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### Loyalty in humanity

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# 2

## **ENABLING WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN AN UNBALANCED ENVIRONMENT: JOB AUTONOMY AND TRUST IN MANAGEMENT AMONG HUMANITARIAN AID EXPATRIATES<sup>4</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Most work-life balance research has taken place in conventional organizational contexts. Only a limited body of research has examined the work-life satisfaction of workers who live abroad and reside outside the typical 'family' or 'life' domain. The aim of this study is to extend existing research by examining work-life satisfaction in the context of humanitarian action. Using unique survey data (N=142), we engage in an ordinal logistic regression analysis with results revealing that high levels of autonomy are positively related to work-life balance satisfaction. When levels of autonomy are high and trust in management is low, however, the effect of autonomy on work-life balance satisfaction is negative. When trust in management is high, autonomy has a positive effect on work-life balance satisfaction, indicating a buffering effect of trust in management on the negative effects of high autonomy among expatriate humanitarian aid field workers.

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter is based on a revised paper co-authored with Melinda Mills, Liesbet Heyse, Rafael Wittek and Vincenzo Bollettino currently resubmitted to an international peer-reviewed journal. A previous version was presented at the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action Conference in Hartford U.S.A, November 2013.

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

A satisfactory balance between work and non-work is a central concern for employees and organizations (Barnett, 1998). The workplace has been characterized as a 'greedy institution' (Coser, 1974) that has the potential to cause role conflicts in the life and family domain. Understanding work-life balance is vital since it has implications for individual and family functioning: work-life conflict has been shown to be predictive of depression, alcoholism, emotional exhaustion, and lowered life satisfaction (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991; Bedeian, Burke, & Moffett, 1988; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Work-life conflict likewise has consequences for organizations and is associated with higher rates of turnover, absenteeism, lower performance and job dissatisfaction (e.g., Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins, 2001).

A large body of literature addresses the antecedents of work-life balance such as flexibility (organization, timing, and location), work hours, and family-friendly policies (for extensive overviews see Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Most research focuses on conventional organizational contexts, which have similar work-life interfaces. Only a limited body of research has examined the work-life satisfaction of workers in less conventional contexts, such as of those who live abroad and reside outside of their typical 'family' or 'life' environment. Exceptions are studies of expatriate employees (e.g., Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001 and Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012) and military families (e.g., Karin, 2009).<sup>a</sup> In these transnational contexts,<sup>b</sup> employees are literally removed from their 'life' and the accompanying strain- and time-based demands. The aim of the current study is to extend existing work-life balance literature by examining perceptions of work-life satisfaction in the non-conventional work context of humanitarian aid provision.

Humanitarian expatriates face unique demands and draw on different resources to mitigate work-life conflict. The work-life balance research often focuses first on *protected leave policies* to take time off for caregiving as a way to balance work and life. However, leave in the humanitarian context has an additional unique function. During field missions, humanitarian expatriates are often required to leave active duty to recuperate away from the mission site, similar to 'exigency leave' in the military (Karin, 2009). Time between missions is also often unpaid to deal with the uncertain nature of crises and funding (Loquercio, Hammersley & Emmens, 2006).

Second, most literature on work-life flexibility/balance implicitly assumes that workers have the ability to adapt or reduce working hours and schedule flexibility (Mills & Täht, 2010) or change their working location (Hill, Ferris & Mårtinson, 2003). Humanitarian aid workers cannot reduce working hours or adapt their workplace since they are often placed in remote areas with a compromised communications and physical infrastructure. Third, most humanitarian expatriates experience a unique work-life conflict since they must leave behind friends and family due to employment and safety constraints (Ahmad 2002; Lindenberg, 1999; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino, 2012; Takeuchi, 2010). The lack of the physical presence of a partner, children, or parents to care for in their location, for instance, fundamentally alters the constraints related to their employment and time allocation (Perlow, 1998; Wotschack & Wittek, 2008).

Finally, the often remote location and inherent danger for humanitarian field workers generates markedly different levels of job autonomy, and reliance on and relationship to management. Because of the urgent nature of their work, humanitarian workers must make rapid, independent decisions that can have significant consequences, making job autonomy an inherent aspect of the job (Walkup, 1997; Fox, 2001). The importance of trust in management is likewise crucial in such a highly risky environment (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995).

