Role Distancing and the Persistance of Long Work Hours in Professional Service Firms

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Abstract

This paper examines how and why individuals distance themselves from the prescribed professional role that—like the ideal worker image—centers on long work hours. Our study of audit and law professionals demonstrated that although many people complied with the professional role, some came to distance themselves from the professional role centered on long work hours. We develop a model of role distancing as consisting of two inter-related microprocesses: apprehension, involving a cognitive and emotional shift as individuals start envisaging their professional role as provisional and potentially changeable, and role redefinition, private and/or public, where individuals modify their work practices.
In the firms we studied, although both men and women redefined their roles for themselves (private role redefinition), women were more likely than men to also redefine the professional role for external audiences (public role redefinition). Together, these findings highlight the importance of apprehension and role redefinition for role distancing, offer new insights into the role of emotions and material constraints, and thus enrich theory on role distancing.

Keywords:

Long work hours, apprehension, professional service firms, role distancing, role redefinition

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Introduction

Many organizations expect professionals to embrace an identity that centers on the ideal worker role, such that they are totally committed and available for their work, with limited constraints from non-work commitments (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 2006; Reid, 2015). A consequence is that many professionals nowadays experience tensions between who they are—their experienced identity—and what they are expected to do according to the institutional environment they evolve in—their prescribed professional role (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Leung, Zietsma, & Peredo, 2014; Reid, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Past research has identified cynicism, humor, and dis-identification as some of the strategies professionals develop to cope with oppressive professional roles. These studies also suggest that by adopting such strategies, professionals become more compliant and indefinitely postpone taking action (Contu, 2008; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006) to distance themselves from their professional role. Thus, this research revealed little change in individual work practices. Consequently, we still know little about if and how professionals can change individual work practices to better fit their life choices, priorities, and values while still belonging to and thriving in their time-demanding organizations.

In contrast to these studies, which show professionals generally unable to question the prescribed professional role and unaware of alternative ways of working, some of the professionals in our sample, due to their personal circumstances, showed an increased capacity to challenge the professional role and, specifically, the norm of long work hours. They distanced themselves from long work hours by questioning their taken-for-grantedness and redefining their professional role for themselves and others.

Our study asks: how and why some professionals came to distance themselves from the professional role centered on long work hours. We focus on long work hours because it is

a practice central to many professional roles, such as those of auditors (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Ruiz Castro, 2012), finance professionals and investment bankers (Michel, 2011; Perlow, 1999; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002), lawyers (Cook, Faulconbridge, & Muzio, 2012), and surgeons (Kellogg, 2009).

Role distancing is problematic to identify as the more individuals build their identities around wholesale commitment to institutional practices, the less likely they are to question them (Kellogg, 2009; Voronov & Vince, 2012) and to envisage and enact alternative ways of working. Therefore, investigating the triggers and the conditions of this process will add to our knowledge of the under-studied aspect of role distancing in professional roles. Moreover, departing from practices that become identified as part of the role (such as working long hours) is an emotional process, involving strong emotions such as shame or anger (Creed et al., 2010; Kellogg, 2009). However, though previous literature has acknowledged the important role of emotions, we still do not know much about how emotions come into play in the process of role distancing.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 78 accounting and law professionals in the UK, we develop a model of role distancing as consisting of two inter-related microprocesses: first, *apprehension*, involving a cognitive and emotional shift as individuals start envisaging their professional role as provisional and potentially changeable rather than the more normal experience of it as natural and unquestionable (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Voronov & Yorks, 2015), and second, *role redefinition*, in which individuals modify their work practices. By exploring and unpacking the role of apprehension, emotions, material constraints, and role redefinition, our study develops theory about how people distance themselves from a previously endorsed professional role and associated practices.

Theoretical background

The role identity nexus in the professions

Previous literature presents roles as external, socially defined "bundles of norms and expectations" (Baker & Faulkner, 1991: 280; Mead, 1934) that are relatively structured and enduring and which guide and sometimes constrain individuals' behaviors and identities. Roles can be more or less strict, but professional roles tend to be especially directive, requiring wholesale commitment epitomized in long work hours (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Kellogg, 2009; Lupu & Empson, 2015; Michel, 2011). Professional roles are associated with substantial technical expertise and respect of strong work ethics, but being seen as a professional has more to do with ways of behaving and acting as an "ideal worker," an individual fully committed and available for work (Acker, 1990; Reid, 2015) rather than with the possession of technical expertise (Grey, 1998). For instance, surgeons, who spend years acquiring specific technical skills, are expected to endorse a traditional professional role of the "iron man" surgeon who is tough enough to withstand any hardship, including extremely long hours (Kellogg, 2009).

While roles are related to social expectations, such as the externally-imposed expectation to become an ideal worker, identity corresponds to an individual's internalized self-understanding and experience (Mead, 1934; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). External expectations to conform to the ideal worker are reinforced through socialization and supervision, which contribute to the development of a particularly strong connection between role and identity among professionals (Abbott, 1988; Kellogg, 2009). We focus here on organizational and peer expectations and refer to these as the prescribed role. Individuals are thus molded and made to "fit in" (Kornberger, Justesen, & Mouritsen, 2011) the professional role. Moreover, promotions or salary increases often depend on compliance with institutionalized practices (Karreman & Alvesson, 2009; Perlow,

1998) and the risk of career penalties and marginalization is high for those who do not comply with role expectations. Kellogg (2009) suggests that there is both a cognitive and an affective attachment to practices, such as working long hours, that becomes identified as part of the role. To depart from those practices is to question oneself as a "true" professional. Working long hours thus becomes so entrenched in professional settings that professionals who encounter opportunities to depart from such institutionalized practices might oversee or refuse those opportunities (Karreman & Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2011; Perlow & Porter, 2009).

Yet, roles are less stable and fixed than some previous research assumed (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016; Simpson & Carroll, 2008). Building on Goffman's work, Kunda (1992) argued that although ready-made roles exist within organizations to communicate how individuals should think, feel, and act, there is potential for the construction of a dynamic identity, i.e. individuals can choose the extent to which they embrace or distance themselves from these roles at different times. Challenging and changing established roles is possible as individuals face life transitions and develop new interests and perspectives. As a result of these changes, professionals' relationships with their professional roles and the related institutionalized practices might become problematic, possibly leading them to distance themselves from their professional role. However, this process is still not well theorized.

