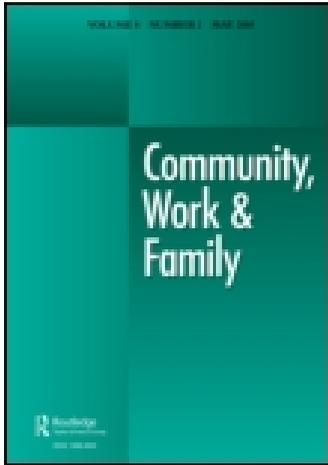


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Self-employment and family life: constructing work–life balance when you’re ‘always on’

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This study explores how men and women who are self-employed and have children living at home construct work–life balance. Guided by the concept of *work–life fit*, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 parents who were self-employed and had at least one dependent child. Using thematic analysis, the first theme, ‘in control,’ related primarily to schedule flexibility but also extended to income opportunities and, sometimes, to job security. Feelings of control were experienced and expressed in relation to shortcomings of previous job experiences, business location, and preferences for raising children. The second theme, ‘always on,’ meant that parents expected to be both readily accessible to children and available to clients, while continually pursuing income opportunities. This contributed to time pressure, although some viewed participation in volunteer and children’s activities as a form of business networking. Work–life balance was described in terms of time, activity, or experience. Most participants believed self-employment contributes positively, but some questioned whether work–life balance is possible. Parents mostly followed traditional gender role patterns. Some fathers resisted this arrangement and saw self-employment as a way to participate more actively in family life. Implications and directions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: self-employment; work–life balance; work–life fit; parents; flexibility; Canada

Cette étude examine les façons dont les hommes et les femmes qui sont travailleurs autonomes et qui ont des enfants à la maison arrivent à équilibrer travail et vie personnelle. Appuyées sur le concept de *travail et vie équilibrés*, des entrevues exhaustives ont été réalisées auprès de vingt-deux parents qui travaillaient à leur compte et qui avaient au moins un enfant à charge. Le premier thème dégagé d’une analyse thématique des entrevues: «avoir le contrôle» faisait principalement référence à la souplesse de l’horaire, mais il s’étendait aussi aux possibilités de revenu et, parfois, à la sécurité d’emploi. L’impression d’avoir le contrôle était ressentie et exprimée en relation aux expériences de travail antérieures qui avaient été insatisfaisantes, au lieu d’affaires et aux préférences pour élever des enfants. Le deuxième thème: «toujours en mode actif» signifiait que les parents s’attendaient tout à la fois à être facilement accessibles à leurs enfants et disponibles pour leurs clients, et ce, tout en étant sans cesse à l’affût de possibilités de revenu. Il s’ensuivait des contraintes de temps, quoique, pour certains parents, le temps consacré au bénévolat et aux activités des enfants consistait en une forme de réseautage professionnel.

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L'équilibre entre travail et vie personnelle se déclinait en termes de temps, d'activité ou d'expérience. La majorité des participants croyait que le travail autonome contribuait positivement à la conciliation de leurs responsabilités professionnelles et familiales, mais certaines personnes s'interrogeaient à savoir si l'équilibre travail et vie personnelle était réalisable. Les parents s'inscrivaient pour la plupart dans des modèles traditionnels de partage de rôles en fonction du genre. Certains pères résistaient à ces modèles et voyaient dans le travail autonome une façon de participer plus activement à la vie familiale. Les répercussions et les orientations pour des recherches plus approfondies sont abordées.

Mots-clés: travail autonome; conciliation travail-vie personnelle; travail et vie équilibrés; horaire flexible; rôle parental; vie familiale; genre

Self-employment in Canada currently accounts for approximately 16% of the labor force, or about 2.7 million people (Wannell & Usalca, 2012). Although growth in self-employment is often seen during recessionary periods when there is a higher incidence of involuntary job loss and more limited employment opportunities (Moore & Mueller, 2002), individual motivations for self-employment vary. Some are drawn to self-employment because of the potential for higher earnings and the perceived flexibility to attend to family needs, but there can be disadvantages associated with self-employment that may affect the quality of personal and family life. Unpredictable or irregular work hours can play havoc with daily or weekly routines (Bell & LaValle, 2003), and the lack of job security and limited access to statutory entitlements and social benefits make self-employment a precarious work arrangement (Lero, Whitehead, Korabik, & Rooney, 2004; Vosko, Zukewich, & Cranford, 2003). These factors can impinge on other areas of life including family responsibilities, leisure activities, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The extent to which self-employment may contribute to or detract from feelings of work-life balance is not at all clear.

Despite the growing popularity of self-employment and the economic contributions of small businesses in Canada, little attention has been given to parents' experiences as they navigate the demands of running a business, caring for family members, attending to children's school expectations, arranging leisure activities, and the other commitments and responsibilities in their lives. The purpose of this study is to explore how parents who are self-employed construct work-life balance. Specifically, we address how mothers and fathers describe their experiences of daily life, and what they see as factors and strategies that either inhibit or enhance work-life balance. We are particularly interested in understanding the differences and similarities between men and women who are self-employed, between those with younger or older children, and the influence of business location, whether at home or elsewhere.

Self-employment is a highly heterogeneous work arrangement, which makes it challenging to define, both conceptually and empirically. In this study, self-employment is broadly viewed as individuals who work for themselves as opposed to paid workers who work for others. Many work alone, but others may own small businesses and employ others (LaRochelle-Côté, 2010). Self-employment also suggests the individual's active engagement in creating his or her own job (Loscocco, 1997).

Job characteristics, such as the nature of the work performed, whether one works at home or elsewhere, and whether an individual works on their own or has employees, most

certainly influence the experience of self-employment (Annink & den Dulk, 2012; Loscocco & Smith-Hunter, 2004), as do demographic factors such as age, gender, and geographic location (Hughes, 2005). Compared to those who work for others, the self-employed in Canada are more likely to be male, older, married or cohabitating, have children at home, and have immigrated to Canada (Hou & Wang, 2011). They spend proportionally more on housing, less on transportation, and in 2009 had a median household income that was 19% lower than organizationally employed workers (LaRochelle-Côté, 2010). Even though a larger proportion of men is self-employed, this work arrangement is increasing more rapidly among Canadian women (Statistics Canada, 2012). Given the comparatively higher proportion of individuals with children and women's growing levels of self-employment, it appears that self-employment is becoming a more common work arrangement within families. Therefore, the intersection of self-employment and family life has the potential to create a complex set of considerations which merit critical attention.

