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Gendered Work–life Ideologies among IT Professionals

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the discourses IT professionals use to produce work–life relations. We focus on work–life ideologies and explore the agencies produced, as well as whether and how they are gendered. Our data were collected in interviews with 24 women and men working in the IT industry in Finland. Our results show, first, that work–life relations were constructed discursively through two different work–life ideologies, and second, that these ideologies produced different gendered agencies in reconciling work with life. In our study, work–life talk produced different positions for women and men, which were influenced by gendered norms and social expectations. We conclude that gendered agencies in work–life relations may have negative implications for both women and men who work in the dynamic but male-dominated IT industry.

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Introduction

Being able to reconcile the demands of work and life is a serious organizational challenge currently faced by employees (Bourdeau, Ollier-Malaterre, & Houlfort, 2019). The field of information technology (IT) has been professed as the vanguard of new work practices, with the separation of work and life more blurred than in traditional occupations (Ahuja, 2002; Scholarios & Marks, 2004). In this field, work has been described as passionate, and connected to ideals of freedom and creativity (Scholarios & Marks, 2004; Walby, 2011). IT organizations have often been depicted as desirable places to work because of their low organizational hierarchy, close social relationships, and high work autonomy and flexibility (Hari, 2017; Walby, 2011). However, they are also blamed for normalizing long intensified working hours, as well as setting high demands on employees (Hari, 2017; Van Zoonen, Sivunen, & Rice, 2020), which can all be sources of stress and conflict between work and other life spheres (Ongaki, 2019; Wang, Gao, & Lin, 2019).

This study investigates how IT professionals produce work–life relations through discourse. We focus on work–life ideologies and explore the agencies produced, as well as how they are gendered. Although advances in technology-enabled work solutions have created new work models without constraints of time and place, there is limited knowledge of work–life integration for IT professionals (DePasquale et al., 2017; Holth, Bergman, & MacKenzie, 2017). In IT work, masculine ideals continue to dominate, perpetuating the naturalized connection of technical skill with a “male” job and placing women in clerical work and less technical positions (Lie, 1995; Tassabehji, Harding, Lee, & Dominguez-Pery, 2021; Kenny & Donnelly, 2020). Motherhood is often seen as a problem, an obstacle for women who want a professional career in the IT field, whereas fatherhood remains invisible (Holth, Bergman, & MacKenzie, 2017; Tiainen & Berki, 2019). Women in IT tend to scale down their work tasks and career objectives to meet their domestic responsibilities (Holth et al., 2017), and among women there are lower rates of return after having children than men (Walby, 2011).

Methodologically, we draw on critically oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Chilton, 2005), which allows us to examine the ideological underpinnings of IT professionals' discourses. We are also interested in what kind of gendered constructions are involved in agency and how gender is "done" (Davies & Harré, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and "undone" (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). Our data were collected in interviews with 24 professionals, female and male, working in IT in Finland. Work-life research and its theories have failed to adequately consider the variety of sociocultural contexts, or different fields of business in which people operate (Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2020; Ollier-Malaterre, 2013). Therefore, research approaches that take into account country's family and economic policy, labour market, social norms, and national culture are needed (Poggesi, Mari, De Vita, & Foss, 2020). We included both genders because both views are important to understand the gendered practices in the Finnish context and how people experience work-life issues in the fast-developing and male-dominated IT industry. Like the other Nordic welfare states, Finland offers extensive state-subsidized parental leave and day care. Nonetheless, the labour market continues to be marked by gendered segregation: in 2017, women comprised 25.5% of the workforce in IT (Statistics Finland, 2018), and only 10% of developers were women (Finnish Software and E-business Association, 2017).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: first, we review earlier research on work-life issues in IT workplaces through the gender lens. Second, we introduce work-life ideologies and explicate the discursive approach to doing gender and agency. Third, we introduce the research setting, followed by the research data and analysis. We then present the research findings. Finally, we discuss the importance of our findings and draw some conclusions.

Theoretical and empirical foundation

Gender and work-life relations in IT workplaces

There is a strong narrative that women's professional careers have been stalled because of their family obligations and inability to work long hours, which is seen as a requirement in IT work (Padavic et al., 2020; Walby, 2011). The expectation of "presenteeism," that is, the need to be physically present at work, persists (Lack, 2011). No surprisingly, women in this field have been shown to favour roles that are easily combined with family responsibilities (Holth et al., 2017). For women, who often depend on flexibility in sharing care responsibilities, the expectation of long working hours may also lead to the risk of stigmatization and marginalization (Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Career breaks can place women in particularly precarious positions. For example, career absences due to care responsibilities can lead to a loss of technical competence, and eventually to doubts about their technological expertise, as well as to structural discrimination (Holth et al., 2017). Kenny and Donnelly (2020) found that male-held assumptions about women's lack of technical ability and competence were endemic in IT organizations. Taking breaks from work meant that women needed to prove their technical qualifications and demonstrate knowledge of the field. In addition, women in IT experience higher levels of stress and work-family conflict than their male counterparts due to careresponsibilities (DePasquale et al., 2017). Although it has been emphasized that family responsibility is a common problem for women, resolving this issue is individualized and the employer's responsibility is disregarded (Hari, 2017). Therefore, having a family support system is particularly important for women in leadership positions in IT (Bhattacharya, Mohapatra, & Bhattacharya, 2018).

