

Single, childless working women's construction of wellbeing: On balance, being dynamic and tensions between them

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Abstract. *Objective:* Single, childless working women (SCWW) are a notable proportion of the female workforce. The budding research on this population suggests that they have issues of wellbeing that may be tied to specific needs of both their workplaces and their personal lives, and hence, distinct work-life dynamics that require attention. This study explores how SCWW construct their wellbeing.

Participants: The sample was composed of 22 SCWW aged 29 to 45.

Methods: A discourse analysis of the transcripts of semi-structured interviews with these women was performed.

Results: Most women drew on an interpretative repertoire of “wellbeing as balance” (e.g., diversification and reasonable dosing of life's dimensions). It was associated with a recurrent subject position we have termed “the dynamic woman” whose intensity transfused talk of the activities in her life. Here, work becomes a “passion” and a source of appreciated challenges. However, a dilemma could arise from these constructions for positioning oneself in relation to the cadence of one's active life or rather, in articulating an unambiguous claim to balance. Balance/dosing and dynamicity/passion can be uneasy bedfellows.

Conclusions: Our analyses raise questions about possible counter[balancing] discourses and further argue the relevance of work-life issues for SCWW.

Keywords: Work-life balance, marital status, wellbeing, passion, busyness, discourse

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, scholarly publications attuned to the interests of single workers without dependent children have begun to accumulate within the expansive work-life field and that concerned with the link between social roles and wellbeing. From an initial concentration on the health, familial, organizational and societal im-

plications of workers', particularly women, combining family roles (parental, spousal, elder care) with the demands of paid work, more appropriately termed “work-family,” the discussion has since expanded to admit this socio-demographic group.

Collectively, these few written works can be seen to focus on two broad overlapping themes: the equity of current work-life policy and the limitations of common methodological approaches for understanding the wellbeing of single, childless workers, if not, for taking a wider perspective on workers' needs in general. More explicitly, in response to organizational efforts to be more accommodating to workers' personal commitments, research and deliberation have honed

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in on the fairness of resultant workplace policies, both formal and informal, for single and/or childless workers [10–12,20,41,42]. In turn, the orientation of the methodological critique has accentuated the need to adapt or develop concepts, measures, theoretical frameworks and research designs to investigate workers without conventional family roles, a generally overlooked group. This task has begun [10,17,21,28] and a modest amount of empirical data on single, childless workers has thus emerged. Yet, the nascent nature of scientific attention to this population means much remains to be learned. Our study follows from the above areas of concern offering a qualitative analysis of how single, childless working women themselves construct wellbeing. A heavy reliance on notions of balance in our sample signaled an opportunity to examine how work-life discourse may be drawn on by this group. Before elaborating any further, each of the above themes will be presented, highlighting how this study intends to contribute to this area of inquiry. Demographic observations are covered first.

1.1. Single, childless workers as an emerging demographic

Several authors have underscored a disconnection between the socio-demographic composition of the workforce and the working populations of interest to work-life researchers (e.g. [20,42]). While they remain a rather marginal consideration in work-life studies (e.g. [9]), single, childless workers represent a sizeable segment of the workforce. In Canada, where the present study was conducted, over a third (37%) of the employed were neither married nor living common-law and over half (55%) did not have a child at home in 2006 [36].

The presence of single, childless workers can be contextualized within widespread social shifts in previous decades, including the rise to majority of singles in the population, an aging workforce, delayed, less linear and less standardized life transitions (e.g., leaving home, completing education, childbearing) [3], a low fertility rate, and less stable intimate relationships. Single, childless professional women, specifically, have lately been heralded as a new global demographic tied to the widespread diffusion of individualism, women's economic empowerment and a western view of romantic love that impedes their match-making [4].

Some indication of the prevalence of single working women without dependent children in industrialized countries is provided by national study data of adult

women. They suggest that over the course of the 1990s, this group may have accounted for approximately 9% of full-time women workers in England¹ [2], 7% of working women in France² [27], 14% of employed Norwegian women³ [29], 14% of employed Finnish women [35], 16% of employed Swedish women⁴ [35] and a fifth⁵ of Canadian paid female workers [25] and could be more highly concentrated among those with a high income [27]. In Canada, more recent census data show that never married, divorced or widowed women with no children at home account for fully 28% of employed women in 2006 [36].

1.2. Equity issues and related research

The idea that employees are for the most part married and raising children is one of two central assumptions governing both practice and research in work-life that Young [42] sought to dispel. Her incursions into the theme of equity for single and/or childless workers [41, 42] also challenged the view that family is what primarily draws workers emotionally, mentally or physically away from their jobs [42]. She argued that conflicts between work and life cut across employee populations, as do Canadian work-life researchers [15], and that restrictively family-oriented workplace policies to address them raise the question, what's fair?

Adding grist to the mill and attuned to these very concerns, Hamilton, Gordon and Whelan-Berry [20] theorized that single, childless women may also have multiple roles that are difficult to balance. With a sample of American women employed in health care or financial service organizations, they examined five measures of work-life conflict in three groups of women: never-married women without children, married women without children and married parents. They found quite comparable conflict profiles between the groups. Impact of work on home, impact of home on work, difficulty balancing work and non-work, and work-to-life conflict were similar between groups. However, one significant main effect arose. Post-hoc comparisons

¹Data were derived from the Health Survey for England and the sample restricted to women aged 20 to 59.

²Data come from a national health survey and this statistic applies to women from a narrow age group (30 to 49).

³This statistic is derived from Census data restricted to women aged 18 to 59.

⁴These findings are based on Surveys of Living Conditions in Finland and Sweden among women aged 25 to 49.

