back on his work, Rodrigo had an explicit negotiation with his superior soon after the birth of his child:

> My peers said that I looked like a vulture for two months because I was sleeping three hours a night, basically, and I was falling asleep on my computer. There

> was a lot of unhealthy stuff in terms of just drinking ridiculous amounts of coffee and not sleeping and eating poorly. Basically, that was—that was totally not sustainable, and it was a huge challenge just to say, "Okay. How do I—what do I trade off here?" I was trading off sleep and my health. . . . I realized that I was being a little stupid too because I was doing all of that, so I started to try to communicate more with the partner, saying that that was not sustainable for me. I was hurting physically. I mean, I couldn't really do it. I was pretty close to just saying, "I'm just gonna leave. No. This is silly." Then I had that conversation with the partner, and this was at the extreme. After I really opened up, . . . he told me, "Okay. When you're really close to breaking down, tell me about it." I was like, "I felt that. That's what I've been telling you." . . . I was like, "Okay. He's not getting it."

Rodrigo tried to demand change from his superior, but instead the superior flipped responsibility back to Rodrigo, advising him to work until he was "really close to breaking down." The partner was essentially advising Rodrigo to take comfort from the *existence* of flexibility policies—many of which are designed specifically for new parents like Rodrigo—without actually making use of them. Since Rodrigo felt he was already at his breaking point, he did not know where else to turn. He began to consider that flexibility might be an illusion, difficult for employees to use in practice: "If it was my choice," he explained, "there would have been other projects that I could be doing, equally as attractive for me, and that would have given me the opportunity to not go through hell for those two months." Once Rodrigo made explicit his desire to partake of flexibility programs, he realized that the rhetoric of choice is limited to rhetoric without practical translation, despite the existence of flexibility policies.

Taylor, a single woman without children, explained how her attempts to protect vacation time ended up failing:

> I am not a planner. [But] . . . "Okay, I'm gonna plan my vacations for the whole year in advance so that they're on my calendar, and they're blocked" . . . I was like, "This is really important to me." I did that, and no sooner had I done that, that I get pulled for this [project]. They're like, "The next two months are gonna be really busy. We need you to do this."

Taylor agreed to the project for two months, but explained to her superiors, "Okay, I have these four things planned on my calendar. I'm willing to give up these two, but these other two are really important." She added that the personal events she had on her calendar did not require extensive time away from work: "They were like a long weekend. They weren't like a ten-day vacation." Although her superiors initially agreed to these, she said, "And then both of those things got blown up, too." She elaborated on what this meant: "I technically did them. I went to Mexico City for a wedding, but I was working the entire time." Taylor tried to exercise her sense of autonomy, in order to protect her scheduled vacation time, but the firm's expectations compelled her to work through her vacations despite her

protests. The perception of control became difficult for Taylor to maintain: "I had these clear examples of how I had felt abused and victimized."

Consultants offered many examples of instances when work responsibilities hampered their ability to meet personal commitments. Despite their insistence on their own autonomy and choice, consultants clearly had trouble defending the boundaries they set between work and personal life. Given the structural and cultural realities of the consulting industry, this sense of control is often an illusion, serving only to reframe external firm expectations and limitations as intentional choices. Yet, even when the perception of control was challenged, as in the examples of Rodrigo, Stacy, and Taylor, consultants tend not to challenge the status quo.

Rodrigo, for example, reluctantly continued working on the project he desperately wanted to escape. He attempted to reclaim his sense of control by emphasizing to the interviewer the "flexibility" the job offers him to go home around dinnertime, have dinner with his family, then work "two or three hours later into the night . . . as long as I don't have client meetings," and as long as he is not traveling. He also emphasized that he is in a "testing mode," testing whether the job is right for him given his changed work–life circumstance and exploring whether there is "any formal training that I can go through to be more effective in my job, which I don't think there is." Here, Rodrigo uses the strategy described in the section above: He attempts to problem solve work–life conflict in much the same way he would build other professional skills.