Due to the unique differences of work-life boundaries, time-based (e.g., work hours, schedules) and strain-based demands (e.g., psychological spillover between domains) of humanitarian workers, we enter relatively uncharted theoretical and empirical terrain, adopting theory related to ‘enabling resources’ and trust in management. The former refers to ‘structural or psychological assets that may be used to facilitate performance, reduce demands, or generate additional resources’ (Voydanoff, 2004a: 398, 399; Voydanoff, 2004b). Enabling assets such as job autonomy may be crucial for mitigating work-life conflict (e.g., Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2001; Berg, Kallebery & Appelbaum, 2003) or, conversely, may have detrimental effects due to a lack of time parameters and over compliance or tendency to overwork in emergency situations (Briscoe, 2007; Van Echtelt, Glebbeek & Lindenberg, 2006; Jones & Butler, 1980). Trust in management is likewise a crucial condition for work-life satisfaction (Harvey, Kelloway & Duncan-Leiper, 2003) since it can both reduce work strain and buffer the potentially negative effects of high job autonomy.

This study provides several contributions to work-life research. First, by examining the unique context of humanitarian field workers, specifically job autonomy and trust in management, we go beyond the predominant focus on work-life balance as strictly caregiver or flexibility policies. Second, we focus on perceived as opposed to objective work-life balance, since the former has been shown to be more salient in its impact on individuals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A third contribution is that to our knowledge this is the first empirical study to examine work-life balances among humanitarian workers. Despite the strong societal importance of this group, quantitative empirical studies are scarce (Teegen, Doh & Vachani, 2004; Fechter, 2012). The lack of data is attributed to difficulties in collecting information from employees scattered over remote and often dangerous locations in the world. The primary data collected in this study therefore offers a unique window into this vital – yet seldom examined – non-profit humanitarian group. Finally, dissatisfaction with work-life balance often has negative organizational outcomes, such as high turnover, with turnover rates in the humanitarian sector at extremely high levels (Loquercio et al., 2006; Richardson, 2006; Telford & Cosgrave, 2007). This study therefore offers a practical direction for both humanitarian and transnational work organizations in identifying the factors that might contribute to dissatisfaction in work-life balance.

## **2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

We assume that individuals’ own demands can be balanced by enabling resources, which in turn contribute to work-life satisfaction (Voydanoff, 2005). Enabling resources are the structural or psychological assets that can help individuals cope with work demands and thus balance work and life (Voydanoff, 2004a). In the work domain, they often refer to job design characteristics (Voydanoff, 2005), with job autonomy

deemed a most influential job-related enabling resource (Voydanoff, 2004b; 2005). We extend this framework by arguing that the effect of the enabling resource ‘autonomy’ is contingent on an employees’ trust in management.

### **2.2.1 Autonomy as an Enabling Resource for Work-Life Balance**

The work-life literature has focused on autonomy and flexibility in setting working hours, location and organization of work, which have been shown to exhibit a positive influence on work-life balance (e.g. Anderson et al., 2002; Berg et al., 2003; Voydanoff, 2004a). In the humanitarian aid context, autonomy is related to control and order over tasks, and the pace and organization of work. Humanitarian fieldwork often involves unpredictable complex tasks that are not necessarily carried out in a standard sequence. Rather, they require a holistic and flexible approach, where the employee can adapt rapidly, and autonomously (Dertouzos, Lester, & Solow, 1989). By giving employees broader responsibilities, encouraging them to contribute, and giving room to make mistakes, employers can create an environment based on flexibility, trust, and openness (Perlow, 1998). According to Drucker (1988), employees must be treated as specialists who direct and discipline themselves. To achieve this, considerable autonomy is transferred to the employee.

The implicit assumption behind this rationale is that employees are optimal self-managers, capable of planning, structuring and deciding on diverse requirements, including time allocation and balancing work and life. An implicit assumption is that autonomy reduces the overlap of “work and non-work pressures... in the same block of time” (Golden, 2001: 1158). If autonomy enables an employee to control the timing and organization of work, the expectation is that it will enhance the potential to balance work and non-work demands better, leading to higher levels of work-life satisfaction. Even if autonomy implied greater demands, the ability to structure and control one’s working schedule or the way in which the job is done will act as an enabling resource and help prevent work from interfering with the family or other domains (Anderson et al., 2002). Following this argumentation, our first hypothesis is:

*H1: The more autonomy an expatriate humanitarian employee has, the higher the level of satisfaction with work-life balance.*

### **2.2.2 Trust in Management and Work-Life Balance Satisfaction**

Research has also shown that autonomy may have detrimental effects on work-life balance (Briscoe, 2007; van Echtelt et al., 2006; Jones & Butler, 1980) or boundary demands (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Voydanoff, 2004a). Although high levels of autonomy might seem beneficial in humanitarian work contexts, it could also allow employees to focus just on tasks and finishing projects, and ignore the overall number of working hours (van Echtelt et al., 2006; Shortland & Cummins, 2007).