Men's paternal role has been marginalized in previous studies, which has resulted in the invisibility of fatherhood (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011) also in IT organizations. In contrast to working mothers, fathers who work long hours and distance themselves from care responsibilities are typically spared negative sanctions and moral disapproval (Heikkinen & Lämsä, 2017). For men, the reality is that their non-working identity is secondary to their role as an ideal worker (Acker, 1990). Hari's (2017) examination of Canadian IT

companies revealed an underlying gendered substructure in which company practices were built on the male breadwinner model. The policy of separating care responsibilities from the related leave, was legitimized on the grounds that because most workers were male, their availability to work was not compromised because their wives were assumed to bear key responsibility for childcare and domestic work. Holth et al. (2017) found that despite the dual emancipation agenda and the increasing approval of being a devoted father, the employees in a Swedish ICT consultancy expressed work–life issues following traditional gender roles. This meant that women were considered more responsible for the family, and often played a supporting role for their male partner’s career demands, while their own roles tended to be non-technical and coordinating (ibid.). A limited number of previous studies have focused on men’s work–life relations. However, DePasquale et al. (2017) found that male IT employees may also experience difficulties and stress in combining IT work with family life. Their findings showed that men could be more flexible than women, and that women were harmed more with the ideal worker norm, and the long hours culture. Yet, both women and men believed that being “family-oriented” meant career penalties and barriers to success (ibid.).

Our review of extant literature suggests that IT work is predominantly built on gender stereotypes. Despite the existence of different family structures, these workplaces continue to conform to the hetero-normative Western nuclear family model. Hence, women have been characterized exclusively as mothers, not as competent and loyal professionals, whereas men have been considered devoted professionals without any care responsibilities (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011; Hari, 2017).

Work–life ideologies

Work–life research has tended to approach work–life dynamics mainly from a conflict perspective, in which work and life are viewed as strong separate entities and work is often prioritized (Özbilgin et al., 2011; Powell, Greenhaus, Allen, & Johnson, 2019). The conflict paradigm is strongly gendered with the effect that managing boundaries of work and other life spheres is regarded as women’s issue. Women’s paid employment can and should be then balanced with their family responsibilities, which is usually considered a burden (Grünberg & Matei, 2020; Padavic et al., 2020). The concept of work–life balance has been criticized for neglecting situational and institutional conditions and for the naïve assumption that the balance could be attained by improved time-management, for which the individual is responsible (Lewis & Cooper, 2005; Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, Den Dulk, & Kossek, 2013). Getting the balance right has become an ideal aspiration of neoliberal discourse with highly simplistic assumptions about cultural neutrality and gender (Rajan-Rankin, 2016). Current debates on work–life research have suggested a newer approach work–life “blending”, which refers to the idea that work and life are seen as merged, and that there are blurred or no boundaries between work and life (e.g. Kossek, 2016; Leslie, King, & Clair, 2019). The idea of work–life blending has also challenged the simplistic boundary management thinking (Leslie et al., 2019), and shifted the research focus on understanding the beliefs about how different aspects of life and the society work (Eagleton, 2014; van Dijk, 1998).

This study supports the aforementioned broader view and understands work and other life spheres as a complex web of relations rather than as two separate domains. We apply the concept of work–life ideology (Leslie et al., 2019) to understand individual beliefs regarding work and life and how they are interrelated. Ideological beliefs are then understood as a tool that individuals use to efficiently sort through multiple options, with the result that their preferences in life mirror their ideologies (ibid.). Leslie et al. (2019) suggest that individuals hold three work–life ideologies: 1) a fixed pie (versus expandable pie) ideology; 2) a segmentation (versus integration) ideology; and 3) a work (versus life) priority ideology. Work–life ideology is best understood as a bipolar continuum, not two distinct constructs, which means that individuals may hold beliefs that fall between the extreme ends of the ideology.

At one extreme, individuals with a strongly fixed pie ideology believe that a finite set of psychological and physical resources exists and is available in either the work domain or the life domain. As a result, the investment of resources (e.g., time, energy, commitment) in work depletes the resources available for life, and vice versa. At the other extreme, individuals with a strongly expandable ideology believe that the investment of resources in work creates more resources for life, and vice versa.

In contrast, the segmentation (versus integration) ideology is concerned with beliefs regarding whether work and life are independent or interdependent (Leslie et al., 2019). Individuals with a strong segmentation ideology believe that work and life are independent domains that are separated by strong and impermeable boundaries, which means that thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in one domain do not influence the other, and vice versa. At the other extreme, a strong integration ideology suggests that work and life are interdependent domains that are separated only by weak and permeable boundaries, and that these domains are influenced by each other.

