The Articulation of Different Life Domains among Female Senior Managers and Their Subjective Well-Being: Focusing on Meaning Constructions in Everyday Life

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Abstract

Work-life issues have become a major concern across Western societies with the objective to promote women's careers and well-being. However, despite growing attempts to increase the number of women in senior management positions in European countries, such as Switzerland, they remain highly underrepresented. Inspired from the cultural approach in psychology, this article focuses on these women's concrete everyday life to understand how they articulate different life domains and how this influences their subjective well-being. A narrative approach based on reflexivity is adopted to analyze women's activity. Results show meaning intertwinements between life priorities that are often conflicting. Two psychological functions are identified: the feeling of control and the letting go of control. Each of these contributes to women's subjective well-being through the use of diversified supports, but their structuring roles appear only in relation to one another. Results are discussed in the light of existing literature and of their implications.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, important transformations in Western societies have entailed fundamental consequences in regard to the organization of work and life, henceforth considered as articulated universes. Among these changes, there has been a rapid growth of women's involvement in the labor market and the subsequent urge for gender equity (Acker, 2006; Campbell Clark, 2000; European Commission, 2010, 2014; Lewis & Cooper, 1999, West & Zimmerman, 1987). In European countries, important political and institutional efforts have been undertaken to support women in advancing their careers. Work-life issues and their impact on women's health have received particular attention to better promote female participation in decision-making jobs.

Moreover, new modes of work built around projects and networking have emerged. While these modes have brought more autonomy and flexibility in the organization of work duties and responsibilities, they are also very demanding because of their strong focus on productivity, efficacy and individualization (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999).

At the crossroads of these crucial transformations, the situation of women working as senior managers in contemporary industrialized societies becomes emblematic to better understand how work and other life priorities are concretely articulated given a demanding changing context, and how this process influences their subjective health and well-being. Their activity in leading positions is characterized by: the intensification of work related to project management; the accomplishment of brief diversified tasks; the fragmented nature of work, and the dominant character of the relational and affective dimension (Agypt & Rubin, 2012; Clough & Halley, 2007; Ehrenberg, 1991; Karvar & Rouban, 2004). In addition, women remain mainly responsible for household work and (child) care duties (UNECE, 2013). Moreover, as suggested by Little and her colleagues, leaders' health deserves further attention in research despite its complexity, both on its positive and negative states (Little, Simmons, & Nelson, 2007). Indeed their health may impact at organizational level, because of the key position they occupy within the organization as a whole.

An abundant literature within the social sciences has emerged along with the social changes that have been

underlined. Amongst this body of research, it is possible to identify two main trends related to the study of the articulation of different life domains and its impact on women's health and well-being.

The first stream defines such articulation as the conflict that results from coping with incompatibilities regarding two main realms, work and family. Authors in this trend have been greatly inspired by Karasek's seminal work on "stress" (Karasek & Theorell, 1990), adopting mostly a quantitative perspective. Among them, Kahn and his colleagues first developed the "role theory" (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), characterized by the negative spill over effect of work and family roles on health. To some authors, this tension results from the double burden of professional and domestic duties, where the latter weigh more heavily on women than on men (Artazcoz, Borrell, & Benach, 2001; Harenstam & Bejerot, 2001; Messing, 1999). Others have focused on the negative impact of a heavy workload on employees' health because of its interference with family life (Eby, Casper, Lockwook, Bordeau, & Brinley, 2005; Geurts, Taris, Kompier, Dikkers, van Hooff, & Kinnunen, 2005). The "conservation of resources model" (Marks, 1977) also studies work and family demands as conflicting by stating that time and energy resources tend to decrease when juggling between work and family roles (Fisher, Bulger, & Smith, 2009; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2005). Moreover, research has underlined the beneficial impact of flexible schedules, job control, and social support, whose influence moderates stress from work demands (Byron, 2005; Grönlund, 2007; Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005). However, disparities have been shown concerning the stressful effect of schedule control (Chesley, 2005; Kelly, Moena, & Tranbyb, 2011). Finally, authors interested in state and institutional policies have observed the alleviating effect of family conciliation strategies to reduce "work-family conflict" (Grönlund & Javornik, 2014; Braun, Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Baumgärtner, 2008) although, once again, international research presents inconsistencies as highlighted by Jang and his colleagues (Jang, Park, & Zippay, 2011).

The second stream promotes balance between different life domains, that is, how their articulation is related to health and well-being (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). While certain authors have targeted the enrichment brought by work and family roles (Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006), others have studied the enhancement of subjective well-being by promoting "work-life balance" (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Rego, Pina, & Cunha, 2009). Subjective well-being is defined in this view as a broad construct including cognitive and affective reactions to life when biological needs, psychological needs, and leisure activities are fulfilled (Diener & Ryan, 2009; Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2014). Certain authors have broadened the "work-family" perspective to explore the beneficial effect of non-professional practices outside family life on work performance (e.g., physical activity, leisure, social support, cultural activities, etc.) (Fisher et al., 2009; Hecht & Boies, 2009). Hence, non-professional practices can relieve job stress and enhance subjective well-being, and job stress can be moderated by the expression of emotions in other life domains (Jansen, Kant, Kristensen, & Nijhuis, 2003; Moreno-Jiménez, Mayo, Sanz-Vergel, Geurts, Rodriguez-Muñoz, & Garrosa, 2009).