Similarly, Stacy agreed to join the project she dreaded would present problems for her pregnancy. Her earlier quotes indicate the way she reclaimed a sense of control by emphasizing her "positive attitude" and natural fit with the consulting industry. In the case of this specific project, she claimed the outcome was not as bad as she feared: "It ended up being a really great [project], so lesson learned on trying to judge the [projects] beforehand."

In a comparable situation, Taylor's earlier quotes reveal her use of the "overachiever/Type-A" consultant identity to paint overwork as a personal choice; she switched back to this individualistic rhetoric immediately after telling the interviewer how she felt "abused and victimized" by the company. She also used the ultimate option rhetoric, described in the following section, to explain that she reserves the right to leave the company at a later time if she cannot find a way to personally, individually improve the situation within the confines of the extant structural constraints.

Although consultants occasionally confront the inaccuracies of their control perceptions, they more often use the strategies outlined in the above sections to reclaim a sense of control. Among consultants who remain in the industry, they respond to cracks in the facade of control by meeting company demands and emphasizing the limited control they do have, such as their option to leave the company if things get bad enough.

The Ultimate Option: Exiting the Company

Consultants can also employ choice rhetoric by emphasizing quitting as an intentional choice available to them, if all else fails. Consultants experience this option as aspirational; reserving it as a last-ditch choice gives employees a sense of control (while they remain with the company) because the ultimate option to leave the industry remains available to them. Employees emphasize that they can leave their companies entirely if work–life conflict becomes too severe, which justifies continuing to overwork in the meantime.

When the interviewer asked Keith, a new father actively seeking alternative jobs with better work–life balance, whether he ever asked his company about flexible options such as decreasing travel, he replied, "Honestly, I haven't been the squeaky wheel. . . . I probably could've been a squeakier wheel, but I'm not sure that would've served my long-term development, either. I'd rather solve it a different way, I think." Despite his awareness of flexible work arrangements, Keith claimed a sense of control by focusing on the possibility of exercising his option to leave the industry rather than using the flexible work policies provided by his company. Similarly, Taylor felt that work obligations impinged on her ability to keep personal commitments, and she explained, "I was so upset by the end of that two-month part that I had talked to everybody about how hard that had been and how that couldn't happen again." For Taylor, the situation became serious enough that she considered leaving the job, and she made this clear to coworkers. Taylor "tested" whether her boundaries around time for her personal life were respected and whether she wanted to use the ultimate option to leave her job: "By the end of the year, I'm gonna know whether I'm here longer or not." The readiness to exit the job highlights two things: the sense of control that consultants derive from possessing career alternatives, and the belief that managing work–life conflict is primarily an individual responsibility. The option to leave the company may not seem like much of an option to scholars, but to employees, it presented an important choice available to them.

It is also possible that consultants who ultimately reject the illusion of control may tend to leave the company, but this speculation is impossible to test with our data on participants currently working in the consulting industry. Although we generally limited the sample to people currently employed in an elite management consulting firm, we did agree to interview three former consultants, who may be able to shed some light on the question.[2] Lien, a 25-year-old woman, left her elite management consulting firm for a

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[2]These three participants were recruited in the same manner as the rest of the sample, that is, through snowball sampling. They had all recently left management consulting firms. The other two participants besides Lien were working for technology companies at the time of the interview. One, a 26-year-old man, was engaged to be married with no children, and the other, a 32-year-old woman, was married with no children.

smaller, boutique consulting firm (which did not require travel). The interviewer asked how her relationship with her boyfriend changed when she left management consulting; she replied, "He's even told me that I'm happier. And the fact that I get to see him more often is a huge perk. It's not even a perk. It should be allowed. . . . Being able to see your boyfriend on a weeknight, right? . . . Everything about the quality of life in that sense has gone up." Because Lien ultimately left her elite firm, her perspective likely differs in key ways from those who chose to remain. It is unclear whether she felt entitled to flexibility after she left the firm, or whether this sense of entitlement in fact motivated her to quit.