The work (versus life) priority ideology concerns beliefs about whether work or personal life is more important. Individuals with a strong work priority ideology believe that their work is more important than their personal life, which means that work demands and commitments take precedence over personal life. A strong life priority ideology suggests the opposite (Leslie et al., 2019). There can be variation in views on which aspects of personal life are more important than work (e.g., family but not hobbies). The work-life ideology offers a theoretical concept to understand the function of work-life cognitive processes instead of only focusing on work-life behaviours (ibid.), suggesting that these ideologies are related to wider societal value system and gender beliefs regarding the roles that men and women are suited to in society (Hochschild, 2001; Rokeach, 1973).

Discursive view of gendering work–life relations

In this study, we examine work–life ideologies from the perspective of discourse, and we focus on how these relations are possibly constructed by socially derived gender expectations. The study of discourses enables us to understand how people interpret their experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Potter, 1996). The value of examining discourses lies in the fact that it allows to highlight human interactions and the meanings that underlie constructions of work–life relations and gendering.

Following West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of "doing gender" we take the view that genders are created and "done" as both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimizing fundamental divisions in society. Viewing gender as socially constructed means considering it as something that is (un)done and enacted in social situations both in the workplace and at home and that produces asymmetrical power relationships (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004). Therefore, we acknowledge that individuals have the possibility to both reproduce and resist gender and norms by engaging with "undoing" of gender (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). In using this approach, we reject essentialism and claim that both women and men may choose how to express themselves in discourses and in performing the gender roles in which they would like to be perceived (Cammack & Kalmbach Phillips, 2002; Wagner & Wodak, 2006). Individuals construct the world from the vantage point of their own position and in terms of the images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts that are relevant within the discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). A subject position is made available to an individual within a discourse, so we see that IT professionals' desires are formulated in the discourses available to them.

The present study enriches the literature on this topic by extending the gender perspective to a contingent view of how work–life relations in IT affect the roles of both genders. Our focus is on how agencies are produced and may be available differently to IT professionals. We approach agency as discursively constructed, which means that agency is spoken into existence in any

moment. It is a fragmented and transitory discursive position that can be occupied in one discourse and abandoned in another (Davies, 1991). This approach could yield a fine-grained understanding of work–life outcomes in this field. The study setting, which is introduced in the next section, allows us to see IT workplaces as sites that make visible trends that exist throughout society.

Methodology

Research setting

We chose to analyse the Finnish social-cultural context because the country is presented and promoted as a gender-equal society (Tiainen & Berki, 2019), and it has been ranked highly in international comparisons of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2020). However, the problem is that gender neutrality often becomes gender blindness (Saari, 2013), which is the reality in IT, one of the most male-dominated sectors in Finland. In 2017, women comprised 25.5% of the Finnish ICT industry workforce (Statistics Finland, 2018), which was somewhat above the EU level (17.2%) (European Commission, 2019). The IT job market shows both horizontal and vertical segregation. Only 10% of developers are women (Finnish Software and E-business Association, 2017), and women lack access to managerial careers. In the EU generally, only 19% of IT management positions were held by women (European Parliament, 2018). Women typically work for public sector organizations and universities, while men dominate industry positions (Tekniikan akateemiset, 2016). Male-dominated contexts are also fertile grounds for sexism. According to a recent labour market survey (Tekniikan akateemiset, 2016), 30% of women in technology have experienced discrimination. Women's under-representation in the IT industry is partly explained by education: the number of women graduating from studies in this field has decreased over the last decade (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018), and women comprise less than one fifth of university students enrolled in IT programmes (Statistics Finland, 2018).

When examining work and life relations, we need to understand them within the wider socio-cultural context, and the availability of family policies and state support (Heikkinen, Lämsä, & Niemistö, 2021). Finland offers paid parental leave for both parents and subsidized daycare to foster equal labour force participation. However, in practice, women use almost all the paid parental leave (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020), and Finnish men rank low among their Nordic counterparts in their interest in taking longer parental leave (Lammi-Taskula & Salmi, 2013). Moreover, in families with under-aged children, women have a higher domestic workload than men do (Statistics Finland, 2018). This development has had serious consequences for Finnish organizations, allowing them to remain passive in developing policies and arrangements that would ease combining work and family life for both genders (Heikkinen et al., 2021). At present, in an attempt to increase the amount of paternity leave for male employees, the Finnish government is preparing a reform of family leave to offer equal quotas for both parents. The question still remains that how the organizations will support these endeavours in practice, particularly in male-dominated IT sector (Cf. Kangas & Lämsä, 2021).

Data and analysis

The empirical data were derived from 24 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (14 men and 10 women) (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), conducted between 2016 and 2020. The interviewees were recruited from different types of organizations, including small growth-oriented firms, medium-size and large companies, and international IT consultancy firms. The participants were aged between 33 and 50 years, and most reported having children or other care responsibilities in their non-working lives. Most interviewees had worked in the IT sector their entire career. Most respondents occupied professional and senior professional or top management positions, with titles

such as chief executive officer (CEO) (usually founder of the company), product manager, customer service manager, senior consultant, and system specialist. To ensure anonymity, each interviewee is identified by a pseudonym.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to describe the nature of their work; their career paths and major career steps; other spheres of life, such as personal wellbeing, family, and relationships; practices in facilitating work–life integration; and their prospects for future development in their organization and in the IT field. The interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes. The transcribed interviews were imported to NVivo, where an a priori coding framework was developed to aid the careful and systematic analysis of the data. The initial phase of the data analysis included identifying key themes and sub-themes.