Role distancing

Role distancing was initially introduced by Goffman (Coser, 1996; Goffman, 1961) to account for those situations where individuals perform their social role but exhibit a "disdainful detachment" (Goffman, 1961: 110) from the role performed. Those individuals will make use of the "leeway" they find in the structure to show that they are not subsumed entirely by the role and its related practices. In the Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective, where individuals prominently stage their practices to give others an impression of who they

are, role distancing is a way to signal to an audience that the individual does not fully identify with the role and that he or she is not fully expressed in the performed role (Stebbins, 1969). Role distancing then publicly expresses some measure of dissatisfaction from and resistance against the role (Goffman, 1961).

Research has highlighted the difficulty of transforming the culture of long work hours in professional service firms (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019; Karreman & Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2011; Perlow & Porter, 2009). In spite of many PSFs launching various work-life balance initiatives, they have generally failed to reduce the number of hours professionals work (Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014). Past research has found that professionals are more likely to express their dissatisfaction with the work role through cynicism, jouissance, humor, or dis-identification (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006) by constructing alternative future selves (Costas & Grey, 2014) or imaginary authentic selves (Collinson, 2003; Costas & Fleming, 2009). These forms of role distancing were shown to allow employees to overcome tensions between who they feel "they really are" and who they have to be at work in order to maintain a sense of authenticity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2010; Kunda, 1992). However, by creating buffer zones for the expression of individual identities, they do not make professionals aware of the possibility to act otherwise, nor do they incite them to act. Thus, they ironically have the effect of making people more compliant with long work hours (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006; Kunda, 1992).

In contrast to this research, many of our participants distanced themselves from practices associated with the professional role by starting to enact their role differently. Prior literature depicts professionals as generally unable to question the normative definition of the professional role and unaware of alternative ways of working in the present. This might be the case because these studies regarded professionals as having limited agency to change

externally prescribed definitions of roles and because they have not explored the enabling role of personal facilitators, such as seniority and family arrangements. In contrast, our research explores how some professionals manage to redefine their professional role for themselves as well as for external audiences. Thus, our paper offers a more complete picture of role distancing in PSFs.

Prior research shows that departing from practices that become identified as part of the role (such as working long hours) is an emotional process, involving strong emotions such as shame or anger (Creed et al., 2010; Kellogg, 2009). Yet the role of emotions in how people come to question and distance themselves from the professional role has remained understudied. In order to explore this aspect, we draw on the concept of *apprehension*—a shift toward experiencing the institutional arrangement that a person inhabits as provisional and potentially changeable (Voronov & Yorks, 2015) as a prerequisite to role distancing. We go beyond this understanding to also explore how professionals redefine their professional roles through specific changes in individual practices. Revitalizing the concept of role distancing from Goffman (1961) and Stebbins (1969), we thus propose role distancing as entailing not only a cognitive and emotional distancing through role apprehension, but also an enactment of this distancing through role redefinition.

Setting and method

Research setting

Our research setting is represented by two PSFs in auditing and law, Firms A and L, respectively. These knowledge intensive firms apply specialist technical knowledge to the creation of customized solutions to clients' problems and their core assets are represented by specialist knowledge (Empson, Muzio, Broschak, & Hinings, 2015). Professional service firms represent important sites where "professional identities are mediated, formed, and

transformed" (Cooper & Robson, 2006: 416). Our participants usually work over 50 hours per week and up to 100-hour weeks in busy periods, e.g. the audit season.

In these firms, professional staff below the managerial level are often treated as resources allocated to projects and they have relatively low levels of autonomy and control over their time, being required to travel on short notice and to work long hours in order to meet tight deadlines. Starting with the managerial level, professionals take a more advisory role for their teams and enjoy more flexibility, such as the ability to work from home or other locations or to shift work around private commitments.

Research method

The data analyzed in this paper derives from 78 semi-structured interviews conducted in Firm L, a law firm (24 interviews), and Firm A, an audit firm (54 interviews), two PSFs located in London. (See Tables 1 and 2 in the Annex for a detailed description of the participants' demographics).

The aim of the participants' selection was to have a diverse sample on the basis of gender, parental status and hierarchical level, allowing us to develop and refine emerging theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006) rather than to create a statistically representative sample. Interviewees represent all hierarchical levels in firms, but most of our participants are senior professionals with more than 5 years of experience, as we wanted to focus on socialized professionals who are more likely to have experienced a variety of identity processes ranging from endorsement to distancing themselves from the professional role. We interviewed a similar number of male and female professionals in both firms. Women and men in both firms differed starkly in terms of their family situations, 70% of the women being in dual-career couples, contrary to only 40% of the men. The majority of the professionals had at least one child.

The first author conducted all the interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes; the majority were in the region of 75 minutes. Interviews asked participants about their backgrounds and previous careers, career prospects and satisfaction, ability to manage work and private life, as well as their use of flexible work arrangements.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo11, a qualitative analysis software. Initial codes were created for general statements about long hours and instances of rejection or distancing from this practice. We then analyzed why and how they occurred by focusing on identifying triggers. In the first phase, we produced interview summaries exploring the storyline of individuals' experiences, which served to identify any turning points or salient experiences that individuals identified as prompting them to recognize role conflict and envisage ways of deviating from the long hours practice.

A second round of coding focused specifically on the experiences of individuals who showed the capacity to *apprehend* the prescribed professional role and specifically the norm of long work hours[1] as questionable. These were mostly those interviewees who expressed dissatisfaction, disenchantment, or who challenged the existing long hours practice. The notion of role apprehension proved useful for us as a starting point for specifying and operationalizing the microprocess of cognitive and emotional role apprehension as well as the factors shaping this microprocess. We also explored the triggers of apprehension.

In a third round of coding, we focused more on theorizing and unpacking how role distancing is *enacted* by our participants. We found that professionals adopted strategies of role redefinition which we identified to be private and public. We then unpacked the facilitators of role redefinition, which we found to be personal and work-related. Modeled on

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[1] This represented 51 participants (65% of our sample).

other inductive research (Creed et al., 2010), we present these constructs and supplementary representative quotations in Tables 3 and 5 below.