⁵Data originate from the National Population Health Survey and persons aged 20 to 60 compose the sample.

showed never-married childless women had a significantly lower mean of life-to-work conflict than that of married mothers. As a second objective of the paper, the authors analyzed differences in the perceived importance and rated use of a sample of 20 typical organizational work-life benefits. Results showed in each case, that at least 50 percent of the benefits were either rated as significantly more important or used significantly more by women who were married than by never-married women without children. On most of the remaining items, differences were non significant with some exceptions: never married women without children rated elder care referral and health insurance more highly. The authors thus inquired "... is it fair that so few benefits are seen as important or utilized more by never married women without children than by married women with children?" [p. 410].

In continuity with the previous study, the task of determining precisely what kind of organizational support might appeal especially to single, childless workers was taken up by Casper et al. [10]. These investigators developed and validated a multidimensional measure of a "singles-friendly work culture" based on qualitative research with this group and an assessment of the literature. Among the five dimensions identified, they found three were associated with organizational variables in single, childless workers. Notably, greater social inclusion and equal respect for nonwork roles both predicted perceived organizational support, and more equal work opportunities (e.g., for career development, mentoring) related to lower turnover intentions. Importantly, they also compared single, childless workers with workers with families along each dimension. With the exception of social inclusion, which showed no group difference, single, childless workers rated their organizations as significantly less egalitarian than workers with families on work opportunities, access to employee benefits, respect for nonwork roles, and work expectations.

Along similar lines, Chui and Ng [11] pursued the notion that single, childless working women may have different priorities from women with partners and/or children as regards "women friendly" human resource management policies. In their sample of single, childless Hong Kong employees, they found only work-oriented women friendly policies (e.g., training and development opportunities, anti-sex discrimination policies) and not family-oriented policies (e.g., maternity leave, flextime) were related to organizational altruism and emotional attachment to the organization. Family-oriented policies were, however, related to higher perceived costs of leaving one's place of work.

Together these few findings suggest tentatively that while single, childless workers can experience similar levels of perceived conflict between work and "life" to that of workers with conventional family configurations, the quality of their workplace experiences and support differs, as do, quite possibly, the organizational elements that can ameliorate it. Workplaces are experienced as less equitable by single, childless workers along family status lines and converging results point to equal chances for career development as having positive effects on this group, at least as indicated by organizational variables.

Discussing the distinct career issues of single, childless workers, both Young [41] and Cummins [12], in a semi-autobiographical account of her experiences in academia, have emphasized the common assumption of this group that they have fewer personal responsibilities and thus more available time than working parents. In a context of little recognition of their life circumstances, this can translate into expectations from both the private (e.g., to care for an elder parent) and professional spheres (e.g., to take on additional work) that challenge work-life harmonization. That their lives outside of work may be seen as filled with "discretionary" and thus inessential activities (e.g., spending time with friends) can compound matters [41]. As the next section will explore, there is budding evidence to suggest that such activities, when examined, are not merely 'nice' [41] but contribute importantly to single, childless workers' wellbeing, as does a positive experience of work.

1.3. Methodological critiques and related research

Methodological critiques stemming from an acknowledgement of single, childless workers as a distinct group have touched on issues of inclusion in investigations [9,17,20], the adequacy of existing theoretical frameworks (e.g. [28]) and the appropriate use of measures [21]. Resultant research suggests that this population is infrequently the object of study, and not uncommonly, interpretation of findings can fall short for lack of knowledge on the population.

Many have noted that direct attention to single, childless workers in work-life or work-family-related research is minimal. For example, in their recent review of organizational studies from 1980 to 2003 ($n = 225$), despite casting a wide net by including "work-life" and "work-nonwork" among its search terms, Casper et al. [9] underlined the absence of representation of single, childless workers. The study samples' available socio-demographic characteristics indicated that fully

83 percent of participants were either married or cohabitating and 77 percent had children living at home. Overall, the authors concluded that “most of what researchers know about WF [work-family] issues [. . .] is based on the experiences of heterosexual, Caucasian, managerial and professional employees in traditional family arrangements” [p. 37].

From the field of stress research, Fong and Amatea [17] suggest its emphasis on multiple roles (usually defined as combining family and work roles) as causing women's stress has led the issues particular to single, working women without children to be overlooked. Comparing four life role groups of American women within academia, they found only one significant group difference in levels of physiological and psychological stress symptoms: Single, childless workers had significantly higher levels than married mothers. Attributed in part to a dearth of conceptual work sensitive to this group's experiences, the authors were at a loss to explain their results: “. . . we are, in a sense, left wondering what are the factors that are relevant in the stress of single, professional women” [p. 27].

Wishing to gain understanding on the key dimensions of the life experiences of middle-aged single, childless professional women, Lewis and Borders [28] found most theories of adult development inappropriate for their group. Whether based on research with men or designed for women, they typically required family status. The authors turned instead to the research literature on life satisfaction from which ten variables were culled. Their resultant analyses showed a combination of five of these significantly predicted the life satisfaction of their sample of single, childless professional women: job satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, regrets about life circumstances (the most important were financial), internal locus of control and importance of leisure-time activities. Gender identity, social support, health, and financial resources were not retained. Once again, the authors expressed difficulty explaining their findings, in this case, as concerned sexual satisfaction, a variable rarely considered in previous research.

In line with the two previous studies, other work suggests that work quality and finding pleasure in life outside of employment are differentially important to single, childless working women's wellbeing. With a sample of American practical nurses and social workers, Barnett, Marshall and Singer [1] found changes in job role quality were inversely related to changes in psychological distress in single, childless working women but not in coupled working mothers. Among Japanese white collar workers, Mori et al. [31] found the men-

tal health of single childless working women was predicted by gender variables (i.e. masculinity, consciousness of “being a woman” at work), finding enjoyment outside of work, and the support of friends and family while for coupled working mothers, stress outside of work and support in the workplace were determinant.