Whether focusing on "conflict" or on "balance", these two trends have led authors interested in women, work, and health to broaden their perspective to a more integrated vision of these themes. Stress and subjective well-being can henceforth be defined as complex processes that outstep the pure impact of working conditions on health, by taking into consideration influences stemming from other life domains. Yet, this general overview points out the need to further investigate how different types of activities—such as work, leisure practices, cultural activities, social activities, physical activities, family duties, and social support—can become beneficial, namely to women, from their own point of view. Existing research, however, has majorly overlooked sense-making in its analysis of the influence of such activities across life domains. This is mainly due to the dominant use of standardized scales to assess stress, depression, subjective well-being, quality of life, and job satisfaction, through quantitative approaches that are not based upon concrete life situations. Besides, many studies tend to relate subjective well-being and low stress levels to a state of "equilibrium" that is to be reached between work-family or work-life. In other words, both trends, by decreasing conflict and struggle between different life priorities, pursue the "ideal" of the "right" balance between life priorities (COST A34, 2009; Fisher et al., 2009; Jansen et al., 2003; Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009), and in doing this, subjective meaning related to concrete practices tends to be widely overlooked.

This article aims to contribute to fill in these gaps. As underlined by several authors on the field, more comprehensive approaches need to be developed (Campbell Clark, 2000; Johnson, Lero, & Rooney, 2001; Thompson & Bunderson, 2001). My field study is qualitative. It focuses on female senior managers in order to identify how they develop strategies and supports across different domains of their everyday life, and how this may contribute to their subjective well-being through their meaning. The research has been conducted in the context of Switzerland, which among rich countries, is particularly challenging to working women in regard to work-life issues, despite the efforts undertaken in this direction (Dutu, 2014). Its theoretical framework is

inspired by the cultural approach in psychology (Ratner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1997, 1999). This choice is underpinned by the potential of this perspective to highlight the central role of meaning that emerges through activity anchored in daily life across different life domains. Psychological phenomena are hence understood in relation to their specific sociocultural setting (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Ratner, 1997). In this sense, values, norms, and rules cannot be reduced to variables; on the contrary, they are pivotal entities that organize and structure psychological processes. At the same time, they are continually interpreted and transformed by human beings through meaning (Engeström et al., 1999). Therefore, language is not merely representational; it is rather a psychological instrument (words as socio-cultural signs) used through individuals' activity to transform their social realities and their own self and psychological processes (Engeström, et al., 1999; Vygotsky, 1997). Within this perspective, subjectivity can be viewed as "intersubjective" given its social and historical anchorage (Santiago-Delefosse, 2014).

The next section presents the qualitative method that was implemented. Based on accounts of concrete activity, it was designed in order to enable self-reflexivity among female senior managers to access meaning constructions on their lived experience. I will then describe the main results, illustrated through women's accounts. They will be discussed in the light of existing literature, considering their implications regarding subjective well-being in relation to the articulation of different life domains in contemporary industrialized societies.

2. Method

2.1 Sociocultural Context of the Research

As highlighted by Bruner (1990, 2002), research needs to integrate "real life" situations and socially embedded narratives produced by "real people". This is why this study focuses on female senior managers who work in a specific context.

The Swiss context raises important challenges with regard to work-life issues, namely among women occupying positions of high responsibility. Encouraging the advancement of women in their careers has indeed become a major objective in this country (European Commission, 2010, 2014; Federal Office of Equality, 2010, 2012). But recent statistics (OCDE, 2011) show that female participation in senior management positions remains strongly underrepresented (5.7%) compared to their male counterparts (9.6%) despite an important integration of women in the labor force (46%) (Boye, 2009; Dutu, 2014; Thoenen, 2010). In Switzerland, women are also mainly responsible for domestic work and (child) care (UNECE, 2013; Federal Statistical Office, 2013). Indeed, it has been stated that men and women adhere to rather "conservative" values regarding their family life (Dutu, 2014). At the same time, there is also limited provision of child-care facilities and services, only available at a high cost. Although the general trend in the Swiss setting is to adopt a "modified male breadwinner" model (men working full-time and women half-time) (Bühlmann, Elcheroth, & Tattamanti, 2010), this research will target women working on a full-time basis, or at least 80%, to better grasp how they deal with the highly demanding context they are confronted with.

2.2 Participant Characteristics

The sample is composed of 20 women senior managers who accepted to participate (anonymously) in the study upon being fully informed of its objectives and methodology (21 women were originally part of the sample, but one passed away during the time our research took place; also five refusals were recorded and analyzed to improve the initial contact with this group). The size of the sample was determined in relation to the saturation point. Finding women holding senior management positions was not an easy task, given the low rate representing this category in Switzerland. Nevertheless, I was introduced to some of them through third parties. This strategy allowed me to contact women personally via email and to continue to define the sample randomly through the so-called "snowball effect". Participants were Swiss or European. Their average age was 43, a period within the life course when family, work and social responsibilities can be assumed. All participants worked as company or department head in organizations based in Switzerland. The sampling strategy aimed to cover the private sector (namely multinationals) and the public sector, focusing on main domains of activity in the Swiss context: healthcare and pharmaceutical sector, food and micro-technologies. Also, participants' family status was cautiously diversified, so that alternative patterns to the "traditional" work-family configuration could be included in the research: eleven women lived with a partner and nine of them lived alone. In addition, six of them had children under fifteen; nine of them had children over fifteen, and five of them were childless (see Appendix A).