Here we can draw upon boundary theory, which states that when the boundaries between work and family are overly permeable and flexible, it can result in resource drain or negative spillover (Ashforth et al., 2000; Voydanoff, 2004a). Such boundary demands often refer to time- and strain-based demands, where time-based demands usually refer to working hours and schedules or time for caregiving. In the humanitarian context, where employees serve on longer missions in often remote locations, time-based demands refer to lack of personal time when in the field and a

compression of family, friend and leisure-time allocation when workers come back for breaks from the field. Strain-based demands refer to the psychological spillover where strain in one domain, such as work, spills over into one's personal life domain thereby influencing role performance in each domain, as when negative attitudes and behavior experienced at either work or home spillover into the other domain. This includes stress, time pressure and role conflict (cf. Greenhaus & Beutel, 1985; Rothbard, 2001). This is highly characteristic of the humanitarian work context, where both time-based and strain-based demands can thus be expected to be high and contribute to low satisfaction with the work-life balance.

Since the enabling resource of autonomy might not be a sufficient condition for satisfaction in work-life balance, trust in management could be decisive. Following Cook and Wall (1980), trust in management is defined as positive expectations regarding management, emphasizing faith in the good intentions of managers, confidence in the actions and competence of managers, and confidence that managers will act in a fair, reliable, and ethical manner.

Trust in management is crucial for humanitarian expatriates in unpredictable and sometimes dangerous working environments, because it can help to reduce strain from work. When organizational demands are strong and there is a constant pressure to finish tasks, employees might fear the consequences of the failure to meet demands. Employees with a high degree of trust in management may experience less strain because they feel confident that their managers will treat them fairly, even if they do not meet all the demands (cf. Friedman, Christensen & De Groot, 1998). As a result, trust in management can lead to lower levels of fear of the consequences for failure to complete the assigned work (Harvey et al., 2003). This might lead to a greater control over one's situation (Anderson et al., 2002), thereby reducing spillover to the non-work domain, resulting in a higher satisfaction with an employee's work-life balance.

Employees are vulnerable due to their location in highly unpredictable and high-risk environments. When trust in management is high, employees are expected to be more prone to accept their vulnerability and the possibility of failure and reach higher levels of equanimity that would in turn lead to higher satisfaction with the work-life balance. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H2: The higher the level of trust in management, the higher the level of satisfaction with work-life balance.*

### **2.2.3 The Buffering Role of Trust in Management**

Since humanitarian expatriate employees generally enjoy a high level of autonomy and their decisions can have far-reaching consequences for the client population in distress (Walkup, 1997; Fox, 2001), employees need to trust that management will support their decisions. Therefore we contend that autonomy leads to higher levels of satisfaction with work-life balance where trust is high, not low. In other words, high trust reduces employees' tendencies to respond negatively to high levels of autonomy. In highly uncertain, often dangerous contexts, direct contact with the home office is not always within reach. High-autonomy employees therefore need to be able to trust management to support their decision-making and help them manage their high levels of autonomy.

Additionally, employees need to trust that management will not punish them if their decision turns out to be a wrong one (Siegel, Post, Brockner, Fishman, & Garden, 2005). If employees make either or both of these trust-related inferences, they are likely to maintain relatively high levels of satisfaction with their work-life balance in the face of high autonomy relative to their counterparts who experience similarly high levels of autonomy but who trust less in management support. If employees with high levels of autonomy do not trust their management, they could literally be left on their own in a remote location, which may lead to frustration and increased dissatisfaction with their work-life balance. This leads to a negative effect of autonomy on satisfaction with their work-life balance and the following hypotheses:

*H3a: Autonomy will have a positive effect on the satisfaction with work-life balance for expatriate humanitarian employees who have high levels of trust in management.*

*H3b: Autonomy will have a negative effect on the satisfaction with work-life balance for expatriate humanitarian employees who have low levels of trust in management.*

