Work–Life Balance Among Humanitarian Aid Workers

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Abstract

A limited body of research has examined satisfaction with work–life balance of expatriate workers who live abroad, residing outside the typical "family" or "life" domain. This study aims to demonstrate how and under which organizational circumstances job autonomy can increase work–life balance satisfaction of humanitarian aid expatriates. We hypothesize that especially in humanitarian work, trust in management can buffer potential negative effects of high autonomy. We test our hypothesis by means of ordinal logistic regression, using survey data collected among expatriates of the Operational Center Amsterdam of Médecins Sans Frontières ($N = 142$). Results reveal that high levels of autonomy are positively related with work–life balance satisfaction when trust in the management of the organization is high. When trust in management is low, the effect of high autonomy on work–life balance satisfaction is negative. This implies that trust in management indeed buffers negative effects of high autonomy among expatriate humanitarian aid workers.

Introduction

A satisfactory balance between work and nonwork is a central concern for employees and organizations (Barnett, 1998). The workplace has been characterized as a "greedy institution" (Coser, 1974) that can cause role conflicts in the life and family domain.

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Understanding work–life balance is vital due to its implications for individual and family functioning: Work–life conflict is known to be predictive of depression, alcoholism, emotional exhaustion, and lowered life satisfaction (Bedeian, Burke, & Moffett, 1988; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Work–life conflict also affects organizations due to its relation to higher turnover and absenteeism rates, and lower performance and job dissatisfaction (e.g., Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins, 2001).

A large body of literature—mostly focusing on conventional organizational contexts—discusses how factors such as timing and location of work, work hours, and family friendly policies can contribute to work–life balance satisfaction (for overviews, see Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bodeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Less attention has been paid to the work–life balance satisfaction of workers in more unconventional contexts, such as of those who live abroad and reside outside their typical "family" or "life" environment: expatriates. Studies on expatriate employees investigate particular groups, such as employees in large multinationals (e.g., Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012) or military families (e.g., Karin, 2009), and often focus on the family members left behind (e.g., Bourg & Segal, 1999; McFayden, Kerpelman, & Adler-Baeder, 2005). There is also a substantial amount of literature on transnational workers (e.g., Polish immigrants, rural Chinese workers) and domestic workers (e.g., Filipinos in Los Angeles, see, for example, Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Parreaas, 2001), groups rather different from the expatriate group because these move location to find jobs with employers within the borders of the country they have moved to, whereas expatriate workers move work location *as part of their job*, at the request of their employer.

In this study, we focus on the work–life balance satisfaction of expatriates working in the humanitarian sector, and particularly on the impact of two job resources—job autonomy and trust in management. Humanitarian expatriates are both Western and non-Western aid workers who work to alleviate human suffering in humanitarian crises in other countries than their country of origin. This understudied group is empirically and theoretically interesting for two reasons.

First, these are highly committed employees (Fechter, 2012; Walkup, 1997) who voluntarily choose for international relocation, knowing that it is likely to be related to cultural dissimilarities, security risks, and leaving their friends and/or family behind (Ahmad, 2002; Shaffer et al., 2012; Takeuchi, 2010). Especially in humanitarian work, working conditions are rarely compatible with the presence of family on the project location. Hence, expatriates often cannot bring their families to the field, which especially holds for the organization under study (Médecins Sans Frontières [MSF]).[1] This combination of expatriate aid workers' high commitment and the fact that family is often not allowed to accompany them alters the constraints related to their employment and time allocation (Perlow, 1998; Wotschack & Wittek, 2008): It is likely to result in (very) long workdays (cf. Fechter, 2012; Shortland & Cummins, 2007).[2] Some humanitarian aid expatriates even argue that they hardly have a life outside their work (Dickmann, Emmens, Parry, & Williamson, 2010; Oelberger, 2014), or that their work is closely intermingled with their life (Fechter, 2012). An empirical question we

therefore hope to answer is to what degree this group is able to achieve satisfaction with its work–life balance in the first place.

Second, expatriate humanitarian aid workers cannot draw on some of the resources available to mitigate work–life conflict in more conventional work contexts. For example, there are often no means available—such as protected leave policies—to take time off for caregiving. Moreover, "leave" within the humanitarian context has a particular function: Expatriates are often required to leave active duty to recuperate away from the mission site, similar to "exigency leave" in the military (Karin, 2009). Furthermore, to cope with budget constraints and the unpredictable occurrence of crises (Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006), humanitarian organizations often do not pay their employees when they are not on a mission. Humanitarian expatriates also cannot apply other strategies to mitigate work–life conflict, such as adapting or reducing work hours, scheduling flexibility (Mills & Täht, 2010), or changing the location of work (Hill, Ferris, & Märtinson, 2003) because work is done under time pressure in remote areas with a compromised infrastructure. This leads to the question whether other means are available to mitigate work–life conflict in this context.