Findings

Normalization of long work hours in professional service firms

Professionals at the two firms we studied told us repeatedly that "it is not long hours that make you a good professional, but that you cannot be a good professional without working long hours". Clients' expectations for availability and prompt reply were often used to rationalize and normalize the need to work long hours: "[working long hours] is pretty standard now—I'm in a job where clients are demanding" (Tom, partner, law). Similarly, a director in audit recognized, "Working such long days is normal … it's not an uncommon pattern … it's just the nature of the job, you can't delegate to others" (Paul, director, audit). This unquestioned acceptance annihilates professionals' desire to act differently and makes them resign themselves to working long hours. As Tom also stated, "What did strike me though, in part because of the awareness created by this [research] project, is how accepting I have become of the position."

Likewise, Claire, a senior associate in Firm L, recognized that endorsing the professional role makes it impossible for professionals to see the possibility to act differently: "I think the difficulty is that when you are in that zone, it's very difficult to maintain perspective and think about possibilities outside of what you're doing." Adherence to the role makes professionals feel that they need to give themselves up to the role and be fully committed to it and that there are no other alternative ways of enacting the professional role:

One night, I had a client [emailing] and say: 'we have a meeting coming up in New York next week, can we try and mobilize somebody to come?' I was turning off my

computer, … it was midnight and I just was very sleepy, turned on my computer, … and I was like 'oh my gosh', sent an e-mail around to the team … Every single one of them responded like that [click of fingers], there were five of them. I got five responses. At midnight. And then I sent around a note saying 'what are you all doing? Go to sleep!' And they did not appreciate that, they were really mad at me for writing a note like that because that's what they feel is expected of them, and they feel that they need to do it and they feel that they don't have any other choices. (Emily, director, audit)

Professionals' emotional reaction to being challenged on their work practices shows the extent to which working long hours has become institutionalized in PSFs. They feel anger when asked to depart from a practice to which they are attached because they perceive it as a central part of their professional role.

These quotes show how difficult distancing from the professional role can be because individuals often experience long hours as an inevitable and natural part of their professional role. Nevertheless, people are sometimes able to break from the mold imposed by roles. In the following section, we focus on the cases in which professionals did distance themselves from the professional role centered on long hours and the part that apprehension played in this process.

Role apprehension as cognitive and emotional role distancing

Triggers of role apprehension

Role apprehension refers to the experience of one's role and related institutionalized practices as provisional and potentially changeable, rather than the more normal experience of it as natural and unquestionable. Our data shows that the "shift" people experienced from unreflective participation in the role towards questioning it was facilitated by at least one of

three types of triggers: on the one side, *disruptive personal experiences* and *alternative socialization*, resulting from the sedimentation of previous disruptive experiences within the self, and on the other side, *experiencing conflicting roles*, the result of individuals moving across fields with conflicting demands. Supplementary data can be found in Table 3.

Disruptive personal experiences

Among the professionals who questioned long work hours, some traced their increased capacity for role apprehension to disruptive personal experiences, including *dramatic events* and *bodily and mental suffering.*

Dramatic events: These represented disruptive life episodes affecting our participants. In explaining what prompted them to consider making radical changes in the way they engaged with their professional role, interviewees often narrated dramatic episodes such as the illness or death of a family member or colleague. Frank, a senior manager at a Big 4 firm said:

> My wife … had a miscarriage … It made me realize that because I … work long hours … that your work is not that important or not as important as a family at home … Since then I changed slightly the way I work and I put more priority on the family than work. I think maybe I was putting more priority on work but the balance changed definitely to trying to prioritize the family a little bit more. (Frank, senior manager, audit)

Experiences such as this were difficult for participants to disregard and rationalize and thus led to an increased capacity for apprehending the practices associated with their professional role as provisional and questionable. They forced our participants to pause and reflect. Michael's experience with his newborn son's illness was a shock that made him "step back" and question his work commitment:

> I came back to work and it was probably about 2 weeks after my son was born, he was re-admitted to hospital with severe weight loss … I felt that I wasn't at home enough in that period with my wife … to understand fully what was going on … *it was*

probably me stepping back from it all [work commitments] and saying 'Hang on a minute! … That was quite shocking! It sort of hit me quite hard in terms of maybe if I had been at home a bit more to help out … (Michael, director, audit)

Bodily and mental suffering: An individuals' capacity for apprehension was also triggered by experiences of personal suffering. This could stem from work, such as in the case of Maria (senior associate, law) who suffered from work-related depression. As she noted, "I suffered quite badly from stress … and thinking at that point, I need to take a bit of a step back." Similarly, Kalie, a director in audit described how her realization that she could work differently was triggered by her bodily and mental incapacity to perform her work:

> It got to a point before Christmas where I was dreading going to work. If I picked this thing [mobile phone] up to look at emails, I felt physically sick and … I was, you know, bursting into tears at every opportunity. My husband was really worried about me …

Times of crises are such moments that can trigger apprehension, which prompts individuals to reflect on things that were previously taken for granted or considered the natural order of things.

Alternative socialization

Prior socialization, less centered on long work hours and involving a healthier work-life balance facilitated individuals' role apprehension.

People are not blank slates when they join firms, and their aspirations and values regarding work and career are largely formed during their upbringing through socialization in the family and previous workplaces. John, whose case greatly exemplifies the influence of family upbringing, asserted that he has always considered his family life to have priority over work, just as his own father did:

> I've been very clear from a very early age that I wanted a family, and I wanted to make that the priority. I do know that that's partly come from my father and I do remember him … he used to get home from work [the] same time every day. (John, director, audit)

These individuals are more likely to question the practice because it conflicts with ingrained values about a balanced work-life and overall well-being.

Though most of our participants have only been socialized in PSFs with similar time-intensive requirements, a small minority of our sample had previous exposure to socialization in different work environments where long work hours were not central. For example, Emily joined a large audit firm in London in a high-responsibility position on a 3-day week contract, coming from the banking sector, where she had experienced a stronger emphasis on work-life balance. Since joining, she had been struggling to cope with heavy workloads while at the same time refusing to work on her days off and on weekends. Her refusal was met with intense resistance from her team:

> Whenever I would try to challenge the way people would think about certain things, there was a huge amount of resistance to it and I think *that's because people had only been at this firm and really loved it and loved all the people and loved the things about it and were extremely loyal to the firm itself* [our emphasis] … I've resisted quite a lot of it, but … I've been beat[en] up for that. (Emily, director, audit)

Due to previous alternative socialization, i.e. her previous work experience in another context, Emily could envision working differently, whereas her team could not, and thus resisted her attempts to introduce change. In the end, she was pushed to quit and left the firm.

