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Work-life interface of Portuguese international business travelers

O interface trabalho-vida pessoal dos viajantes de negócios internacionais Portugueses

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the narratives of the work-life interface (WLI) of Portuguese international business travelers.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews with 14 Portuguese international business travelers were conducted to expose the narratives of the WLI in terms of demands, resources, and coping and how these work-life events shape work-identity.

Findings – The findings show that: work-life events are interconnected and are sources of conflict and enrichment; work-life boundaries are personally managed and socially enacted; and WLI shapes work-identity. The analysis shows that occupational travel can be both a source of positive self-regard and fulfillment that entails high work-identity and low boundary control or a source of conflict and identity threat. In either case, work-life coping is devised to prompt self-worth.

Originality/value – Following the findings from this exploratory study, several research propositions are outlined for international business travelers, highlighting the interactions between work-life centrality, work-life boundary management and work-identity. In extending the work-life research to international business travelers this study reveals the extent to which the advancement of work-life research benefits from the theoretical and empirical contributions of the literature on work-identity.

Keywords Work-life interface, International business travelers, Demands and resources, Coping strategies, Work-identity

Paper type Research paper

Resumo

Propósito/objetivo – Este estudo exploratório examina as narrativas dos viajantes de negócios internacionais quanto ao interface trabalho-vida pessoal.

Metodologia – Foram efetuadas catorze entrevistas semiestruturadas a viajantes de negócios internacionais portugueses com o objetivo de expor as suas narrativas de interface trabalho-vida pessoal, em termos de exigências, recursos e estratégias para lidarem com estes eventos. Adicionalmente examinou-se como os eventos relacionados com o trabalho e vida pessoal moldam a identidade profissional destes viajantes frequentes.

Resultados – Os resultados demonstram que: (1) os eventos relacionados com o trabalho e a vida pessoal estão interrelacionados e são fonte de conflito e enriquecimento; (2) as fronteiras entre o trabalho e a vida pessoal são geridas individualmente mas são ditadas socialmente; e (3) o interface trabalho-vida pessoal molda a identidade no trabalho destes viajantes internacionais. A análise revela que as viagens de trabalho frequentes podem ser fonte de autoestima e satisfação, associada a uma

JEL Classification — M19

forte identidade profissional, assim como podem ser fonte de conflito e de ameaça a essa mesma identidade. Em qualquer dos casos, os indivíduos inquiridos acionaram estratégias para lidarem com os eventos de ambos os domínios que visam elevar a sua autoestima e identidade.

Originalidade/valor – Os resultados deste estudo permitem avançar várias proposições para investigação futura, salientando as interações entre a centralidade do trabalho e/ou da vida pessoal, a gestão das fronteiras entre estes domínios e a construção da identidade. Ao estudar o interface entre o trabalho e a vida pessoal dos viajantes frequentes, este estudo contribui para o avanço da investigação neste domínio ao revelar os benefícios de explorar as contribuições teóricas e práticas da literatura sobre a identidade associada ao trabalho.

Palavras-chave Interface trabalho-vida pessoal, Viajantes de negócios internacionais, Exigências, Recursos e estratégias para lidar com o interface trabalho-vida pessoal, Identidade profissional

1. Introduction

International travel has increased dramatically over the last few decades, including the proliferation of men and women who travel for business and professional purposes (National Business Travel Association (NBTA), 2009). This growth persists despite the global environmental and security concerns and the use of communication technologies that facilitate virtual meetings. Over the past decade, approximately one-third of global trade growth was driven by international business travel (The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 2011), which is becoming strategically required by many organizations and occupations. In this context, it is surprising that international business travel and occupational travelers have received too little attention from academics.

This study defines international business travelers as paid workers traveling across international borders as part of their jobs for brief but frequent periods. This definition accords with others (Welch *et al.*, 2007) and is consistent with the taxonomy of global work experiences from Shaffer *et al.* (2012). While the literature identifies a higher incidence of stress and illness among occupational travelers (Striker *et al.*, 1999; Burkholder *et al.*, 2010; Patel, 2011), fewer studies investigated their work-life demands (Welch *et al.*, 2007; Jensen, 2013); and how the engagement in multiple roles shape their work-identity (Dutton *et al.*, 2010; Brown, 2015). Little is known on how international business travelers cope with multiple roles, and how this process relates to the meanings they attach to work and life. This is particularly relevant because these workers travel across cultures and are exposed continuously to multiple identity discourses (Easthope, 2009; Muhr, 2012) and identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011). Thus, the present study draws on the literature of work-life interface (WLI) and work-identity to explore how Portuguese international business travelers account for work-life challenges and portray themselves in terms of identity. Following the findings from this exploratory study, several research propositions are outlined for international business travelers, highlighting the interactions between work-life centrality, work-life boundary management, and work-identity. In extending the work-life research to international business travelers this study reveals the extent to which the advancement of work-life research benefits from the theoretical and empirical contributions of the literature on work-identity.