#### **2.2.4 Other Factors Influencing Work-Life Balance**

Although we maintain that autonomy and trust in management are key factors in understanding the work-life balance of humanitarian field workers, we are aware that other factors can play a role. Therefore, in our analysis we control for factors salient in this context or in work-life balance research in general. These include job stress, since the very nature of expatriate work, and especially humanitarian work, involves high levels of uncertainty (Shortland & Cummins, 2007). Job stress is found to lead to role pressure and incompatibility (Greenhaus & Beutel, 1985) which can then influence the life domain, decreasing the satisfaction with work-life balance in general. Furthermore, we will also control for marital status.<sup>c</sup> Working hours are also controlled for as they have been shown to have a negative effect on work-life balance (e.g. Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). Finally, we control for the employee's level of commitment.

### **2.3 DATA AND METHOD**

#### **2.3.1 Data**

To test the proposed hypotheses, we used the Humanitarian Employee Survey (HES), primary survey data collected from a sample of expatriate humanitarian aid workers currently working for one of the largest humanitarian aid organizations in the field: Médecins Sans Frontières. The research team was granted access to use the HES to gain information on the career, job characteristics, and work-life perceptions of humanitarian expatriate staff working for MSF Operational Center Amsterdam (MSF-OCA).

To ensure optimal response rates among this hard-to-reach population in the most remote parts of the world, we provided two reply options, identical in content. The first was a regular online format, for employees whose internet connection was

stable enough for the 45-odd minutes needed to fill out the survey. The second option was an attachment, which could be downloaded if there was a connection, filled in off-line, and returned when the connection was available again.

The HES was sent to 550 expatriate fieldworkers. Two additional reminders were sent over a period of eight weeks. We received completed surveys from 168 expatriate field workers, a response rate of 31%. Of these 168 respondents, 54 (32%) used the off-line option, indicating that the response rate would have been substantially lower if we had only provided the online option. This rate is consistent with the average response rate in regular expatriate samples obtained in other studies by Shaffer et al. (2001), Birdseye and Hill (1995), Black and Stephens (1989) and Naumann (1993).

To assess the representativeness of our data, we compared the demographics of the sample to the characteristics of the full organizational population in terms of gender, occupational groups, and nationality. The MSF HRM department provided this information. Although the higher-level employees were slightly overrepresented, the sample was largely representative for occupational groups, gender, and nationality (see Appendix).

After removing cases with missing responses on our main variables, we were able to analyze a final sample size of 142. Additional analyses (available upon request) showed no significant differences between the missing and non-missing group in relation to work-life balance. As Table 2.1 shows, the sample has an almost equal gender split, with the mean age of the respondents 38.7 years. The average respondent worked an average of 57.1 hours a week (actual, not contractual hours). Overall there were moderate levels of work-life satisfaction (3.06 out of 5), slightly higher job stress levels, and a high level of job autonomy and organizational commitment (4.15 and 4.02 out of 5, respectively). Mean level of trust in management is slightly more positive than negative.

### 2.3.2 Measurements

**Dependent variable.** The dependent variable is *satisfaction with work-life balance* measured on a seven-point Likert scale using a pre-tested standard survey question (ESS, 2006): 'How satisfied are you with the balance between the time you spend on paid work and the time you spend on other aspects of your life?' (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied). To ensure that categories contained enough cases to avoid zero-cell problems, we collapsed 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied' into one category as well as 'very dissatisfied' and 'dissatisfied', constructing a five-point scale (1 = dissatisfied to 5 = satisfied).

**Independent variables.** *Job autonomy* was measured by five items on a five-point scale using a pre-tested standard measure (WERS, 2004) (1 = none to 5 = a lot). The scale has high reliability ( $\alpha = .81$ ) and included the following items. In general, how much autonomy do you have over the following in your current job: 'what tasks you do in your job', 'the pace at which you work', 'how you do your work', 'the order in which you carry out your tasks', and 'the time you start or finish your day'. Because the distribution is highly left-skewed (mean = 4.15, see Table 2.1) the variable was dichotomized, comparing the highest scores with the lower ones. The cutoff point is 4, with scores lower than 4 indicated by 0, and 4 and higher indicated by 1. *Trust in management* was measured by six items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly



disagree to 5 = strongly agree) again using a pre-tested standard measure (Cook & Wall, 1980). The scale ( $\alpha = .72$ ) included the following items: 'management at my organization is sincere in its attempts to meet the employees' point of view', 'our organization has a poor future unless it can attract better managers', 'management can be trusted to make sensible decisions for the organization's future', 'I feel quite confident that the organization will always try to treat me fairly', and 'our management would be quite prepared to benefit by deceiving the workers'. Items 2 and 6 were coded in reverse direction to indicate more trust in management when higher values were indicated.