This study therefore investigates whether and to what extent expatriate humanitarian aid workers can be satisfied with their work–life balance, and if so, under which conditions this balance is more likely to be realized. This question is also of interest to humanitarian organizations, because satisfaction with the work–life balance is known to be a determinant of turnover, and expatriate turnover rates in the humanitarian sector are substantially high (Loquercio et al., 2006; Richardson, 2006; Telford & Cosgrave, 2007).

This study focuses particularly on how autonomy and trust in management affect the work–life balance satisfaction of expatriates, with standard human resource management (HRM) tools to mitigate work–life conflict being unavailable in these contexts. As we will elaborate in the first part of the theory section, work-related strain-based demands (e.g., psychological spillover between work and life domains) and time-based demands (e.g., work hours, schedules) can be balanced by job resources, as proposed by the job demands–resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Voydanoff, 2005). A key job resource is *job autonomy*, an important tool organizations have to influence employees' work pace, content, and order (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004b, 2005). Moreover, it is an inherent characteristic of humanitarian work (Fox, 2001; Walkup, 1997). However, job autonomy can have both positive and detrimental effects on work–life balance satisfaction, as we will argue below (Berg, Kalleberg & Appelbaum, 2003; Briscoe, 2007). We hypothesize that in the humanitarian setting—which can cause strain due to the uncertain and quickly changing work circumstances and strong dependency on others (Seybolt, 2009)—job autonomy can be expected to have positive effects on work–life balance satisfaction only if expatriate workers *trust their managemen*t. If humanitarian expatriates know that their autonomously taken decisions—whether good or bad—will be supported higher up in the hierarchy, we expect this to positively influence their work–life balance satisfaction (cf. Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

This study provides several contributions to work–life research. First, despite the fact that humanitarian expat workers are of empirical and theoretical interest to study for the reasons previously given, quantitative empirical studies are scarce (Fechter, 2012; Teegen, Doh, & Vachani, 2004). This lack 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 offer one of the first quantitative investigations into this seldom examined nonprofit humanitarian group. Second, by focusing on job autonomy and trust in management, we add to insights about the conditions in which particular job resources can promote work–life balance satisfaction in the work context of humanitarian expatriates, where more conventional solutions cannot be applied. Third, we focus on perceived as opposed to objective work–life balance, because the former has been shown to be more salient in its impact on individuals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Finally, dissatisfaction with the work–life balance can have negative organizational outcomes, such as high turnover. This study offers practical insights to similar organizations as how dissatisfaction in work–life balance can be reduced as one way to address turnover.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we ask which resources employers can provide to assist their expat staff to mitigate work–life conflict. The job demands–resources model—which has been successfully applied to model the relation between work characteristics and employee well-being in different settings such as home care organizations (Bakker, Demerouti, Taris, Schaufeli, & Scheurs, 2003), dentists (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008), and nurses (Zito, Cortese, & Colombo, 2016)—provides relevant points of departure. This model states that an imbalance between job demands and job resources is related to decreased employee well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001; Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007). *Job demands* refer to the physical, psychological, social, and organizational characteristics of work that require effort and costs of the employee, and *job resources* refer to the physical, social, psychosocial, and organizational aspects of work that help to meet task requirements (Demerouti & Geurts, 2004).

Typical job demands are an unfavorable physical environment, high work pressure, and high emotional and physical demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which are all characteristic of humanitarian work (Bjerneld, 2009; Roth, 2015) and cannot be easily altered by humanitarian organizations. Such job demands require high efforts by employees and could be so demanding that they deplete energy, create stress, or result in exhaustion and burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job resources can counterbalance such job demands by assisting employees in achieving work goals, reducing job demands and their related costs, and by offering staff opportunities to learn and grow in their jobs, which in turn will create increased employee motivation. Hence, potentially negative effects of high job demands, in terms of reduced well-being, can be buffered by job resources that facilitate high performance, motivation, and engagement, as well as reduce costs of the job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014).

Besides a focus on employee well-being (e.g., stress and burnout or its opposites motivation and engagement), the job demands–resources model has also been applied to study other work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction and work–life balance perceptions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Geurts, 2004; Bakker, Ten Brummelhuis, Prins, & Van der Heijden, 2011). In the latter literature, it is argued that a disbalance between job demands and job resources can result in exhaustion, stress, and increased work–family conflicts, which in turn is likely to negatively influence perceptions of work–life balance due to spillover effects (Beham, Drobničb, & Präg., 2011; cf. Nordenmark, Vinberg, & Strandh, 2012). Negative perceptions of the work–life balance have also proven to affect an individual's overall well-being (Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005). The job demands–resources model therefore seems a valuable model to apply to answer our research question.

