Knowledge work intensification and self-management:
the autonomy paradox

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ABSTRACT
In the analysis of the sustainability of knowledge work environments, the intensification of work has emerged as probably the single most important contradiction. We argue that the process of knowledge work intensification is increasingly self-driven and influenced by subjectification processes in the context of trends of individualisation and self-management. We use a qualitative case study of a leading multinational company in the information and communications technology sector (considered to be 'best-in-class') to discuss this intensification and its linkage with self-disciplining mechanisms. The workers studied seem to enjoy a number of resources that current psychosocial risk models identify as health promoting (e.g. autonomy, learning, career development and other material and symbolic rewards). We discuss the validity of these models to assess the increasingly boundaryless and self-managed knowledge work contexts characterised by internalisation of demands and resources and paradoxical feelings of autonomy. Knowledge work intensification increases health and social vulnerabilities directly and through two-way interactions with, first, the autonomy paradox and new modes of subjection at the workplace; second, atomisation and lack of social support; third, permanent accountability and insecurity; and finally, newer difficulties in setting boundaries.

Introduction

While knowledge work expands, European trends in job quality remain ambiguous. In the last two decades, evidence has accumulated that highlights the fact that European economies have been experiencing a process of work intensification (i.e. increased effort at work[1]) (Burchell, Ladipo & Wilkinson, 2002; Green & Mostafa, 2012)[2], that has also affected knowledge workers, no longer safe from potentially harmful working conditions (Green, 2006; Pérez-Zapata, 2015; Worrall, Mather & Cooper, 2016). Although many scholars have pointed out that higher socioeconomic status provides better working conditions and health protection (e.g. Siegrist & Marmot, 2004; Tausig, 2013), emergent trends, in line with the so-called 'stress of higher status' concept, suggest that higher level occupations might have started to suffer increased stress because of additional job demands, work-family conflicts and exposure to resources that might exacerbate demands (Damaske, Zawadzki & Smyth, 2016; Koltai & Schieman, 2015; Schieman, 2013; Schieman & Glavin, 2016; Schieman & Reid, 2009; Schieman, Whitestone & Van Gundy, 2006). The results from European Labour Force Surveys (ad hoc modules in 2007 and 2013) have also confirmed that work intensity (measured by time pressures and overload) is a risk for mental well-being[3] according to approximately 85% of the workers surveyed (Eurostat: European Commission, 2012).

This 'increased effort' trend that we term 'work intensification' could be interpreted according to two different analytical frames: one focusing on the individual level and one concentrating on the organisational management level. Mainstream discourses and scholars in the fields of psychology of work/organisations tend to neglect the political dimension and have focused on either individual *work engagement* (i.e. a healthy and passionate effort[4]) or *workaholism* (i.e. an unhealthy and obsessive effort). In both cases, they implicitly promote the idea that increased effort results mainly from *individual* choices, motivations and dispositions[5] (Schaufeli, Taris & Van Rhenen, 2008; van Beek et al., 2012). Other scholars (for example, from the fields of sociology of work

1 By *work intensification* we mean 'increased effort at work', either because of higher intensity during working hours, or because of longer hours (strictly, a work extensification) or because of both. European Working Conditions Surveys have operationalised work intensity by using the 'pace of work', the frequency of 'tight deadlines' and more recently measures of 'emotional effort' as indicators. A similar and common term is *overworking* (i.e. working too hard or too long), but we prefer the term 'work intensification' because of its history of pointing to underlying/sociological conditions. Another quite related (and new) construct from the psychology of work/organisations is 'heavy work investment', a concept that focuses on the *time* and *effort* that people put in at work (Harpaz & Snir, 2014).

2 In Europe, many working conditions seem to have improved (e.g. skills use, participation, safety...) (Green & Mostafa, 2012; Greenan, Kalugina & Walkowiak, 2012; Thébaud-Mony, Davezies, Vogel & Volkoff, 2015). But these trends have been accompanied by a work intensification process considered a threat for the sustainability of work at the aggregated level (Burchell, 2009; Docherty, Forslin & Shani, 2002; Pérez-Zapata, 2015).

3 Occupational health and work stress literatures have repetitively confirmed the effects of excessive job demands on mental and physical health. Apart from psychosomatic symptoms, well connected with anxiety and mild depression, impacts on physical health include neck, stomach, infections, bruxism and/or the more serious strokes and infarctions, among others (e.g. Allvin, 2011; Pérez-Zapata, 2015).

4 Operationalised as *vigour*, *dedication*, *absorption* (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008) with antecedents associated with intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; van Beek et al., 2012).

5 More recently, psychology of work/organisational scholars, following the 'Heavy Work Investment' thread, are arguing that more situational factors, like the 'overwork climate' need to be considered (Harpaz & Snir, 2014; Mazzetti, Schaufeli & Guglielmi, 2014). Nevertheless, this will still be far from a comprehensive sociological framework.

and critical management studies) have concentrated on the political dimension of this increased effort and have traditionally used the term 'work intensification', a classical construct associated with the struggles for control/resources in the workplace, explicitly arguing that increased effort results mainly from *organisational/social* power conflicts (e.g. Braverman, 1974; McCann, Morris & Hassard, 2008). In practice, organisational practitioners and psychology of work/organisations scholars are winning the interpretation battle, and organisations are increasingly focused on promoting *work engagement*, positioned as the key strategy for productivity, well-being and aligning organisational interests with those of workers[6].