2. WLI
2.1 WLI in the domestic context

The issue of depletion vs enrichment perspectives (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Rothbard, 2001) has dominated the fields of WLI and role engagement. The depletion perspective draws on resource drain theory (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000) and role

conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) to suggest that people possess limited personal resources and so the allocation of time, energy, and effort to one role deploys resources available to allocate to another. When people get involved in multiple roles, it becomes difficult for them to accomplish all requirements, generating conflict and stress. The enrichment perspective suggests that people expand resources from the advantages they receive with their involvement in multiple roles. When people become engaged with multiple roles, they gain benefits they would not attain otherwise, generating positive emotions and outcomes (Rothbard, 2001; Greenhaus and PowelL, 2006).

Despite this controversy, the work-family conflict (WFC) has been the most widely studied construct in the literature (Byron, 2005). Research to date has explored the antecedents and business outcomes of WFC (i.e. work role interfering with family role), and family-to-work conflict (FWC); ignoring requests to rethink and broaden the field (Chang *et al.*, 2010; Keeney *et al.*, 2013). In particular, work-life research has disregarded the opportunities of work-life enrichment (Greenhaus and PowelL, 2006), and has underestimated social and cultural differences (den Dulk *et al.*, 2013; Gatrell *et al.*, 2013; Trefalt *et al.*, 2013).

Few studies investigate cross-over demands and coping strategies related to WLI. Building on this research gap and following a social constructionist approach, Kreiner *et al.* (2009) used boundary theory (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000) to examine how American Episcopal parish priests managed work-home interface. They found a preference for a segmentation boundary style (i.e. clear separation between work-home domains), but the study best documented how priests used agency to intentionally segment or integrate life spheres, highlighting that the process was framed individually and embedded socially (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009; Kossek *et al.*, 2012). Further extending this approach, this study explores how people manage their engagement in multiple roles, in particular through the narratives of WLI of international business travelers.

2.2 WLI in the international context
In the international context, work-life research has focussed primarily on the influence of family on relocation decisions (Starr and Currie, 2009; Lê *et al.*, 2010) and the influence of these same decisions on family (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002). More recently, some studies have target cross-cultural disparities and WFC (Spector *et al.*, 2007; Hassan *et al.*, 2010; Lu *et al.*, 2010), and have showed how national differences in the workplace arrangements affect WLI (den Dulk *et al.*, 2013; Trefalt *et al.*, 2013).

Few studies report WLI and coping among international workers. Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010) and Mäkelä *et al.* (2011) described WFC among female expatriates. Both studies found that: female expatriates experience conflict and enrichment during international assignments, WLI has varying meanings over the lifecycle, work-life coping mechanisms depend on personal and social circumstances (e.g. having children, receiving organizational support, etc.), and work-life balance has an individual meaning, suggesting social support, and coping are tailored individually.

Mäkelä and Suutari (2011) examined coping with WFC in the international context in a study of 20 Finnish global managers. The most frequent conflicts were time based, related to long working hours and extended traveling, and strain based, reflecting extended assignment accountabilities. The authors also found evidence of mobility-based conflict, related to relocation and physical and psychological distance from friends and family. To cope, global careerists followed various coping mechanisms classified as active (i.e. changing the environment), emotional (i.e. re-conceptualize the problem), reappraisal (i.e. re-assess the problem), and avoidance (i.e. withdraw from

the problem). Family members also used active coping. In particular, they participated in the decision to relocate and prepare for the relocation; got external household help; and kept regular contact with extended families and friends during the assignment. Partner support was also an essential family coping mechanism, and organizational support was much appreciated.

Whereas earlier research provided evidence of WFC during international assignments, the amount of research on the association of short-term assignments with work and life domains remains limited. Extensive traveling for work is likely to act as an energy drain and take time away from other life roles, and international business travelers are more likely to have trouble in coping with work-life roles than other international workers are. The following section presents the research supporting this prediction and showing that international business travelers often face work-life demands that entail specific types of coping.