We assume that job resources can be helpful in counterbalancing the job demands typical for humanitarian work. Job resources can be located in the task itself (see also Voydanoff, 2005) as well as in the social and organizational context of work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Geurts, 2004). A key *task-related job resource* is job autonomy (see also Voydanoff, 2004b, 2005). Job autonomy was the core job characteristic of the predecessor of the job demands–resources model: the job demand-control model, which states that job strain is the result of an imbalance between job demands and control over one's job (Bakker & Demetri, 2007; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). In humanitarian work, autonomy is an inherent aspect of expatriate work (Fox, 2001; Walkup, 1997): Due to the often remote location and the urgent nature of humanitarian work, humanitarian workers need to make rapid and independent decisions that can have significant consequences. Job autonomy is also an aspect of work that is explicitly appreciated by aid workers (Dickmann et al., 2010; Oelberger, 2014; Roth, 2015) and that humanitarian organizations can influence.

Although research on job autonomy shows that it indeed can function as a job resource, it can also have detrimental effects on the work–life balance satisfaction (Berg et al., 2003; Briscoe, 2007). We argue that for humanitarian work, this also depends on the job resources originating *from the organizational and social context of work*, in particular trust in management. We first elaborate how job autonomy is related to work–life balance satisfaction and then proceed to outline how trust in management may moderate this relationship.

The Upside of Job Autonomy

Job autonomy can be a crucial job resource for mitigating work–life conflict (e.g., Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Berg et al., 2003). In conventional work contexts, work–life research has shown that autonomy and flexibility in setting work hours, location, and organization of work have a positive influence on work–life balance (e.g., Anderson et al., 2002; Berg et al., 2003). Humanitarian fieldwork often involves complex and unpredictable tasks that are not necessarily carried out in a standard sequential process. Rather, they require a more holistic and flexible approach, where the employee is able to adjust rapidly and autonomously (Dertouzos, Lester, & Solow, 1989).

By giving employees broader responsibilities, considerable amounts of autonomy are transferred to the employee. The implicit assumption behind this rationale is that employees are optimal self-managers, who are able to plan and structure the diverse requirements, including time allocation decisions and balancing work and life. Autonomy is thus expected to reduce the overlap of "work and non-work pressures . . . in the same block of time" (Golden, 2001, p. 1158). If autonomy enables employees to control the timing and organization of work, it is expected to help them better balance work and nonwork demands, leading to higher levels of work–life satisfaction. Even if autonomy implies greater demands, the ability to structure and control one's working schedule or the way in which the job is performed would act as a job resource and prove helpful in preventing work from interfering with family or other domains (Anderson et al., 2002). Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize the following:

> **Hypothesis 1a (H1a):** The more autonomy an expatriate humanitarian employee has, the higher the level of satisfaction with work–life balance.

The Downside to Job Autonomy

However, research has also shown that autonomy might have detrimental effects on the work–life balance (Briscoe, 2007; Jones & Butler, 1980; van Echtelt, Glebbeek, & Lindenberg, 2006) or boundary demands (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Voydanoff, 2004a). Although high levels of autonomy might appear to be beneficial in humanitarian work contexts, it could also result in employees who are only focused on tasks and on finishing projects, and therefore ignore the number of overall work hours (Shortland & Cummins, 2007; van Echtelt et al., 2006).

Here, we 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. Within 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 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. This includes stress, time pressure, and role conflict (cf. Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Rothbard, 2001), all characteristic of the humanitarian work context. Hence, in the humanitarian context, both time-based and strain-based demands can be expected to be high and to contribute to low satisfaction with the work–life balance. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize the following:

> **Hypothesis 1b (H1b):** The more autonomy an expatriate humanitarian employee has, the lower the level of satisfaction with work–life balance.

The Buffering Role of Trust in Management

Because job autonomy in itself might not be a sufficient condition for satisfaction with the work–life balance, other factors must moderate this relationship. The job demands–resources model provides clues on potential moderating factors, because it emphasizes the importance of not only *task-related job resources*—such as job autonomy—but also job resources pertaining to the *organizational and social context of work*. Such resources relate to an organization's HRM (such as training and career opportunities) and to social resources, such as team climate and coworker support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014). Research has shown the positive effects of these job resources on work–life balance perceptions (Bakker et al., 2011; Beham et al., 2011; Demerouti & Geurts, 2010).

The limited research into humanitarian expatriates that is available confirms the importance of these job resources in the humanitarian setting. For example, Dickmann et al. (2010) showed that reasons for managers to remain working for humanitarian organizations are related not only to the values of humanitarian work and the personal motivations of these managers but also to organizational and social context aspects such as career and training opportunities, and relationships with peers. Moreover, these managers also mention the work–life balance as an important factor. Social and organizational support has also been shown to be important job resources in reducing burnout in aid workers (Eriksson et al., 2009).