Consistent with the 'stress of higher status' hypothesis, Michel (2012; 2014) and Lupu and Empson (2015) have recently highlighted how very qualified knowledge workers with apparent high levels of autonomy work beyond their limits, burning out and severely harming their health and personal relationships. When questioned, these workers frequently refer to their activities and efforts as *self-chosen*[7], an emerging contradiction that is beginning to be known as the 'autonomy paradox' (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates, 2013). From a psychology of work/organisations perspective, this self-chosen perception would be consistent with an attribution of *work engagement* (that it is considered to be a *discretionary* effort produced in the context of a passionate and enjoyable job). However, work engagement is expected to protect health, so if we had to interpret these findings from an individual psychosocial risks perspective, it would be more appropriate to regard it as *workaholism*, which, with obsessive and addictive components, is expected to have negative impacts on health and other aspects of life (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Classic critical literature at the organisational level has addressed similar paradoxes in the past. Particularly well known is Burawoy's (1979) *Manufacturing Consent*, where workers treat the labour process and its piece rate system as a shop floor 'game'[8], which, in turn, generates feelings of being in control that ended up contributing to an intensification of work (Burawoy, 1979). Moving towards a knowledge work context, the seminal ethnographic study by Kunda (1992) published as *Engineering Culture* discusses the so-called normative controls and how maintaining/engineering a corporate culture was the way to get workers to want what the organisation wanted them to want (i.e. full commitment and sustained effort). This is also in line with Bunting's (2004) 'willing slaves' thesis. These landmark studies, carried out in different contexts, suggest that it is not autonomy[9], but a perception of autonomy in the workplace that seems to be the critical factor that shapes workers' attitudes and sustains work intensification, an assumption that has long been core in the movement towards building strong corporate cultures (Peters, Waterman & Jones, 1982; Willmott, 1993). More recent organisational

6 Without much success, when considering that only 13% of worldwide employees seem to be engaged (http://www.gallup.com/poll/165269/worldwide-employees-engaged-work.aspx).

7 E.g. '*I work hard because I want to*' (Michel, 2014).

8 Burawoy (1979) referred to the shop floor 'game' of 'making out', meaning being engaged in a game to play the system (of variable pay linked to piece rate system) to workers' benefit. This included practices like 'banking' (producing surplus that was used in the next shift) or 'chiselling' (playing with the times per job to reach the most beneficial outputs) ... Our key point here is that by doing this (playing the system...) they had feelings of 'self-determination' that build 'consent' and partly explain why they were working that hard.

9 Autonomy has always been a critical dimension in theories of motivation at work (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

studies are retaking this route with the aim of better understanding how to explain the increasingly prevalent practices of overworking in knowledge work contexts and the associated 'autonomy paradox', and have proposed expanded explanations referring to *self-entrapment* (Michel, 2012; 2014) or *illusio* (Lupu & Empson, 2015) that connect back to Bourdieu's *habitus* (e.g. 2008) to frame the partially unconscious processes involved in the intensification of knowledge work (or overworking).

In this context, our first objective is to contribute to this debate about the 'autonomy paradox', with the help of the Foucauldian discussion on *subjectification* and power. Our second objective is to add a psychosocial risks perspective in an attempt to highlight some implications for current models[10]. In all these models, *demands* are a key dimension and different types of *control/resources* (including autonomy in the workplace, among others) are expected to have an independent positive impact on health and/or partially compensate for or buffer the potential negative effect of excessive demands. However, recent research, based on representative working conditions surveys in Canada, Spain or Belgium, suggests more complex scenarios and, specifically, that some resources might exacerbate the harmful effects of demands on health (e.g. 'job authority' or 'putting your ideas to work' or 'control over the rhythms'), at least for high-level and educated knowledge workers (Koltai & Schieman, 2015; Pérez-Zapata, 2015; Vanroelen, Levecque, Moors & Louckx, 2010). Thus, while resources and, particularly, autonomy and control in the workplace have traditionally been considered to be key factors for the motivation and promotion of healthy working conditions, the current trends make this scenario more confusing. Two additional background-related conditions seem critical for understanding vulnerability factors related to the intensification of knowledge work: first, its increasing self-managing and boundaryless nature; and second, the subjectifiation processes and the autonomy it encourages in the workplace. In the following, we first discuss the implications for psychosocial risk models and then how subjectification processes can interact with autonomy to become a disciplining resource.

Knowledge work and psychosocial risks in a self-management and boundaryless context

Knowledge work seems to be becoming more 'boundaryless', 'limitless' and 'extreme' (Allvin, 2011; Gascoigne, Parry & Buchanan, 2015; Granter, McCann & Boyle, 2015) and current psychosocial risk models are not always adequate to cope with these changes. We define a boundaryless work[11] context as one in which there is a blurring or

10 Classic psychosocial risk models, like the Demand/Control/Support (DCS) model (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and Effort/Reward imbalance (ERI) model (Siegrist, 1996), but also the renovated and currently most popular approach, the Job Demands/Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), all posit that job demands should be no problem and/or a desirable challenge, as long as they are accompanied by the right level of *control/support* (DCS), *rewards* (ERI) or *organisational/personal resources* (JD-R).

11 The *boundaryless* concept has been applied in different ways in the field of organisational research. However, we use it here following Allvin's (2008, 2011) description of the Swedish context around the turn of the century, which help us to frame trends of the flexible knowledge work. According to Allvin (2011), a boundaryless knowledge work environment breaks all types of regulations around work: about the *what and how* (procedures, responsibility, quality…), the *when* (regularity, availability…), the *where* (home, customer, airport…), the *with whom* (customers, peers, suppliers, managers…) and the *how much* of work (hours, intensity, pace…).

breaking of traditional regulations/boundaries around work. Boundaries between control/resources and demands also blur, and it is no longer clear where control lies, whether resources help to cope and/or generate demands, what is personal and what is organisational and even what is labour and what is capital, in line with the neoliberal governmentality thesis (Lemke, 2001). One critical implication is that boundaries between manager and employees in knowledge work also become increasingly blurred and management becomes more and more *self-management*[12], something that complicates assessments of demands and different types of controls and resources, the essential dimensions of psychosocial risk models. More specifically, two trends can be observed:

First, *demands* blur and are no longer only something externally generated (by management, clients...), something a *passive* employee has to cope with, but rather something that an *active* and self-managed employee participates in, in line with our subjectification and 'enterprising self' discussions (to follow) (Crespo & Serrano, 2010). Demands are then increasingly self-generated (but not necessarily voluntarily), for a variety of material and symbolic reasons mediated by 'carrots and sticks'. Demands are also driven by instrumental needs to build resources to regulate other demands (e.g. learning how to put limits on external demands[13] or managing emotional demands in relation to the self and others[14]).