Collectively, the findings point to single, childless working women as having issues of wellbeing (e.g., stress, work-life conflict) that may be tied to specific needs of both their workplaces and their personal lives in which organizational support may play a role. However, the possibility of distinct work-life dynamics between workers may not always be taken into consideration in the application of relevant measures to study samples. In a recent article, Huffman et al. [21] stressed the importance of construct breadth when assessing “interrole conflict”, suggesting, in order to avoid inappropriate inferences, the conceptualization of the “non-work” domain be matched to a sample's family role status and the research questions pursued. Given current emphasis on the construct of “work-family conflict”, they point out, the use of “family” items alone to capture this domain risks construct underrepresentation, and hence its validity. In fact, their innovative study, which analyzed the validity of two interrole conflict measures simultaneously, demonstrated that work-nonwork conflict significantly predicted job satisfaction and turnover intentions in single, childless employees yet not in employees with a partner and/or children, and work-family conflict, a more narrow measure, significantly predicted these outcomes in partnered and/or parenting employees but not in single, childless employees.

1.4. The present study

Our intent in this study is to help fill out extant research on the work-life issues of single, childless workers, and that concerned with social roles and wellbeing which, as our review of studies illustrates, seems to show disproportionate interest in workers of the middle to upper classes as well as women. We have thus conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-two single, full-time working women without children, aged from 29 to 45 years old, living in the Montreal area of the province of Quebec, Canada and responding to a call for career women to participate in a study. In contrast with many past studies, we sought participants from diverse occupational fields and adopted a research strategy that would not impose limits on the factors (e.g., occupational, personal, social, familial) that might be

deemed important to their lives. Specifically, we used a qualitative approach, critical discursive social psychology (e.g. [16,32]), and the concept of “wellbeing” [14] as a reference for analysis. With these tools, we pursue the general question: How do single, childless career women discursively construct their wellbeing?

An advantage of this approach, given the previous research, is that it recognizes discursive constructions of wellbeing as products of contexts as well as actors. It thus acknowledges that they may be flavored by operating power relations (e.g., at the heart of workplace equity issues), circulating discourses (e.g., on work-life balance) or even negotiations of a stigmatized or ‘deficit’ identity (e.g. [4,6,13,30]), as the women are without the social roles expected for their age and gender (i.e. wife/partner, mother).

2. Analytical approach

Discourse analysis can be understood as the “close study of language in use” [38, p. 5]. Language, for discourse analysts, is not a static system nor is it transparent or neutral [26]. It is constitutive – it can create and change meaning- and represents an important means of action (e.g., persuading, negating). As such, it is recognized as having effects. Analyzing discourse involves description but it often has a critical aim, one that can be used to contest the status quo and to advance positive social change [26]. Discourse analysis is nevertheless a vast field of research. Our approach, critical discursive social psychology, originates in the work of Potter and Wetherell [32], and is distinguished by its eclecticism, in part, by bringing together an emphasis on talk’s action orientation, more typical of conversation analysis, and a post-structural theory’s understanding of discourse [40]. As a result, it sees individuals as both the masters (producers) and slaves (products) of language. Among its principal objectives are the analysis of processes of normalization or naturalization in talk and reflecting on the beneficiaries of different discursive formulations [16]. It does not, however, offer a specific analytical method but rather a theoretical framework with which to approach texts. For Potter and Wetherell [32], two phases are central to analysis: 1) searching for and describing patterns (i.e. variability and regularity), and 2) theorizing the functions and effects of language based on linguistic observations to support one’s interpretations. Its concepts of “interpretative repertoire,” “subject position” and “ideological dilemma” provide anchors through-

out these processes. The first can be described as historically generated linguistic resources that draw on a society’s or community’s common sense and form the building blocks of conversation [16]. Alternately, interpretative repertoires are “broadly discernable clusters of terms, descriptions, common-places [. . .] and figures of speech often clustered around metaphors of vivid images and often using distinct grammatical constructions and styles” [33, p. 212]. Individuals, in general, are seen to creatively select from a largely pre-existing bank of these in their talk. Subject positions are locations in conversation, that is, identities that are emphasized by ways of talking [16]. They are inherently relational as people position themselves or are positioned by others against alternative subject positions and are also shaped by ideologies [16]. The concept of ideological dilemma, borrowed from Billig [5], refers to lived ideology or the common sense and habits of belief of a society. Here, “An ideology comprises the ways of thinking and behaving within a given society which make the ways of that society seem ‘natural’ or unquestioned to its members” [p. 217]. Such ideologies, however, contain contrary themes, providing the basis for dialogic discussion much like opposing proverbs (e.g., “absence makes the heart grow fonder”, “out of sight is out of mind”). Ideological dilemmas thus highlight the contradictions and inconsistencies within speech as well as its argumentative nature and can signal what is taken for granted as the way things are. Thus refined, the objective of this study becomes to identify the main interpretative repertoire(s), subject position(s) and ideological dilemma(s) involved in the discursive construction of wellbeing by a sample of single, childless working women.

3. Method

3.1. Sampling

This paper is the product of a larger qualitative research project on the experience, wellbeing, and social construction of single women, especially workers, based at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), in Canada. To participate in the semi-structured interview component of the project, a woman needed to meet the following criteria: she resides in the Montreal area, is aged 29 to 45, has a gross annual income of at

least 30,000\$ CND⁶, currently works full-time (minimum 35 paid hours per week), is not married or living with a partner, does not have a biological or adopted child, possesses a bachelor's degree, speaks one of the two official languages (i.e. French or English), is heterosexual, and recognizes herself on some level as a "career woman."