Experiencing conflicting roles

For one group of participants, role apprehension was triggered by the conflict between their professional role and other meaningful roles, such as those of parent, aspiring writer, or active Christian due to the heavy time investment required by the professional role. In our sample, the parent role triggered by far the most prevalent role conflict experienced by participants.

Some female participants reported being very committed to their professional role

before becoming mothers and experiencing strong role tensions after becoming mothers: "Becoming a parent changes your perspective on the world very, very significantly … and there's no way really that you can really understand genuinely what that's like until that happens." (Sylvia, a senior associate at the law firm). This dissonance takes the form of "a massive inner struggle" or "feeling torn" (Maya, senior manager, audit) between two greedy institutional spheres, each seeking exclusive loyalty.

Some men becoming fathers also experienced conflicting roles. Daniel, a senior professional who changed his job in order to travel less frequently and keep more manageable hours so that he could better fulfill his role as a parent, is illustrative of this clash of roles:

> Nothing is more important than keeping my son safe and get[ting him] educated properly and preparing [him] for the wide world. Compare to that whether my boss wants his PowerPoint presentation by 9 o'clock or 6 o'clock.

In some male cases, their role tensions were created by their spouses' career investment. For example, Harris (director, audit) acknowledged that his wife's return to full time employment after maternity leave was "quite a noticeable shift" that prompted him to reflect on what he values: "What do you value? And the thing is if I don't see my children at some point each day, I feel I've missed something." (Harris, director, audit)

Unlike Harris' case, most male participants in senior positions who had stay-at-home spouses did not experience the same role tensions and, consequently, were more prone to normalize working long hours and did not show the same role apprehension.

So far, our findings show that triggers of role apprehension prompted some individuals to start questioning the professional role they previously endorsed unreflexively. These triggers made experienced tensions more difficult to rationalize and highlighted the need and possibility to enact the role differently. Thus, the rules of the game, previously taken for granted, become open for negotiation.

Role apprehension

Once the triggers of apprehension were present and the professionals could no longer ignore or rationalize them, the professionals engaged in role apprehension. By engaging in role apprehension, experiencing one's professional role as provisional and potentially changeable, our participants critically recognized tensions and showed awareness of the possibility of working differently. We found that role apprehension has two intertwined facets, a cognitive and an emotional one (Voronov & Yorks, 2015). We distinguish them in the following section for analytical purposes only.

Cognitive role apprehension

Our results show that role apprehension involved a shift in participants' mindsets, increasing their capacity to question socialization discourses that created a sense of urgency and gave prominence to work and deadlines, thereby relativizing the importance of work and de-normalizing long hours. Sylvia's experience of conflicting roles made her aware of things she previously ignored, that is, the sacrifices to her personal life and the heavy weight given to her job:

> I wasn't really aware that I was kind of making a choice to sacrifice this, you know, somebody's birthday party … it felt like it was necessary to do that, wasn't until I had children that I thought, actually, I can just send out this draft that in an ideal world I'd spend another 3 hours working on. But you know what? It's just not going to be as good a job as it maybe would have been pre-children. (Sylvia, senior associate, law)

As a result, Sylvia started to subject her previous understanding of the professional role to more rigorous deliberation. Some professionals apprehending their role at the cognitive level recognized that their professional role is "not a matter of life or death" or "saving lives," or as

John, a director in audit put it, "We're in this crazy world where we have so many meaningless [work] deadlines." Because the professional role centered on long work hours presents itself as natural, necessary and requiring undivided commitment, some professionals are not able to apprehend their role as potentially changeable: Jack, a partner approaching the end of his career, said: "… my biggest regret is that I regarded it as completely inevitable that I will work every weekend." (Jack, Partner, law). Jack's experience shows how some individuals can continue adhering completely and unquestioningly to the professional role. They see the present order as "inevitable," which annihilates their desire for change and are thus unable to de-normalize the long hours practice and accept that they can work differently. Unlike participants who embraced the "normality" of long work hours in PSFs, and their inability to act otherwise, some participants were able to question their previous excessive work commitment and denormalize it by acknowledging alternative ways of working. Kate (partner, law), for example, experienced a mental shift, recognizing that while the idea of "[I] must work, must work, must work" had been "indoctrinated into her," she was now aware of the existing "clash" between this idea and "where she is now" as a mother. She was aware that she needed to de-normalize working long hours in order to be able to work differently.

Understanding how work could be done without necessarily working long hours was sometimes a lengthy process. Professionals needed to understand how to do things differently, which involved "unlearning" habits inculcated during socialization. Michael, an audit director, illustrates this:

> And it has taken me probably up to now, like my son is now 2 [years old], to get to a point where it is like, it's evolved into 'this is how it works' [working more balanced hours], and it has taken that sort of length of time, probably longer than I wanted it to, but it's there now. (Michael, director, audit)

Cognitive role apprehension also implied disinterest in the stakes of the game, such as career progression or making partner in the firm. Role apprehension is thus never only cognitive, but also involves an affective dimension, i.e. it involves starting to care less about being an ideal professional. We now move on to discussing the emotional facet of role apprehension.

Emotional role apprehension

In talking about distancing themselves from previously endorsed roles or taken-for-granted practices, our participants often showed a "rupture of emotional investment in institutional arrangements," (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Yorks, 2015: 567) or "a disenchantment" (Bourdieu, 1998: 77) related to the long hours practice. This was reflected in strong emotions, such as resentment and anger, signaling an emotional detachment from the previously endorsed role—that is, caring less for work and more for private life. For example, Tobias's apprehension focused on the fact that his work was robbing him of valuable time:

> You feel *resentful and bitter* that something *that fundamentally isn't that important to the essence of life is stripping valuable time and minutes away from you* [our emphasis] … it's accentuated even more when you see someone who has lost their life or someone who has been told here's how much time that remains on your clock. (Tobias, director, audit)

Following a period of bodily suffering due to a difficult pregnancy and the identity-role conflict she experienced when confronted with the culture of long work hours after returning from maternity leave, Maria (senior associate, law) began to emotionally disinvest from the professional role:

> I was then working quite long hours … it was a horrible sort of period … And I think for me, that was the key point, I thought I am not doing this anymore, this is ridiculous. So, *I think from then on, I have taken a real step back* … So, *the priority has probably shifted for me … when I suddenly thought, this is just not what I want any more, you know* [our emphasis]. (Maria, senior associate, law)

Being able to emotionally apprehend the professional role allowed people to more deeply reflect and consider alternatives "to either genuinely reflect on or experiment with the validity

of alternative institutional norms" (Voronov & Yorks, 2015). This was the case of Maria (above) and of Duncan, whose priorities in life shifted: "the more I really understand what's important in life and it's not really work, it's you know, the relative importance of work—I still get a lot of satisfaction and stuff from work, but it used to be everything to me, but now it's less than half to me" (Duncan, director, audit). Our participants may still see themselves as professionals, but they redefine the professional role as more inclusive and accommodating of other valued roles, such as that of parent, instead of solely centered on work and sacrifice.

