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The struggles of being a real estate agent

- Justifying a lack of work-life balance through egoism, altruism, importance, and blindness

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Enjoy!

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Abstract

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- Key words:* Work-life balance, technology, availability, identity, and justifications
- Purpose:* The purpose of our study is to nuance the understanding of work-life balance, with the ambition to portray an alternative view. By this, we will extend the current literature within work-life balance with a new perspective.
- Methodology:* A qualitative research has been carried out. Our methodology chapter has derived from an interpretive paradigm, where it is assumed that there is no objective truth. It has sought to provide the reader with a transparency of the approaches used in the thesis.
- Literature Review:* The literature review has showed the traditional research within the field, with the aim of presenting a broad picture. The focus of this previous research has mainly been on how to achieve work-life balance. The second part of the literature review aims to portray an alternative view of the field.
- Empirical foundation:* We have conducted semi-structured interviews with ten real estate agents from six different agencies in Skåne. The respondents are anonymous as well as the agencies.
- Conclusions:* Our research has portrayed that, rather than aiming to achieve work-life balance which traditional theory suggests, the real estate agents in our study instead let their lack of balance proceed. The reason for why they did this was due to different justifications based on their identity work. These justifications were founded in egoism, altruism, importance and blindness.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Due to eminent progress in the field of technology (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough & Swan, 2009; Thomas, 2014) the context of work-life and private life has rapidly changed (Emslie & Hunt, 2009). Thomas (2014) elaborates further on the impact that technology has had on work-life practices and emphasizes that electronic tools enable for communication and facilitate for performing one's work. The author explains that the development in technology has improved employees' flexibility and efficiency in the work setting. Research conducted by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2009) shows that a consequence of technological changes is that organizational members always have a wireless contact to their employer. Furthermore, Thomas (2014, p. 286) explains that "Today, the ability to work anywhere and anytime means that we indeed *do* work anywhere and anytime". As an effect of this technological development, an individual's private life and work-life becomes much more intertwined since one can work from pretty much any location and at any time of the day (Kreiner et al., 2009; Thomas, 2014).

A field that is relevant to illuminate in light of the previous discussion is the one of *work-life balance*. According to Guest (2002, p. 276), "Work-life balance is central to debates about quality of working-life and its relation to quality of life." This could be argued to imply that in order to be content with the quality of life, individuals need to be satisfied with their work-life balance. A generally accepted definition of the concept, work-life balance, is lacking, but a broadly established view concerns that it is a subjective perception of one's perceived balance between work and private life. In concrete terms, this means that it is about an individual's experiences of as little conflicts as possible between the two domains of work and life (Guest, 2002; Thomas, 2014; Nam, 2014). This is also the definition that we will use throughout the thesis.

The blurred out lines that the technological development has brought with it also have implications for work-life balance. Kelly and Moen (2007) underline how employees, due to increased expectations on availability, experience conflicts in work-life balance that could be argued to have negative impacts on people's attitudes towards their employer and also in their own private lives. Most of the traditional research in the field of work-life balance has mainly focused on what implications the intertwining between work and private life has had on stress, health, burnouts and workload (e.g. Kossek, Lautsch & Eaton, 2006; Kelly & Moen, 2007;

Kreiner et al., 2009; Khallash & Kruse, 2012). Furthermore, most studies to date have investigated how work-life balance can be achieved on an organizational level through human resources management practices which have focused on performance and turnover (e.g. Thomas, 2014; Barber, Grawitch & Maloney, 2016), and hence neglected the individual level (Kreiner et al. 2009). However, the research that has been conducted on the individual level has mainly concerned how to handle work-life balance from a conflict-perspective (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These perspectives on conflict-handling primarily touch upon how individuals could separate or integrate working life and private life in order to achieve a perceived balance between the two domains (e.g. Guest, 2002; Nam, 2014; Roy, 2016; Barber et al., 2016). It is worth noting that throughout our thesis, the words struggle and conflict will be used synonymously to explain the same phenomenon. Another way of handling struggles which is put forward in the literature is the one of support. This view is emphasized in both the separation and in the integration approach and regards how individuals have a need to discuss their balance with their environment in order to gain support and cope with the situation (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007).

Sarker, Xiao, Sarker and Ahuja (2012) argue that there is an insufficient amount of studies when it comes to work-life balance among knowledge workers. The authors further elaborate that it is relevant to study work-life balance among knowledge workers since technology impacts their work practices and result in a pressure to be available at all times. Scholaris and Marks (2004) also discuss how the concept of work-life balance should be especially noteworthy among knowledge workers since the lines between the work and private life are often more blurred out for these individuals. Alvesson (2004) defines knowledge workers as well-educated and highly skilled individuals who participate in knowledge creation. Furthermore, he describes knowledge work as ambiguous and difficult to evaluate. Alvesson (2004) also emphasizes that knowledge workers usually spend a significant amount of time on their work outside the ordinary working hours, autonomy and flexibility being important aspects when performing their work.

A profession that has not gained much attention in the research of work-life balance is the one of real estate agents. Benjamin, Jud and Sirmans (2000, p. 6) define real estate agents as the one who "(...) provide information to sellers and buyers." Snyder, Claffey, and Cistulli (2011) elaborate further on what is included in the definition and mean that the profession is a mixture between human-service work and sales work. The real estate agents also face a duality in the relationship between the sellers and buyers due to differing interests. Benjamin

et al. (2000) continue to describe that the profession is not easily measured when it comes to performance and that the outcomes are often characterized by uncertainty and ambiguous demands. According to Mäklarsamfundet (2014)¹, real estate agents frequently also struggle with unpredictable salaries and working hours. This description of a real estate agent is similar to what Alvesson (2004) defines as a knowledge worker. By this, we mean that Alvesson (2004) describes knowledge workers as individuals who engage in ambiguous activities and are highly engaged in knowledge creation that is difficult to evaluate.

While real estate agents make an interesting object to study due to the lack of previous research on this profession, this thesis will also argue that the theory within the field of work-life balance is insufficient. Expressed differently, our empirical material shows tendencies that cannot be fully explained by traditional theory. This means that the real estate agents do not achieve work-life balance through proposed methods that are suggested by the existing research and literature. Rather our study will demonstrate why a lack of work-life balance can proceed. This background makes our study relevant since it seeks to fill this gap and provide an alternative view within the field of work-life balance.

1.2 Research Questions

- *How do real estate agents perceive their work-life balance in practice due to the possibility of being available 24/7?*
- *Why do real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed?*

The research questions have an empirical character with the ambition to facilitate for an understanding of work-life balance in the context of real estate agents. In order to reach a more theoretical level, our thesis will be guided by the purpose presented below.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of our study is to nuance the understanding of work-life balance, with the ambition to portray an alternative view.