Nick, whose family is originally from the Nordic region of Europe, compared the US emphasis on long hours to the Nordic culture: "My dad [in the Nordic region] likes to say, 'If this takes more than 40 hours a week, then you're a bad hire. It shouldn't take more,' whereas here it's like, . . . 'How can we squeeze more work out of you and still only have it say it's a full 40-hour job?'" Nick's familiarity with Europe gave him a unique perspective from which to challenge time norms and organizational framings accepted without question by other employees.

Nick and Lien's cases suggest that consultants who report relatively higher expectations of firms may also maintain less perceived control over their situations. Nick and Lien both left their companies when they felt their companies would not provide for their needs (though Nick later returned). These exceptional cases provide support for our findings about perceived control: By individualizing their predicaments and downplaying their entitlement to flexibility, consultants can retain a sense of control over their lives and futures.

Conclusion

In this study, we find that perceived control operates as a powerful force supporting the individualization of work–life conflict and avoidance of using flexibility programs. Whereas the concept of control has been studied by existing research (e.g., Burawoy 1979; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, and Mullan 1981; Kunda 1992; Ross and Sastry 1999; Michel 2012; Mazmanian et al. 2013), this article uniquely expands the concept of control by applying it to the management of work–life conflict. In doing so, we reveal a paradox: In this context, assuming individual responsibility appears to offer a sense of control, while actually undermining employees' ability to demand the change they really need. The organization constrains consultants' decisions about how to manage their work–life conflict, and consultants themselves express little faith in flexibility programs. Instead, by emphasizing their professional skills and natural ability in managing issues of work–life conflict, consultants reclaim a sense of control. We thus corroborate a lesson about organizational change more broadly: If contradicting structures remain in place, the addition of formal policies will not necessarily engineer

the desired change (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Kellogg 2011; Perlow and Kelly 2014). Until work structures are fundamentally redesigned to support work–life balance, employees will likely remain skeptical of formal policies that promise flexibility.

Our findings add to research on the stress of higher status (e.g., Schieman et al. 2009; Mazmanian et al. 2013; Moen et al. 2013) by identifying perceived control as a problematic high-status resource. When the generalized sense of control over one's life and choices—typically considered to be a beneficial aspect of high-status jobs and a positive influence on mental health (Pearlin et al. 1981; Ross and Sastry 1999)—is applied to the specific instance of managing work–life conflict and dividing time between personal and professional responsibilities, it may create the unexpected paradox of acting as a psychological palliative, assuaging the distressing symptoms of work–life conflict without actually ameliorating the underlying structural features of work that feed this conflict. The advantages of higher status jobs in this way may undermine the conceivable advantages of flexibility programs. Future research should further explore the mental health implications of perceived control. Evidence suggests that a sense of control reduces psychological distress (Pearlin et al. 1981; Ross and Sastry 1999); thus consultants may gain psychological benefits from their perceived control. However, the perception of control over work–life conflict could also damage psychological well-being by discouraging employees from changing long-term drivers of mental health.

Our results call into question what it means to exercise agency within a given context. By individualizing work–life conflict, consultants experience a sense of control. However, scholars identify alternative sources of agency—such as exercising "voice" (Hirschman 1970) and demanding change from companies. The consultants in our sample did not report seeing this as a viable option. Therefore, we are led to ask: Are consultants accurately understanding their opportunity structures, or would more fundamental structural change in fact be possible? If consultants actively protested and demanded change, how would their companies respond?

Although consultants possess considerable agency as elite employees, the solution to the overworking ideal worker norm must involve more than simply teaching consultants to have a different mindset about flexibility initiatives. Consultants operate within the contexts of their companies, which perpetuate structural and cultural organizational features—such as performance management systems, client-service norms, and intensive cultures—that undermine flexibility programs. Even though consulting firms often lead the charge in implementing cutting-edge flexibility programs designed to increase work–life fit among employees, these flexibility programs do not sufficiently challenge the entrenched framings, ideologies, and mindsets that cast doubt upon the viability of flexibility. As our results indicate, employees remain skeptical of the ability to succeed in their careers while enjoying fulfilling personal lives. Existing flexibility programs do not change

the prevailing definition of success embedded in how companies evaluate and reward employees. Employees too do not think they can ask their organizations to change this definition of success; rather, they accept this structural and cultural reality as central to the job.