Factors shaping role apprehension

Our findings revealed that role apprehension was often fleeting given that, under the continued influence of the normalizing and naturalizing institutional forces, people went back to the status quo and "business as usual." While envisaging the possibility of acting differently, many participants returned to the "comfort" of their old routines and the enchantment of the game. As we show below, two interrelated factors—cumulative personal experiences and intensity of emotions—facilitated a more intense and lasting apprehension, which was more likely to prompt individuals to engage in role redefinition.

Cumulative personal crises

The repetition of difficult or challenging experiences prevented apprehension from vanishing. This is illustrated by the case of Tobias, who shared that his sister and father had died within the 4 years prior to the interview. The accumulation of these experiences challenged his understanding of life and made him decide that his prioritization of work needed to change, prompting him to act differently, or as he put it:

> … just reinforcing that … [these events] just sort of reiterated, you know what? You've got to spend some time with these people and you can't just work, [work] can't be everything. (Tobias, director, audit)

Tobias's apprehension about the fact that "life is short" and cannot be fully dedicated to work was also reinforced by critical events happening within his organization:

> We had a passing away of a partner, a guy who I immensely respected. He was young, under 50 … super fit … and three weeks ago I went to his funeral. Moments like this have just said to me, 'You know what? It's just not worth it.' (Tobias, director, audit)

It is noteworthy that previous apprehension created a mindset propitious for questioning one's work practices and the meaning of work, which resulted in every new event (trigger) reinforcing the directionality of the apprehension and the likelihood that individuals would see change as possible. We thus see how apprehension sensitizes people to the presence of new triggers.

Intensity of emotions

Our findings show that the more intense the emotions experienced by individuals are, the more intense and productive apprehension will be. Emotions are intense when people experience "hitting rock bottom," when they feel that things have gone too far. This was the case for Kalie, who at the end of a busy audit season that went worse than usual, felt that change was not only possible, but necessary to preserve her physical and mental integrity:

> … and it was just, enough is enough for my health, my sanity, you know, everything else, I just had to make a change. … you go through these periods and then okay, things get a bit easier and you forget, you forget how bad it was and I got to the point and I was just, I, *I cannot forget how bad that was and I'm not going through it ever again* [our emphasis]. (Kalie, director, audit)

Hitting rock bottom, as it happened to Kalie, made her resolute to not lose this state of awareness and let the status quo take control again. These experiences provoke a more intense role apprehension, prompting people to refuse to forget.

So far, our findings suggest that the existence of triggers of role apprehension disrupt professionals' normalization of long work hours and prompt them to engage with role apprehension, and envision, for instance, alternative ways of working. Importantly, we have shown that role apprehension is shaped by cumulative personal crises and intensified emotions, which intertwine to create a more lasting apprehension.

Role redefinition

Once the microprocess of role apprehension is triggered and enhanced by the presence of cumulative personal crises and intensified emotions, premises are created for professionals to move beyond role apprehension to redefine their professional role, the second microprocess of role distancing. Our findings show that professionals use two strategies of role redefinition—private and public role redefinition—both of which are facilitated by personal and work-related factors.

Private role redefinition

Private role redefinition refers to situations where change in the work practices was done by individuals themselves without attempting to change external expectations from supervisors and peers about their professional role. The main private role redefinition strategies we noted were: a change in priorities with the professional role taking less prominence, imposing stronger work boundaries, such as not working on evenings, weekends or during holidays, or by overlooking or ignoring some role demands, such as when turning down new work or travel. These practices were rather "unusual" for most professionals working in these firms, as noted by Kalie (director, audit):

> I'm quite disciplined when I take my main holiday, I never take my phone. I don't do emails. Two weeks without, you know, just without it completely which is quite unusual you know.

This redefinition implied acting upon a shift of priorities, from a central focus on work to one on private life. Moreover, this redefinition also showed an attempt to minimize work's interference with private life by constructing stronger work-life boundaries.

Derek, a partner in audit, redefined his professional role by arriving home early at least 2 days per week to spend time with his children. He also stopped working on weekends "which used to be a regular occurrence" (Derek, partner, audit). Another participant, Michael, stressed that whereas he used to follow common work schedules that demanded working late, he decided to take charge of his own schedule. This created the space for private role redefinition which involved less time dedicated to work:

> I drop him [son] off at nursery twice a week and pick him up once. So I am not in the office until 10 o'clock twice a week, I leave at 4.30 p.m. once a week, so fitting that within your working week and the pressures that you have, which you think ultimately as you start out is going to be quite hard, but the more you do it and the more you just push for it [the easier it becomes]. (Michael, director, audit)

Personal role redefinition involved a change in the professional's role enactment and related priorities, which ultimately led to self-imposed changes in the work schedules and level of involvement. This type of strategy may bring only short-term relief, since the external audience's expectations from supervisors and peers are not being met. Thus, this strategy may not solve strong role conflicts, such as those experienced by some mothers in professional roles. That is why some individuals may find this strategy rather ineffective and may attempt to redefine their role publicly.