By this, we will extend the current literature within work-life balance with a new perspective.

¹ The trade association for the real estate agents in Sweden

2. Methodology

This chapter aims to describe in detail the scientific approach for the thesis. Firstly, we start by explaining the metatheoretical starting point where it is assumed that there is no objective reality. This is followed by a description of the collection of the empirical material which is characterized by an abductive approach. Following this section, the approach for data analysis is presented, which portrays the steps taken to understand and theorize the empirical material. The methodology chapter ends with a reflexivity paragraph where we elaborate on the trustworthiness throughout the process.

2.1 Ontological and epistemological grounding

Our thesis has ascribed to an interpretive paradigm, with the ontological grounding that the world is socially constructed (Merriam, 2002). This implies that there exists no objective truth, rather multiple realities. Epistemologically, we believe that knowledge emerges from interpretation and from social interaction (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, we considered the interpretive paradigm to be suitable for the research since our purpose was to capture and understand a social phenomenon (Prasad, 2005), work-life balance, from the real estate agents' perspective. To put it differently, the intention was to nuance our understanding of how real estate agents interpreted and made sense of their social realities in terms of work-life balance. We also found the interpretive approach appropriate since Thomas (2014, p. 284) explains the following; "(...) balance is a subjective construct, as each person's idea of what constitutes balance differs." A similar argument is put forward by Khallash and Kruse (2012) who mean that balance is a biased understanding. Since our study has aimed to elaborate on real estate agents' perception of their social realities, we acknowledge, in line with social constructionism, that we have not obtained an objective truth (Merriam, 2002). Instead, multiple subjective understandings of the phenomenon regarding real estate agents' perception of work-life balance have been portrayed in the analysis.

As we were interested in understanding how real estate agents perceive work-life balance, we took on a hermeneutic approach when analysing the empirical material. This implies that we moved between our pre-understanding and understanding in a circulating way (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The aim with the hermeneutic orientation, in line with the interpretive paradigm, is to nuance our understanding and move beyond common sense regarding real estate agents' perceptions of work-life balance (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

Our theoretical pre-understanding regarding work-life balance which our analysis was filtered through was mainly based on traditional research within the field (e.g. Clark 2000; Guest, 2002; Thomas, 2014). Moreover, our pre-understanding regarding work-life balance among real estate agents was also primarily grounded from media (e.g. Million Dollar Listing New York, Toppmäklarna, & Hemverket TV-commercial) where the real estate agent profession is commonly portrayed as stressful, prestigious and characterized by possible constant availability. Our pre-understanding of the phenomenon in combination with the understanding that we have gained during our study, have facilitated for a greater insight into the topic of work-life balance. This implies that we as researchers became a part of the creation of knowledge (Merriam, 2002) which means that the study has been influenced by our values and biases. Our aim was not to eliminate those values and biases, instead, we tried to be reflexive and acknowledge that our pre-understanding affected the outcome of the analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This reflexivity will be further discussed at the end of the methodology chapter.

2.2 Collection of Empirical material

For this study, an abductive approach has been used, which means an interplay between induction and deduction in the research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The reason for this methodological choice was because it enabled us to move between theoretical and empirical reflection, and it was also in line with our hermeneutic orientation. Moving between our empirical material and the theoretical framework has facilitated for us to reinforce our pre-understanding and understanding of how real estate agents perceive work-life balance. Furthermore, the thesis has primarily originated from induction since our literature review has mainly been generated from our empirical material. However, in the initial stage of our research we compiled traditional research in the field of work-life balance, which guided us in the creation of interview themes. This means that our study has elements from deduction since we had a pre-understanding of work-life balance when we entered the field. In other words, this means that our theoretical pre-understanding has provided guidance in the collection of empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Nevertheless, during the process it became evident that some themes that have emerged from the empirical material could not be explained by traditional work-life balance theory, which led us to a revised and reconstructed literature review. In this way, we developed new theory based on an interplay between our empirical findings and theoretical framework in line with our abductive approach (Bryman & Bell,

2011). The development of our themes in the empirical material will be further discussed in the paragraph below called *Approach for data analysis*.

As mentioned in the first research question, we have aimed to understand real estate agents' perception of their work-life balance in practice due to the possibility of 24/7 availability, and thereby get a comprehension of their socially constructed realities (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). With the premises of the interpretive paradigm we found interviews as a suitable technique in order to understand the participants' realities. Kvale (1996) explains that interviews are an advantageous way to gain access to individuals' subjective experiences. More precisely we have conducted semi-structured interviews due to our wish to follow up on interesting themes that occurred during the conversation. We believe that this was a meritorious choice since it enabled us to immerse ourselves in tensions, contradictions and make sense of the interviewees' statements. The technique allowed us to ask questions of a more open character which aimed to gain deeper insights of the interviewees' perceptions (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, it encouraged the interviewees to speak more freely without the answers becoming too narrow. Since some of these answers could not be explained by traditional theories, this prompted for the creation of our second research question: Why do real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed? For the interested reader, you can find a description of the logic behind the structure of the interviews, both written in English and in Swedish, in Appendix 1. The reason why we did not design a more specific interview guide is due to our abductive approach where the conversation decided the questions and themes.

We have interviewed ten real estate agents in order to collect as deep data as possible, which is in line with qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). The participants were chosen through a strategic sampling based on their titles of being real estate agents (Bryman & Bell, 2011). By this, we mean that all participants in our study had the title real estate agent and belonged to a real estate agency. In order to gain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon examined, a various group of respondents was chosen where age, gender, experiences, and circumstances of life differed. The interviewees were contacted by email and worked at six different real estate agencies in Skåne. The reason why we contacted real estate agents belonging to different real estate agencies was due to our wish to capture a variety of perceptions regarding work-life balance. By this, we wanted to avoid that the perception could be reflected through the organizational belongingness. It is worth noting, that even though we wanted to capture a variety in the field, our aim was not to contribute with a statistical generalization or an attempt

to portray an objective view. Rather, our aim was to contribute with a theoretical or analytical generalization in line with a qualitative research methodology (Alvehus, 2013).

The interviews conducted were each between 30 to 70 minutes long. In order to capture the interviewees in their natural work setting and thereby make the respondents feel comfortable, all interviews were held in their offices. The reason for why ten interviews were conducted was due to that we experienced the answers becoming similar, repetitive and lack more nuances at this point. This could be explained by what Ryen (2004) describes as a saturation in the answers. Furthermore, the time limit and the scope of the study made it undesirable to realize a larger amount of interviews. The interviews were recorded after receiving permission from the interviewees since it facilitated for us to conduct a deeper analysis of the answers in terms of tones, emotions, and hesitations. The interviews were then transcribed directly afterward in order to decrease the risk of losing valuable nuances in the material (Bryman & Bell, 2011). All three authors of the thesis were present at all interviews to enhance the likeliness of capturing as many impressions and as much information as possible, as well as to follow up on interesting answers in line with our semi-structured approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This was also made possible due to asking questions like: “could you give an example of...”, “what do you mean by...”, and “could you describe a situation when...”. These types of questions facilitated for us to get a more comprehensive picture of the underlying meanings and perceptions of the phenomenon examined.