The experience of self-employment may be linked to different role expectations. Mothers of younger children are more likely to seek self-employment as a way to manage the domestic double shift (Walker & Webster, 2007) and, more often than fathers, cite self-employment as a strategy to integrate work and family responsibilities (Boden, 1999; Gray & Hughes, 2005; Marler & Moen, 2005). For those in non-professional occupations, self-employment is one of few options to allow greater temporal and spatial flexibility to attend to family needs (Budig, 2006). This is an important factor since the demands associated with intensive motherhood, the dominant middle-class approach to mothering (Hays, 1996; Warner, 2005), are often made more challenging by rigid workplace schedules. For example, a flexible schedule can help facilitate greater involvement in children's school and leisure activities that may occur during regular business hours.

Motivations for self-employment are commonly described as 'push' or 'pull' factors (Hughes, 2003; Lero et al., 2004). Some people are 'pushed' into self-employment for reasons related to economic restructuring like involuntary job loss, or difficulty finding work to match their skills and abilities. Others face employment barriers such as poor language skills, geographic isolation, or chronic illness. A different group may be drawn or 'pulled' toward self-employment because of entrepreneurial values that prioritize having greater independence and responsibility for decision-making, more opportunities for creative expression, and the potential to earn more money (Baines, Wheelock, & Gelder, 2003; Delage, 2002; Hughes, 2003). Additional pulls can include a preexisting family business, the nature of the work, and expectations of decreased stress (Delage, 2002).

Focusing on women's entrepreneurship, Hughes (2006) extended motivation factors to include a third group of *work-family* reasons, since self-employment is frequently identified as an opportunity to create a more balanced lifestyle. Perhaps, the most commonly cited reason is the flexibility associated with self-employment, which is seen to allow greater control over daily routines and activities. This is especially relevant for mothers with young children, since women generally assume more responsibility for childcare and unpaid domestic work (Walker & Webster, 2007). Conversely, men more often than women cite work-related reasons for becoming self-employed (Marler & Moen, 2005). It is important to recognize, though, that individuals may have multiple motivations, which can include a combination of push, pull, and work-family factors.

Background context

To appreciate the challenges faced by self-employed men and women with children, it is important to consider dominant approaches to understanding work–life balance, along with some of the qualities and characteristics of self-employment related to the organization of everyday life. This section begins by outlining perspectives on work–life balance, and is followed by a more in-depth consideration of what is known about the effects of self-employment on daily activities, time use, and family life.

Perspectives on work–life balance

‘Work–life balance’ represents a dominant discourse in the media, commonly interpreted as an appropriate allocation of time and attention to paid work and other life spheres (Duxbury & Higgins, 2002; Frone, 2003; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006). Emphasis is usually placed on work and family, with the discourse directed primarily toward mothers in the workforce (Gambles et al., 2006). In particular, tensions and conflicts may surface when work schedules and responsibilities interfere with family time (Duxbury & Higgins, 2009). For others, such as men and those without dependent children, work–life balance is presented less often as a pressing issue, even though these individuals may have other time-consuming responsibilities and commitments (Ransome, 2007). More recent literature demonstrates that work–life balance and opportunities for greater involvement with their children is an increasing concern for fathers, especially among younger and more educated men (Ball & Daly, 2012).

There is a substantial literature exploring theories and approaches to understanding work–life balance (e.g., see reviews by Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Frone, 2003; Thompson, Beauvais, & Allen, 2006). Perhaps, the most common approach is the conflict perspective, where work and family roles are viewed as potentially incompatible in some way, making the fulfillment of one role more challenging because of participation in the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The resulting role strain or stress has been variously referred to as work–family conflict, overload, incompatibility, and negative spillover (Moen, Kelly, & Huang, 2008). By contrast, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) describe work–family enrichment as ‘the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role’ (p. 73). Enrichment is part of the facilitation perspective on the work–family interface, which also includes positive spillover, enhancement, and fit (Moen et al., 2008). Conflict and enrichment theories are bi-directional. Work can enrich or conflict with family roles; similarly, family roles may enhance or detract from the ability to perform one’s work role. With the dominant focus on conflict and enrichment, integrative approaches are sometimes overlooked (Carlson & Grzywacz, 2008). Work–life integration moves beyond work and family roles to include other activities and resources that contribute to one’s quality of life (Voydanoff, 2005). Considering domains beyond work and family, such as leisure, is important since these activities are known to serve restorative purposes, and can also contribute to feelings of personal, family, and community well-being (Crosbie & Moore, 2004; Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004).

For this study, *work–life fit* (Moen et al., 2008) provides a framework to guide our understanding of perceptions of ‘work–life balance’ among self-employed men and women with children. It is a person rather than couple-centered approach that brings together different aspects of the work–family interface and focuses on individuals’ ongoing appraisals, throughout the life course, of their quality of life both at work and at home. ‘Fit’ is dynamic and changes according to individuals’ assessments of the match

between the expectations and demands of their adult roles at different points during their lives (Moen et al., 2008). Individuals will seek to gain control by minimizing the gap between external demands and individual control. This depends on having sufficient resources (time, income, appropriate control over work scheduling and job security) to effectively attend to daily needs and activities. Needs and resources shift throughout the life course. When individuals perceive work–life *misfit*, they are more vulnerable to stress, poorer health, and decreased quality of life (Moen et al., 2008). For some, self-employment may offer a way to increase fit by enhancing resources such as control over work hours. The extent to which fit is achieved would depend largely on whether the reality of self-employment matches expectations.

Self-employment and daily life

Time use studies provide some insights into the ‘balancing act’ by documenting daily behavior patterns. Daily activities can be seen as a series of priorities and trade-offs, determined by a combination of social norms and expectations, biological needs, and individual preferences and constraints. Time use studies have uncovered some notable differences between the self-employed and employees. A cross-cultural comparison of Canada and Pakistan indicates that self-employed workers in both countries spend significantly less time with family members than those who are organizationally employed (Jamal, 2009). Similarly, Hyytinen and Ruuskanen (2007) report that the self-employed generally work longer hours on both weekdays and weekends, work more often during the evening, and have less leisure time than their employee counterparts; but paradoxically, also report greater job satisfaction, which is attributed, in part, to temporal flexibility. Among parents, self-employment is often associated with more strongly entrenched, traditional gendered behaviors (Baines et al., 2003), evident in daily activity patterns. In a comparison of employee and self-employed parents’ time use, self-employed mothers spent fewer hours on paid work and more time on household labor and childcare. These patterns, in part, reflect lifestyle choices related to women’s preference for self-employment as a means of providing parental care (Gurley-Calvez, Harper, & Biehl, 2009).