Public role redefinition

Some professionals adopted strategies of public role redefinition, through which the person attempted to alter external, normatively imposed expectations held by others regarding the appropriate behavior attached to his or her professional role. This involved attempting to redefine the expectations so that fewer demands to work long hours were placed upon the person and a new set of role behaviors would be expected from that person by others. An example of this type of role redefinition was to request formalized, specific changes to work arrangements, which they had not done before engaging in role apprehension. For instance, John, a director in audit, decided to apply for and take advantage of flexible working policies allowing him to start work at 7 a.m. and to leave at 4 p.m.. Emily, Maria and Eliza decided to change their full-time contracts to part-time. Kalie and John also redefined their professional roles for external audiences by moving into internal roles, where working long hours were not expected as much as in client-facing work. Through their formal request to work part-time or perform a more internal-oriented role, these professionals redefined the external expectations imposed upon their original professional roles so that they would be expected—and allowed—to work shorter hours. Adopting a public role redefinition strategy involved communicating their decision, and in some cases even voicing their private commitments. This behavior attempts to publicly change the professional role definition:

> I definitely feel now almost a responsibility … to be able to say, 'I can't do that because that's when I take my daughter to school' … because I do really believe unless a few people start normalizing the fact that actually it's not the end of the world to confess to the fact that you actually have children, and you've got to take them somewhere, I think nothing would ever change. (Daisy, partner, audit)

Our data shows that overall, 33% of the men and 54% of women in our sample engaged in attempts to redefine their professional role. It is interesting to note that role redefinition strategies were gendered: the majority of these women (86%) redefined their role publicly, whereas this was the case only for 15% of the men. The majority of men opted to redefine

their role privately, which allowed them to (at least temporarily) better align their professional role with their previously apprehended need to shift priorities, and only engaged themselves without trying to change the external definition of role demands. While private redefinition only changed the person's own enactment of the conflict laid bare by the role apprehension, public role redefinition aimed to reduce the conflict experienced by these individuals by changing the expectations held by other people regarding the way the professional role should be enacted.

Many of our participants felt that role redefinition was good for them and allowed them to set their priorities straight. However, role redefinition did not seem a completed or finalized project, it was rather a continuous struggle where individuals had to continuously draw on their role apprehension to give meaning to their role redefinition.

Facilitators of role redefinition

Our findings indicated that role redefinition—either private or public—was only possible thanks to the presence of *work-related* and *personal facilitators*. These facilitators were necessary to overcome constraints and distance oneself from the practice of long hours associated with the professional role.

Work-related facilitators of role redefinition included (1) the availability of key organizational resources, (2) team and supervisor support, and (3) role models. The *availability of key organizational resources* involved flexible and part-time work arrangements as well as alternative career tracks offered by the firms. Though the two firms studied had similarly good work arrangements available on paper, they were quite different with regards to the availability of alternative career tracks. This was mainly because the law firm was much smaller than the audit firm. Thus, whereas some auditors who wanted to

redefine their roles moved to less demanding positions in the firm, potentially at the expense of their careers, they had more flexibility to do so than lawyers whose firm offered fewer internal mobility possibilities. Participants in Firm L mentioned how they lacked role models—individuals who made partner by working part-time, for instance—and how their team leaders were not supportive of working flexibly or from home, in spite of the fact that Firm L promoted a program of agile working.

Furthermore, due to the organization of work at PSFs into small teams and given that team members can act as perpetuators of long hours, *team and supervisor support* were important work-related facilitators of role redefinition. Those professionals who either requested changes to work arrangements or made work schedule changes by themselves were dependent on the support from peers and supervisors, or else were forced to revert to old work practices (e.g. go back to a full-time position) or even leave the firm. For example, Emily, who was working part-time as a director in audit, did not manage to enlist the support of her team for her work patterns and was eventually forced to leave the firm after half of her team refused to continue working with her. This points to the material penalties that individuals incur as a result of public role redefinition.

While belonging to a team that would not resent someone leaving the office early was important for role redefinition, equally crucial was the role of supervisors. As Anna (senior manager, audit) put it:

> Another partner, who is notoriously bad for thinking about these issues [long work hours and their implications], tried to get me onto another project, even though I was already flat out doing 4 days a week, and I had the support of my counselling partner to say, 'Ok, I'm ready to step in and support [you if] he doesn't back off'…. So having that comfort … we never got to that. But having this … sort of relationship and support network was absolutely critical. A lot of women *would have given up by that point because the emotional pressure on an individual to consistently say no, that's hard, that is difficult* [our emphasis]. (Anna, senior manager, audit)

Similarly, Tobias (director, audit) could go from regularly working on weekends to not working on weekends at all only "because my boss has also been on that similar path." This points to the fact that, in some cases, senior professionals did not only directly support professionals' strategies of role redefinition but also served as role models.

Role models, a third work-related facilitator of role redefinition, usually demonstrated and voiced a commitment to keep a healthy balance between work and family. Role models were not broadly available, but when identified by our participants, they were influential in facilitating their role redefinition. Michael's private role redefinition was clearly also supported by role modeling partners:

> We have a couple of them [partners] that work hard and they are very successful, but their family is their priority. And that's that! And they still make it work! So it gives you hope that this is achievable and you can do that. (Michael, director, audit)

Some professionals took it upon themselves to be open about the change in their working patterns in order to empower junior individuals to do the same. These individuals, who redefine their professional role publicly can act as role models for others, facilitating role redefinition in other people. For instance, John, a director in audit, hopes his behavior will allow others to be aware of the possibility to change individual work practices: "So, the fact that I was running the team and I got up at 5 o'clock [p.m.] every day to go home, and I now get up at 4 o'clock [p.m.] every day to go home. Hopefully, it starts to rub off on some people."

Personal facilitators of role redefinition included (1) career ambitions, (2) seniority, and (3) family work arrangements. In many cases, *career ambitions* served as a personal facilitator of role redefinition and meant that professionals had accepted renouncing the traditional career paths in PSFs based on constant upward advancement. Those professionals,

who redefined their professional role either publicly or privately, did so even though they were aware of the potential negative consequences on their careers. They showed a degree of acceptance of renouncing material rewards and lowering their career ambitions. As Kate, who started experiencing role tensions after becoming a mother, put it:

> [Other women partners] took those sorts of decisions to put their work first and what I'm trying to do is not do that and actually put family life first and work second, and I think people are looking at that as a, 'well, I don't know if you can be a partner if you're going to adopt that approach because you're taking on a job that requires a certain amount of dedication and travel and giving up of things in your personal life.' (Kate, partner, law)

On the contrary, professionals aiming for partnership were reluctant to reduce their working hours, as this director, mother of one, recognized:

> My perception of being able to progress, so I've felt that I've had to come back full time … had to come back full time and come back earlier … Honestly, as soon as I make partner, I will go down to 4 days a week. But why do I have to wait? Why do I have to wait? Why can't I just do it now? (Lilian, director, audit)

Although she questioned long work hours, Lilian did not attempt to redefine her role as she did not want to renounce the material gains associated with it (i.e. promotion to partnership). Professionals like Lilian adhere to the rules of the game in their professional field and, even if they show some emotional detachment from the professional role, are still cognitively attached to it as they have a strong interest in the stakes of the game (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, once they have achieved their desired status, they could feel enabled to act to reduce their work hours.