In order to reduce the feeling of intenseness for the real estate agent and thereby facilitate for a more relaxed atmosphere where the respondent felt comfortable to speak freely, only two of us held the interviews. The third author of the thesis was also present but took notes instead during the interviews to enable for a more efficient transcribing and reduce the expenditure of time for this process. This author also took field notes in order to capture body language, nuances of expressions and emotions.

Since our aim was not to study any specific real estate agency as an object, the names of the organizations would not contribute to our study and therefore, we decided to keep them anonymous. Moreover, several of the respondents expressed a wish to be anonymous in our research. In our analysis, we have therefore chosen to name the respondents as Real estate agent A-J. We have also chosen to use the pronoun of *he* throughout the analysis in order to ensure that the respondents are anonymous by not referring to any gender, even though women also participated. All ten interviews were held in Swedish since this is the native

language for both the authors of the thesis and for the respondents. This choice was actively made due to our wish to decrease the risk of losing important aspects, underlying meanings and specific native expressions. It also facilitated for the respondents to express themselves freely and elaborate on their stories in a genuine way. Another reason for this choice was the time limit, where the transcribing process became more efficient and smooth when not having to do it in English. The quotations we used were first transcribed in Swedish in order to not lose valuable nuances in the analysis. These were later translated into English at a final stage and were read through by an external person in order to confirm that important aspects were still clear. Worth noting, the translations are not always grammatically correct, but rather aim to reproduce the respondents' expressions and phrases in order to create trustworthiness.

2.3 Approach for Data analysis

When analysing the data, it was crucial to get an overview and comprehension of the empirical material. Therefore, the first step was to engage closely with the transcribed material to start finding transitions, similarities, repetitions and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The transcriptions were printed in order to facilitate for identifying salient findings. This was done through making notes in the margin and colour-coding individually, and discussing the interviews together piece by piece. The reason why we started analysing individually was due to our wish to not let the group affects your own thoughts at the initial stage of the process. The findings from this first step were then developed into particular themes, which were analysed further in order to establish what was more relevant and what could be reduced. This sorting was based on which themes we found being of most relevance in relation to our first research question. Expressed in other words, the research questions guided the thematising. Lastly, the quotes that supported the themes discovered were chosen and sorted.

The themes that were developed were generated both from our literature review and from the empirical material in line with our abductive approach. These seek to answer our first research question: *How do real estate agents perceive their work-life balance in practice due to the possibility of being available 24/7?* The themes that were created to respond to this first research question were: *Changed premises due to the technological development*, *Sacrificing the private life for work*, and *Struggles of being it all*. By bringing it all together, the next step was to start questioning the findings, which enabled for a deeper theorization later in the process. By this, we mean that our empirical material could not fully be explained by the existing theory within the field of traditional work-life balance, leading to that we had to

expand our literature review with an identity perspective. This deeper theorization also enhanced our ability to analyse the empirical material further which also worked as a foundation for the creation of the second research question: *Why do the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed?* The themes that were developed with identity as a lens were: *I am a real estate agent, Aspirations of becoming the chosen one, The Good Samaritan, Messiah, and Spellbound by a dream of paradise.*

In order to strengthen our argumentation in the analysis, we have applied a model by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) which is outlined in the book by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015). The model consists of four steps: Analytical point, orientation, empirical extract, and analytical comments. These steps are visible in our analysis where each section starts with a brief overview of what we have seen in the empirical material. Thereafter, we put forward quotes and extracts from the interviews, and lastly we develop an interpretation of these in relation to theory. The analysis approach explained above was not a linear set of clear steps, but rather an on-going process that existed simultaneously with the data collection. To reconnect our analysis process to our hermeneutic approach, the transcripts and the themes can be seen as parts that together created the whole (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

2.4 Trustworthiness – Reflexivity

The term reflexivity encompasses the process of examining one's own presumptions and be aware of how subjectivity, interpretations, and culture influence the research. However, in the interpretive paradigm reflexivity is also assumed to discover and generate knowledge, since it enhances for an openness where the researcher is not hindered by his or her vocabulary and own assumptions (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). We are aware that we as researchers have continuously influenced the process since we had pre-understandings and prior knowledge that affected our sense-making when doing the research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). As mentioned previously in the thesis, these pre-understandings originated partly from sources such as Mäklarsamfundet and Million Dollar Listing New York. They also derived from our own experiences of being in contact with real estate agents when buying our apartments, were we all obtained the impression of them being excessively available. Furthermore, stories from acquaintances that are in the real estate agent business helped add to these pre-understandings and assumptions. We do not find this being an obstacle for the research since the empirical material immediately showed nuances that were similar to our presumptions. Expressed differently, we did not have to reconstruct our own understanding extensively; rather it

provided us with a more solid comprehension of the context, which facilitated for a deeper study.

Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014, p. 442) pointed out that “(...) interview statements do not objectively mirror a reality beyond the interview situation. They may even reflect the respondents’ identity ambition (...).” When we designed our structure of the interviews we did reflect upon this and thus created themes of more explaining character. We did this since we acknowledge that the first interviewee tried to portray himself as a balanced real estate agent who did not have any struggles when it, in fact, turned out to be quite the opposite. In concrete terms this meant that, to avoid distorted answers we tried to make the respondents give concrete examples of situations and encouraged them to elaborate further on their statements by asking follow-up questions when they hesitated.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) emphasize that it is of importance in research to be aware and reflexive of the culture. The three authors of this thesis are all raised in Sweden and are therefore acquainted with the cultural norms that exist. We find this meritorious in our interviews, which are all conducted in Sweden and in Swedish since it allows us to understand the context and the nuances in the real estate agents’ statements more in detail. Even though, the notion of reflexivity has allowed us to approach the material differently on several levels (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), in order to understand work-life balance in the context of real estate agents, our aim is not to generate an objective truth regarding how real estate agents perceive work-life balance. Rather, we seek to provide the reader with multiple and subjective understandings of the social phenomenon investigated in. This was accomplished through the use of quotations in the analysis, which mirrored the stories of the real estate agents literally.

Our aim with this methodology chapter was to give the reader a transparent view of how our research has been conducted. This could be argued to further strengthen the trustworthiness of this thesis since it has provided a clear description of our methodology.