2.3 WLI among international business travelers

Regarding business travel, evidence suggests that extensive travel influences the physical and psychological health of both travelers and families (Striker *et al.*, 1999; Espino *et al.*, 2002; Welch *et al.*, 2007). Earlier research demonstrated that health claims and self-reported stress were high and influenced greatly by a perceived lack of control over travel, perceived negative impact of traveling on the family, and feelings of powerlessness to refuse travel without impairing career prospects (Liese *et al.*, 1997; Espino *et al.*, 2002). Frequent travelers also reported high social and family concerns, including a sense of isolation while away and a perception of negative effects on the family. Frequent travel, including frequent, extended trips, and unpredictable schedules that interfere with family celebrations were found to be related to behavioral changes in the spouse and children. Travelers and families reported two coping mechanisms: attempts to exert personal control over travel and family support. Effective personal control strategies included the establishment of realistic travel and workload demands, and taking time off after a trip to convalesce. Nurturing a sense of purpose and accomplishment from traveling also proved helpful. Finally, family coping included regular contact with significant others during travel and keeping the traveler involved in family matters and children's needs while away.

These findings suggest a high incidence of strain and stress among occupational travelers that is extensive to family members. Yet, drawing on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Westman and colleagues (Westman *et al.*, 2008; Westman and Etzion, 2002) argued that business trips can act as respites, representing a period of resource gains, whereas stages before and after a trip can increase resource loss and work-life conflict, stress, and burnout. By providing detachment from regular work-family demands, trips interrupt the drain on personal resources and offer new resources such as new experiences and social contacts. While some empirical evidence was consistent with these predictions (Westman and Etzion, 2002; Westman *et al.*, 2008), the data were insufficient to support these causal claims. In both studies, only a small number of employees were surveyed (57 and 78 workers, respectively), and most subjects were occasional instead of frequent travelers (on average, participants reported fewer than four trips per year, with a mean trip duration of 6.5 days). More recently, a study from Jensen (2013) with a large sample of Norwegian business travelers found that frequency and control over travel predicted WFC, and travel frequency in combination with WFC predicted emotional exhaustion. WFC increased

with the number of overnight stays away from home and decreased with travel control. The study also suggested disparities in WFC among varying business patterns: commuters (i.e. traveling regularly to a permanent work site) experienced the highest WFC, above both international and national travelers.

Research to date has shown some support to the association between the patterns of business travel and WFC, but the quantitative nature of most studies did not assist in finding explanations for this phenomenon. While international business travel affects WLI at the individual and family levels, little is known on how business travelers experience work-life events and how they enact specific coping. Thus, this study addresses these research gaps by exploring the following research questions:

RQ1. How do international business travelers' account for their work-life experiences?

RQ2. Which aspects of work and life domains act as demands and resources for international business travelers?

RQ3. What are the coping mechanisms sought by international business travelers?

3. Linking WLI with work-related identity

In reviewing the management literature on identity, Ashcraft (2013) ascertains that research has been dominated by the relationship between the self and the organization (p. 10), while less attention has been paid to the relationship between the self and occupation in individual terms. From a social constructionist viewpoint, Kuhn (2006) defined identity as the "conception of the self reflexively and discursively understood by the self" (p. 1340). People negotiate and manage multiple identity constructions of the self, including work-identity (i.e. occupational or professional identity) in a process called identity work (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). These self-constructions manifest through accounts regarding how individuals perceive themselves in context (Kuhn, 2006). Addressing the influence of mobility and place on identity construction, Easthope (2009) argued: "Identities are incomplete, relational, and hybrid as well as constructed in relation to place and mobility" (p. 75). This dialectic and ongoing process of identity construction is of particular interest to understand how people who work across borders and are continuously exposed to various cultures, such as international business travelers, construct work meaning, and enact work-identity.

Earlier research shows that expatriate assignments trigger self-reflection and identity changes (Kohonen, 2004, 2008), but little discussion exists concerning work-identity construction during shorter assignments. International business travelers – by frequency, diversity, and duration of international exposure – are expected to wear various "professional masks" (Brown, 2001, p. 114) that can lead to anxiety and identity confusion or to the reinforcement of an earlier work-related identity. Although evidence suggests that the more salient a role identity, the more time and effort individuals devote to that role (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2012), little is known about how people cope with work-identity threats and how they derive self-knowledge from less salient roles. Petriglieri (2011) defined individual-level identity threats as "experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity" (p. 644), a definition that recognizes that identity threats are based on the individual judgment of the cues that are potentially harmful to identity. Accordingly, events perceived as identity threatening generate coping to either protect the threatened identity (e.g. identity protection) or change it (e.g. identity restructuring). These responses depend on the

centrality of the role identity, on the existence of social support, and the strength of the threat. Identity and identity threats can originate from any work-life role, depending on centrality (Petriglieri, 2011). Since an event can only be identity threatening when an individual appraises it as such, exploring how international business travelers' account for work-life experiences should provide a more detailed understanding of how these experiences can be identity threatening and how WLI relates to work-identity, this being another core objective of this research. Thus, the fourth research question is:

> *RQ4.* How do the accounts of international business travelers' WLI relate to their subjective feelings of self-regard and the discursive construction of a work-identity?

4. Method
4.1 Research approach
This study follows a constructionist approach and a person-centered analysis to show how international business travelers account for their work-life experiences and how they are linked to work-identity. The international business travelers' WLI narratives are particularly adequate, since occupational traveling has grown over time, and yet, little is known about business travelers' WLI. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, as the interview is an appropriate approach to reveal how extant work-life and work-identity theories operate (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Moreover, the links between the descriptions of major work-life events, in their most salient demands, resources and coping, were specially sought. All interviewees were purposely selected to highlight the work-life experiences of international business travelers and to preserve the homogeneity of the sample. Thus, the following criteria were used: travel motives - traveling abroad for occupational purposes; travel frequency - traveling more than once per month to exclude occasional travelers; and travel places - traveling to distinct work sites to exclude commuters traveling to a permanent work site (Jensen, 2013). In addition, business travelers from the same nationality were selected to reduce cross-cultural biases and assist in the analysis and interpretation of individual narratives. Portugal was considered an adequate context for studying international mobility as the country has one of the highest emigration rates (OECD, 2013), and a growing number of international business travelers (INE, 2013).

The second author conducted the interviews between April and June 2012 and April and May 2013. Interviews lasted on average 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, audio-recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed. Only transcripts appearing in this manuscript were translated into English.

4.2 Interview protocol
The interview protocol included demographic data and covered a wide range of topics, such as descriptions of significant work-life events, and the identification of actual work-life demands, resources, and coping. Since people are not likely to describe their identity when directly asked (Walsh and Gordon, 2008), the work-identity was explored through the narratives of WLI. To this end, all participants were purposely asked to make an overall assessment of their present work-life (i.e. "How do you assess your present WLI?"); and to project themselves into the future (i.e. "How do you see your WLI in the future?"). This approach was considered adequate because according to the social identity theory (Turner, 1982), individuals create their self-identity first by social

comparisons and second by social differentiation through an ongoing process. As individuals aim to maintain a positive self-image from their multiple roles (Tajfel, 1982), the narratives of present vs dreamt work-life experiences would reflect the values and the centrality of work and non-work roles (Brown, 2015).

4.3 Participants
Following the selection criteria, 14 Portuguese international business travelers were interviewed. Nine (64 percent) were male and five (36 percent) were female. Ages ranged from 27 to 54 years. Ten participants were married (71 percent) and six had children (43 percent). Participants occupied professional and management positions and five were self-employed. Most participants were highly qualified and all were born in Portugal and lived in the country. Overall, they have been traveling for work for more than nine years (ranging from two to 30 years), moving to different destinations in Europe, Africa, the USA and Latin America. The average number of business trips per month was 1.4, ranging from a minimum of one to a maximum of three. The duration of each trip ranged between two and 14 days. Although the sample is small, its composition reflects the demographic characteristics of business travelers (NBTA, 2009) and its size meets the minimum requirements for an exploratory approach (Rowley, 2012).

4.4 Data analysis
The interview material was collected, transcribed, and content analyzed in Portuguese. A three-step procedure was followed to ensure a reliable classification and interpretation of the data (Bardin, 2009). The first step included data preparation to ascertain that all interviews and transcripts were included in the analysis. The second step comprised the data coding. An initial hierarchical coding scheme was established for the main thematic categories (e.g. work-life experiences, demands, resources, and coping mechanisms), while new thematic categories were added and refined according to the findings from iterative reading. Finally, the third step covered data examination and interpretation, resulting in minor refinements, and a final re-categorization. This thematic content analysis assisted in the identification of the themes and data connections reflected in the description and interpretation of research findings. This analysis was performed with the aid of NVivo 9. The direct quotations used to illustrate the findings were translated into English by one of the authors and later back translated into Portuguese by another researcher to preserve data integrity and minimize bias. The process was double-checked and revised whenever disparities arose.