With few exceptions, consultants in our sample took personal responsibility for managing work–life conflict, essentially following a loyalty approach. Among the three consultants who left their companies, while pursuing an exit strategy, none suggested exercising voice (Hirschman 1970; Farrell 1983). If those who oppose the existing culture and structure leave the organization rather than openly voicing their dissatisfaction, change ultimately may not occur. Therefore, those who exit the industry may still functionally perpetuate the status quo. Our sample of consultants overwhelmingly accepted the norm of overwork. Indeed, only two consultants in our sample, both of whom left their companies (though one later returned), discussed flexibility as a moral right to which employees should be entitled. More data on people who leave consulting would be useful in understanding how workers understand their rights to a personally fulfilling life via-à-vis the demands of their work.

Causality is also difficult to parse out in a study like ours, as various factors are continually intertwining. For example, the existing flexibility stigma is both a causal factor, as a cultural constraint that contributes to employees' decisions that their best method of retaining perceived control is by individualizing work–life conflict and avoiding flexibility policies, as well as an outcome of employees' avoidance of flexibility policies. Furthermore, as employees conform to the extant organizational norms, the causal pathways become a self-reinforcing cycle: Employees avoid flexibility policies due in part to a desire for perceived control, this avoidance succeeds in enhancing their sense of control (with noted exceptions), and thus employees become even more motivated to continue preserving their perceived control by avoiding flexibility use. Qualitative studies are well-suited to exploring the discourses, meanings, and justifications participants use, but such studies are not able to test precise causal relationships. Future research can further establish the causal pathways with more precision.

Future research should also explore whether the sense of perceived control over work–life conflict operates differently across various kinds of jobs and job levels. Some questions for scholars to consider: Is self-directed work more prone to the individualization of work–life conflict, as employees are more accustomed to exercising personal control over their work activities? Would employees in jobs with fewer benefits, wages, and so on be less inclined to view work–life conflict as a personal responsibility and more likely to demand change from their companies? Would employees in unionized jobs be more likely to exercise voice (Hirschman 1970)? Or do employees in these jobs lack the resources (and the protection of alternative jobs) to risk angering their employers by demanding change? Research that compares findings across job types would be beneficial in tackling these

questions. Future research can also explore the extent to which our findings vary based on distinct professional identities. By examining the personalities or specific characteristics of people who select into consulting, compared to other professions, we can better understand the structural and normative realities that enshrine overwork and constrain work–life balance.

Because the consulting industry has many particularities, caution must be used when generalizing the implications of our study. In the new economy, service and knowledge professions, such as consulting, are on the rise (Benko and Anderson 2010). These professions represent the career of the future—a window into what work–life balance may look like as more occupations begin to resemble consulting (Wynn 2018). Consultants may play an especially important part in how professionals think about work–life balance, given their role as advisors to other companies and the task of consulting firms to help develop and diffuse organizational structures that become recognized as best practices more widely (Kelly 2003). Understanding the barriers to successful uptake of flexibility programs in this industry may help us construct better policies in other professional industries as well.

Although consulting is an extreme case that is not representative of all workers, or even necessarily of all professional workers, it does allow us to theorize about the individualization of work–life conflict. We may expect processes similar to the various aspects of perceived control analyzed here to operate in other "extreme jobs" (Hewlett and Luce 2006: 50). These processes are most likely to be prevalent in professional client-service industries where employees are highly identified with their work, to which they dedicate long hours. We expect that the processes we have outlined might offer insights into work–life management among professional employees in extreme jobs, for example, in industries such as banking (Michel 2012), hedge-fund management (Neely 2017), high-status technology companies (Cooper 2000), as well as among entrepreneurs.

By providing a novel understanding of perceived control and its role in the avoidance of flexibility policies, this article identifies important tendencies and assumptions that underlie the continued stigma against flexibility. Our analysis contributes to understanding why flexibility programs—even the most progressive and celebrated programs—continue to fall short. Future research can build on our findings to further diagnose the challenges of flexibility and, ideally, take steps to address them.

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