3. Literature review

The aim of this section is to highlight the conversation that takes place within the field of work-life balance and furthermore to position our study. There is no generally accepted definition of the concept work-life balance, thus, the paragraph will highlight the variety of research to give the reader a comprehensive view of the field. At this point, it is necessary to notice that an underlying dimension throughout the literature review is the one concerning knowledge workers. The literature review will initially discuss the traditional research with the purpose to put forward what has already been studied within the field of work-life balance. This broad picture will enable for a further understanding of the gap we aim to fill with our research. To be able to do this, we will also put forward an alternative view on work-life balance. This alternative view originates from the concept of identity, and will be applied in order to contribute to the field of work-life balance. The identity theory that will be presented in this section is not new, but it has not been applied extensively in the context of work-life balance.

Firstly, we will present a brief background to the origin of work-life balance. Work-life balance is a concept that was first established in the 1970's in the United Kingdom. As an effect of demographic changes where female workers entered the labour market leading to more dual-earner families, the concern of work-life balance issues increased (Jain & Nair, 2013). This is also exemplified by Kelly and Moen (2007, p. 487) who claim that workers to a greater extent now share the responsibility for the children, instead of this solely being the mother's main care. Another aspect that has had an impact on the concept of work-life balance is the changed premises due to globalization and technology, where you can now work longer, more frequently and across various time-zones (Jain & Nair, 2013). Hence, several aspects form the basis for why work-life balance has become increasingly relevant to discuss in contemporary society.

At this point, it becomes important to define work and the non-work domain, in order to understand work-life balance. *Work* is described by Lewis (2003) as obligated time that is normally financially supported. Thompson, Grant, and Dharmalingam (2002) discuss leisure, which we refer to as life, and define it as time that is not obligated where individuals can choose activities freely out of pleasure. Also Greenhaus and Powell (2006) describe life in terms of activities that take place outside work practices. Siu (2013) elaborates on this definition and bring up non-work activities such as relationships, family, and health as important aspects of the life concept.

3.1 Work-life balance – Objective or Subjective

One dialogue that is present within the field of work-life balance is whether the conceptualization is objective or subjective. According to Guest (2002, p. 261), there is a need “to recognize that balance can have both an objective and subjective meaning and measurement, that it will vary according to circumstances and that it will also vary across individuals.” An objective definition is argued in the article to derive as a consequence of that “certain patterns of behaviour, such as very long hours at work, has led to legislative and social attempts to define balance more objectively” (Guest, 2002, p. 264). The objective definition is then, in other words, an attempt to create a more general framework for what balance is in terms of working hours and free time (Guest, 2002). This definition is shared by Khallash and Kruse (2012) who describe the objective view and outline that balance is when an individual is spending the same amount of hours on work and private life. Sparks, Cooper, Fried and Shirom (1997) also put forward a discussion in their article that concerns the objective view. The authors mean that there is a positive correlation between hours of work and ill-health, leading to a lack of work-life balance when exceeding 48 hours a week. However, it can be questioned if all individuals experience the same need and have the same preferences for the boundaries between work and life, in order to achieve work-life balance. This suggests that work-life balance is a subjective perception of one's worldview, rather than objective (Nam, 2014).

A subjective definition of work-life balance is outlined by Guest (2002, p. 263) to be “a perceived balance between work and the rest of life,” and this definition implies that balance can look very diverse for different individuals regarding working hours and free time. A similar definition of the concept from a subjective view is given by Nam (2014) who describes work-life balance as an employee's own view of the correlation between work life and the private sphere. Likewise, Thomas (2014, p. 284) describes balance as “(...) a subjective construct, as each person's idea of what constitutes balance differs.” Jain and Nair (2013) confirm this subjective reasoning and mean that personal characteristics and preferences also impact the perception of work-life balance. The point of departure in the thesis will mainly be that “Preferences for work and family boundaries are socially constructed, and there is some social choice in how individuals define boundaries” (Kossek et al., 2006, p. 351). The reason for this subjective approach to work-life balance is due to our interpretive paradigm in the thesis and the aim to understand the real estate agents' perceptions.

3.2 Different perspectives on work-life balance

The concept of work-life balance originates mainly from role theory. This implies that an individual need to take on different roles in society and have to meet several expectations (Barber et al., 2016). Recent studies in the field of work-life balance have elaborated on how the domains of work and life both can have positive and negative spill-over effects on each other. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) outline one positive spill-over effect by introducing the concept of enrichment. The concept means that one role can have a positive impact on the other. By this reasoning, the authors draw upon “the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role” (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, p. 73). This is further exemplified in terms of skills, abilities, values, moods and satisfaction that can positively affect the other domain. Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer and King (2002) concretize the term enrichment by explaining how women through being mothers have become better managers. The authors are giving the following example “Many women said they learned how to listen to and develop others through their parenting experiences” (Ruderman et al., 2002, p. 373).

Another view within traditional research on work-life balance is the conflict-perspective. One of the most influencing articles in the field of work-life balance is written by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) where they introduced the conflict-perspective. In the literature, it is discussed that conflicts can arise when demands and requirements in one’s work life and private life differ. It is for example emphasised that issues can arise if the employer requires one to work on short notice, but the employee perceive a lack of flexibility in the private life or in the working life (Emslie & Hunt, 2009). According to Guest (2002, p. 259), the conflict-perspective “proposes that with high levels of demand in all spheres of life, some difficult choices have to be made and some conflicts and possibly some significant overload on an individual occur.” A parallel argument is put forward by Clark (2000) who explains that conflicts can arise since work-life balance is constructed in an interplay between the environment and the individual. The author describes that work-life balance is determined by a subjective experience of a minimum role-conflict between work and home. In order to enhance self-esteem and harmony in life, it is important to balance the two domains.

In the context of this reasoning, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) further put forward three sources that could be perceived as generating conflicts in work-life balance. The first conflict is named *time-based conflict*, which refers to that individuals could experience limited time being an obstacle for the ability to meet demands from different roles. The author explains

that the struggle can emerge due to perceived inflexibility in work with irregular shifts and long working hours. Another source of conflict that is put forward by the author is the one called *strain-based conflict*. This means that perceived physical and psychological requirements, burnouts and fatigue from interaction, could result in work-life conflicts. The authors exemplify this and emphasize: “The roles are incompatible in the sense that the strain created by one makes it difficult to comply with the demands of another” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 80). The last conflict that is addressed in the article is *behaviour-based conflict*, which occurs when different roles demand various actions from the individual. These demands are created from an individual's experience of the expectations from the environment. If a person is unable to adjust to these demands, a conflict can arise. How the struggles presented above could be handled according to traditional research, will be further discussed in a later paragraph.