Furthermore, those professionals who privately redefined their professional role, e.g. by leaving their office earlier than usual or avoiding working on weekends, were clearly enabled by their degree of *seniority and experience*, a personal facilitator that allowed them to impose limits on workloads and control their own work schedules. They were more certain of the balance they wanted to achieve, of their priorities and of alternative ways of organizing work. As Michael explained:

> It sort of feels like that now I am actually a director, I have more say in, 'no, you will work to my timetable'; like you know, I'm the one that is signing this off ultimately. (Michael, director, audit)

In these cases, seniority enabled professionals to redefine their role without fearing negative consequences for their status within their firms. Moreover, as senior professionals, they had the flexibility and autonomy to accommodate their new work practices. In the law firm, one female redefined her role privately by starting to work 4-day weeks without any formal agreement after making partner. On the other side of the spectrum, junior professionals had little control over their work assignments and would not have been able to reduce their work hours without the permission of their supervisor.

Professionals, especially those in dual-career couples, who privately redefined their roles by making self-imposed, often informal changes to their work practices, referred to the role of *family arrangements* as a personal facilitator. Negotiations inside couples "forced" professionals to reduce their work hours and to redefine their professional role by shifting the importance of work and adopting a more equalitarian share of childcare, such as in Chad's case:

> Jo, my partner, she's very organized and made sure that we shared the way we manage Chris and his nursery. I hear of some stories where the mother is working as well but she's doing all the pick-ups and drop-offs. Jo wouldn't let me do that. [Laughter] But also, I wouldn't want to do that either. [I] wouldn't think it was fair on her. (Chad, director, audit)

For these professionals, the risk associated with role redefinition was mitigated by having a spouse who earned a good living: "I'm lucky enough that my wife has this money, that I might be more regretful if you know I was the sole earner in the family." (Daniel, director, audit)

Contrary to cases such as Chad's and Daniel's, individuals who were in traditional breadwinner roles with stay-at-home spouses found it more difficult to distance from these traditional roles, which ended up reinforcing the ideal professional role:

When my wife gave up work, I did suddenly and imperceptibly start to feel the burden of being the breadwinner and I can be quite out-spoken and say, I don't want to do things if I don't think they're right and I found that I was suddenly more conscious that I really couldn't afford to lose my job anymore because how would we feed the kids, etc. (John, director, audit)

Thus, role redefinition is a complex and challenging microprocess, which relies on the support of work-related and personal facilitators, which not only shape the realization and sustainability of the actions taken, but can also trigger and reinforce role apprehension in others.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand how and why individuals distance themselves from the prescribed professional role they previously endorsed and how they enact this role distancing. In the professional firms we studied, many professionals experienced strong conflict between the prescribed professional role centered on long working hours and other demands, often situated outside work. While many professionals tended to rationalize long work hours, in this study, we focused on those professionals who engaged in role apprehension, which allowed them to envisage alternative ways of working and thus created the premises for a professional role redefinition which defied the long hours imperative.

The grounded theorization of role distancing that emerges from our study revolves around two complementary microprocesses: role apprehension and role redefinition (see Figure 1). This model helps to explicate how and why individuals distance themselves from the prescribed professional role that centers on long work hours and which they previously endorsed. The first microprocess is role apprehension, whereby professionals start perceiving institutional arrangements related to their professional role as provisional and changeable. Our study identifies three triggers of apprehension: disruptive personal experiences, alternative

socialization, and identity-role tensions. Because professional roles center on institutionalized long hours inculcated through socialization and maintained through different types of organizational controls, role apprehension implied a substantial shift in perception involving not only cognitive, but also emotional distancing from the professional role. Our model shows that the cognitive and emotional aspects of apprehension are interlinked and they influence each other. However, as socialization intensely inculcates professional norms in people's minds and bodies, apprehension is often unproductive as individuals return to the status quo and professional comfort zone, failing to make changes to their work practices. In order for individuals to overcome their attachment to institutionalized roles and practices and to envisage making changes despite the negative repercussions they might have on their careers, apprehension has to be rendered more lasting by cumulative personal crises and intensified emotions. We propose that once individuals experienced role apprehension, they became sensitized to the presence and action of triggers, which made it more difficult for them to ignore or rationalize further triggers. This resulted in potential new triggers further intensifying role apprehension.

Role apprehension created the premises for a second microprocess: role redefinition, reflected in individual changed practices. We distinguish private role redefinition (an enactment of role distancing for oneself) and public role redefinition (an enactment of role distancing for others). Role redefinition is enabled by personal and work-related facilitators, which shape the sustainability of the strategy adopted. According to our model, role redefinition amplifies and invigorates role apprehension as people constantly draw on and go back to apprehension to make their role redefinition sustainable. This shows that role apprehension is never absent from strategies of role redefinition.

Our findings carry important implications for the literature on how actors engage with their professional roles, in particular in PSFs, highlighting the role of apprehension, emotions,

and material constraints within such microprocesses, and it suggests new directions for research on policies and practices, and the potential decoupling between both, in PSFs.

Contributions to professional role literature

Our study extends existing research on how people distance themselves from prescribed roles. The limited research that exists on this topic explores how individuals resist the demands of the professional role through different strategies such as cynicism, humor, or dis-identification (Contu, 2008; Costas & Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006). These studies show that these types of dis-identification paralyze action, having the paradoxical effect of making individuals even more compliant with their roles. Thus, there was a need to gain a deeper understanding of how and why some individuals enact role distancing. Moreover, as research exploring roles has been criticized for its assumption that roles remain relatively stable and fixed even when individuals' circumstances change (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016), they cannot account for the possibility that actors can redefine roles for themselves and for others. In contrast to these studies, we find that disruptive personal experiences, alternative socialization, and identity-role tensions introduce a breakdown in "the order of things" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), overriding people's tendency to normalize institutional arrangements. Furthermore, our theorization of role distancing looks not only at its cognitive and emotional aspects, but goes further and empirically explores how people ultimately enact role distancing by privately and/or publicly redefining the professional role. These participants refuse to enact institutionalized practices that are established as an important part of their role and consequently engage in redefining their professional role. We also note how role redefinition strategies are gendered with most men adopting a private role-redefinition strategy and most women choosing a public role redefinition strategy. Because public role redefinition offers a more sustainable resolution of

identity-role conflict by lowering organizational demands for long hours, it seems to be a solution preferred by most women. Our findings extend past research showing that men are more likely than women to "pass" as ideal workers even if they strayed from the ideal worker role (Reid, 2015) by identifying and distinguishing the two microprocesses comprised in role distancing and emphasizing the role of emotions in this process.