**Control variables.** The following control variables were included in the analysis. *Job stress* was measured by four items on a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = always) following standard measures (ISSP, 2005). The scale ( $\alpha = .71$ ) included the following: In your job, how often do you 'come back from work exhausted?', 'have to do hard physical work?', 'find your work stressful?', and 'perform dangerous tasks?' and was left as a five-point scale. *Work hours* was measured by 'How many hours a week do you actually work?' (not according to contract). *Organizational commitment* was measured by five items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The items for the scale were constructed by combining the organizational commitment scales constructed by Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) and Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). The scale ( $\alpha = .73$ ) included the following items: 'I am proudly talking to others about this organization', 'I do not feel a sense of belonging to my organization', 'I often think that it was a mistake on my part to choose this organization over others I had considered', 'I do not feel emotionally attached to this organization', and 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization'. Items 2, 3, and 4 were coded in reverse direction to indicate more organizational commitment when higher values were indicated. Because of the highly left-skewed distribution (mean = 4.02, see Table 2.1) this variable was dichotomized, comparing the highest scoring group ( $\geq 4 = 1$ ) with the lower. Marital status was controlled for by including a dummy variable *married* (married = 1) and *age* and *gender* (female = 1) were also added as control variables.<sup>d</sup>

### 2.3.3 Method of Analysis

We estimated an Ordinal Logistic Regression since the dependent variable satisfaction with work-life balance contains five ordered categories (1 = dissatisfied to 5 = satisfied). Our ordinal response variable assumes that levels of satisfaction have a natural order (low to high), but distances between adjacent levels are unknown. An additional advantage is that the model is not sensitive to variable distributions in the way that many other regression models such as OLS models are (Long, 2006). We also checked for the parallel regression assumption, which our models did not violate. We ran three models, where we were able to test each hypothesis. All variables in the model have been centered at their grand means. Dummy variables were left in their raw metric as well as the dependent variable. In the first model, only the controls will be included to examine the possible differences in explaining the satisfaction with work-life balance. In the second model, the organizational enabling resources (autonomy and trust in management) on which our hypotheses are based will be added. The third model includes the proposed interaction effect between job autonomy and trust in management.

## 2.4 RESULTS

Table 2.1 shows that both autonomy ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ) and trust in management ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ) relate to satisfaction with work-life balance. Table 2.2 shows the results of the ordinal logistic regression analyses. Consistent with H1, higher autonomy is related to higher satisfaction with work-life balance. Those with high levels of job autonomy indicate significantly higher levels of satisfaction with work-life balance than employees indicating lower levels of job autonomy ( $<4$ ) ( $\beta = .79, p < .05$ ). When we examined this effect in detail, however, the positive main effect was driven by the overrepresentation of employees in higher trust categories, in other words, those who had sufficient levels of trust to enjoy autonomy. Since employees in the higher trust categories show a stronger positive effect for autonomy, we tend to interpret this seemingly positive effect with caution.

H2, which predicted a direct positive effect of a higher level of trust in management ( $\beta = 1.38, p < .01$ ) on satisfaction with work-life balance, initially finds support in Model 2. However, when the interaction term is included in Model 3, the main effect of trust in management disappears, suggesting that trust does not seem to matter for employees having low autonomy, forcing us to reject H2.

**Table 2.1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N=142)

|   | M     | SD   | 1      | 2     | 3      | 4    | 5      | 6    | 7   | 8     | 9 |
|---|-------|------|--------|-------|--------|------|--------|------|-----|-------|---|
| 1. Satisfaction work-life balance         | 3.06  | 1.42 |        |       |        |      |        |      |     |       |   |
| 2. Age                                    | 38.66 | 8.62 | .14    |       |        |      |        |      |     |       |   |
| 3. Female <sup>a</sup>                    | .51   |      | .05    | -.06  |        |      |        |      |     |       |   |
| 4. Married <sup>a</sup>                   | .27   |      | .22**  | .21** | .38*** |      |        |      |     |       |   |
| 5. Actual work hours                      | 57.09 | 9.07 | -.14   | -.01  | -.09   | -.13 |        |      |     |       |   |
| 6. Job stress                             | 2.89  | .57  | -.29** | -.13  | -.12   | -.09 | .32*** |      |     |       |   |
| 7. Job autonomy <sup>a</sup>              | .68   |      | .17*   | .02   | -.21** | .11  | -.01   | .04  |     |       |   |
| 8. Organizational commitment <sup>a</sup> | .62   |      | .13    | .04   | .08    | -.10 | -.05   | -.07 | .06 |       |   |
| 9. Trust in management                    | 3.42  | .58  | .39*** | .12   | -.06   | .19* | -.10   | -.04 | .05 | .23** |   |