We drew on critically oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Chilton, 2005), which offers a way to examine how certain belief systems, such as gendered assumptions, are accepted as “common sense” (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 57). The larger social discourse often controls individuals’ views and interactions (Gee, 1999). Nonetheless, while discourse makes different subject positions available (Davies & Harré, 1990), agents have some capability to act otherwise. Discursive practices constitute speakers as agents who make discursive choices that are real in their effects and allow for the refusal of any particular discourse or position within it (Davies, 1990). In terms of gender relations this means, that speakers can both enact the existing gender norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987), as well as challenge and redo these regimes (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). In line with this view, the interviewees were seen as negotiating their positions within wider socio-cultural discourses, and we also examined how their discourse practices contribute to the reproduction and possible transformation of socio-culturally laden discourses and norms (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87).

We began our analysis by identifying general themes that emerged from the interviewees’ understanding of their IT work and how it was constructed in their lives. The interviewees situated their work within the contemporary parameters of IT as highly autonomous, self-directed, competitive, and demanding continuous learning. The female interviewees’ accounts were more personal, emotional, and detailed than those of the male interviewees; the women reflected on their career expectations, work performance, and achievements. The male interviewees were less forthcoming about their personal lives, concentrating rather on reviewing the major phases in their career and their business. We then applied the critical discursive framework by first identifying how the interviewee constructed their work–life ideology, as well as how discourse practices were shaped by their work–life ideology. We then identified preliminary patterns of work–life ideologies. We discovered that the ideologies were shaped by gendered patterns in which the primacy of work ideology was dominant in the women’s discourse, whereas segmented ideology was dominant in the men’s discourse. However, there was ambivalence in the discourses, as the interviewees also relied on other ideologies temporarily, in specific career circumstances and life situations.

To determine the reasons for these patterns, we applied Wagner and Wodak’s (2006) framework of self-presentation strategies for analysing agency. We examined how the participants’ discursive practices were framed by either a team-centred or an individualized self-presentation when portraying career success as a result either of good luck and the right connections or of hard work and individual effort. We also examined the use of linguistic strategies such as impersonal and descriptive statements versus highly individualized, personal, and self-ironical ones. The analysis of self-presentation involved a close textual reading of the linguistic features and metaphors the participants used to intensify or soften their presentation of themselves and their agency. Finally, in our interpretation of social practice, we examined how the IT professionals located themselves and linked to wider societal discourses in Finnish society. Based on our analysis, we identified two predominant work–life ideologies through which the IT professionals patterned their work, lives, and agency and their gendered implications. The findings are presented in the next section in the form of two discourses.

Results

Easy living in clearly segmented work and life

Professionals in the Finnish IT sector construct their work–life relations through two types of discourse. The first discourse emphasizes opportunities to engage in passionate “pioneer work” in IT while easily maintaining work–life relations. In this discourse, the focus is on work as a lifestyle and work reaches into the private spheres of life are naturalized. Central to this work–life ideology is that work and life remain strongly ideologically separated, even in situations where physical boundaries of work are blurred (Leslie et al., 2019). Work and life are managed rationally and technically; for example, the transitions from one life sphere to another are typically expressed in the physical movement from one to another (e.g., from work to home). According to this discourse, these transitions are easy, effortless, and a natural part of life. Stress and work–life conflict are not often mentioned in the discourse. Self-presentation is constructed in relation to a team; for example, the professional’s subject position is constructed around team effort. The interviewees presented themselves as team players who emphasized joint-effort, but the team that they related themselves to were at work. In this discourse a rather passive agency was produced. It was common that the interviewees articulated no such outside pressures (i.e. organizational or expectations from family) that would contest the traditional masculine agency. The subject positions professionals took for themselves were entrepreneurial, team-playing and easy-going, and they presented themselves as team-guided, hedonistic and passionate. This discourse was constructed mainly by men, building on the sort of traditional, established ideas about gender at work and at home that often pass unnoticed and are therefore stagnant (Wee & Brooks, 2012).

A significant finding in the use of the separated work–life ideology was that many daily routines, such as organizing care, were presented as simply following and performing a routine. Gender was (re)constructed in the discourse on the basis of an implicit expectation that both work and non-work structured in a traditional masculine way. Eetu (38, System technician) portrayed his management of work–home transitions as routine performances; he represented the movement between work and home as a transition of the physical body from one place to another. He said, “No special thing, I just leave the kid,” without displaying any emotion. He continued, “But we live about two kilometers away and the day care is a few hundred meters away and, it’s like no special thing, I just leave the kid at the day care. It’s like, then the evenings are what they are, but that is how it is. We do what we do.”