Our choice of age range was meant to attract women who have attained or surpassed the average age at which women in Quebec have their first child (28 years in 2008) [23], while still within their childbearing years,⁷ and have entered the height of couplehood in the general female population⁸ (roughly 30 to 44 years in 2006) [22]. Our focus on self-defined "career women", an expression used in our recruitment advertisements, emerges, in part, from a desire to take account of suggestions in social scientific publications that a woman's professional success troubles her formation of a couple relationship [4] and that a career orientation in women is linked with childlessness [8].

We used multiple recruitment strategies to constitute our sample: calls for participants in the free alternative Montreal press ($n = 12$ participants), advertisements in local university papers ($n = 2$), an online profile on a popular Internet dating site ($n = 3$), word of mouth ($n = 4$), and an advertisement in a local newspaper ($n = 1$). The sample combines two waves of recruitment, one in 2006 (alternative press only), and another in 2008. The first served to produce a series of pilot interviews conducted by the first author ($n = 4$). Despite some variation in the formulation of the interview schedule between waves, due to the pertinence of their content, these interviews were integrated in the final sample.

3.2. Collection procedures

Following a presentation of the study and confidentiality issues, all participants signed a consent form and

⁶The average employment income for a woman aged 25 to 44 in Quebec is \$31,040, while the average employment income for a university educated woman is \$43,656 [24]. Our choice of a 30K minimum speaks to our desire to recruit a range of income levels in our sample while excluding women with potentially more difficult financial situations.

⁷In 2008, the fertility rate for first births among women aged 45 or older was extremely low at 0.1 per thousand in Quebec [23].

⁸In 2006, the proportion of coupled women (married or in a de facto union) in Quebec begins to peak in the 30 to 34 age group (71.1%), reaches its maximum among those aged 35 to 39 (71.8%) and begins to decline from the 40 to 44 age group (70.5%) [22].

received \$20 CND compensation before commencement of the semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted at the respondents' home or place of work upon request ($n = 3$) or in an office of the Department of sexology at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Their duration ranged from 1 to 3 hours. The open-ended interview schedule covered the meaning and experience of paid work, being a career woman, childlessness, and singleness as well as the women's views on wellbeing and the diverse factors deemed associated with it. With consent, all interviews were audio recorded. A research assistant or the first author, while changing identifying nominal information, later transcribed these verbatim. In following, a code name was assigned to each participant. A short questionnaire was filled out by all participants, although second wave participants received a slightly longer version. Specific income bracket, wellbeing measured on a five-point scale (poor to excellent), and a five-point answer to the question "who are you?" are unavailable for these women.

3.3. Preparation of the material for analysis

All transcriptions were revised by the first author for accordance with the audio recordings. Final transcripts were linked with the software Atlas.ti version 5.2 for thematic coding in quasi-totality. This preliminary coding, done with a low level of abstraction, reflects the general interests of the research team as well as the content of the interviews. This paper and its discourse analysis concentrate on understanding entries for the "wellbeing" code. In the psychological literature, subjective wellbeing, also known as happiness, refers to many things and encompasses both general evaluations of one's life or life satisfaction and satisfaction with one's important life domains [14]. While the pilot interviews asked participants which aspects of their lives gave them the most and least "satisfaction", and the latter interviews questioned participants on their "wellbeing" (both factors contributing to and impeding it), we consider much of the same ground was covered and all participants contributed several entries to this code. With this broad definition of wellbeing in mind, irrespective of where in the interview it emerged, any relevant global assessment of one's life, mention of happiness, and talk of elements associated with wellbeing, health or feelings of wellness are subsumed within this code. The output of citations was a little over 80 pages, single spaced. Our analyses were conducted with the material in its original language. The translation of the interview excerpts from francophone participants appearing in this text was validated by all authors.

Table 1
A general descriptive profile of the sample ($n = 22$)

Code name	Profession	Last university degree	Ave. weekly hrs of work	Income category	Last couple	Self-rated wellbeing
Gabrielle	High school teacher	Bachelor's (education)	35 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	1½ yrs	Excellent
Martine	Coordinator	Bachelor's (administration)	45 hours	\$30K to \$39,999	1 yr	Good
Sophia	Self-employed make-up artist and nanny	Bachelor's (physical education)	45 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	3 yrs	Good
Nathalie	Director of finances and administration	Bachelor's (law)	40 hours	\$60K to \$79,999	10 yrs	Excellent
Claude	University professor	Post-doctorate	70 hours	\$60K to \$79,999	3 yrs	Good
Bernie	Coordinator	Bachelor's (hospitality management)	40 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	1 yr	Good
Catherine	Research and documentation specialist	Bachelor's (communications)	35 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	11 yrs	Good
Sasha	Manager	Bachelor's (administration)	35 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	7 yrs	Good
Veronica	Primary school teacher	Bachelor's (education)	35 hours	\$60K to \$79,999	1 mo.	Excellent
Kym	Publicist	Bachelor's (psychology)	40 hours	\$60 to \$79,999	5 yrs	Excellent
Barbara	Analyst	Master's (international management)	37 hours	\$60 to \$79,999	4 yrs	Passable to good
Amelia	Manager	Bachelor's (science)	40 hours	\$80K or more	4 yrs	Very good
Josie	Coordinator	Master's (social science)	40 hours	\$60 to \$79,999	9 mo.	Very good
Diana	Analyst	Bachelor's (consumption)	35 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	1 yr	Excellent
Cindy	Translator	Bachelor's (finance and accounting)	50 hours	\$80K or more	5 mo.	Good
Mona	Psychologist and CEGEP teacher	Master's (psychology)	55 hours	\$60K to \$79,999	5½ yrs	Very good
Caroline	Counselor in integrated systems	Bachelor's (psychology)	45 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	8 yrs	Excellent
Sandy	Self-employed in communications	Master's (communications)	45 hours	\$40K to \$59,999	4 yrs	Good
Fanny	Lawyer	Bachelor's (law)	35 hours	n.a.	6 yrs	n.a.
Jane	Manager	Bachelor's (science)	55 hours	n.a.	6 mo.	n.a.
Louise	Computer scientist	Master's (computer science)	84 hours	n.a.	20 yrs	n.a.
Stephanie	Social worker	Bachelor's (social work)	50 hours	n.a.	3 yrs	n.a.