Second, *controls* and *resources* also become blurred and are no longer something guaranteed from the outside (e.g. by management) without further implications for the worker. Self-managed employees are expected to (and made responsible for) coordinating and building resources, in line with what is often termed *job crafting*[15], that will frequently turn into additional demands. This advances previous discourses linked to self-managed knowledge workers having 'responsible autonomy', a sugar-coated way to say that they are expected to build or use control/resources only in a way that is compatible with organisational goals and controls, a phenomenon that others have called 'caged discretion' (Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012) and 'practical autonomy' (Peters, Waterman & Jones, 1982) – in essence constructing a heteronomous meaning of autonomy (Willmott, 1993).

In summary, the transition towards self-management in a boundaryless knowledge work context challenges current psychosocial risk models that need to be re-invented in line with a more complex approach that, on the one hand, unpacks demands and control/resources and, on the other hand, considers the mechanisms involved in their formation (influenced by blurring and internalisation forces) and their interactions. In such environments, it becomes more and more difficult to attribute responsibilities and assess psychosocial risks, since experienced demands and control/resources (specifically, autonomy) are increasingly fused and perceived as an individual free

12 Muhr, Pedersen and Alvesson (2012) have pointed to three major dimensions of self-managed workers: (1) improved ability to accomplish tasks; (2) aspirations to improve themselves; (3) improved assessment of capabilities, aspirations and limits.

13 Particularly relevant nowadays are electronic and peer-generated demands.

14 E.g. demands involved in self-control (Schmidt, Neubach & Heuer, 2007).

15 This is frequently framed as giving the employee the freedom to *craft* his or her workplace environment. *Job crafting* expands the empowerment construct and makes the employee responsible for generating the right organisational and personal resources that are relevant in the workplace (Bakker, Tims & Derks, 2012).

choice, the core of the 'autonomy paradox', something we turn to discuss now, following the subjectification literature.

Subjectification and autonomy as disciplining resources

The study of the processes involved in disciplining and normalising subjectivity connects us with three different but related literature threads: critical social psychology (Crespo, Serrano & Moreno, 2001; Parker, 2014; Serrano, Martín & Crespo, 2013), the post-Foucauldian analysis of 'government at a distance' (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1996; Rose & Miller, 1992) and critical management studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fernandez Rodríguez, 2007; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012). Although the term subjectification can be tracked to different schools of thought[16], we build on Foucault (2004) and his linkage of subjectification processes with neoliberal governmentality. Foucault's work dismantled the conception of an essentialist subject and focused on an archaeology/genealogy of subjects and the historical processes and techniques involved in their formation (subjectification).

Since subjectivity now plays an essential role in organisations (Edwards & Nicoll, 2007; Miller & Rose, 1990; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), organisational controls have had to evolve accordingly: from the Tayloristic so-called 'hard' controls with the worker as an appendix of the machine[17] to *softer* controls that operate in tandem with the hard ones (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004) and redesign the moral contract between workers and organisations (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; E. Crespo, Prieto & Serrano, 2009; Lahera Sánchez, 2004; Willmott, 1993). Today, organisations require not only intellectual, interpersonal and emotional competencies but moral ones, related to the specific ways that subjects self-regulate (e.g. self-monitoring, job involvement, organisational commitment and responsible autonomy). Power and control are internalised and the subject becomes intensively involved in his or her own vigilance/monitoring and performance evaluation in a form of self-subjugation (Amigot Leache & Martínez, 2013; Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012). In order to cope with external demands, self-managed individuals internalise them in a way that merges structure and agency, removing the marks of explicit controls in the process. This is a requirement for the quick adaptation and innovation that organisations need, but also a dynamic that leaves subjects/workers as the main actors in their oppression (Alaluf & Rolle, 2003).

In summary, although critical research on organisational controls points to a situation of 'multi-regulation' or 'cages in tandem' (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004), the influence of the normative (more recently neo-normative) controls linked with the processes of subjectification and of so-called 'identity work' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Willmott, 1993) seems to be reaching a new peak. The exhortations to self-management for the high-end knowledge worker (Lopdrup-Hjorth, Gudmand-Høyer, Bramming & Pedersen, 2011; Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012),

16 The 'subjectification' construct activates the tension emerging in the participation processes between practices of domination and emancipation that subjects engage in their social self-formation. As Rebughini (2014) states, this construct can be understood simultaneously as a process of internalisation of domination and as a confirmation of the agency and the subject.

17 A worker that needs to be automatic, certain, obedient…: the 'work without persons' and 'amputated subject' (Clot, 2009).

immersed in discourses about the enterprising self and the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002; Du Gay, 1995; Rose, 1990) have never been higher. We argue that understanding this growing sophistication of the normative controls, connected with subjectification processes is critical for explaining the trends of work intensification and overworking that impel knowledge workers to use autonomy to *self-intensify* and perceive their efforts as *self-chosen*.

Objectives and methods

Our aim was therefore to achieve a better understanding of the processes of subjectification and self-discipline involved in the context of exhortations for self-management and blurring of boundaries (and, in particular, external/internal demands and control/resources involved in psychosocial risk models) in knowledge work. This article draws, more specifically, on a qualitative case study carried out to explore management and self-management dynamics involved in coping with the paradoxes around workers' double condition (of freedom/autonomy combined with being tightly subjected); the specific ways that pressures and demands are built and experienced by workers; and finally, the processes of vulnerability and political subjugation.