From a qualitative point of view, the main interest lies in the inclusion of a relatively wide spectrum of lived experiences regarding different life status. This diversity also constitutes a valuable insight in the analysis of data (Mason, 1996). At the same time, the systematic and random sampling procedure allows for generalization,

under the condition that a group with similar characteristics is defined.

2.3 Procedure

In accordance with the research objectives and the sample's characteristics (tertiary level education, an increased cultural capital), a qualitative method was designed to collect our data (Note 1). This method aimed at producing narrative material (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2007) to understand how women make sense of their daily activity across life domains through an inductive approach (Riessman, 2008). Two concepts inspired this design: activity and reflexivity (del Rio Carral, 2014). The concept of activity was mobilized because of its potential to embrace the lived experience as a whole. While it allows to consider explicit and observable behaviors, gestures, practices grounded in concrete domains of daily life (different organizations and institutions conveying rules and norms), it also gives access to meaning constructions that are implicit and non observable (intentions and values), yet related to explicit behaviors. As stated by different authors (Vygotsky, 1997; Engeström et al., 1999), activity links the social and the situated dimensions of human behavior to the psychological dimension of attitudes that underpin them. Concerning reflexivity, this notion refers to the human capacity to turn back upon lived experience as part of the sense-making process (Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006; Mead, 1963; Ratner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1999).

Underpinned by the previous premises, the method implemented enabled participants' reflexivity in order to access meaning given to activity indirectly (Vygotsky, 1997), that is, in two steps. By first focusing on the description by participants of observable fulfilled practices across different life domains, its technique enabled the production, during a second stage, of the intentions and values related to these practices:

During the first stage (Time 1 (T1)), a structured in depth interview (1-2 hours per interview) was conducted to guide women throughout the factual and detailed description of observable behaviors having been performed the day before across different domains, as a "snapshot" of a complete day in their life (immediate lived experience). At this point, a time interval of six months was introduced to favor temporal and psychological distance toward immediate lived experience, that is, to transfer performed practices to a different context across time and space. In a second stage (Time 2 (T2)), the narrative material from T1 was used to guide in-depth interviews conducted across the same sample (1-2 hours per interview). At this stage, narratives from T1 became new "objects of analysis" to the women themselves through reflexivity, guided by the researcher. In addition, this two-step design allowed participants to position themselves concerning new life events, using their own T1 material as a concrete reference. The introduction of a temporal distance toward performed behavior motivated the production of narratives on expectations, possibilities, desires, and difficulties associated by women with subjective well-being in a self-reflective way. The collection of narratives was completed when data saturation had been achieved, that is when no new relevant information emerges with respect to the object under investigation (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), 2006; Miles & Huberman, 2014; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000).

Accounts from T1 and T2 (40 interviews) were fully transcribed (600-800 pages of narratives) and were analyzed exhaustively using two different techniques to enhance the quality of research (Fischer, 2006). The triangulation of methods was made up of a main technique of analysis of all collected data stemming from the narrative approach, namely a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). In addition, a secondary technique consisted in a lexicometric analysis (Alceste ® software), which was used to support interpretation of data. This software processed the vocabulary employed by women in T1 and T2 by counting frequencies of co-occurrent words and grouping them into classes (Aubert-Lotarski & Capdevielle-Mougnibas, 2002; Reinert, 1998). The triangulation strategy enabled to confirm the adequacy of the thematic analysis. The strategy of analysis also integrated dynamics of change concerning women's lives, since narratives produced in T1 were used to elaborate the interview guides for T2.

Instead of considering the researcher's influence as a «bias», the cultural approach argues that it is necessary to make this influence explicit (values, presuppositions, cultural belonging, gender issues, etc.) (Danziger, 1994). In adequacy with this premise, the researcher's reflexivity was included in the study by undertaking a critical analysis of assumptions produced as historically and culturally situated, rather than static facts drawn out of context (Danziger, 1994; Willig, 2001). This self-reflective procedure intended to address the need for research to turn back to itself as to take into account the situated nature of its results (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Clegg & Hardy, 1996). In addition, reflexivity allowed the appropriate distance between theory and the field (del Rio Carral & Santiago-Delefosse, 2015).

3. Results

This section will present main research results. The analysis of women's narratives highlights the central role of work in their accounts on lived experience. Work constitutes a major source of personal fulfillment and

satisfaction to the great majority of participants. Specificities regarding their accounts on their job as senior managers concern their self-awareness of having: the required qualifications and skills to be able to coordinate several parallel projects; the capacity to face the urge to produce effective outcomes regarding these projects in short periods of time, and the ability to be able to respond to urgent and important demands that can potentially arise at any time. However, all women underline the subjective importance to be enabled to maintain activities that are perceived outside work and/or family life, that is, as "parenthesis" to responsibilities and obligations.