5. Research findings
This section presents the main themes that emerged from the data coding and assists in answering the research questions. The content analysis generated four main categories: work-life experiences, work-life demands and resources, coping strategies and work-identity, which are presented below, and illustrated by direct quotes from the interviews.

5.1 WLI
The first research question was: "How do international business travelers' account for their work-life experiences?" As outlined in the previous section, the work-life experiences were first coded, and then categorized according to the depletion and

enrichment perspectives (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Rothbard, 2001). The findings are presented below with supporting evidence.

All research participants became occupational travelers resulting from work intensification and internationalization; they first held domestic positions that increasingly involved short international displacements that then became regular and frequent. On average, they have been traveling for work for more than nine years. All participants felt that work-life domains were mutually influential in terms of conflict and enrichment. Several sources of work-to-life conflict were reported, primarily time- and mobility-based ones:

> I have practiced sports for many years […] and now, it's over. There is no time or patience (Married male, with dependent children).

> I have missed many family dinners and many social events, because I end up being out for long periods (Single female, without dependent children).

Life-to-work conflict was mentioned rarely, except to emphasize that the lack of family responsibilities helped when it came to coping with work-travel requirements. Even among business travelers who had parental responsibilities, work-travel was expected to be carried out without disruption.

In terms of enrichment, work-to-life opportunities for development were much emphasized, while life-to-work enrichment included the logistic and affective support provided by families. Overall, these international travelers were engaged in multiple roles, and yet work-role engagement was dominant and a primary source of conflict and enrichment:

> Right now, to me, work is just about everything in my life (Single female, without dependent children).

Although some travelers experienced work and life as separate and imbalanced domains, most viewed work-life as interconnected:

> I have no "working-hours" and hours "outside-work". I have hours, only! […] I believe that work comes first and then, the other things […] (Married male, with two dependent children).

5.2 Work-life demands and resources

The second research question was: "Which aspects of work and life domains act as demands and resources for international business travelers?" In this section, themes were categorized broadly by demands and resources as they related to each domain.

Regarding the demands, the most difficult factors were work related. Eight interviewees experienced heavy workload and permanent work-connection and most felt powerless to control sudden work and travel changes:

> I always start the week without knowing what will happen the day after. […] This makes me have my suitcase always ready and be available to go anywhere, at any time […] (Married male with two dependent children).

Another frequent work-demand was related to travel incidents; and stress and health claims were reported frequently as an outcome of work traveling. From the life-domain, all interviewees felt their work impaired their ability to cope with other roles and expectations:

> My father passed away earlier this year, and so [his] last days […] I had a trip, nearly 10 days off, and I was worried because he could die from one day to another. So that feeling that you cannot be here right away […] (Married male, with two dependent children).

Resources were categorized as follows: individual-level resources, organizational-level resources, family-level resources, and interactional-level resources. Most resources were individual related and included readiness to act, time-management skills, and travel enjoyment. The most frequent individual-level resource was nurturing a sense of purpose and faith on the job, as one traveler commented:

> I love what I do. I have passion for what I do, so I do not have bad-weeks. I have easier or more difficult ones […] (Married male, with two dependent children).

Organizational-level resources included logistics and travel support and 24-hour back-office assistance. Family-level resources included family acceptance of a traveler's lifestyle and the provision of care and affection. Finally, the most salient theme that was categorized under interaction-level resources was holding an international network of friends and acquaintances, named couch surfing:

> I do much couch surfing - staying at friends' house, which is obviously very different from being in hotels, but I also do not really like living in hotels. When you stay with friends, we always go to dinner, we go somewhere […] it actually helps (Single female, without dependent children).

Almost without exception, the international business travelers relied heavily on work-life resources that extended beyond the individual sphere, and included organizational backing and social networking, key sources of instrumental, and emotional support. These findings reflect both spillover and cross-over effects. Spillover was stronger from work-to-life domains, and included both conflict and enrichment opportunities. Work-to-life cross-over was stronger because most international business travelers relished the challenge of occupational traveling, and often experienced it in terms of lifestyle:

> I get to know the world with my work. I meet extraordinary people at work. I greatly enrich my culture and my training at work. […] The negative part is that we have virtually no time for ourselves. […] But well, we make our choices and live with them (Married male, with two dependent children).