The fieldwork took place in the Spanish subsidiary of a leading US-based multinational company in the information and communications technology (ICT) industry publicly recognised as a 'Great place to work' (we will call it Bridgix). For this specific case study (which was carried out as part of a bigger project[18]), we conducted a total of nine semi-structured in-depth interviews, including a company representative (HR Director) and eight high-level knowledge workers occupying positions making a direct contribution to the business (four men and four women between 34 and 46 years of age), just before the global economic crisis. The interviews followed a biographical and professional career script and concentrated on the working environment.

The ICT sector is particularly interesting to study for at least three reasons. First, multinationals from the ICT sector typically lead recognised rankings as 'Best Workplaces', suggesting a best-in-class workplace with theoretically (discursively) quite favourable working conditions[19]. Second, the ICT sector has been a pioneer in developing forms of ICT use and innovative work organisation practices that eventually reach other industries, so the analysis could be expected to anticipate more general trends in knowledge work environments[20]. Third, the ICT sector is a global industry led

18 The case study was part of a more ambitious three-year research project (starting at the end of 2007) that included the analysis of eleven information and communications technology (ICT) companies with diverse sizes and organisational cultures (a total of 69 interviews). The project was originally aimed at obtaining a better understanding of the main barriers to gender equality in the ICT Industry (Castaño, 2010). We decided to focus our article on this particular company because of what we considered as very rich and honest interviews, partly influenced by a previous level of trust built up between researchers and the company.

19 Beyond potential bias, multinational ICT companies have traditionally led rankings like those by the 'Great Place to Work Institute' (GPWI) (http://www.greatplacetowork.com/). In 2008, when most of the fieldwork was conducted, three ICT companies were among the top 10 in GPWI's US list, while two multinational ICT companies included in this project led the GPWI rankings in Spain.

20 If we had to support this in terms of the evolution of the critical organisational literature linked with knowledge work, we first witnessed case studies in the ICT sector (e.g. Kunda, 1992; Perlow, 1999). After that, the consultancy sector was probably next (e.g. many papers from critical management scholars) while the latest fieldwork is more diverse (investment banking, accounting, education …).

by big multinational companies with strong cultures that tend to deploy fairly homogeneous organisational practices across geographies; this means that our results, though locally influenced, might transcend the Spanish context.

Bridgix[21] has a strong culture characterised by an innovative organisation of work with total compensation packages well above market averages (measured by indicators such as wages, benefits, development and recognition) in exchange for commitment, availability and accountability, in line with the so-called 'High Performance Work Systems' model[22]. From a psychosocial risks perspective, this led us to expect an ambiguous context, with, on the one hand, several factors generally considered to be involved in health promotion (e.g. learning environment, opportunities to use skills, extensive rewards and high work autonomy) but, on the other hand, a workplace demanding high commitment and intensity, developments that might become a challenge for health, work-life balance and social support.

Because organisational exposures to these factors were expected to be unequally distributed, we focused on knowledge work professionals in occupations with a direct contribution to business, discarding employees working in more supportive roles such as HR or Finance, typically less exposed to ongoing organisational pressures. Results from national working conditions surveys in Spain suggested that non-manual qualified professionals would have experienced a particularly strong work intensification process, relevant to our study, linked with psychosomatic complaints during 1999-2012 (Pérez-Zapata, 2015; Pérez-Zapata, Alvarez-Hernandez, Castaño-Collado & Lahera-Sanchez, 2015). Professional women were expected to be at particularly risk, as a result of having to deal with horizontal and vertical segregation together with the so-called 'double burden'[23]. In addition, the ICT sector has traditionally been dominated by men, which poses additional difficulties for women, according to the STEM[24] literature.

Moreover, risks associated with an increasingly boundaryless environment in a knowledge work context can have a larger effect on generations of young professionals who need to put in more effort to signal commitment (and advance careers, identities and employability) and to adapt themselves to the increasingly individualised organisational environments. Nordic research has pointed out that young professionals might be particularly vulnerable to what has been termed 'performance-based self-esteem' (Hjarsbech et al., 2015; Löve, Hagberg & Dellve, 2011; Verdonk, de Rijk, Klinge & de Vries, 2008), a psychological construct consistent with our discussion around the subjectification process.

21 Bridgix is a market share leader with revenues growing at double digit rates at the time of the interviews. We could well consider it an 'extreme case' that can facilitate theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989).

22 In essence, a system of organisational practices linked with organisational learning and high commitment (Appelbaum, 2000; Arthur, 1994; Boxall & Macky, 2009; Huselid, 1995).

23 The 2015 European working conditions survey by Eurofound continues to confirm that women's total (paid and unpaid) working time is longer than men's (http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/resume/2015/working-conditions/first-findings-sixth-european-working-conditions-survey-resume).

24 STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. A more gendered analysis of the contents of our article was not possible because of space constraints, but gender was 'the organizing category' in the original research project (Castaño, 2010).

We now start by briefly discussing the organisational culture of self-management and high commitment of Bridgix (using the HR Director's discourse) before exploring employees' experiences in this working environment.

Organisational ethos: self-management and high commitment

According to the HR Director, Bridgix's strong corporate culture is built around the importance of performance, empowerment and collaboration in a technologically enabled working environment. The workplace is characterised as highly demanding but with built-in flexibility and high autonomy, looking to elicit personal responsibility and commitment. Horizontal and vertical mobility are also very much promoted and the exhortations to self-management are explicit.