Workplace Autonomy and Flexibility. Overall, interviewees refer to the unpredictable nature of their job, where autonomy and flexibility appear as important qualities. All participants value the significant degree of autonomy, allowing flexibility in time management, which is highly appreciated:

> Valentine
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> Managing is a multi-criteria procedure, but sometimes these criteria are not necessarily conscious: it's like a picture with a set of balloons and signals and I know where I'm heading! But I didn't necessarily do a logical procedure of analysis to evaluate what is most important in terms of priorities. And if something new arises, then it's not a problem because it's "elastic", in other words, it's open. (T2, q. 8)

Autonomy and flexibility at work seem beneficial not only to efficiently organize priorities stemming from the work domain. These qualities enhance certain "permeability" at psychological level between professional tasks and extraprofessional activities associated to four different life domains (work, family, social and personal lives) (see below Table 1). Meaning given to activity in a specific life domain (e.g., work) emerges in relation to that particular context, but also to what is experienced outside that context, in other life domains involving different expectations, values, norms, etc. that also mobilize women's subjectivity.

Table 1. Definition of four main life domains identified on the basis of thematic analysis of produced data

Life Domains	Description
Work	Work activities oriented towards project and team management
	Job perceptions involve identifying with features related to the type of activity, its sector and the hierarchical position within the organization
Family	Activities associated with family via interactions with children and/or partner
	Duties associated with (child)care
	Activities involving strong emotional bonds
Social	Shared social activities with chosen relationships (friends, associative life, sports, sociocultural activities, etc.)
Personal	Activities associated with being alone in an intentional manner (embodied and sociocultural)
	Emotional life defined by the relationship to another person, namely a partner

To illustrate this, the use of social networks (e.g., Facebook) often represents a way to explore friends', partners', and/or children's universes during work time without needing to disturb the flow of professional activity. Also, interviewees allow themselves some space at work to set social appointments with friends by e-mail or telephone; to address health or personal needs by calling the doctor, the hairdresser or the partner; and finally, to plan extracurricular activities for the children (among working mothers).

> Elisa (Note 2)
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> There are tiny things that take two minutes and that you can sneak into your day, and you cannot group them all together. That is, I could never work in a place where I am not able to take these personal spaces off, because I think that I invest a great deal in my job, I love my job, I have no regrets, but one of the things I appreciate about it is that if I spend eleven hours per day here, it means I am also able to dedicate 30 minutes, 3 minutes, 5 minutes, 2 minutes to other stuff. I couldn't do otherwise. I could not be a cashier at the supermarket or work in an … **Open space office?** Yes, where I could not function according to my

own rhythm. I take a few minutes to check my Facebook: this is not an "official break" because I am at the same time on the phone, attending a professional call. (T1, q. 127-129)

Parallel to permeability, all women describe the subjective need to build psychological boundaries meant to separate the lived experience related to each life realm as distinct from the rest of their day-to-day, but most of all, to preserve their experience in a certain time/space from obligations and responsibilities regarding other life domains. This dissociation constitutes a widely shared strategy among participants, signified as indispensable to feel less strained and more relaxed. According to narratives, psychological boundaries are enhanced through the possibility to change from one activity to another one, thereby influencing spatial, temporal, social and corporeal dimensions. This possibility to shift activities goes hand in hand with clear changes in women's intentions and attitudes.

Carla

So you never think about it in the car on your way home? No, never! Or rarely, because just before leaving I will take some time to conclude my working day and to put things in their own "little box" I'd say, so in the evening it's over, I do not think about work anymore. I am quite lucky to have a moment on my own to drive home, so I may listen to the news on the radio, so I turn the page when I arrive home if it's not a particularly busy period at work, you see? (T1, q. 45)

As confirmed through Carla's narratives in T2, it seems particularly important to be able to steer activity in different environments, so as to perceive the possibility of shifting from one life domain to another. This is signified as a resource that helps this participant to adjust to day-to-day constraints:

Carla

I fill my "basic needs", I recharge my batteries at home every evening. So then I am ready to head for a new "round", so for me it is extremely important, these moments, I find my resources for the new day to come. (T2, q. 43)

Psychological Functions Emerging from Daily Life. Both, intertwinements and boundaries described by female senior managers are not exempt from "micro-conflicts" stemming from their plural social participation, because of the heterogeneous nature of the experience in different life domains (del Rio Carral et al., 2009; del Rio Carral, 2014). Yet, these tensions between professional and nonprofessional priorities may give rise to various supports that can be implemented and used through activity in daily life by participants.

More particularly, there is a dialectical tension between two poles, each of them defined by a psychological function that plays a specific role in participants' subjective well-being. One of these poles concerns the feeling of control over daily responsibilities, and the other is defined as the letting go of control. Both poles become an integral part of subjective well-being when signified by women in relation to one another. They reveal constant adjustments that emerge as meaningful responses by interviewees to different social and embodied constraints experienced in daily life as: senior managers, women, companions, mothers, friends, etc.

Feeling of control. The first psychological function related to subjective well-being refers to the feeling of control, appearing across narratives as a necessity to be able to cope with numerous responsibilities, duties and obligations. Signified as a source of satisfaction, the feeling of control is most often associated with the work and family domains through the use of organizational supports. The latter include: the implementation of a routine outside work to facilitate domestic and family chores as opposed to the flexible nature of senior management activities at work; the anticipation and organization of work and family obligations through diversified strategies involving the use of written language (e.g., "to-do" lists, post-its, agendas), and finally, access to institutional supports that give structure to the day-to-day organization (e.g., maternal leave, parental leave, claiming a cut in work hours, etc.).