3.4. A description of the sample

The eighteen participants who supplied information on their annual incomes are distributed as follows across the four categories considered: \$30K–\$39,999 ($n = 1$); \$40K–\$59,999 ($n = 8$); \$60K–\$79,999 ($n = 7$) and \$80K or higher ($n = 2$). Regarding the participants' age, at the time of their interview, 5 women were 29 to 34 years old; 10 women, 35 to 40 years old and 7 women belonged to the 41 to 45 age group ($M = 37.7$ years old; $SD = 4.6$). The mother tongue of only two participants was English (Gabrielle and Bernie), reflecting the minority status of Anglophones in Montreal⁹. While most women ($n = 19$) had never married, three participants (Claude, Vero and Caroline) had had marriages that ended. Additional information on the sample is shown in Table 1. The age of each

participant and some details are omitted to protect the women's identities. The professions and educational backgrounds represented show diversity, with 5 women holding Master's degrees and one, a post-doctorate. Women worked a mean of 45 hours per week ($SD = 12$ hours; range: 35 to 84 hours), although this may be an underestimate as many responded with lower bound values (e.g., 40 plus hours), spoke of having periods of more intensive work, or gave a wide range of working hours, the lower limits having entered our calculations. Two women pursued a Master's degree (Fanny and Louise) alongside their full-time employment. As to wellbeing, only one woman (of 18) rated herself as less than "good" (Barbara). Those claiming a "very good" level of wellbeing ($n = 3$) created this category themselves, specifying that their wellbeing was better than good yet not quite excellent. At the time of their participation, the women's last couple relationship, however defined, was deemed to have ended an average of 4 and a half years earlier ($SD = 4$ years, 7 months; range: 1 month to 20 years).

⁹Only 13% of those living in the metropolitan area of Montreal in 2006 identify English as their mother tongue [37].

4. Analyses

In the course of analysis, it became very clear that the term and a concept of “balance” was widely drawn upon, across interviews, to talk about wellbeing. Furthermore, this interpretative repertoire of wellbeing as balance was found in association with a recurrent subject position we have termed “the dynamic woman” whose intensity transfuses talk of the active way of life in which she engages: work becomes a passion; sports, a means to expend one’s high level of energy; travel, deep engagement with a new culture/terrain. However, a dilemma arose from these constructions for many women: their discursive positioning in relation to the cadence of their lives or rather, articulating an unambiguous claim to balance. It is on these three elements that we will focus without analyzing the participants’ mentioned activities in full (e.g., family relationships, friendships, sports, travel) due to space limitations. As we explore in the discussion, this troubled area raises questions about the potency of work-life discourse, as seemingly used here, to discursively ground wellbeing among these women.

4.1. *Wellbeing as balance*

The interpretative repertoire of wellbeing as balance, drawn on by most women, confers four main characteristics to wellbeing: a diversification of the dimensions to one’s life, positive experiences within them, its ability to shift over time, and a reasonable dosing of one’s activities, typically, by not letting work engulf one’s personal life, if not, oneself.

Kim: [. . .] What are the aspects of your life that give you the greatest satisfaction?

Fanny: I don’t seek accomplishment in my life through my career. No. I am not a careerist. I adore what I do. I adore my team. I adore the company. I love my work. I am very happy where I am. And well um (.) I nevertheless admit that for two years, I’ve thrown myself a bit more into my work but my life (.) I constantly seek a balance in my life. And my balance, therefore, my happiness, is (.) I find my happiness in the balance of things: Work hard, play hard. So my happiness, I find it in everything: with my friends, with my family, with my men and my work. In everything. In fact, right now, I find that my life is very well balanced. Um (.) And I don’t believe that I would have this happiness if I were unemployed, if I lost my job for x, y, z reason or if I did not have the friends that I do

at the moment or if I did not have my married man. I think that I am happy right now um (.) because everything is going very well, and I have balance in all of my spheres: personal, professional, familial, financial.

The above citation brings together all the outlined elements of the repertoire. The first sentence uttered by Fanny reminds us, however, that the interviews were conducted in the context of a study with “career women.” It begins with a clarification, a process in which several other participants engaged (nine in total), usually after being asked their definition of career woman. This served to ward off one’s potential positioning as an individual who is focused solely on professional advancement or “living to work” (Gabrielle), is motivated by ambition or questing for power, in this case, a “careerist”, a term used by others as-is or with variation (i.e. “ultra-careerist” Cindy). Some women, including Fanny, discounted investment in work as an explanation for their singleness. On the above grounds, several women also resisted positioning as a “career woman,” as does Amelia below.

Kim: [. . .] what does it mean for you to be a career woman?

Amelia: Well there is a side that I find might, in any case, it’s prejudicial towards (.) It can be negative I find when we say career woman, because I find that it implies that the career takes up all of the space in one’s life. Lots of people tell me: “You’re a career woman” because I work in management. I manage a team in which men are a majority. I find that that implies that: “Well, you work and that’s why you’re single” when what I say is that I work because I am single.