Panu (32, System specialist) offered a similar response, saying that there was no need to negotiate the borders between home and life (e.g., hobbies and children)—little effort or only mechanistic agency was required. His response indicated that men had the right to construct their identities in work–life relations in a non-conflictual manner. When work and life are constructed as separated, work–family boundaries are produced through technical rationality. Panu continued, “That it’s just by snapping the fingers (snaps fingers) free time mode is on and then (laughs).”

A dominant feature of the talk was the naturalization of the 24/7 work culture, with opportunities to work with cutting-edge technology and personal development. Passionate dedication was taken for granted as a part of the entrepreneurial identity commonly constructed in the discourse. By emphasizing team symbiosis in his self-presentation (Wagner & Wodak, 2006), one interviewee, Sakari, reinforced his neoliberal entrepreneurial commitment. He reflected on when he started as an entrepreneur:

“Well, . . . I did work a lot. I was in a relationship, which, probably because of getting caught up in work, ended eventually. And it was very interesting, very exciting. Like I did have time off and had time for other things, too. But work was like what I loved to do. And like we didn’t use the traditional timecards or working hours or nobody looked at them. So everyone felt their eager working on a whole new thing that hadn’t been done before. Everyone was swept away with it. And it’s awesome to work in such a group where everyone is pulling together and is equally excited. (. . .) I worked a lot during that time. So like well, most of my free time was probably also spent working.” (Sakari, 50, CEO/entrepreneur)

In this discourse, work and family were strongly compartmentalized (Blithe, 2015), with the focus on business and work, and non-work aspects were mentioned briefly or downplayed. Sakari briefly remarked that working hard upset his personal relationships, but it was only a passing mention. The excerpt from Sakari's interview shows that even when the interviewees recognized that work may have affected their personal life, they produced a traditional masculine agency that silenced personal life, and their discourse reinforced their agency at work, not at home. The culture of silencing the personal life at work in IT organizations was visible in the research data. The male interviewees typically spoke less than the female interviewees about their personal lives, particularly problems they had. Although this ideology of separation of spheres was predominant in the male interviewees' discourse, it was also ambivalent. For example, Sakari also deployed the priority of work ideology when describing the early phases of starting his own business.

For Kaarlo, the possible occurrence of stress was something that simply had to be endured. His response to the situation echoed a masculinist response, and he used a firefighter metaphor to invoke masculine physical resilience and bravery in the face of difficulty:

“[At] least I have the feeling a bit that it's not seen as like, like somehow looking for ways to ease the stress, but, but like you just have to walk toward fire [the Finnish original *leuka rintaan ja tulta päin* can be understood as a metaphor that lends the image of brave firefighters], you just have to work hard.” (Kaarlo, 36, Key account manager)

In this discourse, family leave allowed for business as usual with short absences that did not interfere with or challenge work-life relations. According to the male IT professionals, family-based absences from work were unproblematic, and their membership within their organization remained uncontested. In the interviewees' IT organizations, the attitude towards the father's family-related leave was neutral or positive. For example, the interviewees emphasized that no arguments were raised against their leave, although it was not actively encouraged. This discourse was featured by gender talk that constructed parenting predominantly through traditional gender roles; it assigned responsibility for domestic work to the mother, whereas the domestic subject position available to men was mainly to help out. For example, Rami (32, Platform specialist) described his memories of family leave as follows: “They've been quite nice; at times I feel that you don't have time to do anything in the evening with the kids and if you've had hobbies, so then you can perhaps help out more at home.”

Finally, the gender talk in this discourse involved some transitions in gender roles. One of our interviewees, Eero (46, Project manager), emphasized equal parenting, which supports the new masculinity discourse (Lund, Meriläinen, & Tienari, 2019). Eero said that child-raising responsibilities should be shared by both parents, and more parental leave should be earmarked for fathers to “somehow force” them to take time off with their children. Eero's taking of lengthy parental leave to be with his children was exceptional in the research data. Eero explained that he wanted to “prioritize family”, and “invest in the children and the family”, and this was why he had not worked overtime; when he did have to work more, his wife had been responsible for domestic matters. Eero's choices can be interpreted as challenging the traditional distant fatherhood for working men, and producing involved fatherhood (Butler, 2004; Eräranta & Moisander, 2011; Lund et al., 2019). This meant disrupting the existing gender order.

To conclude, this first discourse is similar to the dominant discourse in Finnish working life, which continues to reinforce the separation of the private sphere (including feelings, work well-being and care work) from paid work. Surprisingly, the segmented work-life ideology in Finnish IT organizations reproduced traditional gender norms in which work-based engagements through technic-rationality was allowed and made acceptable especially for men, while the role of key caregivers in families was often still attributed to women.

Primacy of work with the emphasis on personal responsibility

The second discourse produced by the IT professionals constructs work-life relations through the primacy of work, thus following the work priority ideology (Leslie et al., 2019). Work-life relations were in conflict due to the dominant position of work, with career and work responsibilities often taking precedence over personal life. The primacy of work is strongly related to success and career advancement, and the pressures are set both by the IT professionals themselves and the IT organizations. Because work and non-working life are in constant collision, there are major problems in managing work-life relations. The discourse revolves around increasing one's competence and continuous learning to keep up with the pace of development in IT. By reproducing this discourse, the speakers maintained an agentic view of themselves in which they were in control and wanting to attain success "at any cost". They presented themselves as an individualistic survivor. Key subject positions in this discourse were competent, fierce and resilient, and the metaphorical frames used were upbeat, daring, energetic, goal-oriented, determined, and capable of self-regulation.