A much less explored organizational job resource is that of trust in management, 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 (Cook & Wall, 1980). Trust in management differs from the above-mentioned job resources, because it does not refer to concrete managerial or organizational actions or practices, but to the faith and confidence employees generally have in the competence and behavior of their managers. We hypothesize that especially this cognitive nature of trust in management is important for how humanitarian expats experience their work–life balance. Because humanitarian expats work in uncertain and quickly changing contexts with often strong dependency on others (Seybolt, 2009), in which there is also a constant pressure to finish tasks given the urgency of the work, this may lead expats to fear the consequences of the failure to meet demands. At the same time, expats often have autonomy to decide and act, given that direct and immediate contact with head office is not always within reach due to the nature and location of the work. Due to this combination of risk of fear of failure with high levels of autonomy, trust in management is crucial for humanitarian expatriates to reduce strain from work: It will give them confidence that their managers will treat them fairly, even if they do not meet all the demands (cf. Friedman, Christensen, & DeGroot, 1998) or their decisions turn out be wrong (Siegel, Post, Brockner, Fishman, & Garden, 2005). Trust in management can thus lead to lower levels of fear of the consequences of failure to complete the assigned work (Harvey, Kelloway, & Duncan-Leiper, 2003) and result in greater control over one's situation (Anderson et al., 2002).

The few studies available about the impact of trust in management in the job demands–resources model (Bakker et al., 2010) or in the humanitarian sector (Oelberger, 2014) provide empirical evidence for this line of reasoning. Oelberger (2014), for example, showed that aid workers value to have a fair and considerate boss and that this is related to work outcomes such as burnout and job satisfaction. We therefore suggest that autonomy leads to higher levels of satisfaction with work–life balance when trust is high: High trust reduces employees' tendencies to respond negatively to high levels of autonomy. If employees with high levels of autonomy do not trust their management, this could lead to stress, frustration, and increased dissatisfaction with their work–life balance. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): 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.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): 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.

Data and Method

Data

To test the proposed hypotheses, we used the Humanitarian Employee Survey (HES), which is primary survey data we collected in 2011 from a sample of expatriate humanitarian aid workers working for one of the largest humanitarian aid organizations in the field: Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as Doctors Without Borders.

MSF consists of 19 national offices and nine branch offices (MSF International Activity Report, 2012). In 2013, MSF had a budget of 953 million euro (MSF International Activity Report, 2013). MSF is specialized in medical humanitarian emergencies, operating globally in conflict and natural disaster areas by means of teams composed of both expatriate and national staff. These teams consist of a combination of management and coordinating staff (project managers, for example); medical experts (nurses, doctors, etc.); and logistic, technical, and financial staff (drivers, lab technicians, financial administrators, etc.). Expatriate staff in these teams refer to aid workers who work in countries other than their nationality (i.e., an American working in Bangladesh, or a Sudanese person working in Benin).

To gain information on the career, job characteristics, and work–life perceptions of humanitarian expats, the research team was granted access to conduct the Humanitarian Employment Survey (HES) among the humanitarian expatriate staff working for MSF–Operational Center Amsterdam (MSF-OCA). MSF-OCA is responsible for operational and human resource–related matters for the national offices in the Netherlands, Germany, and Great Britain.

The questionnaire was provided in English. To ensure optimal response rates among this hard-to-reach population, we provided two reply options, which were identical in

content. The first was a regular online format, for employees who had a stable Internet connection for the approximately 45 min it would take to fill out the survey. The second option was an off-line version as an attachment, which could be downloaded when the connection was there and filled in off-line and returned when an Internet connection was available again.

The HES was sent to a total of 550 expatriate field-workers. Two additional reminders were sent over a period of 8 weeks. We received completed surveys from 168 expatriate field-workers leading to a response rate of 31%. Of these 168 respondents, 54 (32%) made use of the off-line option, indicating the value of this option to generate response. This response 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). Our sample consisted of more than 80 nationalities with almost half of the sample in a coordinating position (including medical coordinating tasks), about a fifth in a medical position, and the remaining part was involved in logistical tasks.

To assess the representativeness of our data, response analyses were performed by comparing the demographic characteristics of the sample with the characteristics of the full organizational population in terms of gender, occupational groups, and nationality. The HRM department of MSF provided this information. Although the higher level employees were slightly overrepresented, the sample was largely representative for occupational groups, gender, and nationality.[3]

After removing cases with missing responses on our main variables, we were able to analyze a final sample size of 142. Additional analyses (not shown) showed that there were no significant differences between the missing and nonmissing groups in relation to work–life balance. As Table 1 shows, the sample has an almost equal gender split, with the mean age of the respondents at 38.7 years, and with 27% of the respondents being married.