Married women who are self-employed are significantly more likely than men to work part-time hours to accommodate family life (Marler & Moen, 2005). Similarly, Craig, Powell, and Cortis (2012) found the allocation of time to daily activities differs considerably between self-employed and employee mothers, but fathers’ time remains similar, regardless of employment type. The authors suggest that paid work remains the priority for fathers, whereas for mothers, self-employment may be a ‘do-it-yourself’ strategy to integrate work and family responsibilities in the absence of a national childcare policy, especially for those working from home. This is reminiscent of Mills’ (1959) discussion of personal troubles and public issues, where the trouble, or private problems at an individual level, calls for policy, or structural-level solutions since these troubles are so commonly shared.

Using a qualitative approach, Baines et al. (2003) explored the intersection of self-employment and family life among small business owners. Mothers reported more domestic and caregiving activities, while fathers seemed particularly susceptible to reduced family time. The expansive nature of work hours due to financial pressures suggested that self-employed fathers spent less time caring for children than employee fathers, and more often worked for pay during evenings and weekends. The authors

concluded that despite the ‘family-friendly’ nature of temporal flexibility, self-employment is linked to perpetuating a gender schema supporting the male breadwinner/female care provider model, regardless of which partner owns and operates the business. Similarly, Loscocco (1997) found that among couples where at least one partner is self-employed, gendered power dynamics were highly entrenched and few men questioned their primary provider status. Furthermore, women’s businesses often generated less income than men’s, and their contribution to household earnings was more likely to be seen as secondary (Loscocco & Bird, 2012). In a study of home-based contractors, Osnowitz (2005) observed that while temporal flexibility creates conditions for reshaping traditional gendered behavior, women were more subject to normative gender expectations that impinged on their careers, whereas men who combined work and household activities were seen to be ‘breaking new ground’ (p. 99).

Self-employment and work–life balance

The literature is divided on the contribution of self-employment to perceptions of work–life balance, due not only to gender differences in role expectations, but also to the heterogeneity of this work arrangement, as noted by Annink and den Dulk (2012) in their study of self-employed Dutch mothers. Self-employed men and women with children may experience greater satisfaction with work–life balance as a result of having increased flexibility to attend to family needs, but they may be less satisfied because of long work hours, fewer holidays, a lack of statutory benefits, and income instability (Tremblay, 2008). The location of work matters too. Women with home-based businesses report more satisfaction with family life, work fewer hours, and experience less work-to-family spillover compared to those working from other locations. This is attributed to having greater control over one’s schedule, whereas when businesses are based elsewhere, operating hours may be more rigid (Loscocco & Smith-Hunter, 2004). Such findings are in contrast to the literature on the challenges of managing the potential for blurred boundaries among home-based workers (e.g., see Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009).

In addition, Parasuraman and Simmers (2001) found stronger perceptions of work–family conflict and decreased satisfaction with family life among the self-employed. The flexibility associated with self-employment may come at the expense of leisure time and income, so that a majority of self-employed workers report either time or income poverty, or both (Merz & Rathjen, 2010). The use of mobile, digital technologies, seen as a requirement of most small businesses, has also been implicated in increased work–life conflict for parents who are self-employed (Baines et al., 2003). Mobile technologies used for business can lead to longer work hours, as well as a feeling of continually being on duty (Towers, Duxbury, Higgins, & Thomas, 2006). Therefore, the intersection of self-employment, family stage, and perceptions of work–life balance merits greater attention, especially when considering the implications of rising levels of self-employment.

In summary, although there may be many reasons for becoming self-employed, both the initial decision and subsequent experiences are influenced by parental status and role expectations. For women, traditional gender patterns of primary responsibility for household tasks and caregiving are evident and even amplified in their use of time compared to mothers who are organizationally employed. For many, the flexibility of self-employment can create opportunities to integrate work and family life, particularly when children are young. Self-employment may also help men to balance roles, responsibilities and interests, but most retain a primary breadwinner role, evidenced by

longer work hours with an attendant decrease in time for family and leisure. This raises questions about perceptions of work–life balance and how self-employment fits with family life and other interests, commitments, and responsibilities for both men and women with children.

Methods

Participant characteristics

In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 self-employed men and women with children between November 2010 and October 2011, either in person or over telephone. Eligibility criteria for inclusion required that participants had been self-employed in a small business with five or fewer employees for at least one year and devote a minimum of 20 hours per week to their business. Each participant had at least one child 18 years or younger living at home, with the exception of one mother of a 22-year-old who provided a retrospective account of more than 20 years of self-employment while raising her son. Equal numbers of mothers and fathers volunteered to participate. Most participants were solo self-employed (17) and none of the other participants had more than five regular employees. Each interview took between 35 minutes and 2.5 hours to complete, with most lasting about 75 minutes. Only seven parents had a preschool child (less than 6 years old) in the family; the rest had school-age children (6–12 years old) or teenagers (13–18 years old). Some had adult children (19 or older) at home too. All but two participants were married or cohabiting. Two women and two men had spouses who were also self-employed. Three mothers and five fathers were immigrants to Canada. As such, living arrangements and immigrant status were generally consistent with self-employed workers in Canada (Hou & Wang, 2011).

The length of time participants had been in business was equally divided into three groups: less than 5 years, 5–9 years, and 10 years or more. Many occupational sectors were represented including health care, construction, manufacturing, business support services, entertainment, retail, and real estate. Eight participants worked in creative occupations such as fine art, theater, writing, and graphic design. A summary of participant characteristics is presented in [Table 1](#).

Sample recruitment

Parents were recruited mainly from Southern Ontario through an advertisement on a work–life website. In addition, government-operated small business support centers and a business loan center assisted by providing the study description and contact information to clients. A concerted effort was made to invite fathers who were immigrants because of the greater representation of this group among Canada’s self-employed workers. On the advice of a local immigrant services office, men who owned retail businesses were visited by one of the authors and provided with study information.

Business locations reflected trends identified in other research related to gender and self-employment (e.g., see Loscocco & Bird, 2012). Nine of the 11 mothers worked from home, whereas 8 of 11 fathers worked primarily outside the home. Six participants worked part-time, or less than 30 hours per week, and the rest reported full-time hours. Of this group, six men and one woman worked 50 hours per week or more. Some had difficulty assessing the amount of time spent working since they considered certain work-

Table 1. Characteristics of interview participants.