Based on the reasoning above it becomes evident that the concept of work-life balance has been investigated broadly in different contexts. However, there is still no consensus on the definition of the term. We, therefore, find it necessary to define what we include in the concept of work-life balance. The choice of definition has derived from tendencies that were seen in the empirical material. Furthermore, the definition is grounded in our interpretive paradigm, with the assumption that the world is socially and subjectively constructed. In the thesis, work-life balance, therefore, refers to:

A subjective perception of minimal role-conflict between the work domain and the non-work domain.

3.3 Handling struggles within work-life balance

Within the field of work-life balance, there are several ways of achieving an experienced balance (Guest, 2002). Two of the most prominent approaches within the field touch upon whether work and life could be two distinct spheres or not, which is conceptualized around *separation* and *integration* (e.g. Guest, 2002; Nam, 2014; Roy, 2016; Barber et al., 2016). Roy (2016) discusses that individuals handle conflicts and struggles within work-life balance through separation or integration between work life and private life. Sarker et al. (2012) have a similar discussion regarding how individuals handle the relationship between the work domain and life in order to avoid conflicts. The authors emphasize three different perspectives regarding individuals' preferences of a separation or integration between work and life: the total separation perspective, the overlap perspective, and the total integration perspective.

Firstly, it is emphasized that some people want “(...) a total separation of work and personal life, and any spill-over of work into personal life is regarded as undesirable or even unacceptable” (Sarker et al. 2012, p. 146). Nonetheless, the authors explain that the employees who are followers of this perspective regarding separation will struggle since their work is characterized by demands and requirements for fast pace and quick reactions. Secondly, the overlap perspective regards how some employees do not want to separate the work domain fully from the private life and further do not think it is achievable. Instead, the authors mean that there is an overlap in the form of emotional and behavioural integration between work and life, which are influencing each other. Individuals, who support this perspective and accept integration between the domains, may still experience serious conflicts when they try to balance work and private life (Sarker et al., 2012). The authors further explain that employees who accept the overlap between the two domains normally think that their work is a vital part of a satisfying life. The third and last perspective that is put forward by Sarker et al. (2012) shows how some individuals do not separate work and life at all. In comparison to the overlap perspective, this perspective is more extreme in that it means that you rather completely integrate the two domains and “live to work”, instead of just having some parts integrated (Sarker et al., 2012, p. 149).

A similar view that supports the second and third perspective of Sarker et al. (2012), is held by Roy (2016). Roy discusses that it is not possible to separate work and life from each other since they are always interrelated. The author explains that the two domains are interwoven and constantly shape and construct each other. Another salient theme within the research field that is emphasised both in the separation and in the integration approach is the one put forward by Ashforth et al. (2000) regarding social support. The authors suggest that some individuals discuss their balance with their environment in order to gain support and cope with the situation. This argumentation is confirmed by Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) who mean that social support from the external environment is of significance in order to handle struggles in work-life balance. This is further exemplified by Jain and Nair (2013) who discuss that support can be given from the workplace, management and family with the purpose to achieve work-life balance. The dimensions that have been made visible in the section above concern how to handle struggles within work-life balance through separation, integration and support.

3.4 The entrance of technology

One prominent factor that has changed the conceptualization of work-life balance is the entrance of technology (Guest, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Thomas, 2014). The area of technology is extensive, and there seem to be two distinguishing opinions within the conversation in the field regarding its effects on work-life balance. Thomas (2014) argues that technology has brought both positive and negative effects on work-life balance. The author emphasizes that it has, on the one hand, enabled employees to become more flexible since they do not need to be at a certain physical place each day. Technological devices such as smartphones and laptops have facilitated for individuals to work from locations outside of the office at any time of the day (Lewis, 2003).

On the other hand, the technology has caused more pressure on the employees to always be available and to work more, leading to stress and burnouts (Thomas, 2014). A similar discussion is conducted by Nam (2014) who suggests that the boundaries between work and private life have become more blurred out due to technological systems. Here it is outlined how technology both entails dimensions of freedom and flexibility, but also aspects of overload and anxiety. In the author's findings, it is emphasized that effects of technology are dependent on how flexible a person is (Nam, 2014). However, Tausig and Fenwick (2001) emphasize that this flexible way of working due to technological devices, often in fact end up leading to less perceived work-life balance. The authors suggest that the struggle of balancing conflicting demands from the different domains becomes more challenging when the lines between the work and life are not strong enough. In a similar manner, Guest (2002, p. 257) suggests that the technological development has led to that "the demands of work begin to dominate life and a sense of work-life imbalance ensues."

3.5 Work-life balance for knowledge-workers

As mentioned earlier, the concept of knowledge workers is appropriate to use in order to understand work-life balance among real estate agents since they share similar characteristics. To remind the reader, we mean that real estate agents are autonomous, flexible and able to work outside normal working hours. Furthermore, real estate agents are highly engaged in knowledge work, for example, laws and economy, and their primary work tool is their intellectual ability (see definition of knowledge workers in Alvesson, 2004).

In research conducted by Sarker et al. (2012), it is emphasized that a group particularly affected by technological development in the context of work-life balance, is the one of

knowledge workers. This is due to that they often experience a pressure to always be in the forefront of advancement. Furthermore, the new conceptualization of work-life balance is more noteworthy among knowledge workers than other groups, since they experience more blurred out lines between working life and private life. In support Lewis (2003) claims that technology is of particular importance for professions that possess characteristics of knowledge work since knowledge workers often have the possibility to perform their work from different places with the use of technology. The author states that “it could be argued that many forms of post-industrial work, which dominate people’s lives, are becoming the new leisure.” (Lewis, 2003, p. 344) She goes on by elaborating on why work has gained an increased part of the lives of knowledge workers, and finds that it is a ‘choice’. According to the author, this springs from changing work premises due to technology, and the importance society place on work-related performances.

To relate the concept of knowledge worker to an earlier paragraph regarding individuals’ different relationships to the separation or integration of work and private life, people hold dissimilar opinions about technologies’ aid to work-life balance. According to Sarker et al. (2012), knowledge workers who separate working life and private life do not use work-related technology after working hours. Yet, knowledge workers who accept an overlap between work and the private domain experience a struggle due to their ambiguous attitudes towards their work-life balance. By this, the authors mean that these types of individuals have a desire to simultaneously be updated frequently about work-related issues, but at the same time have a wish to reduce the intrusion of work into the private sphere. Sarker et al. (2012) further claim that knowledge workers who want to integrate the two domains, work and private life, entirely experience the development of technology as supportive in their life. These types of knowledge workers think that technology enables them to work more and integrate the two domains of work and private life.