Measurements

Dependent variable. The dependent variable is *satisfaction with work–life balance* measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale: "How satisfied are you with the balance between the time you spend on your paid work and the time you spend on other aspects of your life?" (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 7 = *very satisfied*). This single-item measurement is taken from the pretested standard survey question in the European Social Survey (ESS; 2006). To ensure that the different categories contain enough cases to avoid zero-cell problems, we collapsed the categories "very satisfied" and "satisfied" into one category as well as "very dissatisfied" and "dissatisfied," constructing a 5-point scale (1 = *dissatisfied* to 5 = *satisfied*).

Independent variables. Job autonomy was measured by five items on a 5-point scale using a pretested standard measure (Workplace Employment Relations Survey, 2004; 1 = *none*, 5 = *a lot*). The scale has high reliability (α = .81) and included the following items: In general, how much autonomy do you have over the following in your current

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (*N* = 142).

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Satisfaction WLB	3.06	1.42									
2. Age	38.66	8.62	.14								
3. Female[a]	0.51		.05	−.06							
4. Married[a]	0.27		.22**	.21**	.38***						
5. Actual work hours	57.09	9.07	−.14	−.01	−.09	−.13					
6. Job stress	2.89	0.57	−.29**	−.13	−.12	−.09	.32***				
7. Job autonomy[a]	0.68		.17*	.02	−.21**	.11	−.01	.04			
8. Organizational commitment[a]	0.62		.13	.04	.08	−.10	−.05	−.07	.06		
9. Trust in management	3.42	0.58	.39***	.12	−.06	.19*	−.10	−.04	.05	.23**	

Note. WLB = work–life balance.
[a]For dichotomous variables, percentages are given.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

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 (*M* = 4.15;), 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 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) again using a pretested standard measure (Cook & Wall, 1980). The scale (α = .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 gain advantage by deceiving the workers." Items 2 and 6 were coded in the reverse direction to indicate more trust in management when higher values were indicated.

Control variables. In our analyses, we also include two job demands from the job demands–resources model as control variables: high work pressure and high emotional strain (Bakker & Geurts, 2004). Job stress and work hours are used as proxies for these job demands because job stress is found to lead to role pressure and incompatibility (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which can influence the life domain and the satisfaction with work–life balance. Work hours will also be controlled for as work hours have been shown to have a negative effect on work–life balance (e.g., Tausig & Fenwick, 2001), and humanitarian expatriates often work long hours. Furthermore, we

will control for the level of organizational commitment among the employees, given that humanitarian aid workers are known to be highly committed workers and this commitment can be expected to relate to work–life balance satisfaction (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Finally, we will also control for marital status, age, and gender, given that being married is often related to more strain between work and life, compared with singles, and thus often decreases the satisfaction with the work–life balance.[4] In addition, work–life balance tends to increase with age (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). The last control variable, gender, will be added to the model because it is argued that higher demands are placed on women in the household, and therefore, they struggle harder to maintain balance (Guest, 2002).

Job stress was measured by four items on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*) following standard measures (International Social Survey Programme, 2005). The scale (α = .71) included the following items: How often do you in your job "come back from work exhausted?"; "have to do hard physical work?"; "find your work stressful?"; and "perform dangerous tasks?" and was left as a 5-point scale. *Work hours a week* was measured by the following question: "How many hours a week do you actually work?" (not according to contract). *Organizational commitment* was measured by five items on a 5-point Likert-type 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 (α = .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 the reverse direction to indicate more organizational commitment when higher values were indicated. Because of the highly left-skewed distribution (*M* = 4.02), this variable was dichotomized, comparing the highest scoring group (≥4 = 1) with the lower. Marital status was controlled for by including a dummy variable *married* (married = 1 other = 0), and *age* and *gender* (female = 1) were also added as controls.[5]

Method of Analysis

We estimated an Ordinal Logistic Regression because the dependent variable is satisfaction with work–life balance that contains five ordered categories ranging from 1 (*dissatisfied*) to 5 (*satisfied*). Our ordinal response variable thus has the assumption that the levels of satisfaction have natural ordering (low to high), but the 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 ordinary least squares (OLS) models are (Long, 1997). We also checked for the parallel regression assumption,[6] 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

Table 2. Results Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis on Satisfaction With Work–Life Balance (*N* = 142).