This discourse was mostly constructed by women. The gender talk is ambivalent in this discourse with women acknowledging the traditional gender expectations they face as working mothers. The expectations were even boosted in a male-dominated workplace such as IT. Therefore, these women also searched for novel ways to produce traditional masculinities rather than just reproduce the expected feminine positions. In contrast to the first discourse, in which work-life relations were articulated as a technical-rational solving of issues and rather carefree, mainly physical transitions between work and home, this discourse produces talk in which emotions and home life are an integral part of the speakers' work lives. Unlike in the first discourse, IT's 24/7 working culture is seen as more conflicting. In the following quotation one of the interviewed women looks back on her working style, criticizing herself for the choices she had made and identifying herself as not having followed the "preferred" motherhood:

"But umm, I can't say like if like the trend applies to other than the IT industry (.) because I haven't been anywhere else (. . .) But I do feel bad kind of because when I came home, I just sat in the armchair, opened the laptop and continued working like. There was like the 15 minutes of coming home from work, during which I did not work, usually my husband cooked at that time, then I went to the table to eat and continued. So, it wasn't even like when the kids went to bed, then I started, I kept doing it constantly, and I feel that I did miss at that point, when the kids were smaller, they did go to school when I really started working a lot, but in any case, well, they would have like needed their mother in a different way. But of course their father has always been there, I'm grateful for that." (Tanja, 48, Communications manager)

The above quote is illustrative of the way by which the women's choices to work and focus on their career, and occupy the position as a (masculinist) ideal worker, conflicts with the conventional motherhood role, and bears personal cost, such as guilt (see also Niemistö, Hearn, Kehn, & Tuori, 2021). In this discourse women often used self-irony to emphasize their pride in their aspirations and daring attitude. One of our interviewees, Siiri (43, Product manager), made the point that her whole career choice was a gamble, and she wanted to do something totally different from everyone else. This was made clear in the interview: "I had to like, always, like score and—go study things that are the most challenging, ((laughs)) (then) I started studying information technology because it was, at that level it was the most difficult, like, and the smallest group of people, which was chosen, so then I just like had to get in. Well it was good I got in but it was quite a gamble like, if I hadn't got in, then probably many like other things, would probably have been very different after that but, but I was like quite defiant". Siiri portrays her entry to IT studies as a "gamble"—a metaphor that allows her to present herself as someone willing and able to take risks—a characteristic typically linked with entrepreneurialism and masculinity. By calling herself "defiant", she challenges traditional feminine gender norms, which we interpret as a discursive strategy to achieve fit in the masculine domain of IT. She is able to construct an ideal postfeminist position, by emphasizing her courage, confidence and sense of being in control (see Kelan & Mah, 2014).

Drawing on individualistic talk of career success was central to how our interviewees sought to emphasize their agency (Davies & Harre, 1990). This is illustrated in the following passage, where our interviewee explains how she returned to her former workplace after she had taken time off to work abroad: “So then of course I returned, uhm, and in fact I returned to Company X because they had just given me like a holiday (laughs), to go, go to Denmark and if you want to come back, come back (laughs)”. The way she narrates this episode in her career allows her to accentuate her role as a valued member of her organization; the laughter in her discourse signifies her content with the position she has occupied. She uses individualization to illustrate how her superiors were willing to allow her some space and to welcome her back at a time of *her own* choosing. This, we argue, is a part of performing a masculine agency while implicitly rejecting the stereotypical positions reserved for women. She also draws on “interactive others” (Davies, 1990) to strengthen and legitimize her position as a valued member of her professional network. The interviewees’ emphasis on their professional competence was part of their construction of their agentic subject position in the discourse. Being publicly acknowledged as a competent figure was centre-staged, and the talk often involved irony and emotional involvement (Wagner & Wodak, 2006).

Work and life relations are constructed in this discourse with determination and self-assurance, often resulting in descriptions of “super” performers. Work and home life are built on hard work and self-control, and many of the interviewees use the strategy of a self-made woman (Wagner & Wodak, 2006). This emphasizes the commitments that need to be made for career advancement and to show outstanding self-directiveness. We suggest that the women’s positioning themselves as strongly agentic individuals (Davies, 1990) can be interpreted as their participating in contemporary gender ideals for women that emphasize individual responsibility and goal-orientation (Lewis, 2014; Gill, 2017). Postfeminism invites women to mould themselves, promoting confidence, independence, and self-regulation as keys for women aspiring to advance in their careers (Gill & Orgad, 2015), and these types of expectations towards professional women to take individual responsibility in steering one’s career are also circulated within Finnish management education (Kivijärvi, 2021). This type of discourse use opens the possibility for women to engage in gender expressions that are traditionally unavailable for women, and therefore offers a way to disrupt the existing gender order. In the quotation below, the female professional describes her performance orientation and her refusal to slow down during maternity leave:

And somehow switching mode from the like incredibly, busy working life to having nothing, well then it started unravelling elsewhere, I thought well now I’ll have time to do what I want, well I did write my MBA thesis, and . . . I didn’t want to start that in the beginning either. I was thinking, what are these like my passions that I would like to do, have always wanted to do, well I’ve always been fascinated by fashion, I started to design (accessories) [. . .] and then I bought a really nice car for myself and, Petteri went on a work trip and *then he came home again* and asked, “you did what?” (laughs) (Paula, 45, Business development manager)

In the data, the interviewees commonly experienced pressure and feelings of guilt from the incompatibility of their choices at work with their family obligations. The organizations’ role in easing work-family issues is omitted in this discourse—or rather, it is accepted that getting on in one’s career means choices for women. For example, the women working for international IT consultancies reported how the results-oriented culture of the industry made it impossible to implement organizational work-family policies in practice; for example, according to one of our interviewees part-time work arrangements for recent parents only existed on paper (Cf. Heikkinen et al., 2021). The primacy of work and the striving for competence at work are also evident during family leave: one interviewee, Heli (41, Marketing director), said that while on maternity leave she had read over a dozen professional books in order to keep up with the fast-paced industry. Women who were working mothers felt the weight of gender expectations placed upon women, but they escaped blame by re-articulating family responsibilities and roles and emphasizing their professional self. In both discourses, the role of spousal support and sharing domestic responsibilities was brought out, and care responsibilities were handled by outsourcing them (see Hochschild, 2001).

This discourse emphasizes the primacy of work over other life spheres, a discourse that is now being questioned in wider discourse in Finnish working life. The discourse was used by women, which is not so common in other industries. Although the discourse acknowledged the challenges and emotional stress arising from work–life relations, these continued to be downplayed in comparison to the agencies open to women. Consequently, women were often called hard and resilient. This unwillingness to admit any problems or weaknesses results in the perpetuation of the gendered expectations that are set for women in IT.

Concluding discussion

The study investigated how IT professionals produce work–life relations through discourse. We focused on work–life ideologies and explored the agencies produced, as well as how they were gendered and differently available to men and women. The first discourse was characterized as rational and emotion-free, putting forward fixed and straightforward solutions to cope with the requirements of work and other life spheres. Agency in this discourse was constructed as a matter of “shifting gears” from one mode to another. The discourse offered male interviewees the possibility of constructing a “long hours” culture, commitment to work, and care responsibilities in a naturalized status quo. Heroic, masculine stereotypes were used to stifle personal problems, and adventurous team journeys in the public sphere were related to work. Interestingly, the findings reveal that the men produced an easy care relationship to domestic responsibilities, describing themselves as performers of a routine. Thus the segmented ideology allowed the IT professionals to effortlessly travel through the interchanges of work–life relations. This implies locking the family into a traditional gender structure, in which men’s traditional roles affect their management of work–life relations. The traditional masculinities were hardly ever questioned and fatherhood was rarely discussed in the IT workplaces, which may further sideline the men’s participation and social recognition as equal parents (Burnett et al., 2013).

The second discourse emphasized the primacy of work, along with professional competence and personal investment. In this discourse, female professionals’ need to achieve work goals often led to work–life conflicts. Grünberg and Matei (2020) argue that the conflict discourse reinforces traditional gender roles and causes unsustainability in working life. Our results, however, showed some overturning of traditional gender roles, with the women positioning themselves as agentic, self-assured, and daring subjects. The women’s use of a strong competence discourse can be understood as a response to the work–life conflict experienced by women who enter a professional masculine environment. The ideal worker in IT is still predominantly masculine (Acker, 1990). We suggest that this continues to create unequal possibilities for women in IT and to contribute to the unsustainability of working life (ibid.). Our results suggest that the work–life ideologies constructed here may lead to men having fewer possibilities of devoting themselves to other spheres of life than work and to women being required to foster a certain type of work–life balance, with mothering responsibilities combined with a continuous effort to achieve self-discipline and self-development. These are all demands that are typically set in a neoliberal society (Rottenberg, 2018). In the contemporary gender regimes in these types of IT organizations, particularly women are expected to act heroically (Kelan & Mah, 2014), and to be willing to be active and responsible for creating their own career success (Gill, 2007). While women are offered a broader spectrum of positions (availability of positions typically considered masculine), and can be hence interpreted as a means to disrupt gender relations, we argue that the discourse serves to conceal structural inequalities by emphasizing women’s individual responsibility. Based on our study we can conclude that masculinities procuded in a male-dominated IT workplace are often left untouched or difficult to change (e.g. Berggren, 2014). The key ideas of the discourses are summarized in Table 1.

In our study, the gendering of work–life ideologies indicated that women experience gendered pressures (i.e., balancing work and motherhood, gaining acceptance in a male-dominated field), whereas men continue to be placed in the traditional breadwinner role and any new type of

Table 1. Summary of key findings.