Furthermore, the feeling of control described in narratives requires the specific engagement of women in activity following a constant and intensive pace, namely focused at performing for practical purposes, and efficiency oriented. While organizational supports help an efficient adjustment to duties characterizing senior manager positions (meetings, travelling, coordinating projects, etc.), they are also used by women to better articulate (child)care and/or school schedules, extracurricular activities for children (among mothers), housework, meals, etc. Indeed, interviewees feel mainly responsible not only for work obligations, but for most issues outside work too.

Elisa

It is a lot of organization, but at least it works for me. I try to write everything down because I believe that

it allows you to find all the remaining "spaces" in your schedule. If you go through your list, you say: "well, now I have ten minutes so that I do not have enough time to do this or that, but I can write this little e-mail indeed". So that's it, that's how I manage. It is a mix of "what is important?" and "what is urgent?". Besides, I know naturally how much time each activity will take, more or less. **So the activity of writing things down helps you to feel in control?** Oh totally, yes, yes! Because I find that even the calendar does not show enough details… (T2, q. 6-7)

But beyond the pragmatic role of organization, the feeling of control can also respond to another concern, yet less developed in women's narratives. This concern is signified by a blurred feeling of anxiety related to the changing, demanding and unpredictable nature of participants' working context. Their engagement through complex organizational supports following an intensive pace of constant activity could hence represent a strategy in some cases:

Elisa

I think that if we sit down and rest and say: "ok, I am happy, I love my kids, I love my work, I love my family", well, tomorrow you loose everything! So you must never stop moving. Even to find a certain balance, always keep on moving. (T2, q. 61)

Finally, the ability to cope with work and family duties through organization can also provide women with a sense of "structure" regarding the day-to-day that seems profitable from their perspective. In particular, it allows free time for the development of activities outside work and family obligations. This strategy seems common to all interviewees, although participants with small children (under 15) find this more challenging than those with children aged over 15 or childless. It is important to note that some working mothers may nevertheless succeed in creating these spaces. Anna for instance is the mother of a four year-old. Because she works far from home, she is able to free time for herself, despite a heavy schedule involving daily trips for professional and family reasons.

Anna

It's how time is used, organization means being able to use time in the best possible way, so as to be able to take advantage, simply that, being able to group things together so as to free other spaces, and then being able to use them as in a profitable way. (T2, q. 13)

In sum, the psychological function related to the feeling of control is enabled among female senior managers through complex organizational supports. The latter are implemented according to their role to each woman, given her life context. The structuring value of supports is linked to their potential in coping with experienced institutional constraints, often professional and domestic. Also, women adjust by these means to a changing and unpredictable context at work. Finally, the feeling of control allows participants to free spaces that can be experienced outside the highly structured framework defined by their work and/or family lives. In this regard, it contributes to subjective well-being only when experienced in tension with the function described here below.

Letting go of control. The second psychological function that contributes to subjective well-being, on the basis of interviewees accounts, is the letting go of control. Interacting dialectically with the feeling of control, this function addresses an issue made explicit by most interviewees: the subjective awareness of needing to distance oneself from daily institutional constraints. This process is defined as the participants' ability to step out from certain duties, concerns and responsibilities (very often, but not always, from work and family lives), temporally and spatially, in order to achieve psychological detachment within a limited context and period of time. Activities associated with this second function mostly belong to the social and personal domains, even if some interviewees may refer to family and work activities as enhancing the letting go of control, depending on their intention and value in a given context. An excerpt from Dalia's narratives reveals how the mechanical gesture involved in washing the dishes is signified as a moment of escape, aimed at letting go on the psychological level:

Dalia

It is interesting to note that washing the dishes is related to well-being for you. Yes, because it's a mechanical gesture and the mind wanders. Actually it's an activity where I can think about anything I want, work if I want to, or anything else, since I don't need to focus when I do it. It's a moment of escape! (T2, q. 31)

This example shows the subjective importance to women of perceiving the possibility to engage in practices underpinned by the intention of letting go of control. Very often, this may be achieved through diversified embodied and sociocultural supports, used by women to actively create their own personal space. In Dalia's case, the embodiment of an automatic and repetitive gesture is associated with a moment of "escape" that releases her

mind from certain professional concerns, at least momentarily. Other activities call for the voluntary withdrawal from social interactions (e.g., meditate, stare at a landscape, go for a walk or for a drive, smoke a cigarette, etc.). Physical activities (swimming, skiing, walking, cooking, etc.) and sociocultural activities (travelling, reading, watching television, painting, going to a museum, to the theatre or to the movies) can also become means to let go of control by using the body and/or cultural tools that evoke sensations and feelings that are experienced as satisfactory, relaxing, agreeable or revitalizing.

In the following example, Beatrice describes the beneficial role of engaging in physical activities that are qualitatively different from one another, belonging to different contexts. One of them is related to positive sensations stemming from her own corporeality; the other underlines the subjective need to be in touch with nature in order to attain a state of meditation.