> *Our value proposal towards the employee is very specific to us. It is based on **personal responsibility**. We don't go after the employee. We do not track him/her. Physical presence is not important [...] Really it is a culture driven by performance [...] First, the core is the activity, not the place. Second, it is a **culture of performance.** We do not pay everybody the same, it is not based on tenure. There are some objectives and people have to deliver. We believe employees are mature and responsible enough to **organise work on their own** [...] (HR Director)*

This corporate culture that emphasises performance and self-management defines workers' values in terms of competencies around three axes: moral responsibility, individualised objectives, and permanent accountability. In this context, achieving performance depends on workers' ability to self-manage, to act autonomously, to adequately engineer their own subjectivity to become an 'enterprising self/entrepreneur of the self'[25].

The HR Director describes a demanding workplace that aims to combine fun and pressure, looking for a theoretical 'win-win' scenario where *work engagement* is expected to emerge. Flexibility is underlined but it is subordinated to *personal responsibility*, *mutual* commitment and *trust*.

> *[...] we want to have fun, in the pressurised context; it is a company that demands a lot from employees, we get the best out of them, they work a lot of hours, but they also work them **when they want [...],** the most valued component is flexibility. But more than flexibility, we give **personal responsibility and mutual commitment**. A basic premise is trust [...] (HR Director)*

The appeal to 'choice' and 'free will' is emphasised ('on your own', 'when they want') and self-management emerges as a cross-cutting dimension in the organisation of work. This can critically be linked with the subjectification processes to elicit a moral and normative commitment (Amigot Leache & Martínez, 2013; E. Crespo & Serrano,

25 Life and the self become a micro-enterprise ('enterprising self') that can be governed under management principles: autonomy and personal responsibility, human capital optimisation, self-governance, initiative, strategic planning and analysis, implication, etc (Rose, 1996:1554-5). In this way, agency becomes no longer the opposite of organisational power, but the enactment of it (Edwards & Nicoll, 2007; Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1996).

2011; Willmott, 1993) in line with the key attitudinal components that make up competencies today (e.g. Tovar & Revilla, 2009). This flavour of self-management involves an internalisation of the uncertainties and ambiguities of the external context together with an entrepreneurial mobilisation of subjectivity to achieve the also internalised (and 'not to be questioned') organisational goals. Self-management gets enacted through personal responsibility (Alonso & Fernández, 2009; Willmott, 1993), an ability to respond (or *response-ability*) combined with a moral commitment aligned with the organisational goals. In this process, the subject becomes subjected/subjugated in line with Foucault's (1982) argument and ongoing discussions (Lemke, 2001; Serrano, Martín & Crespo, 2013; Willmott, 1993). This is also the background of Sennett's (2000) 'power without authority': a context where self-management means management of the subjectivity, a subjectivity that needs to be tamed, monitored and normalised.

Managing and governing workers' subjectivities becomes, then, an essential part of the process of guaranteeing productivity. Workers are no longer just executors, but they need to mobilise their subjectivities in the work process (Hardt & Negri, 2001; Neck, Neck & Houghton, 2006; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). This has been associated with more empowered and motivated workers (e.g. Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011) but the emancipatory potential may be outweighed by dangers. From a political perspective, subjectivity becomes a central territory of power relations, and workers' minds become the main organisational control and controlling instance (Cabanas Díaz, 2013; E. Crespo & Serrano, 2011; Honneth, 1997). The new developments in self-management do not only ensure discipline and normalisation, but also render their oppressive dimensions invisible, shifting conflicts into a sphere of productive complicity and consent. From this perspective, self-management becomes an increasingly insidious way for organisations to exercise a more intense and invasive power.

Employees' experiences and vulnerabilities around work intensification

Even when self-managed knowledge workers face diverse structural/organisational conditions contributing to the work intensification process[26], responsibilities are effectively transferred to the individual. Failure is considered a *personal* flaw: not to have mobilised the right type or amount of resources; or not to have self-managed in the most appropriate way. Employees also experience a great deal of ambiguity in relation to the *sense-making* processes, similar to those found in *double bind* environments (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1963). They seem to experience intrinsic satisfaction with the content and self-managed organisation of work (in theory and in their discourses), but, at the same time, they have to deal with a highly demanding context they do not seem to be able to control (in terms of practice and

26 These include increased task complexity, expectations of agile responses, difficulties in assessing and controlling their time involvement, permanent accountability and assessment of results, contradictory demands and dilemmas that require individual creativity, in an uncertain context with scarce resources and procedures. Some of the words most used by the interviewees were *hardship*, *frenetic pace*, *tension*, *information overload*, *long hours* and *emergency*.

behaviours). The final outcome is an enormous pressure, driving the intensification of work, a dynamic with risks for health and personal relations at the workplace and beyond.

In interaction with the intensification of knowledge work, four main processes can be identified that generate contradictions that can translate into health and social vulnerabilities: first, the 'autonomy paradox'; second, atomisation and lack of social support; third, permanent accountability and insecurity; and fourth, newer difficulties in setting boundaries. We now examine these one by one.

Knowledge work intensification and the 'autonomy paradox'

As we have seen, Bridgix's practices of self-management and autonomy in the workplace are conditioned by what the HR Director called 'personal responsibility' and 'mutual commitment'. This implies that self-managed workers cannot use their autonomy to decide whether or not to participate in the demanding environment, and workers' participation also needs to be aligned with organisational expectations and goals.

What we find particularly noteworthy is that the employees themselves affirm that they have 'absolute freedom' (see verbatim below), but then immediately add that they end up involved with work 24/7. This suggests that workers' perception of autonomy in their *discourses* seem to come together with a lack of autonomy in their *behaviours*, in a similar fashion to the patterns Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates (2013) found in relation to the use of mobile electronic devices[27]. This is the core of the so-called 'autonomy paradox'.