Returning to Fanny’s excerpt, investment in work is instead cast as arising from an encompassing adoration of her employment and its context (a way of talking about work that we will return to later), and marked as one among many contributors to her sense of balance/happiness. It also, more generally, presents a life with many focal points, which was usual across interviews, and among other elements described as important to wellbeing were travel and sports. Fully half of participants discussed the latter activity in these terms. Wellbeing is also constructed here as a sort of epiphenomenon of the presence of several associated elements, a concept evoked by others with expressions such as “an amalgamation” (Sasha), “a well-rounded life” (Bernie), “all of it interlinks, a little like dominos” (Sandy), or “investment portfolio” (Mona), in refer-

ence to wellbeing. As in Fanny's citation, women discussed scenarios involving the implications of removal of an important element, the effects of a shifting of the balance of sorts.

Sandy: [...] my wellbeing will be, precisely, to, to be invested in many things. I can't tolerate, for example, weeks when I find I can only work because I have too much to do, and I end up just doing that. By the weekend, I, I, I don't feel well. Or conversely, this fall, there were perhaps two or three weeks in a row, I had nothing [...] I was on the verge of committing suicide, it was (chuckles). So, my wellbeing depends on professional accomplishment, [...] it depends on sports. I necessarily need to do sports. I have a lot of energy so I have to, and I am someone who at the same time is very stressed out, so it has to come out [...] I need for my friends to call and I really need to, to call my friends to know, how they are doing. Sharing between friends is really essential to my wellbeing.

As exemplified in Sandy's citation, suggested by Fanny's "In fact, right now," and apparent in many other interviews, the balance of wellbeing is not constructed as static or absolute. It is commonly grounded temporally in the language of the present or daily life and qualified with the possibility of change or with a recounting of past times when wellbeing was not as good.

Kim: [...] What do you refer to when you say: "My wellbeing is excellent"?

Diana: [...] if I look, I really look at all of these aspects [i.e. "personal", "professional", "familial", "financial"], my life presently has no tensions and that's why I really feel that, really presently it's, I find that I am spoiled presently. You know, I don't know how long it will last but I find, I find I am spoiled presently.

More explicitly, this repertoire was also invoked when recounting a period of one's life, past or present, when investment in one's paid employment was judged excessive ($n = 4$). Furthermore, balance and its tenets also arose as an explicit recommendation by several women ($n = 5$) in response to our interview question asking, based on the woman's own experience, what advice they would offer to a younger woman planning her life goals.

Kim: [...] Is there anything else in reference to your life experience that you would offer as advice?

Sasha: Balance the working with the home because if you throw yourself completely into one thing, you forget the rest and then you realize after x amount of time that finally, you missed a train because you missed out on things in your life. You were so focused on one thing that you did not see other things pass you by. You did not leave at least one door open in case something happened, especially (.) When you focus on one thing and you loose it, you feel useless afterwards. So to avoid that, you must balance the personal and the professional.

Wellbeing as balance is thus constructed, for many women, as a pursuit, something that they "try" to achieve and, in some cases, as an elusive goal. To better understand the discursive dilemmas involved with claiming an attainment of balance that will be discussed, we now turn to a subject position that traversed the interviews.

4.2. The dynamic woman

Women recurrently positioned themselves in terms that portrayed an alliance with activeness and self-evolution, as well as a general intensity. The term dynamic, we find, captures this well. For instance, if we refer to a dictionary definition of the word, we find: "active, potent, energetic, forceful; characterized by action or change" [39, p. 770]. Our realization of this, however, came not from formal definitions but rather from the women's own descriptions of themselves. As a matter of illustration, in response to our "who are you?" question (limited to five responses), the words used in answer are telling. Eleven of eighteen participants, four of whom specifically labeled themselves as "dynamic," used one or more of the following terms: vivacious, determined, go-getter, strong, lively, energetic, motivated, passionate and sporty. In the interviews, use of the French verb *bouger*, in English to move (e.g., "It has to move" Sofia; "I have to move" Amelia; "I am a girl who moves a lot. I am a very active girl" Veronica), as well as describing oneself as active (e.g., "active woman" Barbara; "to be fully active" Catherine) were recurrent. In following, women's descriptions of their activities were regularly invested with similar intensity, whether speaking of sports, travel, or their personal relationships, more commonly, friendships. On a more thematic level, half of women mentioned currently engaging in regular physical exercise as a source of wellbeing, and a similar proportion discussed travel while the roles given to friendships, family and self-development, though present, were more variable.

Space limits a full treatment of these topics but we will provide some examples, followed by a more detailed examination of the meaning of work.

Jane: [...] I am someone who is quite physical, who needs to expend herself physically, and I, I am rather disciplined when it comes to that. I regularly engage in activities. It's like for me, I often tell people: "It's a drug for me" [...] it has become, like that, a necessity. It's no longer even an effort for me and I'm happy to have achieved that because I can feel the wellbeing it gives me. And also the energy that it gives me afterwards just, in my life in general [...] It's something that I'm proud of, to have achieved this balance of physical fitness.

Claude: [...] it's mountain hiking but we do it everyday up to 11 kilometers in altitude. Like last year in [vacation destination], it was intense. We walked for up to 11 hours a day on a few occasions. During that time, I don't work, I walk (laughter). Always as intensely, but I walk.

Josie: [...] you were talking to me about the other things that were important, I think. Well, that's it, friends. Big social life. Big, big social life. (laughter) I have many friends whom I care for deeply. They're all little pearls, I find. People, people who I see regularly and who I, at least, speak to on a regular basis. It's important for me, to, to, that's it, to spend time with them, to have dinner, go see films, go see shows or just go out for coffee, play sports.