The studies of work-life balance for knowledge workers have concerned various aspects such as gender (Kvande, 2009; Kachchaf, Ko, Hodari, & Ong, 2015), attitudes (Scholaris & Marks, 2004; Malik, Saleem, & Ahmad, 2010), stress (Malik et al., 2010; Mullen, 2015), commitment (Sturges & Guest, 2004; Ahsan, Fie, Foong & Alam, 2013), and management (Sturges & Guest, 2004; Albertsen, Persson, Garde, & Rugulies, 2010; Ford & Collinson, 2011). Nevertheless, the studies of the field of work-life balance for knowledge workers have been claimed to still be insufficient since it does not highlight more perspectives of the phenomenon (Sarker et al., 2012).

3.6 Summary of literature review

To sum up, the literature review started off by discussing that work-life balance in this thesis is subjectively conceptualized and socially constructed. The chapter has so far shown how the technological development has affected work-life balance, both in a positive and in a negative manner. For example, technology has brought with it flexibility, stress, and affected performance and work-related attitudes. An extensive amount of research has been conducted when it comes to the concept of work-life balance and what kind of struggles this could imply for individuals. The literature review has also shown how individuals can handle the struggles and conflicts in work-life balance through separation, integration, or support from the environment. However, limited research has been conducted regarding why a lack of work-life balance can proceed. Even though our empirical material shows that the real estate agents did not perceive a balance between their work life and private life, it became evident that they accepted this imbalance. We find that traditional work-life balance theory that has been presented above was insufficient and could not explain the findings in our empirical material, where the real estate agents accepted a lack of balance instead of striving to achieve work-life balance. It seems like there is a field within the concept of work-life balance that has not been fully examined, and this concerns why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed.

In order to understand the findings in the empirical material that could not be explained by traditional research in the field of work-life balance, the upcoming paragraph aims to present an alternative view. This is made due to our aim to understand nuances and contribute to the field of work-life balance.

3.7 An alternative view on work-life balance

This paragraph seeks to act as an analytical support tool in order to enable for a comprehension of the empirical material and for our contribution to the field of work-life balance. The theoretical perspective we will apply stems from identity research. This perspective was chosen since we found it valuable to understand how real estate agents viewed themselves in order to comprehend why they let a lack of balance proceed.

3.7.1 The concept of identity

The field of identity has gained a significant amount of attention during recent years. A generally accepted definition of identity is lacking, but the term is commonly used as a way of understanding “who am I” and “how should I act”. The answers to these questions have implications for the individuals’ acting, priorities and motivations (Alvesson, 2004).

Furthermore, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) explain identity in similar terms and describe it as one's self-view. Identity is especially crucial for knowledge workers since it is assumed that their self-view originate mainly from their professions. This need to identify with their profession springs from a wish to create a sense of well-being and existential safety (Alvesson, 2004; Scholaris & Marks, 2004). It appears that "identity is broadly seen as crucial to understand how people relate to their working world and how organizations functions" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 188).

In the research field, there are mainly two dominant views regarding the conceptualization of identity, namely static or changing. Identity as static is given and is described as something fixed homogeneous, stable and irrevocable (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). In contrast to this view Alvesson (2004, p. 190) claims that "Identity is best understood as constructed, multiple, and varying, rather than something fixed, monolithic, and robust." Furthermore, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) portray self-identity as a continuous process formed by experiences and social interactions that are interpreted and constructed both consciously and unconsciously. This process is explained to take place in everyday life, and workplace context is of crucial importance when trying to align identity with the meanings and values of the organization (Alvesson & Willmott 2002).

The ongoing process described above is often referred to as identity work. Identity work is triggered when individuals experience changing situations and anxiety, leading to a desire for stability and a positive self-view (Alvesson, 2004). However, it is very difficult to accomplish and sustain a stable, steady growing feeling of competence and respect in contemporary social life. This is since there are many factors that could have an impact on and threaten one's sense of self, which results in identity work being an ongoing process. Sources for identity work could be work tasks, capabilities, social sources, organizational sources as well as personal sources (Alvesson, 2004). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) and Alvesson (2004) describe that expectations are of significance in the process of identity work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016, p. 18) elaborate on this reasoning and mean: "It is not always easy to make your self-view match the demands and expectations of the people around you, or to live up to alternative and often competing ideals about how you should behave." Alvesson (2004, p. 188) further exemplifies how expectations are of importance for the identity and explains: "We form identities through social groups, and how others relate to us is crucial to how we see ourselves." The author continues to elaborate on how identities are constructed and negotiated in relations to ideals and images from the environment and what is associated with

status. This implies that identity is constructed in relation to others. Throughout the thesis, identity work and identity construction will be used synonymously, since it refers to the same ongoing process.

3.7.2 Aspects to bring to the analysis

From this alternative view a few perspectives on identity were discussed, which will provide a lens for the upcoming analysis. These are that identity is a socially constructed ongoing process, which is defined in terms of how one views him or herself. Furthermore, identity work is of special significance in uncertain and changing situations and is reproduced through expectations and confirmation. However, these aspects will be applied first in the second part of the analysis where we seek to answer why real estate agents let a lack of work-life balance proceed.

4. Analysis

Our analysis seeks to answer our two research questions. The first section regards the first question: *How do real estate agents perceive their work-life balance in practice due to the possibility of being available 24/7?* This research question creates a foundation for the second part of the analysis which brings an alternative view to the theory of work-life balance. In order to understand our contribution that will be presented in the second part of the analysis, it is of significance to understand the underlying assumptions of how the real estate agents perceive work-life balance. The second part aims to make sense of our second research question: *Why do the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed?* This section outlines how the real estate agents view themselves, which we find being of importance in order to answer this research question and be able to explain our contribution. Hence, we refer to that we will interpret the real estate agents' identity work with the aim of understanding the phenomenon discussed.

4.1 Perceived work-life balance in practice

4.1.1 Changed premises due to the technological development

From our findings, it became evident that the technological development has had a significant impact on the work of real estate agents, and today smartphones and laptops play a crucial role. Real estate agent G expresses the importance of technical tools in work which is illustrated in the following quote:

“Your iPhone is the most important work tool that you have, as well as your laptop which you can use both at the office and at home. Everything is handled through the laptop or the phone.”

Real estate agent C agrees and explains:

“It is phone calls, it is emails, and we work a lot with laptops. We have got our brokerage pages that we have all of the objects [properties] and images on; everything is gathered in one of those programs. So we work a lot with our computer and phone.”

From calls being made only from fixed phones during office hours when making appointments and closing deals, the technological change has facilitated for more flexible work conditions. This has resulted in that the real estate agents can now work from any place at any time, leading to the possibility of being constantly available. The real estate agents

explain that they are more available nowadays due to the use of smartphones and laptops. As Real estate agent F puts it: *"We are very dependent on our [computer] systems, and as I have said the smartphone is always with you since it makes us available."*

This possibility to be constantly available, which technology has facilitated for, is explained in positive terms by all of the real estate agents. Real estate agent B exemplifies this:

"I can do much more. I can often go on trips because I have the cell phone, which I would not be able to do otherwise if I had had a static work or a specific location."