ID ^a	Marital status	Spouse's employment status	Number and age of children ^b	Born in Canada	Usual work place	Type of business	Years in business
F01	Married	Self-employed	2 school-age	Yes	Home	Home sewing	10
F02	Married	Full-time	1 school-age	No	Home	Event planning	13
F03	Married	Full-time	1 preschooler	Yes	Home	Entertainment	5
F04	Married	Full-time	1 preschooler	Yes	Home	Leadership coach	5
F05	Married	Full-time	2 school-age	Yes	Home	Picture framing	3
F06	Married	Self-employed	1 teenager	Yes	Store	Construction supply store	5
F07	Married	Full-time	1 school-age	No	Home	Artist	3
F08	Separated	N/A	1 school-age	No	Home	Online retail store	3
F09	Separated	N/A	Retrospective account	Yes	Clinic	Registered massage therapist	28
F10	Married	Full-time	1 preschooler, 1 school-age	Yes	Home	Interior design	7
F11	Married	Full-time	1 preschooler	Yes	Home	Business admin. support	3
M01	Married	Full-time	2 school-age	Yes	Home	Photographer	7
M02	Married	Full-time	2 teenagers	No	Job site	Contractor	2
M03	Married	Full-time	1 teenager	Yes	Office	Industrial manufacturing	10
M04	Married	Full-time	1 teenager	Yes	Home	Freelance writer	22
M05	Married	Full-time	2 teenagers	Yes	Home	Signage	5
M06	Married	Part-time	1 preschooler, 1 school-age	Yes	Office	Real estate	5
M07	Married	Part-time	3 school-age	Yes	Office	Real estate	5
M08	Married	Full-time	2 school-age	No	Store	Retail store	1
M09	Married	Looking for work	1 teenager	No	Store	Retail store	10
M10	Married	Self-employed	2 teenagers	No	Office	Furniture manufacturing	2
M11	Married	Self-employed	1 school-age	No	Studio	Graphic design	17

^aID codes beginning with an 'F' indicate a female participant, and those beginning with an 'M' indicate a male.

^bA preschooler is a child less than 6 years old, a school-age child is between 6 and 12 years old, and a teenager is between 13 and 18 years old.

related activities such as business networking to be integrated with volunteering and community events, which could also be experienced as leisure and/or family time.

Data collection

Moen et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of work–life fit provided a guiding framework for the semi-structured interviews. Participants responded to questions about their work schedule, time adequacy, job security and income adequacy, as well as the meaning of work–life balance. The term ‘work–life balance’ was used during interviews, assuming that parents were likely more familiar with this expression than ‘work–life fit.’ Other questions explored daily routines, health and well-being, the challenges and benefits of self-employment, motivations for becoming self-employed, and advice for others who might consider combining self-employment with raising a family.

The research protocol was granted approval by the University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and using MAXQDA10 software, transcripts were coded by one author only, initially to reflect participants’ direct experiences, thoughts and observations, and then assigned to selective categories. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was undertaken to compare categories both within and between interviews, between mothers and fathers, between parents of younger and school-age children and teens, and between businesses at different stages of development. Potential themes were then collated, reviewed, refined, checked against coded segments, and then used to create a thematic map. In the quotes that follow, participants are identified by an alphanumeric code, where ‘F’ denotes female and ‘M’ denotes male. Those who work primarily from home have ‘H’ as a suffix and those whose usual workplace is outside the home are designated with an ‘O.’

Results

This section begins by exploring individuals’ routes to self-employment, including their motivations and role responsibilities, followed by the meaning of work–life balance to participants and a discussion of two overarching themes related to work–life balance that emerged from the data. The first of these themes was ‘in control,’ which addressed perceptions and experiences of self-employment as a means to narrow the gap between external demands and individual resources and responsibilities. The second theme, ‘always on,’ related more to feelings of time adequacy or *inadequacy*, job security, and notions of self-definition and identity. Work–life balance was continually being constructed and reconstructed in relation to these themes. Particular attention is given to gender and work location.

Becoming self-employed

The interviews began by exploring participants’ routes to self-employment. As anticipated, a variety of push and pull factors were identified. Work–family factors featured prominently, in terms of being able to parent in the way they preferred, especially among mothers and those whose businesses were home-based. Some felt that the demands of previous employers or work conditions were incompatible with family life and envisioned self-employment as a solution to balancing work and family responsibilities. For example, a long commute was seen as a problem by some parents because it increased time away from home and limited access to children. As one former commuter commented, ‘Well isn’t the purpose of self-

employment to be with your children?’ (F01-H, two school-age children). For others, work schedules and cultures were problematic. A highly skilled emergency services worker left her former employer when they refused to support a proposal to job-share that she initiated with a coworker. Others started home-based businesses because they were reluctant to return to work following maternity leaves. Self-employment was seen as a viable strategy to provide parental care while contributing to the family income. As one mother notes, ‘I definitely really like being home with him and I wouldn’t be able to afford it any other way’ (F03-H, one preschooler). None of the three fathers who worked from home mentioned work–family factors as a primary motivator for self-employment, but all commented on benefits to family life realized once they became self-employed. A father who had previously worked as a musician summarized:

The basic message for me is that self-employment has been a great thing. It’s made my life easier, it’s made being a parent easier, it’s made work and life balance easier, but it works because my partner has a good job. If I were the main wage earner, it might be different. (M04-H, teenager)

For all parents in this study, perceptions of income adequacy were an important component of the decision to become self-employed, and the financial contribution of a spouse was especially relevant when parents, such as this father, worked part-time hours.

Gendered roles and responsibilities

All of the men who worked outside the home considered themselves to be either equal or primary earners. Their family responsibilities were not as extensive as those of the women who participated in this study, nor did these men do as much caregiving or domestic labor as their spouses. This likely facilitated their feelings of balance. All prioritized their work roles, and long work hours made it difficult to participate equally in domestic activities. A father who chose self-employment in order to enhance his income described the situation in his household:

I’m sure my wife would like me to do more. I mean, she’s been really supportive recognizing that, you know, I’m putting in 60 ... 65 hours a week working so the majority of that stuff is going to be done by her. I help out when I can ... get breakfast for my son in the morning, that type of stuff. (M07-O, preschooler and school-age child)

All of the women reported primary responsibility for home and family, whether or not their business was home-based, including the two women who were single parents and were also primary earners. Some managed by placing less importance on housework: ‘I typically do everything but not everything’s got to be spotless’ (F05-H, two school-age children). Some enlisted the help of others, such as this mother who owned a retail store:

Laundry, meals, cleaning the house really does fall back to me. I did have a house cleaner at one point and I felt like I had won a million dollars but she got ill and she’s not back. So my house gets done when I can do it and I sometimes pay my daughter to do it. I don’t mind paying her because I would pay somebody else. (F06-O, teenager)

Although most of the women accepted responsibility for domestic activities, some resented the unequal division of labor. This could be especially difficult when businesses were home-based. One participant, who had shared household chores more equitably when previously employed in social services, felt that the expectation that she now assume greater responsibility for housework was affecting both her relationship with her spouse and her self-identity. Although she identified as a feminist, she observed:

I feel like now more than anything, my life is becoming more of what I thought I wouldn't be doing, which is all the housework, really, pretty much all of it. I feel like I'm doing it all plus I'm running a business. (F07-O, school-age child)

Constructing balance: perceptions, contrasts, and tensions

When asked 'What does work-life balance mean to you?', most parents responded in terms of time, activity, or a state of mind. This father provided an example of a time-based interpretation, as he carefully considered the hours needed for different activities each day to achieve (or maintain) a sense of balance:

I try to give myself at least two hours with the family because otherwise I'll go nuts ... and they [the children] won't get me and my wife will go nuts because she'll have them all day and all night. So I think that's important that I try to specify some time there. I also know that if I don't take at least an hour before I go to bed, usually numbed in front of the TV to forget things, the brain won't shut off when you go to bed. (M06-O)

The mother of a toddler spoke of work-life balance as 'an everyday challenge ... You can't really let anything really take over too much ... yeah, just kind of making time for everything' (F03-H). Part-time work was a tactic used by some. One father, who had worked previously in a retail job, said he felt constrained by the rigidity of his employer's scheduling practices and chose to decrease his work hours when self-employed. He commented 'You know, I'm not going to lie to you, I've got it made right now ... like I don't think my life could be any better' (M01-H, two school-age children). For him, it was not only the reduced work hours, but also having greater temporal control that contributed to feelings of work-life balance.

When people conceptualized work-life balance in terms of activities, they usually mentioned important contributors to daily and weekly routines, as this mother relates:

I am for life and work balance ... I definitely do a lot of things for myself. I run, I do Yoga, I go to the gym, I go to different workshops, I dance, I travel ... I don't just work. And I can't see myself just working. For me it's very important to be able to have a life, you know, and of course spend some time with my son. (F08-H, school-age child)

Work-life balance was most often described in experiential terms, or as a state of mind. A mother of two sons in elementary school felt work-life balance was about 'just getting through everything but at the end of the day ... at the same time feeling calm and not getting frazzled' (F05-H). For a mother who advocated the separation of work and home spaces, it meant 'having a level of satisfaction in both areas and not feeling deprived or having one area deficient over the other' (F09-O). Work-life balance was also described as, 'being confident and secure in turning things off. It means ensuring that I have those holidays and that I look forward to them and that I enjoy them' (F10-H, preschooler and a school-age child). A father of two teenagers felt that it was 'simply the sense that you feel in control' (M05-H).

Resisting the balance discourse

Two immigrant fathers who operated retail stores had different viewpoints. Work-life balance meant nothing to one since he had never heard the term before. The other father, who worked at his store seven days a week for 10 hours almost every day, commented, 'There is no balance here' (M09-O, teenager).

A few parents hesitated to use the term, work-life balance. 'It sounds like a cliché' (M11-O, school-age child), said one father who had been self-employed his entire work

life. 'It's just one of those really nice things to say' (F06-O, teenager), reflected one mother who owned a retail store and also felt constrained by store hours. A mother with a home-based picture framing company said, 'I'm not sure there is such a thing,' but continued by adding, 'I prefer to use the word work-life harmony' (F04-H, preschooler). For her, 'harmony' meant structuring daily activities more optimally when compared to the demands of her previous, inflexible employer.

In control

For most participants, self-employment represented an opportunity for greater control of important aspects of daily life. When discussing their route to self-employment, they often mentioned the desire to have greater control over when, where, and for how long they worked. All participants expressed feelings of being 'in control,' although some perceived greater control than others depending on business demands, household responsibilities, income, and personal priorities. Typical comments included:

Well, you are in control of your destiny ... you can work as hard or as little as you want. It's up to you. (M02-O, two teenagers)

I like that I have control over my day. I have nobody telling me when to do what. Obviously I have deadlines, but I still get to manage those myself. (F02-H, school-age child)

The best thing is not having to dance to someone else's tune. Honestly, that used to drive me crazy. (M01-H, two school-age children)

A mother who had previously worked in emergency services summarized:

The whole choice factor is the key component to self-employment. It's that you create the opportunity for choice and you make your choices. They're not driven by, well, I mean inherently they're driven by other factors, but it's that feeling of control – that you make the decisions. (F10-H, preschooler and school-age child)

Control of time

Control was most often constructed as temporal flexibility. Although it was clear when describing daily routines that these were largely shaped by family and business needs, a sense of control was achieved by eliminating employers' demands concerning the pace and scheduling of work. For example, when his daughter was younger, one father took 'about a day off a week just for childcare, which wouldn't be possible with another job' (M11-O, school-age child). Temporal control was also achieved by locating their business at home, where parents were not beholden to rigid operating hours. As one mother noted, 'I really do love being in control of my days and my time and I would desperately miss that if I do end up going back to work for someone else someday' (F11-H, preschooler).

Temporal flexibility allowed parents to optimally arrange their days to meet business, family, and personal needs. Mothers of younger children were likely to arrange schedules to include school volunteering and children's activities. One participant enthusiastically related how this flexibility allowed her to prioritize her time:

The biggest thing that I *love*, is that I can drop everything and say, 'You know what? This is what's important to me.' I don't have to ask anybody, I don't have to negotiate. I can just rearrange that time. (F10-H, a preschooler and a school-age child)

Fitting work around family

The parents who worked part time identified as the primary caregiver in their families. All worked from home, which made it easier to attend to family needs and paid work was scheduled to fit around children's routines as much as possible. For example, one mother of a preschooler worked from 9:00 am to 4:30 pm, four days a week because 'that's when she's in daycare,' but her hours extended to other times that included 'basically every second that she's not awake and needing my attention' (F04-H). Home-based workers tried to organize work tasks according to what could be accomplished while actively caring for children. Mothers with young children privileged children's needs above their business responsibilities. For example, this mother who became self-employed following her maternity leave noted:

If I have to have the [sewing] machine out, well, I'm going to wait until he's finally napping. If I'm doing a few painting things, I can do that while he's playing around because I can play with him still. So it's just kind of seeing, what do I need to do by myself, and what can I do with him there? (F03-H, preschooler)

Another mother reported that she worked 'after my husband and daughter go to bed at night ... that is my choice as I prefer to spend quality time with my daughter during the day' (F11-H, preschooler). Although her own sleep time suffered, the arrangement fit with her priorities for family life and also allowed her to meet clients' needs.

Two fathers identified as primary caregivers and mostly worked part-time hours. Both worked primarily from home. They organized work activities in much the same way as the mothers, fitting business appointments and activities around children's needs and schedules. One father who described himself as a former latchkey child commented, 'It's good for everyone, you know, they're happy ... seriously, our kids don't even realize how lucky they are to have a parent always available whenever they need us' (M01-H, two school-age children).