4.3. Work as passion, as a source of challenges

Over half of the participants spoke of work in terms that conveyed a strong emotional bond or experience. It is a way of talking about work signaled often by use of the word "passion" and its derivatives, but that could take different forms, whether through talk of adoration, vocation, love, fiery zeal ("*feu sacré*" Catherine), giving oneself "body and soul" (Nathalie), matrimonial commitment (e.g., "I'm married to my job" Mona; "I married the cause of work" Catherine) or even "physical pleasure" (i.e. of "accomplished work" Nathalie). It is a repertoire that can clearly blur the ostensible boundaries between the "private" and the "public" spheres of life. For a few women, like Veronica and Catherine, work was characterized, along these lines, as having primary importance in their lives.

Kim: [...] what is the meaning of work for you?

Veronica: The meaning, well it's my whole life. It's my whole life. I live for it, for work. It (.) It fulfills my life to a great degree. I go to great lengths. I put in many hours for my kids, my students (.) It's really a passion. It's (.) yes, that's it. It's my life (laughter).

Catherine: [...] I married the cause of work. For me, it, it is a way to, to actualize myself, to be involved, to totally actualize myself in my life.

Furthermore, close to half (9/22) of women described themselves as liking, needing, or seeking challenges from their work. This, on a number of occasions, co-occurred in relation with talk of work as passion.

Kim: So it [the label of career woman] is not something with which you identify? That is what you were saying?

Josie: Well, more or less, because I have no professional ambitions. You know, in my professional life, things happened a little haphazardly, I would say. (laughter) I found myself (.) it's haphazard and then it's not, in the sense that uh, I've always been passionate, interested by my work. I made choices at school, on a, on a professional level that always led me to face new challenges. It's more that, I would say, that interests me. You know, it's the, the idea of being challenged. The idea of working on projects with people who stimulate me, you know. It's more that, that interests me than climbing the ranks per se.

Talking about work as a passion or as a challenge, as we can read in the above citation, can function to explain one's heightened investment in work, couching it in relational or personal satisfaction terms, while simultaneously offsetting any overly materialistic or dryly instrumental motives of engaging in paid work implied by the title "career woman" or one's intense interest in work.

Mona: [...] I have fun with my students. We have fun. We laugh. We spend lots of time together. I eat with them. So career, yes, but you know, careerist, like ambition, having a BMW. My car has rust on it and I don't care. My students laugh at me but it doesn't bother me. Having ambition, having money, having. No. I, having, having power doesn't interest me. Having a job with responsibilities doesn't interest me. And yet, being a CEGEP [junior college] Prof comes with responsibilities but beyond that, it, it doesn't interest me. That's not what I'm looking for. I would say, I am, I am passionate about what I do.

4.4. *The trouble with balance: Negotiating the pace and intensity of one's life*

While the language of passion and challenge can be used as discursive resources to reinforce one's dynamism, these ways of talking can also sit uneasily with what might be called the dosing criteria of wellbeing as balance that, in a sense, requires the dimension of work be kept in check within one's life. For example, three of the four women who recounted a brush with or experience of "burnout" in the past drew on the repertoire of work as passion. Among these are Kym and Louise.

Kim: And you, in terms of your relationship with your work, how would you qualify it?

Kym: I find it is healthy enough because I decided precisely to, to well, maybe because of my age too. I gave a lot. I worked a lot through passion too. Perhaps for other reasons. Perhaps I needed to prove things to myself, but at my age today, I try to take the things that interest me. I have my own business so I accept the contracts that interest me [...] I try not to make decisions based on money but based on my personal satisfaction of working on a project or a contract [...] So I try to make sure, nevertheless, to have the time to live, to do other things, to live my life, to go, to travel, to see my family (.) so, to not kill myself at work.

Kim: [...] Burnout, is it something that you are familiar with?

Louise: I experienced it. I experienced it. Yes, as a matter of fact. And I always have to be careful because it's easy, because I have not changed milieu, it's very easy to succumb again [...] Let's say that I no longer, I would say, have illusions, illusions. Yes, it's a passion. Yes. But it's also about self-abnegation.

Hence, passion and dosing can make ambivalent bedfellows, whereby presence of the former, linked to a valued subject position, is constructed as providing no guarantee of dosing or of protection of one's wellbeing in this sense. Claude, a self-described workaholic, in the next citation is answering a spontaneous question pertaining to when in one's career burnouts in her field tend to occur. As is common across citations broaching the conditions of significant investment in work, wellbeing is presented ultimately as a personal responsibility.

[...] we love it so much that, that we don't realize that, we maintain a rhythm, it's a little like the effect of adrenaline, when we have a buzz and we have many projects, and we slog away and slog away, we work like mad and we forget. We forget. It's not that we say to ourselves: "We want, we only want to work. We no longer want a personal life." It's that we forget to have a personal life because we adore our work. And uh, I think that we have to be very vigilant on this point and to not forget that uh, it's not healthy. Even if it's wonderful to be passionate about our work, well it's not healthy to work more than seventy hours per week. And it's not livable in the long run or otherwise, or otherwise, yes, we will only do that our entire life and we will never have a personal life (laughter).

While the above citations have focused on work, the trouble with balance also occurs in talk of other aspects of one's life. Being able to relax, be spontaneous, or do "nothing," are common issues evoked in this regard that, simultaneously, present opportunities to position oneself as dynamic. We present three examples to illustrate the diversity of the passages.