5.3 Work-life coping

The third research question asked "What are the coping mechanisms sought by international business travelers?" Coping strategies were coded following Mäkelä and Suutari's (2011) classification: active coping, emotional coping, avoidance, and reappraisal coping. Active coping was sought most frequently, and the most repeated theme was the use of technology to cope with work-life roles. Despite the support provided in assisting with family interactions, the use of the internet, telephone, and tablet computers made work possible at all times and in all places, making the workload heavier. Planning was another frequent active coping strategy that included planning work tasks and travel schedules, and co-planning other life roles with the spouse.

Emotional coping emerged in some narratives of participants who felt guilty for being absent and/or delaying decisions to get married or have children, although the continuance on the job eased such feelings:

> When we started this job, always having to go, be out all week […] is very difficult! Yet, once you have a few years of it […][work-travel], it is something that we get used to and cope very well. Today, I think we already have some quality of life (Married male, with two dependent children).

Avoidance coping included full concentration on work during travel periods, while reserving time-off for the family, as one traveler explained:

I can disconnect a bit, because usually when I get off work I "close the door" as much as possible, and things do not mix (Married male, without dependent children).

Participants also reported reappraising coping strategies, especially cognitive efforts to accept the negatives of the situation with "no drama":

Fortunately, people realized, many years ago, that this is my modus vivendi and no longer make any comment about it (Married male with two dependent children).

Despite the many coping mechanisms, the WLI was disappointing to some travelers, who recalled that work-life segmentation was useless:

Overall, I feel that the end result is bad, but I do not know if I could do much better, because my private life has been relegated to a second level. I do not like talking like that, but it is what I feel […] (Married male, with one dependent child).

I do not advise this job to anybody. You can do it for a certain number of years, while having fun working, and [while] working is fun. From then on […] it is difficult. One has a wife, small children […] and the price to pay, most of the time, is loneliness, and isolation. We reach the weekend without anyone to talk to! No one to exchange affection with and share a life (Married male, with two dependent children).

Unlike these "dual-centric" counterparts, most travelers accepted and preferred work-life asymmetry:

This discomfort, this grabbing your bags and leaving […] it is normal. It is the icing on the cake for people like me! […] No, the two [work-life spheres] do not mix, but much depends on people […]. I believe [to me] work comes first and then the other things, without a doubt. […] I try to have hours to feed myself, but not for eating, I try to have time to relax, but not for fun. I live according to what the customer wants and what the customer wants crafts my time (Married male, with two dependent children).

Without doubt, [to me] work comes first. […] It is like breathing: staying does not satisfy and hurts me on all levels. […] I need to go abroad, talk to different people who are doing the same as I am. […] My whole life was targeted to make me feel as proficient as possible. My whole life was guided accordingly. […]. I think I have finally reached a balance, but I think this is true, because at a professional level I am able to achieve what I have always wanted (Single female, without dependent children).

Overall, these accounts of how international business travelers managed WLI and eluded work from pervading non-work domains reveal how occupationally embedded they really were:

I am currently in a phase of detoxification; […] [work] occupies an important place in my life, because I like to do things well […] So I am aware that I am trying to balance things and give work its due place […] [work] fills an important place in my life, yet I am hoping it is not the number 1 thing (Single male, without dependent children).

5.4 WLI and work-identity
The final research question asked: "How do the accounts of international business travelers' WLI relate to their subjective feelings of self-regard and the discursive construction of a work-identity?" Themes related to the way interviewees experienced WLI and envisaged it in the future were examined. All interviewees recognized they

were over-committed to work. While a minority "felt trapped" because of the need, most travelers felt satisfied and driven by their work. Almost without exception, the analysis showed that no one dissociated his or her self-image from work:

> I devote myself to work really! I could be described as a workaholic. And it is not worth saying the opposite, because I am.., but I am who I am, and I am not otherwise. And I am fine (Single woman, without dependent children).

> I could have another life. It does not have much to do with the money, it has to do with the passion that you have, you feel a constant adventure that is catching a plane at 4 or 5 or 6 in the morning and you do not know what will happen when you reach the destination. There are people who cannot stand this pace of life, but there are people who are driven by this kind of life, which is my case. Therefore, I do it with pleasure; it is not difficult for me to accept this way of being in life (Married male, with two dependent children).

By framing themselves as highly work engaged, they attributed higher importance to work-identity, which further bounded work-life coping:

> Work has a very important place in my life, because it is what I like the most […] so when I am involved in other activities, I try to link them with things I like to do and things I do professionally (Single female, without dependent children).