a. Percentages are given for dichotomous variables

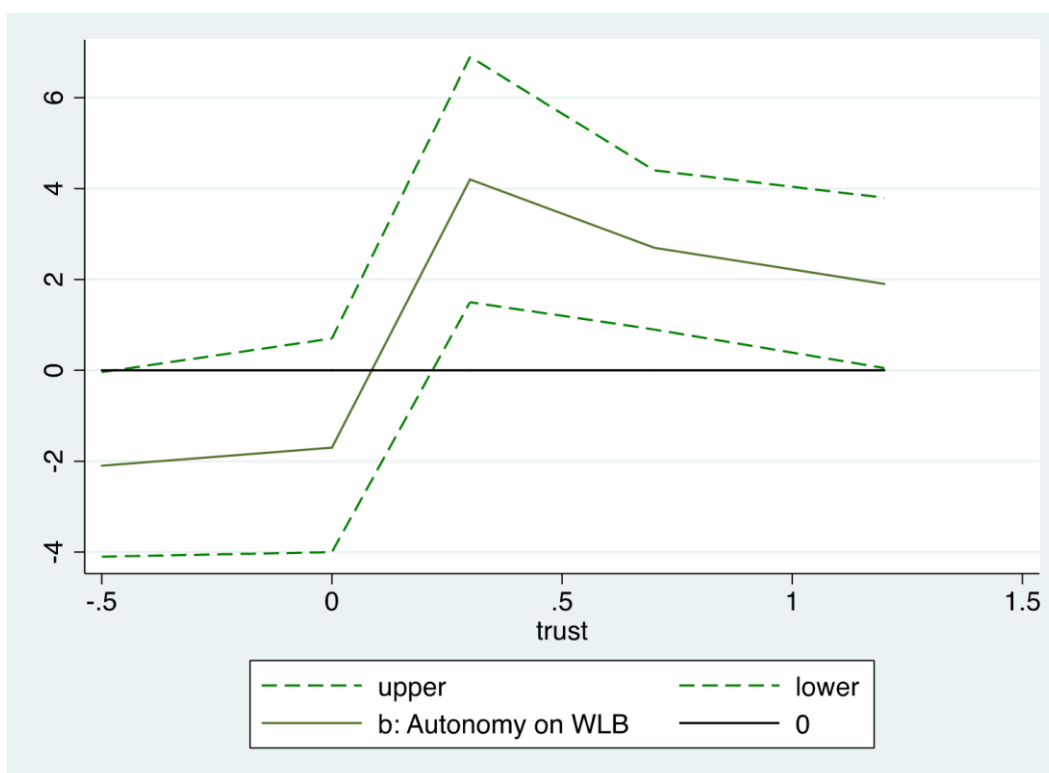
Notes: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 2.2.** Results of Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis on Satisfaction with Work-life Balance (N = 142)

|                              | Model 1 |      |                | Model 2 |      |                | Model 3  |      |                |
|------------------------------|---------|------|----------------|---------|------|----------------|----------|------|----------------|
|                              | B       | SE B | e <sup>B</sup> | B       | SE B | e <sup>B</sup> | B        | SE B | e <sup>B</sup> |
| Age                          | .01     | .02  | 1.01           | .01     | .02  | 1.01           | .01      | .02  | 1.01           |
| Female                       | .43     | .33  | 1.54           | .59     | .35  | 1.80           | .67      | .35  | 1.96           |
| Married                      | 1.05**  | .39  | 2.85           | .81*    | .40  | 2.24           | .95*     | .40  | 2.58           |
| Work hours                   | -.01    | .02  | .10            | .01     | .02  | 1.01           | .01      | .02  | 1.01           |
| Job stress                   | -.81**  | .29  | .45            | -1.01** | .30  | .36            | -1.13*** | .31  | .323           |
| Org commitment (1 = high)    | .55     | .32  | 1.73           | .10     | .33  | 1.10           | .00      | .34  | 1.00           |
| Job autonomy (1 = high)      |         |      |                | .79*    | .35  | 2.21           | .80*     | .35  | 2.23           |
| Trust in management          |         |      |                | 1.38*** | .31  | 3.95           | .03      | .48  | 1.03           |
| Trust in management*Autonomy |         |      |                |         |      |                | 2.29***  | .63  | 9.89           |
| $\chi^2$                     | 23.6    |      |                | 49.6    |      |                | 63.8     |      |                |
| <i>Df</i>                    | 6       |      |                | 8       |      |                | 9        |      |                |