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	*SE B*	e^B	*B*	*SE B*	e^B	*B*	*SE B*	e^B
Age	0.01	.02	1.01	0.01	.02	1.01	0.01	.02	1.01
Female	0.43	.33	1.54	0.59	.35	1.80	0.67	.35	1.96
Married	1.05**	.39	2.85	0.81*	.40	2.24	0.95*	.40	2.58
Work hours	−0.01	.02	0.10	0.01	.02	1.01	0.01	.02	1.01
Job stress	−0.81**	.29	0.45	−1.01**	.30	0.36	−1.13***	.31	0.323
Organizational commitment (1 = high)	0.55	.32	1.73	0.10	.33	1.10	0.00	.34	1.00
Job autonomy (1 = high)				0.79*	.35	2.21	0.80*	.35	2.23
Trust in management				1.38***	.31	3.95	0.03	.48	1.03
Trust in Management × Autonomy							2.29***	.63	9.89
χ^2	23.6			49.6			63.8		
df	6			8			9		

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

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 job 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.

Results

Table 1 shows that respondents worked an average of 57.1 hr a week (actual, not contractual hours). There were overall moderate levels of work–life satisfaction (3.06 out of 5), slightly higher job stress, and a high level of job autonomy and organizational commitment (4.15 and 4.02, respectively, with 5 being the maximum, not shown). The mean level of trust in management is slightly more positive than negative. Table 1 also shows that both autonomy ($r = .17$, $p < .05$) and trust in management ($r = .39$, $p < .01$) are related to satisfaction with work–life balance.

Table 2 shows the results of the ordinal logistic regression analyses. Consistent with H1a, 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 their work–life balance than employees indicating lower levels of job autonomy (<4; β = 0.79, $p < .05$). When we examined this effect in detail, however, the positive main effect was driven by the overrepresentation of the number of employees in higher trust categories, or in other words, the ones that had sufficient levels of trust to enjoy autonomy. Because the employees in the higher trust categories show a
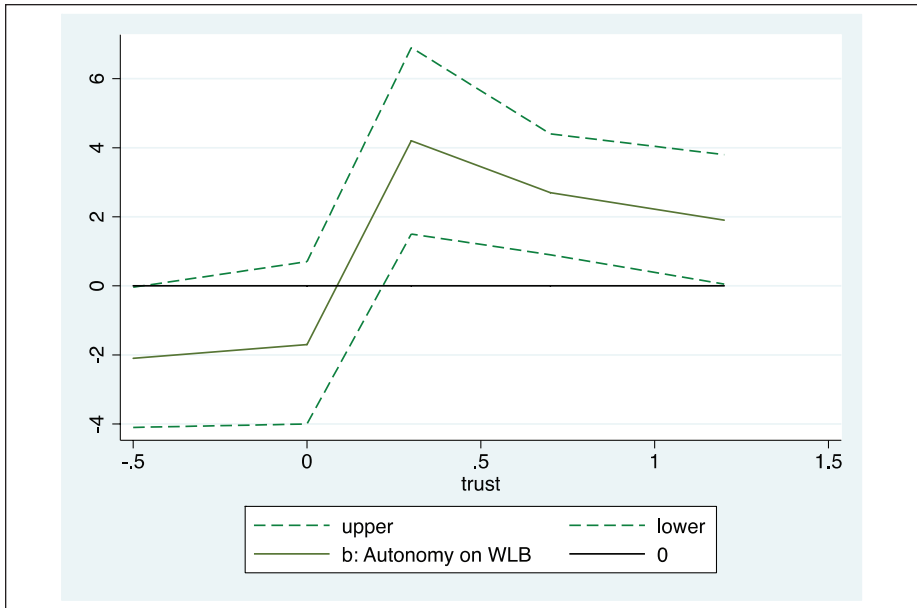
Figure 1. Estimates of autonomy on satisfaction with work–life balance for five quantiles of trust categories (centered around 0) plus confidence intervals.
Note. WLB = work–life balance.

stronger positive effect of autonomy, we interpret this seemingly positive effect with caution.

To test H2a and H2b—on the role of trust in management in the relation between autonomy and the satisfaction with work–life balance—we turn to Model 3 of Table 2 and Figure 1. In Model 3, we included the interaction between autonomy and trust in management. In accordance with H2a, Model 3 shows that autonomy (β = 2.29, p < .01) has a positive effect on work–life balance for employees who have high levels of trust in management. To illustrate the nature of the interaction effect and to examine H2b, which proposed that autonomy will have a negative effect on the satisfaction with work–life balance if trust in management is low, we estimated the effect of autonomy on satisfaction with work–life balance for five quantiles of trust categories (centered around 0).