> *Well, I have never been against work and long hours. If not, I would not be in a company like this one. I imagine that you already know that it is a very demanding company. It gives you absolute freedom ... but the truth is that, you end up involved 24 hours a day [...] (Male respondent 1)*

Employees' underlying discourse is that they have a choice and they end up choosing work. Following a psychology of work/organisations frame, we could interpret this as either work engagement (because of the apparent discretionary component) and/or as workaholism (if it includes compulsive elements) but in either case this would exclude the political dimension. From a political perspective, the fact that workers have not been able to exercise alternative choices (even though these are available in principle, and in the discourse) suggests that this freedom/autonomy ends up being a perception, something similar to a 'false consciousness', 'self-entrapment', or an 'illusio' linked to a specific *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2008; Lupu & Empson, 2015; Michel, 2012, 2014; Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012). From a subjectification perspective, we have to add that these discourses of control/autonomy leave no traces of control, because the whole subjectification process depends on forming a subject, the 'enterprising self', who is, by definition, in charge (Costea, Crump & Amiridis, 2008; Kunda, 1992).

27 Where the possibility to work *anywhere/anytime* became working *from everywhere/all the time*.

We would like to suggest that at least three specific mechanisms might be in play here. First, workers probably experience this condition as freedom because of subjectification processes that activate doublethinking (El-Sawad, Arnold & Cohen, 2004; Orwell, 1949; Willmott, 1993). For example, the interviewee is able to say that a core organisational expectation is 'working long hours', implicitly suggesting that there is no alternative to long working hours ('I would not be in a company like this one ...'), but at the same time he or she is able to contradict him or herself affirming that he or she has 'absolute freedom'. In practice, doublethinking refers to being able to hold and articulate contradictory arguments and beliefs, *without being fully aware*, as if it is possible to forget what needs to be forgotten, at a given moment, to present a certain account, and even to forget what has been forgotten (El-Sawad, Arnold & Cohen, 2004). This could be regarded as an intentional lack of reflexivity, partially unconscious. El-Sawad et al also refer to Giddens (1991) concept of 'bracketing' between practical consciousness (what can be done) and discursive consciousness (what can be said) as a helpful concept for understanding the doublethinking process.

Second, we might also argue that this doublethinking is supported by some *real* autonomy around the *hows* and *means* of the work (though not about its *whats* and *goals*). This real scope for individual decision making might produce a kind of 'halo effect' (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) that might help to sustain contradictory discourses.

Third, it can also be argued that such doublethinking and discourses about autonomy are also useful to defend, secure and develop workers' personal and social identities: to be able to say to themselves and their significant others that they have a choice, at least in comparison with the material and symbolic alternatives that are available elsewhere in the labour market. Furthermore, it enables them to develop the win-win fantasy of an imaginary limitless personhood that 'assumes responsibility, develops personally, thrives in intensity and successfully fuses private and public life' (Ekman, 2015).

Only one of the interviewees[28] was ready to recognise the contradictory discourse:

> *There are different people, well, I have been lucky. I have had managers that tell you this is the objective and you get there* ***in your own way****. Then, getting there* ***as you want*** *is* ***contradictory****, isn't it? Because either you self-organise [...] But you have to find your way* ***[...], you have to look for resources; either you move or you are dead****. (Female respondent 4)*

These self-management models are branded as autonomous and free but incorporate, at the same time, working practices that hinder control over organisational conditions and job demands (e.g. pressures over the pace of work, colonisation of personal life with implicit exhortations that blur or break spatial and temporal boundaries). On the one hand, workers have to self-develop and self-actualise as competent and individual subjects managing their own subjectivity; on the other hand, it is demanded that they internalise the organisational objectives as their own ('either you move, or you are

28 When compared with the rest of the interviewees, this woman's professional career had been uncommon, starting from an assistant and advancing to more relevant positions. This higher cultural distance might be influencing her additional 'enlightenment'.

dead'). The exhortations to take personal responsibility imply that external risks and contradictions are transferred to the realm of self-regulation, becoming a problem of engineering the self (Lemke, 2001) with contradictory demands.

In summary, freedom and autonomy also become mechanisms of self-submission, heightening subjugation and fragility in a new nexus and microphysics of power that contribute to the intensification of knowledge work. In a post-regulatory era, normative/neo-normative controls operate through the encouragement of freedom, the injunction to 'just be yourself' (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) and the promotion of self-governing capabilities. In terms of psychosocial risks, self-management and autonomy become resources that generate additional demands and, more importantly, are used to legitimise demands, because they are perceived as self-chosen. In this way, intensification becomes self-intensification.

Knowledge work intensification, atomisation and lack of social support

While employees seemed to agree with their HR Director about the importance of personal initiative and autonomy in this highly demanding workplace, the workers' testimonies do contradict the collaboration discourse highlighted by the HR Director (as another key component of the culture). They refer extensively to an individualistic workplace environment, something that interviewees consider to be influenced by the work intensification process.

[...] this pressure that we have today, almost limitless, did not exist before. No, it did not; I do think it did change, for the worse, because what I told you before ... even ***relationships among peers are getting lost****. (Male respondent 1)*

Social support is well recognised as a factor that protects psychosocial health (e.g. Johnson & Hall, 1988), and, in the literature on the psychodynamics of work, it is considered to be a critical defence system for averting suffering at work (Dejours, 2009). The dismantling of the collective subject and collective dimensions of work activity also prevent employees from identifying resources and alternative ways to work properly (Clot, 2009). It seems that the intensification and the individualisation and self-management of the workers reinforce each other, contributing to produce an isolation that renders workers fragile.