> Beatrice
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> The type of sport that I practice the most is an outdoor sport. Yet, I also practice Pilates, which is rather indoors. However, it is more for relaxing, because it's like yoga, it helps me to relax physically and also to establish a link with my own body. But the outdoor sport is rather to seek a bond with Nature. This allows me to distance myself from… it allows me to reach this meditation mood (T2, q. 29)

Regarding sociocultural activities, Florence's accounts reveal that going to the theatre can have an influence upon her psychological state, in the sense that it helps her to relate her difficulties at work to the difficulties that actors may also experience in their work. This process plays an important role by introducing the possibility, on the psychological level, of distancing oneself from a given life domain, in this case professional.

> Florence
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> There is pleasure, which is essential to me. I go to the theatre. What I like about it is that it is real, not like the movies. I have the impression of reaching another universe. And that world is in another time; and even if this time can be stressful to people playing on the stage it doesn't compare with what I experience at work, because I am just a spectator. But beyond what I see on stage, I also feel what they experience backstage, they also have a job and they also play a role. That's fascinating! (T2, q. 64)

In some cases, imagination is mobilized to open up new possibilities in women's lives: daily concerns or difficulties can be put into perspective through social exchange, enabling participants to learn from other life stories or the human condition more generally. Thus, daily challenges may become new objects of thought through reflexivity, and sometimes lead to action as the fruit of this process. Creativity and imagining possibilities can help female senior managers to alleviate experienced difficulties and, eventually, find solutions to them.

> Isabelle
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> I like to go trekking on my own, I love to walk in the desert because there is like a call; it soothes me. Sometimes I say to myself "but after all you are in an office with plenty of modern stuff, you earn money". Then, when I find myself in this basic world I enjoy it because I am able to find basic resources, I get to approach different people who talk about their daily lives, and then you realize that you have to stop complaining. I also love the silence of the desert, the peacefulness revitalizes and soothes me; most often I go there alone. My husband does not come with me because in this scenario, I think of it as a space of my own. T2 (q. 11)

So, given the results on two interrelated poles defining psychological functions, this section can be concluded by stating that subjective well-being engages corporeal, social and psychological dimensions through diversified activity, through the mobilization of different types of supports with specific intentions:

> Anna
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> It's a total duality between a very strict organization and a rapid tempo opposed to a total absence of rules, of complete inactivity! **Yes, you define yourself as an organized person yet you need moments of rest and inactivity, with no rhythm or rules.** Just letting go. (T2, q. 36-37)

Therefore, letting go of control can go hand in hand with perspective taking on the psychological level, but only in relation to the feeling of control experienced in certain life domains. Based on this analysis, subjective well-being emerges as a process rather than a state. Its complexity relies on the permeability and dissociation of meaning constructions emerging from a multiple and active social participation of female senior managers. It is important to note however, that specific social and physical conditions in critical life events can impede the possibility of developing meaningful activity. These living conditions have been reported elsewhere (del Rio

Carral, Fasseur, & Santiago-Delefosse, 2009; del Rio Carral, 2014).

4. Discussion

Previous research on the articulation of different life domains has widely explored this phenomenon from a macro-level interest in gender and family policies within organizations, as well as at individual level, geared toward the dominant use of standardized instruments to assess stress and subjective well-being (Allis & O'Driscoll, 2008; Brough, O'Driscoll, & Kalliath, 2005; Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007; Eby et al., 2005). From a critical standpoint, several authors have underlined the need for its broader consideration in research, beyond the "work-family" dyad (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Lambert, 1990; Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011). Through this study, I have raised this issue by focusing on the concrete daily life of female senior managers working in high responsibility jobs. The results have underlined the role of engaging in diversified activity in subjective well-being. Activity is always embedded in different life domains (work, family, social and personal lives), each of which conveys rules, norms, and values, often conflicting in terms of expectations (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). Contradictions and conflicts between different life priorities seem part of daily life, at least to a certain extent (Henriques et al., 1984).

Furthermore, female senior managers seem confronted with a particularly complex system of activities, where tensions can give rise to the use of supports aimed at coping with a highly demanding life context, characterized by unpredictability and change inherent in their job. Among these women, narratives appear in terms of intertwinements and dissociations between meanings given to activities grounded in different life domains. Their positive value is hence signified through a relational perspective (Ratner, 1997) in regard to one another, not only at pure cognitive level, but also through affects, corporeality and sociality. Autonomy and flexibility are two features characterizing senior management positions, which have proved to reinforce this mechanism. Also, the significant progress of technology contributes to permeability across life domains with the use of smartphones, computers, tablets, etc., especially among populations who have a privileged access to these supports, such as those who work in senior management positions (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). However, these women are led to set boundaries to preserve themselves from professional or family demands.

On the basis of the mechanism reflecting the articulation of different life domains, two psychological functions can be highlighted: the feeling of control and the ability to let go of control. A great body of quantitative research has assessed the impact upon well-being of each of these features separately, but the qualitative access to meaning constructions has allowed this study to envisage the links between concrete social constraints and psychological meanings, as well as the influence of the body, feelings, and sensations (Cornish, 2004; Cromby, 2007; Laurier, McKie, & Goodwin, 2000; Lyons & Chamberlain, 2006; Marks, 2002). Subjective well-being appears in this perspective as closely dependent on the possibility to engage in diversified activity through dialectical intertwinements that contribute to professional and personal growth (Wallon, 1942). In other words, activity in each life domain involves embodied needs, sensations, and social interactions that become manifest through antagonisms (Riegel, 1976; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1999).