We created 20% quintiles to provide estimations based on the empirical division of cases across trust groups. Zero means that there is not only no trust but also no distrust (neutral), values below zero indicate more distrust than trust, and values above zero indicate more trust than distrust. As shown in Figure 1, when trust levels are low, the effect of autonomy is actually negative, affirming H2b. In other words, when employees' doubts outweigh trust in their management (trust < 0 in Figure 1), autonomy is negatively influencing their work–life balance. If, however, trust outweighs doubt in

management (trust > 0 in Figure 1), autonomy has a positive effect on work–life balance, affirming H2a. We see a sharp increase in the effect of autonomy on work–life balance once the 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 doubts, 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 ($\beta = 0.95$, $p < .05$), indicating that married employees are more likely to indicate satisfaction with their work–life balance than their nonmarried counterparts. Work hours are not related to satisfaction with work–life balance. Job stress ($\beta = -1.13$, $p < .01$) is negatively related to the satisfaction with the work–life balance: The more job stress is indicated, the less likely employees are to indicate being satisfied with their work–life balance.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated whether and to what extent expatriate humanitarian aid workers can be satisfied with their work–life balance, and if so, under which conditions this balance is more likely to be realized. Because more traditional ways to mitigate work–life conflict are unavailable in this sector, we were interested to explore whether and how employers can influence the perceived work–life balance satisfaction of their humanitarian expatriate staff. Job resources, as suggested by the job resource–demand model, were identified as a promising avenue in this respect, with job autonomy identified as a key job resource. We hypothesized that in the humanitarian setting, job autonomy would only have positive effects on work–life balance satisfaction if expatriate workers trust their management: If these expatriates feel assured that they will be treated fairly and that decisions taken autonomously in the field will be supported higher up in the hierarchy (cf. Mayer et al., 1995), this will reduce fear of being held responsible for failing to meet organizational demands.

We answered our research question with a sample of expatriate aid workers working for MSF (OCA). The central findings of this study were twofold. First, humanitarian aid expat workers can experience work–life balance satisfaction, even though they work long hours. Second, autonomy has a positive influence on the satisfaction with work–life balance if trust in management is high and a negative effect when trust in management is low. The present study thus reinforces arguments that in highly demanding work environments, where classic measures to increase work–life balance are not feasible, autonomy does not inevitably increase work–life satisfaction. This relation strongly depends on the employees' trust in the management of the organization, implying that trust in management can thus help to reduce strain. We also add to the literature by showing that without trust in management, autonomy is actually negatively related to satisfaction with the work–life balance in this particular setting. We reasoned that autonomy can be perceived risky and stressful if humanitarian expats do not trust their management to treat them fairly when evaluating the use of their

autonomy in the field, leading to increased strain and therefore reduced satisfaction with their work–life balance.

Although it was not the focus of our study, job stress strongly influenced work–life balance satisfaction negatively as expected, whereas commitment and work hours did not. The absence of any impact of work hours or commitment is likely related to an overall higher number of work hours (mean of 57 hr/week) and higher commitment, resulting in negligible variation. We will get back to this point below. The impact of marital status on work–life satisfaction was also divergent from classic findings, likely due to the composition of our humanitarian expatriate sample, with only 27% being married and 19% with children. An alternative explanation could be that being able to share your work experiences with a partner, even though the partner is physically not around, helps to cope with the strain from work and thus improves work–life balance satisfaction.

Implications, Limitations, and Avenues for Future Research

The main contributions of this study lie in its extension of the scope of work–life balance research to a unique case study of humanitarian field-workers and in showing how important trust in management is for these expats to be satisfied with their work–life balance. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical attempt to study these issues among the hard-to-reach population of humanitarian aid workers, and one of few studies that investigates the impact of the job resource trust in management on work–life balance satisfaction. Before discussing the wider implications of our study, two limitations deserve attention.

First, given the cross-sectional design of this study, we cannot make inferences about the causal ordering of the relations we studied. Nevertheless, our finding that high trust in management in combination with high job autonomy is positively related to work–life balance satisfaction is a first important step in unraveling this causal process. 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.

Second, our data could be subject to response bias. Although our data covered all categories of satisfaction with work–life balance (ranging from unsatisfied to satisfied) and were virtually normally distributed, the group that is (very) dissatisfied with its work–life balance might be larger in reality, because the ones who are very dissatisfied might actually not find time to fill in a 45-min survey. Therefore, the problem of a disturbed work–life balance might be more pronounced in reality, stressing the importance of job resources like autonomy in combination with trust in management to restore this balance. Given the fact that our sample was also characterized by high levels of commitment and trust in management, this could have influenced our analysis. However, the response analysis on other available characteristics of our sample did not reveal striking differences between our sample and the full population of expats in MSF-OCA.