Notes: \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

To test H3a and H3b on the role of trust in management in the relation between autonomy and satisfaction with work-life balance we turn to Model 3 of (see Table 2.2 and Figure 2.1). Model 3 included the interaction between autonomy and trust in management. In accordance with H3a, Model 3 shows that autonomy ( $\beta = 2.29, p < .01$ ) has a positive effect on work-life balance for employees with high levels of trust in management. To illustrate the interaction effect and examine H3b, which proposed that autonomy would have a negative effect on satisfaction with work-life balance if trust in management were low, we estimated the effect of autonomy on satisfaction with work-life balance for five quantiles of trust categories (centered on 0).



**Figure 2.1.** Estimates of autonomy on satisfaction with work-life balance (WLB) for five quantiles of trust categories (centered on 0) plus confidence intervals

We created 20 percent quantiles to provide estimations based on the empirical division of cases across trust groups. As Figure 2.1 shows, when trust levels are low, the effect of autonomy is actually negative, affirming H3b. In other words, when employees' doubts outweigh their trust in management (trust < 0 in Figure 2.1) autonomy negatively influences work-life balance. If however, trust outweighs doubt in management (trust > 0 in Figure 2.1) autonomy has a positive effect on work-life balance, affirming H3a. We see a sharp increase in the effect of autonomy on work-life balance once trust outweighs doubt. To conclude, the interaction effect seems not to be linear but strongly divides between employees with more doubt than trust and employees with more trust than doubt, while for the former autonomy is harmful and for the latter it is beneficial.

We further see that age, gender, and commitment are not related to satisfaction with work-life balance. Being married is positively related to work-life balance ( $\beta = .95, p < .05$ ), indicating that married employees are more likely to indicate satisfaction with

their work-life balance than non-married counterparts. Working hours are not related to satisfaction with work-life balance. Job stress ( $\beta = -1.13, p < .01$ ) is negatively related to satisfaction with work-life balance: the more job stress is indicated the less likely employees are to indicate being satisfied with their work-life balance.

## 2.5 DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to extend our existing knowledge of work-life satisfaction by examining the unique employment context of humanitarian aid provision. To achieve this goal we needed to go beyond the standard assumptions of work-life balance literature – such as flexibility of time or working location – to examine the importance of enabling resources such as job autonomy and trust in management. This research question also required a different empirical approach and necessitated collecting primary data on this hard-to-reach population. The central finding of this study was that autonomy has a positive influence on satisfaction with work-life balance if trust in management is high and a negative effect when trust in management is low. The study thus reinforces arguments that in highly demanding working environments, where classic measures to increase work-life balance are not feasible, autonomy does not inevitably lead to increased work-life satisfaction but strongly depends on the employee's trust in the management of the organization. We also add to the literature by showing that without trust in management, autonomy can actually have a detrimental effect on satisfaction with work-life balance.

### 2.5.1 Implications for Research

Our theoretical and empirical approach generated new insights into the relationship between autonomy, trust in management, and work-life balance satisfaction. First, the study highlights the importance of the role of trust in management in the relationship between autonomy and work-life balance satisfaction. It empirically demonstrates that trust is needed to achieve work-life balance satisfaction in high-autonomy work contexts. Likewise it demonstrates that job design-enabling resources such as job autonomy may have limited or even detrimental effects in non-conventional work settings. Although it was not the focus of our study, job stress strongly influenced work-life balance whereas commitment and work hours did not. The absence of any impact for working hours or commitment is likely related to an overall higher number of hours (mean: 57 hours/week) and higher commitment, resulting in negligible variation. The impact of marital status on work-life satisfaction also diverged from classic findings, likely due to the composition of humanitarian expatriates, with only 27% married and 19% with children.