Real estate agent B continues to elaborate on the positive impact that technology has had on his flexibility by expressing:

"Thanks to that we can be mobile today; we have got our business system online so I can do pretty much everything from home. I can bring my laptop when I am on the move and so on."

Real estate agent I confirms this view by outlining: *"Due to technology we have got very good opportunities to work from home. For example, we can control the bidding on the mobile and that whole part."*

The quotations above illustrate that the real estate agents view the technology as positive since it has enabled them to work at different locations and have flexible working hours. Another dimension of the positive impact that technology has had on availability is that it facilitates for faster and smoother processes. Real estate agent A describes that this availability through technology is positive since it enables for quicker business deals. Real estate agent E further strengthens this argument by saying:

"It is, of course, positive that I can be more available towards customers and can work faster. One can be quicker in responding, quicker to take action and be faster in communicating everything. So in that respect, it [technology] is great and super-positive."

This was also exemplified by Real estate agent J, who describes how often he uses technology in his work: *"All the time. Without the cell phone and the laptop, you would not have been able to reach this far. So all the time."*

The paragraph above has demonstrated how the real estate agents perceive the possible availability due to technology in positive terms. Speaking in more concrete terms, we refer to how smartphones and laptops have provided for doing deals, answering calls, and making decisions in a quicker manner and a more flexible work setting. While the quotes above support the interpretation that availability is something positive, however, the real estate agents also described the availability in terms that could be perceived as negative. One of these experiences was explained by Real estate agent F, who said:

"People almost expect us to respond seven days a week, nearly 24 hours a day. Often you get an email that arrives during the evening, and often people call you both on Saturdays and Sundays and evenings at seven, eight o'clock. So people are not reluctant to call on my cell phone."

A similar experience is shared by Real estate agent E, who claims that a prominent disadvantage with his profession is that clients always expect one to be available due to the use of smartphones. These negative effects are also quite clearly shown in a statement by Real estate agent D, whose answer regarding the pros about the work unconsciously takes on a negative tone: *"It is the freedom, the relative freedom. You can control your time but you are never free. People are always calling. It is like I say; the catastrophe is only a phone call away."*

The previous discussion has aimed to highlight both the positive and negative effects of technology on the availability for the real estate agents. The statement below by Real estate agent F, which will be analysed further in an upcoming paragraph, refers to these effects and points towards how the availability has changed over time due to the advances in technology:

"It is positive in the sense that, when I started working as a real estate agent and we only had a regular phone and stuff; you could only work in the office as you were more restrained to work in the office. Today, I can work a lot from home or wherever I want, which is a relief for me. At the same time, it can of course also be a disadvantage because you cannot have hol... [holiday]. I mean, it is difficult to have a holiday or take time off when you can always check your emails, it requires a lot of self-discipline to not check them then."

This reasoning outlined above is in line with Thomas' (2014) arguments regarding how the development of technology has changed the premises for how work is performed and has increased the availability. As mentioned in the literature review, this availability brought both negative and positive effects with it (Nam, 2014; Thomas, 2014). This discussion has laid the foundation for the upcoming paragraph, where the implications of changed work premises for the real estate agents are discussed.

4.1.2 Sacrificing the private life for work

The intention with this section is to narrate the real estate agents' work as a basis for the upcoming analysis regarding work-life balance. For the attentive reader, our aim is not to equate a heavy workload with struggles in work-life balance since balance is subjectively constructed (Guest, 2002; Thomas, 2014). Rather we wish to give a background that will enhance a deeper understanding of the context. The workload for the real estate agents was often portrayed as taking up a huge amount of time. Real estate agent C tells us:

"My work takes a huge part; it is the only thing I do (laughter) (...). As you can see, I am working long hours and very often, so it is a big part. I barely have time to work out (laughter)."

Real estate agent J confirms this view by stating: *"I work very very very much. And very hard!"* The average amount of working hours per week for the real estate agents interviewed was between 50 and 70 hours. Real estate agent H explains that:

"I work perhaps between 60-70 hours a week approximately. I have worked quite a lot, and it has probably always been that way. Because we usually work six days a week and so you work maybe ten hours per day."

Also, Real estate agent D confirms this view of many working hours by stating:

"Recently, it has probably been 60 hours a week. I work from 8 to 19 Monday to Friday, and then Sundays too, but then it is mostly something in between 10 to 16 where you have object viewings."

Nevertheless, there were tendencies of a miscalculation of the working hours among the real estate agents. By this, we refer to that they underestimated how much they actually worked. Real estate agent J exemplifies this:

"I would say that I work 55 to 60 hours a week, approximately. Often you work late nights, I am rarely home before 20 in the evening. And I am at the office at 8 in the morning. So 8 to 20 or something like that. And then Sundays as well of course."

This quotation portrays how real estate agent J thinks that he works 55-60 hours a week, but after some calculation, it seems like it was rather closer to 70 hours per week since he expressed that he often worked Saturdays as well. This could be argued to suggest that the real estate agents are not proud of the amount of work they conduct since they do not show a desire to express it. Instead, it could be interpreted as they are wearing blinders and do not see the reality in front of them. On the one hand, they are aware of that they work a lot, but on the other hand they unconsciously seem to diminish and play down the specific amount of hours.

The amount of working hours also led to very limited free time, which is expressed by Real estate agent A who has worked for a couple of years: *"It is easier to say the hours you are not working. There have probably not been any completely free days."* In line with this reasoning Real estate agent D expresses that: *"You can control your time, but you are never free from work."* Moreover, several of the respondents did not take into account the time they were spending on work-related calls and emails during evenings and Saturdays. For example, Real estate agent H explains the working week and means that:

"Usually, I am at the office maybe 8 or 8:30, and then I have object viewings, so then I get home perhaps around 19 or 20 in the evening. And that is when I do not count if I take a couple of phone calls at home late at night or so. I do not count that into my working hours, I do not."