Not surprisingly, this high work engagement was a source of strain and identity threat to less work-centric individuals, as noted:

> It seemed that my life was passing by and the only thing I did was working and the only time I had to myself was that moment when I was alone in the hotel room […] I tried to handle it through an internal dialog, saying I was tired and I needed projects that allowed time to be at home by the end of the day […] and I did it […] but the turning point was basically when I realized what I wanted (Single female, without dependent children).

Together, these findings demonstrate that all business travelers experienced work as an essential and pervasive role. Despite the work-to-life interference, the analysis revealed that work-life coping strategies were purposefully enacted to increase satisfaction and attain a positive self-regard, which were predominantly work related.

6. Discussion

This study explores international business travelers' WLI and work-identity. In answering the first research question, our findings show that most interviewees were work-centric: to them work-role had a higher centrality (Walsh and Gordon, 2008). In addition, most Portuguese business travelers were satisfied or very satisfied with their current WLI, which suggests work-travel can be a key source of self-fulfillment. Despite the long occupational-traveling experience of most participants, these findings might reflect the Portuguese poor economic situation in that the unemployment rate has grown from 7.6 percent in 2008 to 16.2 percent in 2013 (INE, 2013) and emigration reached 70,000 departures per year (OECD, 2013). In such a context, it is perhaps easier to find more employees with higher work-centrality and greater tolerance to work-life interference for whom having a job is a source of self-fulfillment and positive self-regard. While the findings are not generalizable, they are informative and resonate earlier WLI research with domestic (Ford *et al.*, 2007; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009) and other international workers (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the findings question two popular assumptions within the literature of WLI: that work and life are separable domains that must remain so (Eikhof *et al.*, 2007) and that frequent

occupational traveling entails stress and strain (Espino *et al.*, 2002). The rich qualitative analysis revealed that challenging occupational traveling and limited WLI might be of less importance when international business travelers hold a high work-centrality. Based on these findings, the following propositions can be suggested:

P1. The higher the work-centrality of international business travelers (i.e. in terms of work engagement), the lower the perception of work-to-life conflict.

P2. The higher the work-centrality of international business travelers (i.e. in terms of work engagement), the higher the perception of work-to-life enrichment.

Likewise, in exploring work-life coping, the findings consistently showed that the boundary management strategies pursued by Portuguese business travelers differed. Most work-centric individuals valued asymmetry, in that they enabled work to interrupt and dominate other roles, while dual-centric travelers followed an alternating or segmentation approach in that they aimed to separate work from non-work domains to give their best in each role. These findings provide further empirical support for the theory of work-non-work boundary management styles (Kossek *et al.*, 2012) and extend the Kossek and Lautsch (2012) model to other non-work domains that do not include family. The interviews also revealed the attributes of a dominant cluster of "work worriers" (Kossek *et al.*, 2012) who combine high work-identity with low boundary control. These findings lead to the suggestion of the following proposition:

P3. The higher the work-centrality of international business travelers (i.e. in terms of work engagement), the higher the preference for an asymmetrical work-life boundary management style (i.e. higher acceptance of work interfering with non-work roles).

While Kossek and Lautsch's (2012) boundary management model is premised by the notion that "work-family boundary management is a function of individual identities and boundary-crossing preferences" (p. 164), the findings from this study show that identity and boundary management are conditions and consequences of one another. Indeed, in this study, Portuguese business travelers reported that occupational travel was a source of self-fulfillment and positive self-regard that work-life coping assisted in fostering. In extending these findings, the following proposition can be suggested:

P4. The higher the work-centrality of international business travelers (i.e. in terms of work engagement), the more likely they will: (a) derive a positive self-image (i.e. a positive work-identity) from occupational travel; and (b) experience a satisfactory WLI.

On the link between WLI and work-identity, this study showed that the more business travelers experienced work-role engagement as distinct and enabler of a positive self-image (i.e. work-centric travelers), the more devoted to work they become, and the less they experienced identity threat. Inversely, the more they experienced work-role engagement competing with other central roles (i.e. dual-centric travelers), the more they qualified WLI as unsatisfactory, and the more they experienced their actions as work-identity threatening. These findings provide further empirical support for research that explores how individuals subjectively appraise work-life experiences and respond to identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011). To Portuguese business travelers, work-life coping provided an identity threat response that varied with the meaning and value associated to

the threatened identity. Work-centric individuals emphasized work-to-life opportunities for development and enrichment, and consistently felt happy prioritizing work over non-work activities, while dual-centric travelers, because of their limited ability to change WLI and achieve an optimal balance between equally important identities, were more likely to cope by changing the meaning associated with occupational-travel, which became a "lifestyle." Following Petriglieri's (2011) framework, the first coping strategy reflects an identity-protection response of positive distinctiveness, while the latter suggests an identity-restructuring response of meaning change. Based on these findings with Portuguese business travelers, the following propositions are suggested:

P5. The higher the work-centrality of international business travelers (i.e. in terms of work engagement), the more likely they will respond to work-identity threats through an identity protection response of positive distinctiveness (i.e. focussing on the positives associated with work-travel).