Prioritizing activities

A sense of control meant that parents who worked longer hours and/or based their businesses outside the home could take time off work to attend school events. Although many employed parents also make an effort to attend children's school and leisure activities, the difference is that self-employed parents who are in control of their work schedules do not need to negotiate or face sanctions if they take time off. As this father relates, 'I do the odd school thing, so if my son's in a Christmas play during the day or whatever, I make sure I go. I always go to those because, you know, I like to support him' (M06-O, preschooler and school-age child).

Even when children were older, parents continued to arrange work routines to be there when children finished school or to attend special events. For one father who worked more than 60 hours per week, having even limited flexibility allowed him to participate in family activities:

When Marta has a soccer game, at any given time, I take an hour and a half no matter what. That hour and a half is not going to kill me. It makes a huge difference when she sees me there, you know, and my wife will come too. (M10-O, two teenagers)

A few noted that having complete schedule control could create some tensions between work and family life though. The mother of an 11-year-old observed, 'There is that freedom of being able to do your own schedule, but know it's an expense, right? As soon

as you give up that morning to volunteer at her school, you're decreasing your productivity' (F07-H). It could be difficult to make decisions about these types of trade-offs that might detract from the business but perhaps benefit the family, and vice versa. With respect to prioritizing family and business, another commented, 'There are times when you're just totally torn' (F02-H, school-age child).

Income stability and job security

Temporal flexibility was integral to perceptions of greater control, but this sense of control did not always extend to the workflow or to income. The mother of a preschooler observed:

Being self-employed allows me to feel more in control of what hours I need to work rather than being stuck in an office all day because I *have* to be there. However, I don't always feel in control of the amount of work I am able to obtain from project to project. (F11-H)

Many participants with newer businesses believed that self-employment created an opportunity for greater control over income too, but felt that this was largely dependent on their willingness to spend more time working or perhaps expand areas of their business that they did not enjoy as much as other (less lucrative) parts. One father with a newer business who worked long hours believed that 'it gets a little bit easier as you grow' (M06-O, preschooler and school-age child). Another raised questions about the trade-off between work hours and quality of life:

I have to decide, where does my quality of life come in? And I need to figure out how I want to balance it. Initially, of course like everybody else, greed kicks in. 'Oh, I'm going to be self-employed – I'm going to make a lot of money and work, work, work.' But there comes a point where it's not worth it. (M02-O, two teenagers)

A few fathers used self-employment as a job security strategy, even with the inherent risk of income fluctuation or business failure. One father who had experienced job layoffs and recalls with his former employer and then a wage freeze commented:

For me, being laid-off is sort of one of the worst feelings a man can have ... I am the major breadwinner for the home and it just provided a lot of pressure, a lot of stress that I just thought, if I took matters into my own hands, that if I wanted to work extra, I could ... I didn't have somebody limiting me in that area. (M05-H, two teenagers)

Another father who had recently immigrated had experienced several unanticipated layoffs during his previous factory job. He opened a retail business in order to gain greater control over his work life, but it did not alleviate his financial stress. He reported that 'I'm never, ever satisfied with the income. Whatever I do, like the factory job or the business I started here ... I don't make money in Canada, like zero' (M08-O). For these fathers, self-employment allowed perceptions of greater job security for the foreseeable future, although they had little control over economic trends or market forces.

Always on

In contrast to being 'in control,' a second theme expressed by parents was being 'always on.' Although this could refer to the length of work hours and business demands, it was also expressed in terms of self-definition both personally as a parent, and publicly as the face of their business. A heightened psychological commitment to their work meant continually seeking opportunities to develop and promote the business, as well as feeling

responsible for meeting customers' needs to the best of their abilities. As one mother related, 'I look for opportunities as an entrepreneur but at the same time, I never really just take the weekend off' (F08-H, school-age child). Even family leisure activities could serve a dual purpose. One father chose to include his family in a community volunteer activity that he believed would enhance his business. He saw this activity as an opportunity to give back to the community, spend time with his family, and promote a positive image of his business to potential clients. A mother who had been self-employed for 12 years reflected, 'Every aspect of my life involves marketing my business. Whether it is at a hockey game with my son or at a church function...' (F01-H, two teenagers).

Being always on was particularly evident among mothers who combined caregiving with home-based self-employment. Not only they were busy with ongoing childcare activities, but also they were regularly confronted with customers' needs and work requiring attention. Typical comments were:

There's no off switch. You're always on. (F03-H, preschooler)

It is very easy to work around the clock just because you're in it all the time. (F10-H, preschooler and school-age child)

You know, you never leave it behind. (F08-H, school-age child)

Transcending work, family, and leisure domains

Being always on was facilitated by a deep sense of psychological commitment to the business. When asked how many days he worked each week, a father who worked mainly at an office replied, 'It depends on what you consider work. I never turn the brain off, if that means something' (M07-O, three school-age children). A father who worked from home commented:

It's really up to me to steer the shop. Every decision rests on me, I can't defer to somebody else. When I first started, I was actually haunted all the time about the business, and just couldn't get rid of that feeling. (M05-H, two teenagers)

One mother referred to 'fuzzy boundaries,' which left her feeling that 'sometimes I don't have enough just 'me' time' (F02-H, school-age child). Similarly, a mother who worked from home reported that the main challenges of self-employment were, 'Money, inconsistency, the fuzzy boundaries between work and home life, and having downtime where it's totally down and where you're not thinking, "I should be doing work"' (F05-H, school-age child).

Some participants deliberately tried to limit work hours to maintain a sense of balance, but this was often not possible for primary income earners, those who operated retail businesses, or for others with challenging financial circumstances. The mother of a preschooler believed that, 'You can't really have a break because you always want your business to go. I can't just not answer calls for a week or two. It just doesn't work like that' (F03-H). Even when participants had a well-established record of success, there was still a sense of vulnerability. A father who was self-employed for more than 20 years commented, 'You can't say no to an assignment because it could be your last' (M04-H, teenager). A mother with a newer business observed, 'I think everyone has this romantic opinion of being self-employed, that you can drop anything ... but not if you need to bring in the money. If I don't produce, I don't sell' (F07-H, school-age child).

Some struggled with managing workflow and often felt overworked as a result. In contrast to feeling in control, work demands could lead to feelings of time pressure. Comments such as this were not unusual: ‘Probably what I like least is that I feel like I’m always scheduled and working’ (F01-H, two school-age children). When asked about strategies to alleviate pressures, a mother who owned a retail store said, ‘There’s no strategy. Just make it work and do what you can. There’s nothing else...you just do it’ (F06-O, teenager).