	Discursive self-representation	Work-life relations and their management	Key linguistic elements	Implications for gender relations
1. Segmented work-life: Easy living	Self-presentation as a passionate team player Features easy, effortless, living	Rationalized solutions Portraying hard work as a team effort and natural part of the job Reliance on shared responsibility	Technical-rational metaphors which convey an image of a machine Non-emotional, descriptive talk	Reproduces traditional masculinity (technic-rationality; detaching emotions)
2. Primacy of work: Taking personal responsibility	Self-presentation as a self-made woman and main actor on the stage Competence, bravery and resilience Emphasis of active role Pride and public acknowledgement of work achievements	Hard individual work as a necessity for career progress Having to make choices between work life and care responsibilities	Self-irony; downplaying one's own achievements with irony for the purpose of expressing pride/enjoyment	Reveals contemporary gendered expectations for women (as working mothers and professionals) Conflict between work roles and mothering norms Necessitating masculine behaviours and individual responsibility for success

fatherhood is sidelined in the work–life discourse. In terms of the (un)doing gender perspective of our study, we conclude that the men's discourse tended to reproduce conventional gender norms, whereas the women engaged with more dynamic constructions of gender as they distanced from and partially challenged traditional motherhood expectations and enacted a masculine career orientation. We argue that this study of professionals in the IT workplace not only shows the dilemma of women's agency in contemporary postfeminist culture but also perpetuates a stagnant and narrow agency for men that is left untouched and unchallenged, therefore maintaining gender inequalities in IT.

Because the IT sector is often considered a trendy and dynamic field, it was somewhat surprising that the men's discourse contained hardly any presence of parenthood, in this case the fatherhood. In contrast, the women expressed their difficulties (e.g., the need to work extra hours), but they rarely addressed or questioned the implications of inequalities or power. The study also points out that even though work–family practices are in place in IT organizations, they often remain as mere policies rather than actual available practices due to the gendered notions embedding IT work and career. Given that work–family conflict can have detrimental consequences for both employees and employers (e.g., burnout, turnover, loss of productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism) (DePasquale et al., 2017), IT organizations should make greater efforts to ensure the reconciliation of work with other life spheres by promoting family-friendly policies that take into account different types of life situations and families, developing flexible work scheduling that would increase work-wellbeing, with innovative initiatives specifically designed for knowledge work. IT organizations could also offer mentorship or supervisory support to tackle the gendered implications of work-life relations.

In conclusion, we suggest that the need to prove and reaffirm their competence reveals the continued vulnerability of women in the IT workplace (Hari, 2017; Holth et al., 2017). In the face of such pressure, there is no room for failure or hesitation (Kelan & Mah, 2014). The agency produced by women is strongly goal-oriented to meet the requirements of the competent self, compared with the agency that emphasizes team effort typically reported by the men in our study. In other words, it is more important for women in IT to attain the position of valued expert. The competence talk produced by the women supports the ideals of postfeminist sensibilities, which require women to silence their insecurity and vulnerability and to act in a way that portrays them as capable of creating their own success (Gill & Orgad, 2015).

Our findings point out that the field of IT is experiencing subtle changes in terms of the gender regime: Unlike the women in Swedish ICT sector (Holth et al., 2017), the women in our study evinced a strong work orientation, and rather than opting out from career opportunities, they were somewhat resistant of the traditional motherhood norms and established themselves as competitive and self-reliant as they pursued professional development. Such masculinist, career-oriented behaviours have been more recently identified also in other Finnish studies on professional women (Niemistö et al., 2021). However, it is important to denote how the understanding of IT work in itself, remains untouched, as it continues to be marked by the naturalization of long-hours and competition. Furthermore, in our data, fatherhood was silenced and backgrounded, as has been shown both in Nordic (Holth et al., 2017) as well as North American studies (Hari, 2017) of IT work.

On a practical level, our study has shown that both the psychosocial and the equality perspectives in managing work-life relations will be a great concern for IT organizations as they seek to hire new employees and retain them by ensuring their work well-being (Hari, 2017; Holth et al., 2017; Poggesi et al., 2020). Our interview data comes from a sample of heterosexual, white-collar employees with rather traditional caregiver roles (usually in a family with small children). This means that employees with other types of family situations (e.g., single) may be under-represented here. Future studies looking at diverse roles in life and taking into account different types of life situations in specific work roles (e.g., game developers, managers) would be a valuable addition to this vein of research. It would also be worth examining, how young fathers structure their work-life relations in these types of organizations. Nor did our results produce any information about spousal support or alternative forms of social support (e.g., grandparents' support), or the use of organizational support to facilitate the reconciliation of work and life, all of which warrant exploration in future research. From the organizational perspective, it would be fruitful to explore how IT organizations can improve the management of work and life relations and ultimately enhance gender equality (Padavic et al., 2020; Poggesi et al., 2020). This study also builds on a broadened scope of work-family research by drawing attention to work-life ideologies (Leslie et al., 2019) in the field of IT. We feel that this theoretical understanding merits further research, particularly from the perspective of sustainability and promoting gender equality (Grünberg & Matei, 2020; Kivijärvi & Sintonen, 2021).

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