P6. The higher the dual-centrality of international business travelers (i.e. in terms of multiple roles engagement), the more likely they will respond to work-identity threats through an identity restructuring response of meaning change (i.e. changing the meaning associated to work-travel).

In extending work-life research to international business travelers, this study shows that international business traveling *per se* is not a source of enrichment or depletion (Rothbard, 2001) or an obstacle to work-life balance (Espino *et al.*, 2002; Jensen, 2013; Liese *et al.*, 1997). As shown, other aspects influence the experience of WLI such as work involvement and enjoyment, work-centrality, and identity work. According to Larson and Pearson (2012), identity work refers to the ongoing process of "constructing identity" (p. 243) and achieving a coherent sense of self in response to involvement in multiple roles. People negotiate and manage multiple constructions of self from their work and life experiences that shape the corresponding ways they behave. Reciprocally, the way people behave and cope with multiple activities shapes the meaning individuals attach to themselves, which strengthens or changes their identity. Overall, the experience of international business travelers' WLI is more complex than has been conceptualized, as occupational travel can be both identity distinguishing or threatening. Similarly, work-life coping can be enacted to protect or restructure a threatened identity. It follows from the data that the future advancement of WLI research will certainly benefit from the theoretical and empirical contributions of the literature on work-identity.

7. Conclusion
7.1 Practical implications
Two practical implications associate with these findings. The research highlights that all participants became business travelers due to the need to fulfill international occupational responsibilities. All participants engaged in multiple roles, but not all were equally important. While most Portuguese business travelers were happy doing what they loved – work and travel – some were not. The former experienced more positive affect during work and were happy with their work-life imbalance, while the latter were less satisfied with their work-life experiences. These findings suggest that binding employees to international business travel may be inadequate for some, affecting their work-life satisfaction, and their perceptions of self-worth. Employers should be aware that WLI is mostly framed and negotiated at the interface of

individual and social constraints, but organizations are particularly forceful. The findings warn organizations that creating a cultural and social workplace infrastructure that facilitates excessive work can be both addictive (Griffiths, 2011) and identity threatening (Petriglieri, 2011), making it difficult for workers to achieve work-life satisfaction and increase organizational performance.

For frequent business travelers, this study demonstrates that role centrality frames the perception and acceptance of work-life demands and resources, and further shapes work-life coping. Although some individual agency is possible, the occupational context in which one is embedded influences work-life experiences strongly. Thus, fostering a sense of purpose for what one aspires to attain in life is helpful.

7.2 Study limitations and implications for future research

While the research findings are informative and advance our understanding of WLI and work-related identity of Portuguese international business travelers, some limitations should be noted. Data were collected in a single context, so results raise the issue of national context, and notably of the disparities based on cultural work centrality (den Dulk et al., 2013). Portugal has a high level of cultural work centrality in comparison to other countries (den Dulk et al., 2013) that might have influenced the way Portuguese business travelers judged WLI, including the importance they attributed to work. The national context and the poor employment conditions might influence the cultural centrality of work-life roles, the coping strategies regarded as adequate, and ultimately, work-identity. Thus, future comparative studies on the relationship between business travel and WLI are required, employing samples with disparate cultural work centralities.

Another limitation of this study is its sample size and composition. Despite the initial aim of comparing the narratives of WLI of men and women, the progress of the analysis showed that the narratives related more to the way people interpreted work-travel than to gender differences. Exploring gender differences among international business travelers was far too broad a scope for this paper, so future work-life research might examine gender differences, including gendered career outcomes.

Finally, given the salience of work-centrality among the surveyed travelers, it would be useful to examine the influence of social class disparities on people's abilities to cope with work-life events (Gatrell et al., 2013). Future research aiming to explore business travelers' WLI can sample workers from various occupations and socioeconomic classes – including employers' representatives, coworkers, family members, and friends – to better explore constraints that limit the alternatives to frequent work-travel. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of work and life experiences within various social and organizational contexts.

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