Contributing to blurred boundaries and feelings of being always on were cell phones and other digital technologies. These were rarely switched off because they were viewed as essential tools both for business and keeping in touch with family members. This sometimes intruded on family and leisure activities. A father who worked in real estate related:

I was out Saturday evening at dinner with my parents, you know ... quick email here and there and staff looking at you ... but that’s what you have to do. Somebody’s at a kitchen table making a decision on their listing package or whatever it is and they can’t make the decision. They need answers quickly and that’s what you have to do. (M06-O, preschooler and school-age child)

Another father reported, ‘With my BlackBerry and computer and email at home, I’m always on, and that’s definitely something that I’ve struggled with a bit’ (M07-O, three school-age children). Others had mixed feelings about the role of technology in facilitating work–life balance. Computers were a necessity, and most participants used websites and social media to promote their business. Although cell phones and smart phones were generally considered essential too, they could either inhibit or enhance work–life balance. One mother appreciated the convenience of knowing when email messages arrived; nonetheless, she noted that, ‘In being so accessible, people expect you to get back to them quicker. It’s definitely kind of a catch-22’ (F03-H, preschooler).

Coping with illness and pregnancy

Being always on extended to working while ill or recovering from surgery because, as one retail store owner commented, ‘I don’t get any business when I’m sick’ (M09-O, teenager). A mother who organized children’s parties was highly conscientious about not disappointing clients. She reported that, ‘I have never had to cancel because I’m sick, but I do push along’ (F03-H, preschooler). When more serious health issues arose, parents took as little time off as possible and usually less than what was optimal for recuperation. Following a back injury, for instance, one father noted:

There was maybe a day and a half where I was literally on my back and didn’t want to do anything. But then I could, you know, get up and answer emails and do some proposals and that sort of thing. (M05-H, two teenagers)

No one spoke of illness or injury stopping him or her from working entirely. There was a sense that they had to maintain a business presence, no matter what the circumstances, to ensure an income, respond to clients’ needs, and maintain a positive reputation.

Similarly, work did not entirely grind to a halt with the arrival of a new baby. Women discussed the challenges of complicated pregnancies and caring for babies without the maternity leave to which employed women are entitled. One described working right up to her delivery:

I was rushed to the hospital by ambulance and I was put into a dark quiet room and I was on the phone because I knew I had appointments and they [the nurses] said, 'You're working?' And I said I just have to tell people that I can't do this or I can't do that and I'm in the hospital. (F02-H, school-age child)

The feeling of being always on meant returning to work following the birth of a baby much sooner than employed women. Caring for an infant had business and financial implications since childcare options at this stage are limited. As one mother commented, 'Really, the first year of her life it was constantly, am I going to be able to get daycare for this? Can I take on this assignment?' (F04-H, preschooler). Maintaining a business presence, meeting clients' needs, and ensuring an income flow meant that extraordinary efforts were made so that businesses continued to function.

Discussion and conclusions

Although the participants in this study represented a diverse group in terms of occupation, length of business tenure, and ages of children, their motivations and experiences of combining self-employment and family life shared many commonalities based on gender and business location. While most participants believed that self-employment contributed to work–life balance because of feelings of control over work hours and business direction, others recognized some of the drawbacks. Self-employment is not necessarily an easy or ideal solution for all parents, but it may help to address some of the challenges of rigid schedules, long commutes, unsuitable workplace cultures, and job instability associated with previous employers and other work arrangements. These motivations are explored first, followed by discussion of how self-employment, gender, and choice of work location influence perceptions of work–life balance.

The push, pull, and work–family motivations for self-employment identified by others (e.g., see Bell & LaValle, 2003; Delage, 2002; Hughes, 2006; Marler & Moen, 2005; Walker & Webster, 2007) were evident to varying degrees among all participants in this study. Women most frequently mentioned work–family factors. Most women chose to work from home in order to more easily accommodate work and family responsibilities, as has been noted in other research on self-employment (Bell & LaValle, 2003; Boden, 1999; Budig, 2006; Craig et al., 2012; Gray & Hughes, 2005; Marler & Moen, 2005). Some of the self-employed mothers in this study preferred to be home with their child (ren), rather than leave them in the care of others, especially mothers with preschool children. Having greater control over when and where they worked allowed women to put children's needs ahead of their own, even if this meant having to negotiate some complex arrangements to meet clients' needs too. This is consistent with intensive motherhood norms of self-sacrifice, prioritizing and managing children's activities, and reworking their own routines to fit others' (Hays, 1996; Warner, 2005). Some mothers also reported a loss of personal time and sleep if they chose to spend time with children during the day and then work later in the evening. There was little or no questioning of their responsibility as the primary parent; instead, these mothers attempted to gain control and minimize role strain through flexible scheduling, working fewer hours, and locating their business at home. As Craig et al. (2012) identified in their time diary analyses, self-employment appeared to be very much a 'do-it-yourself' approach or private solution to work–family integration. Gaining temporal control and spatial flexibility through self-employment was perceived as a solution to an individual 'trouble' (Mills, 1959), although work flexibility and access to quality, affordable childcare services may be better

addressed at a policy level since role conflict and work–life stress is a common social issue, especially among mothers.

None of the men spoke initially of work–family reasons for being self-employed; rather, they focused on labor market difficulties, income limitations of previous employment, and rigid workplace policies that offered little in terms of job satisfaction or autonomy. This is consistent with other research showing that fathers are unlikely to emphasize work–family reasons for choosing self-employment (Bell & LaValle, 2003). Like the women, pull factors largely centered on a desire for greater control over work schedules, but there was an added emphasis on career direction and financial opportunities. Most fathers were primarily concerned with their provider role responsibilities, as evidenced by the desire to increase their income, as well as the reported stress arising from previous job layoffs and work instability. Some fathers may have preferred more involvement with children, but were constrained by business hours and clients' needs. All expressed a desire for involvement in family life, and many arranged their schedules to participate or be present for special activities.

Contrary to typical gender norms, two of the fathers were largely responsible for childcare. Both chose to base their businesses at home and, like the mothers, they fit their work around the rhythm of children's school and leisure activities, and worked part-time hours in order to accommodate family needs. This has been noted previously in more gender egalitarian relationships, where men have moved well beyond the breadwinner role by altering traditional employment patterns, and provide the amount and kind of caregiving typically associated with mothers (Ranson, 2011). It may also indicate a greater depth of involvement than is commonly found in traditional discourses on fatherhood (see Doucet, 2006) and opportunities created by working from home (e.g., see Osnowitz, 2005). As more women with children become primary earners, and men adopt a value stance of greater involvement as fathers, the number of men who are staying home to care for children has increased (Doucet, 2006). The experiences of the two men in this study may become more common than in the past, and their experiences should not be discounted as highly unusual.