People are very independent, ***you are on your own****, you have to know that you are not going to be helped out, very little ... [...]. It is massively individualist, in my organisation [...] It is a very hard culture, very intransigent, with deference, but anything that it is not excellent, it is rejected, then, clearly, it is little* ***human*** *with people. [...] (Female respondent 1)*

[...] it is a rather hostile environment, because people, in the end, it is not about team building ... all together, not at all, ***you are on your own*** *and it is hard, it is hard. When you are in that moment of, you are on your own [...] you always know someone, don't you? A hint here, a hint there ... there is also nice people that help you out. (Female respondent 4)*

Again, it is not direct management supervision that pressures employees and intensifies their work but employees themselves who do so, through their own personal responsibility and self-management, by which they are silently individualised and trapped. The individualisation of work, the isolation of the individual and the removal of collective subjects and industrial relations all exacerbate the impact of the work intensification process on workers' political vulnerability. But, as our interviewees suggested, this process also works the other way around: the work intensification process does not help to build the missing social support, even when the corporate discourse is awash with calls for teamwork.

Knowledge work intensification, permanent accountability and insecurity

The flip side of the exhortation for self-management and personal responsibility is the acceptance (optional or obligatory) of external (public/organisational) monitoring and validation (Amigot Leache & Martínez, 2013). While employees might feel *free* to elaborate responses, their performance is constantly and externally evaluated. Workers are placed in a position of permanent accountability that involves ongoing exhortations and self-exhortations for improvement and validation. This also opens the door to a more vulnerable subject.

> *[...] The pressure is very high. There is no past record. Even when we know, even when we know the person ... In the end, you realise that yesterday does not count. If not, you would be more calm, but people get nervous sometimes, in moments of crisis, pressure, year's end, you get very nervous because you are in the spotlight. (Female respondent 4)*

This situation produces a feeling of job-related and ontological insecurity, linked to the need to achieve and validate results on an ongoing basis, since 'yesterday does not count'[29]. The aspiration to become a good employee and to secure material and symbolic rewards that need to be revalidated at 'each and every interaction' also drive the intensification of knowledge work, as Muhr, Pedersen and Alvesson (2012) have also found.

Also these external demands for validation, linked with technologies to produce norms and criteria ('collective yardsticks'), end up operating as technologies of the self, used for self-management, self-monitoring, self-measuring and self-evaluation, all contributing to workers' self-esteem (Cruikshank, Barry, Osborne & Rose, 1996). This also seems to function as an effective organisational strategy to produce more insecure achievers, a profile of worker very much aligned with the culture of knowledge-work-intensive companies (Lupu & Empson, 2015). This can further be connected with the increasing relevance of a specific *contingent self-esteem* linked with being able to perform and then to work intensively: *performance-based self-esteem* (Blom, 2012;

29 Bauman has also referred to this: 'You have to repeat again and again the validation of your state in employment. You are as good as your last success, but this one won't last long and you have to repeat it again and again' (http://www.dubitare.es/en/2014/02/thinkers-corner-zygmunt-bauman-about-identity-and-the-fragmentation-of-human-life/)

Hallsten, Josephson & Torgén, 2005)[30]. Again, the dynamics are mutually reinforcing, and, while the permanent accountability and insecurity drive intensification, work intensification can also produce feelings of exhaustion that can impact performance, accountability and produce a growing feeling of insecurity.

Knowledge work intensification, newer difficulties to set boundaries

At Bridgix, this intense working environment ends up pushing employees 'very close to their limits', generating psychosocial vulnerabilities. Some of these are linked to burnout, emotional exhaustion (Barnes & Van Dyne, 2009; Serrano, Martín & Crespo, 2013) and cynicism (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Kunda, 1992; Whittle, 2005) that are very relevant in this environment. More generally, both health (e.g. Pérez-Zapata, 2015) and work-life balance (e.g. Schieman & Glavin, 2016) are placed at risk and, taken together, these hazards become a threat to sustainability.

[...] There is a real feeling that we all, in general, in my group (and I do not want to talk about others because I am sure it would be similar), we are ***very close to the limit, very close to the limit.*** *(Male respondent 2)*

[...] This high pace, this high level of demands would be unmanageable and unsustainable if a person is not at their best physically and mentally [...] And for that mental and physical health it is critical that everyone has their non-permeable time, leisure, joy ... If not, ***things are not sustainable.*** *(Male respondent 1)*

[...] the stability to be emotionally well at home; it is so important for a good professional development [...] that if companies realise, it can only be beneficial. And what is counterproductive is that men stay till 9 PM, till 10 PM because they know eventually it is going to end up in a divorce that is going to affect performance greatly because of the huge crisis in your personal and professional life. (Female respondent 3)

[...] Maybe the Anglo-Saxon world began earlier but that has been deepening into the global competitiveness that we have today; so it has already arrived to the Latin world and now metrics are starting to be much more in real time. This generates a pressure that, together with teleworking, provoke that ***you have to decide when to stop.*** *(Male respondent 2)*

In this demanding context, accelerated by technology and real-time metrics, another critical skill for self-managed workers is being able to enact the right set of boundaries/limits (e.g. 'deciding when to stop'), whether these boundaries are to sustain mental and physical health or to replenish consumed energy (physical, emotional, spiritual and social). This is in line with Pedersen's (2008) argument that coping strategies should be included under the self-management umbrella. This additional responsibility to set limits in a boundaryless environment is another

30 A contingent-based self-esteem. Apart from the more specific performance-based self-esteem, the potential bridging between sociology and psychology in this area can be informed by the very popular self-determination theory developed by Deci and Ryan (2000).

example of internalisation of environmental uncertainties that increases vulnerabilities. Once again, things like 'deciding when to stop', or the ability to 'say no' (Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012), are constructed as an individual, personal responsibility and mask the structural and organisational constraints and controls that are in place.

Concluding discussion

We started our article by highlighting the relevance of the knowledge work intensification process and pointing to the emerging 'stress of higher status' that suggests that increasing job demands, together with some types of control/resources in the workplace, might have the counterintuitive effect of exacerbating demands, challenging current psychosocial risk models. Our article has tried to contribute to a better understanding of this dynamic by reflecting on its connections with self-management trends, using a case study of a leading American multinational in the ICT sector in Spain.