### 2.5.2 Managerial Implications

The present study demonstrates how trust in management in a highly demanding non-conventional working environment can affect work-life satisfaction. The results of this study could contribute to employment policy in similar contexts such as the expat or military environment in three central ways. First, trust in management can enhance the positive effects of job autonomy for workers. A positive climate of trust and support in HRM policies such as professional development and participation in decision-making has been shown to have a positive effect on workers (Vanhala & Ahteela, 2011; Whitener, 1997). Second, management can decide to restrict the degree of job autonomy offered to employees. This can be achieved by standardization and specifying operational procedures

that provide employees with guidelines to make quick independent decisions under stressful circumstances, common not only to humanitarian workers, but also to other professions such as medical services. Finally, autonomy and trust in management can be promising avenues to reduce turnover across a variety of organizations.

### **2.5.3 Strengths and Limitations**

The central strength of this study is that it broadens the scope of work-life balance research to a unique case study of humanitarian field workers. This meant that we needed to rethink classic work-life theories and implicit assumptions resulting in the application of a theoretical framework focused on the enabling resource of job autonomy and the interrelationship between autonomy and trust in management.

A second strength is that to our knowledge, this is the first empirical attempt to study these issues among the hard-to-reach population of humanitarian aid workers. Despite their societal importance, limited attention has been given to humanitarian organizations. Quantitative data in this field is scarce, with systematic academic attention lacking (Teegen et al., 2004; Fechter, 2012). We are aware of the limitation of studying only one organization, as it does not allow us to make generalizations to the entire humanitarian field. Although the MSF is one of the largest in the field, findings cannot automatically be transposed to all humanitarian organizations. Yet, it is very likely that our findings are highly relevant for employees working for other humanitarian organizations that share the same or similar environmental constraints and demands.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional design, which precludes inferences about the causal ordering of the relations we studied. Although our main findings are consistent with our theoretical reasoning, research that adopts a longitudinal approach would be necessary to examine the causal status of these relationships.

While our data covered all categories of satisfaction with work-life balance (ranging from unsatisfied to satisfied) and was virtually normally distributed, the group that is (very) dissatisfied with their work-life balance might be larger in reality. The actual number of employees experiencing problems with work-life balance might be higher because those who are very dissatisfied might not find time to fill in a lengthy survey. Therefore the problem of a disturbed work-life balance might be more pronounced in reality, stressing the importance of enabling resources like autonomy in combination with trust in management to restore this balance.

### **2.5.4 Conclusion**

The findings in our study stress the importance of job autonomy as an enabling resource and the buffering effect of trust in management in reaching a satisfactory work-life balance among expatriate humanitarian aid workers. Specifically, the findings revealed that autonomy does not inevitably lead to increased work-life satisfaction, but strongly depends on the trust in the management of the organization. When trust in management is high, autonomy can contribute to a positive perception of the work-life balance. However, when trust in management is low, autonomy has a detrimental effect on the satisfaction with work-life balance. The findings suggest that investments in managing (degrees of) job autonomy and promoting a trusting relation between employees and management is an essential part of generating satisfaction with work-life balance in unbalanced environments. Consequently, future research should continue to investigate job-related enabling resources and its relation with trust in management in these types of

organizations to enrich our understanding of work-life balance in the humanitarian, expatriate, and related contexts.



### **Notes**

- a.* Although numbers of studies of expatriate employees are increasing (e.g., Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001 and Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012), they generally focus on high-demand professionals engaged in transnational work to enhance their career prospects in large multinationals. Another exception is the study of military families (e.g., Karin, 2009), which often focus on the family members left behind (e.g., Bourg & Segal, 1999; McFayden, Kerpelman & Adler-Baeder, 2005).
- b.* There is a substantial amount of literature on transnational workers (e.g., Polish immigrants, Rural Chinese workers) or domestic workers (e.g., Filipinos in Saudi Arabia) that we are not tapping into here, however, we would argue that these workers are rather different from our case and research often focuses on the child effects.
- c.* Although presence of children is controlled for in most work-life studies, most aid workers are single and only a small portion of the ones with a partner have children. Therefore we do not adopt this in our model. Additional analyses including the presence of children did not show any effects.
- d.* Tenure, presence of children and education were controlled for in earlier analyses but were found to have no significant effect and were left out of the model, also due to the limited sample size.