Results regarding the feeling of control are coherent with quantitative research to assess the impact of "job control" on reducing stress in "work to family conflict" (Grönlund, 2007). Yet our qualitative approach has brought additional light in understanding women's experience in jobs with high demands and high control and who have flexible work conditions (Lundberg & Frakenhaeuser, 1999). As underlined by Hoschild (2003), control does not only help to reduce tensions felt between life priorities, but also seems to enhance agency. To our interviewees, organizational supports are defined as resources implemented in specific contexts so as to feel in control in the face of constant demands, not only as senior managers, but also as mothers and as women. The use of organizational supports as portrayed in this study is essential to women to efficiently deal with daily obligations. Moreover, they play a positive role in relation to senior managers specifically, by helping women to adjust to an uncertain environment at work, where urgent and important matters to attend to can arise at any time. But also, the fact of still being mainly responsible for family, care and domestic issues, seems to reinforce women's need for organization and control.

These results may contribute to explain the generalized tendency among women in our study to engage in constant activity, at least in part. Their intensive pace could also be due to the representation of their own position in the life path and in society more generally, in the sense that the pursuit of a career remains extremely challenging for women in many industrialized societies, such as Switzerland. It is hence possible that female senior managers see their work and life situation as the fruit of a personal choice, which they have to stand by, regardless of any obstacles and impediments that they encounter. Indeed, the intense and steady pace of activity

is often associated with the mobilization of the body as a solid and resilient entity despite tiredness and fatigue. In another article, we report a closer analysis of this aspect by revealing the ambivalences in physical resistance among female senior managers. While this corporeality certainly enables efficiency in some contexts, it also enhances the tendency to ignore any signs or physical symptoms revealing fatigue or pain. This may be a strategy allowing some to better cope with institutional obligations, even if it entails negative consequences for health and well-being (del Rio Carral, 2014). Indeed, the issue of the body cannot be neglected within the field of management, where productivity can be pursued to the detriment of workers' health and well-being; the social dimension of the body is thus inevitably linked to its corporeal dimension (Hardy & Thomas, 2015).

Considering the previous arguments, measures addressing work-life balance need to be extended beyond the workplace, to help women to implement improved organizational supports, namely to set aside personal spaces outside daily constraints and structures. This change would be beneficial especially to mothers, by improving childcare services, promoting external caring responsibilities, and facilitating flexibility in duty sharing as the Swiss sample has revealed (Costa, Sartori, & Åkerstedt, 2006; Grönlund, 2007). Indeed, as Bianchi and colleagues (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000) have suggested, employed mothers may experience a greater dilemma in reconciling work and family duties within the Swiss context, among other things due to the cultural expectations of devotion to children and the home. This might be particularly the case in our study given its dual focus on a sociocultural context with rather traditional views on family life and the gendered division of labor (Dutu, 2013; Fagnani, 2002; Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005), on the one hand, and a societal environment characterized by political and economic changes that have increasingly transformed the organization of work in management positions, on the other. A close analysis of results shows that women with children under 15 working as senior managers do not necessarily experience difficulties in responding to work and family obligations, because they seem to reconcile both life domains through constant organization. However, they may encounter a greater challenge in implementing personal spaces to develop both personal and social activities. Further research is still clearly needed to develop this argument. Besides, the influence of women's age, professional experience, and working status of their partner, on their subjective well-being, needs further investigation.

Critical approaches to the detrimental effects on health and well-being of current transformations of the labor market have been taken by some authors (Allvin & Aronsoon, 2003). They argue in particular that organizational flexibility stresses employees' individual responsibility in defining their own priorities and drawing their own boundaries between work and life. The ambivalence characterizing the regulation of work shows that flexibility and autonomy can be both structuring and burdensome for subjective well-being, witnessing the complexity underlying the human experience.

The function defined by the letting go of control points out the central role that possibility and spontaneity play in subjective well-being (Malrieu, 2000). This seems particularly true in the context of this study, where women lead an intense daily life, characterized by constant demands, numerous responsibilities and important organizational skills. The release of control is signified as a need, yet circumscribed to specific contexts, especially those allowing for the purposeful implementation and use of physical and/or sociocultural supports. Here again, results confirm the primal role of corporeality (Cromby, 2007; Santiago-Delefosse, 2014) across women's accounts, since it enables them to let go through relaxation, physical exercise, breathing sensations, etc. This finding has been previously discussed in the literature, where authors have claimed the positive impact of physical activities to release job stress (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Fisher et al., 2009; Hecht & Boies, 2009). My approach is nevertheless complementary to existing research. Through its focus on concrete activity, it takes into account the structuring role of context in meaning constructions that guide the use of supports regarding physical activities and corporeality. Besides, the sociocultural dimension defining some activities seems a powerful influence in steering psychological attitudes towards the letting go of control.

Meaning constructions related to the second function underline the central role of "letting go" as a "parenthesis" to existing rules and norms that shape female senior managers' experience as professionals, mothers, partners, and women. Its enablement seems dependent on possibilities that society may offer to rely upon structures providing a certain "backbone" to daily life. In the Swiss context, female senior managers seem to have insufficient structural help, either from the state or at work. Still, the implementation of "free spaces" remains a key support to help female senior managers to let go of control. Improvements are needed to enable these spaces, which should remain outside institutional surveillance so that they may be experienced as an "escape" from daily pressures, routines and social structures. The positive influence on subjective well-being of these "interstices", experienced as an aside from institutional settings, has been previously observed by Roussillon (1996), who highlights their pivotal psychological function in distancing oneself from events or difficulties at work. Their

positive influence can be extended to other life domains including family, social and personal lives.