We have referred to critical research that draws on the work of Foucault, and particularly on his work on subjectification processes, to better understand the connection between self-management and knowledge intensification and their implications for psychosocial risk models. We have discussed how self-management implies the mobilisation of subjectivity together with its subjugation and have analysed some of the complex dynamics involved. More specifically, we have detailed how the turn to self-management in our knowledge-intensive and boundaryless environment is parallel to a shift involving the internalisation of the external environment (with its uncertainties, complexities, dilemmas) and a change from a worker that used to be involved in coping with external demands towards one who actively participates in generating them. We have further argued that self-management also involves generating the right type of personal and organisational resources in the workplace and the mandatory internalisation of responsibility. The shift towards self-management also implies the internalisation of organisational control, discipline and self-monitoring, in line with the organisation's expectations, goals and culture. The self-managed worker enjoys only a partial and instrumental autonomy, consistent with what has been termed 'caged discretion' (Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2012) or 'practical autonomy' (Willmott, 1993).

We analysed the connections between self-management trends and subjectification processes in order to explain the intensification of knowledge work and discussed four specific dynamics that interact with this intensification to affect workers' vulnerabilities: first, the autonomy paradox; second, atomisation and lack of social support; third, permanent accountability and insecurity; and fourth, newer difficulties in setting boundaries. We have paid special attention to the so-called 'autonomy paradox', that refers to the paradoxical trend that high-level knowledge workers with apparent high levels of autonomy seem to end up not using their supposed autonomy, reviewing previous explanations that use terms such as 'self-entrapment' (Michel, 2014), 'illusio' (Lupu & Empson, 2015) and 'win-win fantasies' (Ekman, 2015) to describe the features that drive the overworking and intensification trends that endanger health and personal relations.

The core of this autonomy paradox is that workers defend it as their own choice, or in other words blame themselves, even though some research has found that employees seem to gain an expanded perspective retrospectively (for example, after breakdowns or having children …)[31]. We have tried to contribute to this debate, revisiting the subjectification process, and have suggested that doublethinking mechanisms may play a part, together with partial autonomy and the partially unconscious drives to defend/develop their material and symbolic positions. More generally, this autonomy paradox cannot be understood without referring to more general trends towards the 'enterprising self' and managerialism (Costea, Crump & Amiridis, 2008; Du Gay, 1995; Rose, 1990). The autonomy paradox is a good example of the ongoing success of normative and neo-normative controls to drive the knowledge work intensification process. It has the additionally insidious and worrying effect of enforcing organisational controls without leaving marks, because it is workers themselves who self-control, a dynamic they perceive as their own choice.

We have also discussed the implications for psychosocial risk models of the blurring and internalisation of demands and resources in the self-management and boundaryless contexts, leading to two conclusions: that knowledge workers not only need to cope with demands but also participate in their generation; and that resources are not only helpful for coping with demands but also generate additional demands. From a psychosocial risks perspective, these trends imply a need to rethink current models that could benefit from a dialogue between psychology of work and more socio-political perspectives.

There are some threads that seem worthwhile to explore to advance such a dialogue between psychology of work and organisations and critical research. In particular, the recent 'heavy work investment' literature, with its increased focus on situational elements, is being connected with the antecedents of the workaholism and work engagement phenomena[32], and more specifically with the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000). This could have synergies with more critical organisational control literature (e.g. linking 'introjected' and 'internalised' motivations in self-determination theory with the normative controls posited in the more critical literature). Another promising element to further increase dialogue among mainstream and critical literatures would be the linkage between the subjectification process associated with intensification and so-called 'performance-based self-esteem'.

It is also relevant to explore the potential implications of our analysis for wider society. Our case study explicitly articulates the interplay between the so-called 'enterprising self' dynamics with the intensification of knowledge work in an advanced workplace that might anticipate future trends. Our findings are consistent with what Byung-Chul (2012) has asserted as societal trends: a subject that has internalised the

31 'It is the entire pace of work and cues from clients, competitive colleagues, the building that is always open that make you do things without you wanting to or even noticing the pull' (Michel, 2014); 'I really became a robot. I thought it was normal. It shocked me when everyone around me, my husband, my parents, and friends asked me, "Are you crazy?" I replied, "No, it is normal". It is like brainwashing […]' (Lupu & Empson, 2015).

32 There is a lack of research on long-term consequences/sustainability linked with work engagement. In a boundaryless and self-management context work engagement might be driven by dangerous win-win fantasies (Ekman, 2015).

pressures and the controls, that is driven by fantasies of 'yes, you can', by self-exhortations to performance that ends up as self-exploitation but, nevertheless, perceives these as free choices. In this context, if we assume that our research can inform wider trends, we might have reasons to worry, since the knowledge work intensification processes that developed economies are experiencing seem to bring newer and more insidious risks for health and personal relations.

Finally, assessing and regulating these dynamics can become trickier than in the past because of the complexities and blurred character of the responsibilities that are being internalised. On the surface, it might seem that it is up to individuals to 'decide when to stop', more so when many workers seem to perceive it that way (another instance of the autonomy paradox). At the workplace, their decisions are conditioned by organisational goals and expectations, incentives, punishments and controls that have been internalised and are then difficult to observe or question. The regulation of this intensification, overworking and/or workaholism in a boundaryless environment that promotes self-management, is then left to individual choices that are conditioned by many social forces (consciously and unconsciously). It is not the individual choices that we should focus on, but on the social process that drive subjectification and make workers perceive the intensification as their own choice, in workplaces and beyond[33]

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33 Organisational level analysis needs to be complemented by additional levels: institutional, occupational, and individual (Gascoigne, Parry & Buchanan, 2015).

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