Despite these limitations and the fact that one needs to be careful to automatically transpose our findings to other humanitarian or transnational organizations because this study concerns one organization (although one of the largest in the humanitarian field), our findings could be relevant for other types of organizations that share two characteristics similar to MSF: (a) organizations also employing workers who execute highly demanding tasks that cannot be easily influenced by the organization (in terms of workload, long work hours, physical and mental demands, etc.) and (b) organizations in which "conventional measures" to mitigate work–life balance conflict—such as timing and location of work, work hours, and family friendly policies—cannot easily be applied. In such comparable work settings (one could think of, for example, police, military, medical, and social work), employees need job autonomy to properly carry out their tasks. They often need to make decisions on the spot—with little time to consult their head office—that can have serious consequences, whereas at the same time, their work context creates strain and stress, which can result in fear of not meeting demands or making the wrong decision. We argue that in these types of settings, trust in management is a crucial cognitive job resource in the social and organizational domain that can help reduce strain, because employees have faith and confidence in the competence and behavior of their managers and thus can expect to be treated fairly. Hence, as this study showed, "simply" granting job autonomy to workers in these settings is not enough; trust in management is needed to achieve work–life balance satisfaction in high autonomy work contexts. Because this is one of the few studies that investigated the impact of this relatively unexplored job resource of trust in management on work–life balance satisfaction, more research is of course needed to corroborate the validity of our argument and findings in other organizations and settings.

Our findings also lead to the question how trust in management can be achieved in these work settings and whether this is a sufficient job resource to positively influence work–life balance satisfaction. Here, we would argue that the more well-known organizational and social context-related job resources come into play, because trust in management is argued to be related to, among others, employees' positive perception of HRM policies and practices such as professional development, participation in decision making, and performance appraisal practices (Ridder & McCandless, 2010; Vanhala & Ahteela, 2011; Whitener, 1997). In other words, trust in management can be achieved by concrete HRM actions and practices of organizations. Additional analyses of the HES data suggest that for MSF-OCA, this is indeed an important pathway of creating trust in management (Visser, 2015).

The above reasoning implies that a positive work–life balance satisfaction of employees, working in the types of settings as outlined above, is influenced by a complex set of task-related and organizational and social context-related resources in which trust in management could be a defining factor. Without trust in management, job autonomy can be detrimental for work–life balance satisfaction; and trust in management could be induced by HRM practices. Because work–life balance satisfaction is known to be a determinant of staff turnover, this combination of high job autonomy and high trust in management is also expected to contribute to reduced

turnover in these work settings. Future research is necessary to empirically verify this expectation.

To conclude, the present study reinforces arguments that in highly demanding work environments, where classic measures to increase work–life balance are not feasible, autonomy does not inevitably increase work–life satisfaction. This relation strongly depends on the employees' trust in the management of the organization, implying that trust in management can thus help to reduce strain in demanding work contexts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. As is stated on MSF's (Médecins Sans Frontières) website, "The living and working conditions with MSF are rarely compatible with the presence of other people who are not involved with the project. Family members rarely accompany workers, and if they do it depends heavily on security conditions. Each case is considered individually. That said, on the first MSF mission it is never possible to take family members with you" (https://www.msf.es/en/working-field/faq).
2. This is not to say that national staff is not exposed to risk or long workdays. However, national staff are not as detached from their families as expatriate staff, whereas expatriate staff are more likely to experience larger cultural differences, which may cause more strain.
3. Response analyses available upon request. Concerning the occupational representativeness, it has to be noted that higher level employees were slightly overrepresented. These employees (heads of missions and project coordinators) were of utmost importance in distributing the survey among the employees in the field and functioned as role models for filling out the survey. This might have resulted in the slight overrepresentation of these occupational groups. The sample showed a nearly equal gender split, as was also present in the complete population. The sample was largely representative of nationality, with similar percentages as the complete populations for the largest groups (Canadian, Dutch, and German).
4. Although presence of children is also controlled for in most work–life studies, most employees are single and only a small portion of the ones that have a partner have children; we therefore do not adopt this in our model. Additional analyses including the presence of children did not show any effects.
5. Tenure, presence of children, and education have also been 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.

6. An assumption underlying ordered logistic regression is the parallel regression (or proportional odds) assumption, which supposes that the relationship between each pair of outcome groups is identical. This suggests that the coefficients that describe the relationship between the lowest and all higher categories of the dependent variable are the same as those that describe the relationship between the second lowest and all other categories and so forth. Because the relation between all pairs of groups is the same, there is only one set of coefficients (only one model). If this was not the case, we would need different models to describe the relation between each pair of outcome groups. Therefore, we test the parallel regression assumption. The null hypothesis of this chi-square test is that there is no difference in the coefficient between models, so we need a nonsignificant result to not violate this assumption (Institute for Digital Research and Education, 2014). In our analyses, the result was nonsignificant, so this assumption was not violated.

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