As other authors have noted (Newman et al., 2014; Sonnentag, 2012), there is a beneficial impact on subjective well-being of psychological detachment during leisure time to support mental disconnection from work (ex. watching television, walking, doing sports, etc.). In this regard, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (2013) have analyzed the role of watching television, defined as an optimal leisure activity helping individuals to relax as well as recuperate. Yet the relational character of this function needs to be integrated in existing approaches on work-family conflict and work-life balance. Indeed, the intentional and purposeful traits that define the artistic, social, associative or political activities seem central to female senior managers, namely because they experience sensations and engage in social interactions that are qualitatively different from the function of control. The self-reflective capacity to put lived events into perspective seems crucial to appraise feelings, thoughts and opportunities from a different standpoint (Mead, 1963; Vygotsky, 1997).

In the present state of this research, the relationship between feelings of control and letting go could be specific to female senior managers in the Swiss context, given highly demanding yet flexible living conditions. These women seem to steer their activity according to a multi-faceted model of self-fulfillment, defined not only by work and family, but also by social and personal lives. As highlighted by Hogue (2010), being a woman and a senior manager remains a challenge in Switzerland, where "women's presence decreases as the hierarchical levels increase. They are quasi-absent on boards of directors and still very few of them dash into the adventure of entrepreneurship" (in Rossi, Borter, & Sansonnens, 2012, p. 43). This absence of feminine workforce at high levels of the hierarchy could be due to the slow implementation of work-life measures (Federal Statistical Office, 2013; The Economist, 2013) and the lack of state support for leave and care policies (Boye, 2009; Ferrarini & Sjöberg, 2010; Korpi, 2000; Thoenen, 2010) despite recent encouragements toward gender equality in private and public organizations. Socio-political implications for this category nevertheless call for a broader reflection on how to promote appropriate policies at institutional level that respect spaces of subjectivity exempt from institutional regulation.

To conclude, the interest of conducting research on female senior managers in Switzerland is to consider this case as prototypical in understanding the articulation of life domains and subjective well-being. Research is needed to go beyond the ideal of serenity and balance promoted across major trends in "work-life conflict" and "work-life balance" (Diener & Ryan, 2009), since discrepancies are inherent in daily life (Riegel, 1976). Research can greatly benefit from qualitative approaches to better explore how concrete life circumstances are experienced through ambivalences regarding their role and effect (Mielewczyk & Willig, 2007).

At the same time, since qualitative approaches are geared toward the understanding of singularity, variability and complexity (Ratner, 1997), the analyses presented in this article exist in relation to a certain framework and given moment in history (Santiago-Delefosse, 2011; Riegel, 1976). This is why they need to be considered cautiously with regard to their scope and transferability (Danziger, 1994; Vygotsky, 1999). Several limitations can be noted, such as the specificity of the sociocultural context, the size of the sample and the complexity of the methodological design.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to opening new perspectives in the field, as a cornerstone in understanding how meaning constructions emerging from activity across different life domains influence the embodied, social and psychological dimensions involved in subjective well-being.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

Note 1. For a complete description of the premises underpinning the characteristics of our methodological design, please refer to: del Rio Carral, 2014.

Note 2. In bold, interventions by the researcher/interviewer.

Appendix A

Participants' characteristics

	Name*	Life status	Child(ren) yes/no	Child(ren)'s age	Work rate**	Activity sector
1	Anna	In a relationship	Yes	Under 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational pharmaceutical company
2	Beatrice	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of private company Services Sector
3	Bernadette	In a relationship	Yes	Under 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational pharmaceutical company
4	Carla	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company
5	Dalia	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company
6	Diane	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of Multinational micro-technology company
7	Elisa	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational pharmaceutical company
8	Florence	Single	Yes	Over 15	part time	Senior manager of

	Name*	Life status	Child(ren) yes/no	Child(ren)'s age	Work rate**	Activity sector
					(equal to or more than 80%)	department of Public Health sector
9	Gabrielle	Single	No	none	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational pharmaceutical company
10	Greta	In a relationship	Yes	Under 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company
11	Isabelle	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department in public health sector
12	Jeanne	In a relationship	Yes	Under 15	part time (equal to or more than 80%)	Senior manager of department of Multinational Agri-food company
13	Joëlle	Single	No	none	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company
14	Monica	In a relationship	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of Multinational Pharmaceutical company
15	Patricia	Single	Yes	Under 15	part time (equal to or more than 80%)	Senior manager of private company Services Sector
16	Rebecca	In a relationship	Yes	Under 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company
17	Sally	Single	No	none	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational pharmaceutical company
18	Tilda	Single	No	none	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational pharmaceutical company
19	Valentine	Single	Yes	Over 15	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company

	Name*	Life status	Child(ren) yes/no	Child(ren)'s age	Work rate**	Activity sector
20	Véra	Single	No	None	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company
21	Violette	Single	No	None	full time (100%)	Senior manager of department of multinational agri-food company

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