Stephanie: [...] If you're too stressed out, if you are all over the place in your head, if you feel like doing forty-thousand things (.) Because I've also seen people who, who lost their baby. They're not capable of stopping, women [...] They work forty-five hours a week and that I've also often seen: My friends, if we do nothing (.) If we are not doing something, it means that we are doing nothing.

Kim: [...] Are you able to say to yourself: "Ah, today I, I'm doing nothing?"

Martine: I have difficulty. I have difficulty and often, I get to the end of my rope and then, I have no strength left. I just "pff". No strength. It's like I always have something else to do. And I tell myself: "Ah no. You can only relax if this, this, this, this, this, this, this, is done (laughter). And the list is always long and items always get added but I'm working on giving myself the freedom to do nothing.

Sandy: [...] Managing my schedule also puts a damper on my wellbeing because I am forced to, to spell everything out [...] sometimes it, it saddens me or it (.) I find it really, really, I am forced to: "Okay. Then I have a dinner. Then, okay, I'm going to do sports. Okay, then I work. Then, this." I'm at a point where there is a lot going on in my life. That's very good, but to arrive at that, it takes an

organization in which even going grocery shopping has to be put in my schedule. There's something there that tells me: "But your life is not natural, it is not (.)" I feel like I'm organizing my life.

In these citations, as in others, women describe themselves as being under an imperative of purposeful or productive activity that is presented as having negative effects on wellbeing as balance (i.e. issues of dosing activity). To be more explicit about Sandy's case, we retain that having a balanced life (e.g., "a lot going on"), important to her wellbeing, requires an unpleasant "organization" which sets up a paradox: The effort to find balance is presented as generating a kind of imbalance where life takes on the qualities of work.

Read as instances of positioning oneself as a dynamic woman, such accounts of heightened activity construct the women as busy, as doers, or, perhaps simply, as having a "life". Hence, while wellbeing as balance may be cast as a worthy goal or ideal, it can conflict with (if not undermine) a self-positioning as dynamic which calls for intensity to an imperative of purposeful activity. In other words, implying the elusiveness of one's ability to dose (particularly work) may act to strengthen one's apparent dynamicity.

5. Discussion

The budding research on single, childless workers attuned to this segment of the workforce, particularly women, suggests that they have distinct work-life issues linked with wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to shed light on single, childless working women's constructions of their wellbeing while being attentive to contextual elements in their creation. Women's characterizations of their wellbeing showed sensitivity to their positioning as "career women" and single women. Both of these subject positions, which risk implying a life lacking in breadth (e.g., career women are too focused on their work, single women "don't have a life") [13], among other things, can be seen to be challenged by the multi-focal lives portrayed by most women in their accounts of their wellbeing. Notably, most women drew on an interpretative repertoire of wellbeing as balance in which diversity and dosing of life spheres were desirable features.

The pervasive subject position of the "dynamic woman" can be seen to undermine the idea of single women as not having fulfilling lives. Positioning oneself as dynamic (e.g., active, energetic, driven) infused talk of one's activities with intensity. In this regard, we espe-

cially focused on women's professional activities, describing ways of talking about work that characterized it as a passion and a source of needed or appreciated challenges. A parallel could be made between women's discursive alliance with an attraction to challenge and research findings that underscore the importance of career development opportunities for single, childless workers [10,11], suggesting it is an important element in their satisfaction on the job.

Our analyses also brought out tensions, if not contradictions, between two constructions of work: one associated with wellbeing which requires it be kept in check relative to one's other life activities (to varying degrees) and one which associates it with passion, arguably borrowed from a "language of intimacy and spirituality" [7, p. 215]. For some participants this also included talk of "sacrifice". We might ask who benefits from these ways of talking about work. On the one hand, in our interviews, claiming to be a passionate worker offered a positive subject position linked with that of the dynamic woman, that could serve, in part, to personalize one's professional activities, warding off being positioned as a "careerist" or a worker with purely instrumental motives (e.g., to obtain power, material gain, climb the ranks). On the other hand, according to Caproni [7], particularly among management, the language of "passion" has been used to promote productivity and commitment at work and thus may have some origin in organizational interests. Her concerns are that this will lead workers to spend even more time working, to be less attuned to the less appealing aspects of their jobs (e.g., effects of increased hours on health) and to see work as a spiritual duty. Hence, future research might inquire into the mutual benefit of this language in its social, health and material effects. It appears here as a potential counter[balancing] discourse.

Another aspect of the dynamic woman subject position that we wish to return to is the imperative of purposeful activity under which she is sometimes cast to labor, and one that is described as antagonistic to wellbeing. It is interesting to note, in this regard, the bureaucratic language occasionally drawn on (e.g., "the list is always long", "managing my schedule", making "appointments" with oneself). If work-life balance discourse is indeed grounded in traditional models of bureaucratic organizations, there is certainly room to question, as does Caproni [7], whether it might further "perpetuate [. . .] many of the problems it promises to alleviate" [p. 209]. Alternatively, as Gershuny underscores [18], in the latter half of the twentieth century, feelings of busyness have grown cross-nationally,

which are partially attributed to a change in their social construction. In this regard, he proposes an “assertion of “busyness” now reflects an aspiration to high social status,” [p. 5] taking on a positive quality “from its association with the increasingly busy lifestyle of the most privileged groups in developed societies” [p. 7]. We thus consider expressions of an activity imperative or busyness whose roots may lie in bureaucratic discourse and/or that tied to the social significance of busyness, as additional discursive elements with possible counter[balancing] effects.

On a final note, the participants' widespread talk of balance attests on some level to the availability of “work-life” as a discursive resource for workers without children or partners to talk about their wellbeing, despite media [34] and scholarly emphasis on work-family (e.g. [42]). Our study thus adds weight to the argument that work-life issues are of relevance for single, childless workers.

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