Contributions to research on emotions and material constraints in role distancing

A rapidly expanding stream of research insists on the importance of emotions in maintaining and disrupting institutions (e.g. Fan & Zietsma, 2016; Leung et al., 2014; Lok, Creed, DeJordy, & Voronov, 2017; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). Traditionally, research has portrayed identity-role processes mostly as internal, mental processes (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Creed et al., 2010) overseeing the role of emotions (Brown, 2015; Lepisto, Crosina, & Pratt, 2015). More recent research has identified emotions as crucial, explaining for instance why actors challenge the existing definition of institutionalized roles (e.g. Creed et al., 2010). However, the role of emotions in processes of role distancing has remained under-theorized. Our study fills this gap by pointing to the importance of emotions in the overall processes of role distancing and especially in allowing individuals to move beyond fleeting role apprehension to avoid relapsing into the status quo.

While our findings acknowledge the important role that emotions play, they suggest that emotions alone cannot explain role distancing. Despite strong role apprehension and emotions, individuals may neglect to engage in public role redefinition because of the material rewards that result from complying with the institutionalized practices of the prescribed role. This reaffirms the notion that institutionalized practices and roles hold not only because of individuals' cognitive and emotional attachment to them, but also because

role redefinition can involve a material loss. In the cases we examined, apprehensive individuals postponed or refrained from taking action because they were afraid of potential costs due to role redefinition, especially the public type, such as losing the rewards attached to becoming a partner. Hence, when considering distancing oneself from institutionalized practices and risking the hardship of related sanctions, individuals do not act solely based on their emotions. They weigh possible trade-offs between their intention to distance themselves from their professional role and what personal and work-related facilitators allow them to do.

Our results also show that in order to distance themselves from the practice of working long hours in an enduring way, individuals' actions need *facilitators* to support their role redefinition attempts. While those facilitators can be personal (e.g. seniority, family arrangements) or work-related (e.g. support by their team or supervisors), they represent a form of protection against material sanctions in two regards. First, some facilitators render it less likely that individuals will be sanctioned. Seniority, for instance, seems to afford individuals the privilege to reduce their hours without being punished. Unlike previous studies in PSFs which emphasize the compliance of senior professionals with institutionalized practices and depict these professionals as organizational clones (e.g. Covaleski et al., 1998), our findings show that some apprehending professionals in senior positions redefine, at least privately, their professional role by changing their individual work practices.

Second, facilitators can render sanctions more tolerable, for example when public role redefinition, such as moving to a more administrative role, is accompanied by the understanding and support of team members and supervisors.

Our findings illuminate the material aspect of compliance which is absent from previous research on roles in institutional analysis, most probably because those studies have examined collective action (e.g. Fan & Zietsma, 2016; Kellogg, 2009; Leung et al., 2014) or individual cases where the material constraints were less critical (Creed et al., 2010).

Contributions to the analysis of PSFs' policies and practices

Our study provides insights into the decoupling between official policies and institutionalized practices in PSFs. In both our firms, formal work-life balance policies were available on demand to employees, however, most male professionals preferred to personally make amendments to their professional roles without having recourse to these formal policies. Moreover, for those professionals who had recourse to any sort of work arrangements (whether private or public), being in a senior position or having the support of one's team/supervisor shielded them from career sanctions and made their role redefinition more sustainable. While the present study focused on the individual level and did not address the institutional aspect, its findings point to the need to examine how PSFs potentially become sites of organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 1989; Cho, Laine, Roberts, & Rodrigue, 2015) as formal work-life balance policies are implemented to comply with societal and employee demands while senior management continues to enforce informal, yet powerful institutionalized norms of long work hours that come into conflict with these policies. Indeed, 50% of the interviewees who adopted a public role redefinition strategy left the firm within the two years following the interview, which meant that they could not significantly or durably influence the external expectations of the professional role, whereas those who opted to redefine their roles privately did not even attempt such a change.

Our study also provides insights into how individuals inhabit highly institutionalized contexts where they face constant scrutiny. Most research on agency in institutional theory has focused on cases of institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work, where actors engage in challenging the existing institutional order, eventually fostering institutional change (e.g. Battilana, 2006; Battilana et al., 2009; Smets et al., 2012). In our case, although we

identified awareness and individual action-taking to redefine the professional role, we did not

find evidence of institutional change – i.e. an organizational level change in practices and

beliefs. Interestingly, this study suggests that while a relatively high number of professionals

experience role apprehension, this does not necessarily coalesce into a collective movement

that creates institutional change. While our findings point to the importance of individuals

acting as role models to facilitate role redefinition, their influence remains local, i.e. at the

immediate team level. We could not identify an individual or a coalition of individuals who

engaged in initiating significant change in their firm. As such, our study strongly resonates

with Kellogg's study on resistance to long working hours in surgery (Kellogg, 2009), which

showed that such change in institutionalized practices takes a long time, and even though

initiated due to external regulation, was only successful in one out of the two cases studied

when junior staff managed to create relational spaces where they could escape the control of

more senior staff and organize resistance. On the contrary, PSFs enjoy enough autonomy to

decide and implement their own work-life policies, so the institutional pressures existant in

Kellogg's hospital case are absent. Moreover, individuals who managed to redefine their

professional role build on personal and work-related (contextual) facilitators, but we have not

seen evidence of spaces where a coalition for change in practices could emerge. We suspect

that in highly institutionalized contexts such as in PSFs where pressures to comply with the

professional role are strong and social control permanent, such coalitions might be especially

difficult to create. Thus, while previous research documented how institutional change

emerged from small local initiatives (Plowman et al., 2007; Sherer & Lee, 2002; Smets,

Morris, & Greenwood, 2012), the present study reminds us that this is not always the case.

Local initiatives can remain local, not coalesce, and not lead to institutional change. Our

findings point to the role of formal policies as buffers, decoupling between policy and

practice and social control as preventing such institutional change. More broadly, our study

points to the need to further examine the social mechanisms that contribute to small

modifications leading to institutional change, but also what impedes such evolution.

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