The choice of business location was largely tied to individual reasons for self-employment. Those who worked from home believed it generally facilitated the fulfillment of parental and work roles. There were some mothers, however, who found the arrangement more difficult because of heightened expectations to assume a greater proportion of household chores and caregiving. Similar to Loscocco's (1997) earlier study on gender dynamics and self-employment, all women reported doing more household labor than men, and the men did less than their wives with the exception, perhaps, of fathers working part-time from home. Those who worked at locations outside the home were mostly male and not as motivated by work–family factors. Parents who operated retail stores (both men and women) reported the least satisfaction with work–life balance. Even though others may have worked similarly long hours, the retail owners were tied to specific operating hours and felt they could not close the store for any reason. Those who worked in other occupations could at least take an hour or two occasionally to participate in family activities or meet with clients in other locations.

The extent to which self-employment contributes to feelings of work–life balance remains difficult to assess. Temporal control and flexibility, especially for the mothers, were critical to experiences of work–life balance, although how much control they actually had over work hours and how much was determined by family and client needs was seldom considered. Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, and Andrey (2008) identified a similar

phenomenon among mothers who telework. Mothers reported greater temporal control, although their schedules were largely responsive to children's, clients,' and employers' needs. Still, not having an employer dictate when, where, and for how long they worked seemed integral to feelings of balance for self-employed mothers. Of note is how closely participants' descriptions of work–life balance mirror conceptualizations of leisure as time, activity or state of mind (see Horna, 1994), which has not previously been noted. Most parents felt there were benefits to self-employment in terms of job security, income, or schedule control, but the benefits did not always outweigh the drawbacks. Some resisted being drawn into discussions of work–life balance, since the expression had either lost its meaning or never had any meaning for them.

With respect to the guiding framework of work–life fit, being 'in control' had different meanings depending on participants' employment background and social location. There was a general feeling of having more control over time and income adequacy, appropriate scheduling, and job security (Moen et al., 2008) than the organizationally employed, but perceptions of control appeared uneven and were related to aspects of self-employment that were most meaningful to each individual. For example, those who worked from home focused on schedule control, but often felt pressed for time and pulled between work and family responsibilities. Fathers who worked outside the home and operated retail stores reported more control over job security, but talked about inadequate time and income. Other parents who worked long hours but felt in control of their schedule spoke of being pressed for time because of unpredictable client needs. It seemed as though their sense of control had been achieved by eliminating an employer's demands concerning the pace and scheduling of work, even though this was largely replaced by clients' expectations. Many were dissatisfied with their income, yet there was still a sense that they had some control over earnings by working more. This attitude emphasizes individual agency as key to addressing these concerns, rather than seeking broader social and economic reforms that can potentially result in more workplace flexibility or assure more income security for families.

The second theme of being 'always on' is often articulated by parents with regard to children's needs, but self-employed parents had additional expectations of being accessible to clients and many were continually exploring business opportunities during what might be considered family or leisure time. Even though being always on could lead to feelings of time pressure and a loss of personal time, some parents seemed to accept and even enjoy this aspect of self-employment. Children's leisure and school activities represented an opportunity to network, and volunteering with community organizations presented a dual opportunity to both participate in community life and present a positive image of their business. Although these additional commitments meant they were often pressed for time, they valued the connections and felt that there were both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to volunteering and actively participating in children's activities. For these parents, active participation in children's and family leisure activities that offered opportunities to connect with other adults was seen to enhance their business identity and marketing prospects.

In addition, for those who were the primary breadwinner, always being 'on' meant that business interests were frequently placed ahead of family and leisure interests so that any meaningful separation between different spheres was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Being readily available to clients or customers was considered integral to ensuring an adequate income flow, even when it meant exceptionally long work hours, working while sick, or taking business calls during family occasions. This reflects the

'time greedy' nature of small businesses (Baines & Gelder, 2003), and draws into question the 'family-friendly' nature of self-employment. Like many of the fathers in our study, business owners often report long, unpredictable and/or anti-social work hours that can create difficulty for parents in disengaging from work demands (Bell & LaValle, 2003). Cell phones and other mobile technologies were both beneficial and detrimental in this regard. They contributed to feelings of control and accessibility to both family and clients, but also made parents feel continually 'on duty,' similar to employee parents who are required to have mobile technologies switched on while away from the office (Towers et al., 2006). The difference is that self-employed individuals assume all responsibility for the degree to which these technologies may interfere with nonwork activities.

In summary, this study extends our understanding of self-employment and family life in the following ways. First, by applying a work-life fit framework to parents' experiences of self-employment, it is apparent that feelings of control are somewhat paradoxical and relate more to control over problematic aspects of previous employment experiences. Second, while mostly creating conditions that reinforce traditional parental roles, self-employment allowed at least some fathers to resist gender expectations and better integrate their work and family life. Third, parents who are self-employed may capitalize on their active participation in children's school and leisure activities to network and positively promote their business image. Finally, constructions of work-life balance are generally positive, but vary by gender, culture, and work experiences to the extent that some questioned whether work-life balance could exist at all.

The study does not aspire to be representative of the experiences of all parents who are self-employed; however, it does complement larger studies of self-employment and family life, and is largely consistent with findings from qualitative studies that highlight both the attractions and drawbacks of this work arrangement in terms of family life. It is important to remember that our participants were 'success stories' – parents who had been in business for at least one year, with two-thirds having been self-employed for five years or longer. The comments and experiences are undoubtedly different from what we might have heard had we interviewed parents whose businesses did not survive that long. In addition, we provide a snapshot of parents' lives at one point in time, but it would be beneficial to follow parental career paths and learn whether self-employment continues to be a preferred option. It would also be illuminating to explore couple values, dynamics, resources, and supports in future studies since self-employment reflected a joint decision with their spouse in most cases. For at least two of the immigrant fathers, self-employment was chosen as a route to greater job stability. A closer look at families such as these would be helpful in order to develop policies to assist with labor market integration and support.

In conclusion, dual and often contradictory feelings of being 'always on' and 'in control' influenced perceptions of work-life balance. Self-employment as a strategy for managing work and family commitments worked for some parents, but the necessity of being 'always on' should not be overlooked when considering this work arrangement. By using work-life fit as a conceptual framework, it was apparent that self-employment strengthened feelings of control, but the experience was often uneven; parents felt more in control of some areas than others. Self-employment allowed participants to tackle individual issues of the greatest concern in order to meet personal and family needs. In the absence of national policies supporting universal childcare, the right to request flexible scheduling, or effective workforce integration for immigrants, self-employment represents a 'do-it-yourself' option (Craig et al., 2012) in a much broader sense, since it may allow parents to address these gaps and gain more control over daily life.

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