The reasoning above demonstrates that work occupies a large part of the real estate agents' lives, to the extent that they do not calculate the time spent on work during evenings and Saturdays. This suggests that work is integrated into the private life of the real estate agents since they do not differ between the two domains. Another dimension that could insinuate that work is integrated into the real estate agents' private lives, is seen in the expressions below where they talk about their work in terms similar to a lifestyle:

"The profession of being a real estate agent for me is very much a lifestyle. It is something you learn to live with. The real estate agent profession also means that you integrate yourself as a private person. The best real estate agent is usually the one who integrate the personal brand into the company brand. That is a good real estate agent, when you dare to follow suit and dare to involve yourself, and not limit yourself too much." (Real estate agent B)

Real estate agent D continues in a similar manner and states: *"You live with the profession of being a real estate agent 24 hours a day. You never disconnect it."* Also Real estate agent F agrees and argues: *"You are never really in your work-role or private role; instead you always live a bit like a real estate agent I would say. So it is a bit of a lifestyle."*

The quotations above could be said to show that the real estate agents perceive their work as an integrated part of their lives since they express that their work is always present in their private lives. Furthermore, the statements portray what could be interpreted as the real estate agents thinking it is of significance to not have clear boundaries between work-life and private life. This integration between work and private life is in line with what Roy (2016) proposes as a way of handling struggles within work-life balance. At first sight, this integration could be argued to be in line with what Sarker et al. (2012, p. 148) describe as "live to work." Nevertheless, when analysing the empirical material further, there were nuances of other aspects that contradicted this view which will be discussed in an upcoming paragraph. Firstly, however, the analysis will argue that there were findings in the empirical material that could be interpreted as struggles in work-life balance for the real estate agents. These struggles concern the answers that were given to us in the interviews, when the respondents were asked about their free time.

Even if almost all of the real estate agents said that their Saturdays were "holy" and that they did not work at all during these days, when pressed on the matter it seemed to be quite the opposite many times. Real estate agent D says: *"Saturday is my day off. I try to take time off but it is still a tendency that people are calling me. I always take the phone (pause) so I always answer."* This experience is also shown in the answer by Real estate agent E:

"I am available to some degree. But I try to be unavailable, it is not that I constantly sit and check the phone. But I am not entirely underground, so if it is something I will of course answer. So I will put it this way: I am not

unavailable but I do not take any action to make calls or act in my profession. But if someone is calling me, they would probably reach me.”

The quotations above illustrate how there is always a channel for others to reach the real estate agents. This could be understood as the real estate agents constantly being on standby for their customers. The result could be said to be passive work since they are constantly available for customers contacting them, but do not however always reach out to customers actively themselves.

Another aspect is described by Real estate agent J when he explains how he tries not to answer calls on Saturdays:

"Saturdays are very holy to me. Well, I am available but I do not count it as work most of the time. There is always someone who tries to contact me on Saturdays, then I could choose not to answer but okay I guess I work on Saturdays too. Because now I realized that I always respond to emails. I try to not answer the phone on Saturdays. But it depends on the situation."

Furthermore, the real estate agents express that they have to possess self-discipline in order to take time off, which refers to the quote by Real estate agent F: *"(Silence). I mean, it is difficult to have a holiday or take time off when you can always check your emails, it requires a lot of self-discipline to not check them then."*

The reasoning above shows that the real estate agents try to take time off, try to be unreachable and unavailable, and need to possess self-discipline in order to have free time. Thus, it could be interpreted as requiring an effort from the real estate agents to take these actions described in the previous sentence, since they express it challenging to not be available for work. Hence, these challenges could be argued to have implications for a struggle within the real estate agents' work-life balance, which will be further analysed in the upcoming paragraph.

4.1.3 Struggles of being it all

From the interviews, the findings suggested that integration often led to perceived role conflicts, since it was not always desirable to work at the expense of the private domain. This included struggles regarding health, relations, and even self-sacrifices sometimes. These struggles could be argued to have implications for work-life balance since the term is defined in our thesis as a subjective perception of minimal role-conflict between the work domain and the non-work domain. The struggles that will be described below could be referred to two different types of conflicts that are given by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), namely time-based conflicts, and behaviour-based conflicts. Time-based conflicts were discussed in the literature review as perceived limited time being an obstacle for the ability to meet demands from different roles. Behaviour-based conflict, on the other hand, occurs when different roles and expectations demand various actions from the individual, which he or she needs to adjust to in order to avoid a perceived conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Real estate agent I puts forward how he struggles with his private life due to experienced limited time:

"The hardest thing is when you have made private plans, you are going to a party or some wedding, and then something happens at work. Even though you have planned something for several months in advance, and then you have to work instead that particular week. So that is probably the hardest thing, when you unexpectedly have to change your private plans. I think it is really sad when you have decided that you are going to meet someone, and then need to cancel it because of work. That is really a shame."

Real estate agent C further explains how limited time has led to struggles for his private life, where he had to end a long-distance relationship with his partner in order to fulfil the obligations that the profession requires. Long working hours and irregular shifts made it difficult for him to meet demands in the private life.

Another struggle that was described could be suggested to be characterized as a behaviour-based conflict, where the different roles are not perceived to be aligned. Real estate agent E explains one situation where expectations of being a father and a real estate agent were not consistent:

"My son was at the hospital two weeks ago and we were at the emergency room, and then a client called after access to his apartment and sees that he has not received his money on the account. And so you stand there in the hospital, you want to just throw the work away and focus on your private life, but at the same time, you are available."

Real estate agent A confirms this picture of the struggle to meet the expectations of both being a father and a real estate agent:

"You have just got home from work and the first thing I do is to answer the phone with my children standing and drawing my leg. I really cannot stand for it, because it is not how I want to live my life."

A similar experience was shared by Real estate agent J who points towards the struggle of both being an uncle and a real estate agent:

"One example is when I have my niece, because I have her sometimes on weekdays and pick her up from pre-school. Then it is hard for me to tell my clients that I cannot answer, because I have no legitimate reason to say I am busy since it is not my daughter. Then there is a war in my head."

The section above has aimed to show that the real estate agents perceive struggles, since they experience what we have interpreted as time-based and behaviour-based role conflicts between the work life and the private life. Some of the real estate agents elaborate further on these struggles and put forward the implications these have for their dissatisfaction with their work-life balance. Real estate agent D describes how he is not content with his situation at the moment: *"At the moment, I think that I work too much, and I have other things that I rather do in my spare time which I do not really have time for."* Also Real estate agent C says:

"I often notice that I may not do what I feel like doing, due to limited time: working out, having a coffee with friends and go shopping and stuff. Then it just becomes work, work, and work."

As Real estate agent A reveals regarding his perceived balance between the work and the private life: *“That balance does not exist.”* In support of Real estate agent A’s argumentation, Real estate agent G expresses: *“Too much work, too little spare time. That is for sure.”*

The statements above portray how the real estate agents perceive dissatisfaction with their work-life balance, where they experience a lack of balance due to their work. Furthermore, several of the respondents have been operating within the real estate industry for many years and express that they have never experienced a balance. These findings raise the question of why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed? All of the real estate agents express a desire to have more time for the private life, and the question becomes even more interesting since they describe that they themselves could change their work premises. Real estate agent G exemplifies this and reveals *“I think it is mostly a matter of attitude, and you as a real estate agent can impact on the situation pretty much.”* So why does this possibility to control the work not lead to a more content situation regarding their work-life balance? Previous research in the field of work-life balance has shown how individuals can achieve work-life balance through separation, integration and support (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2000; Sarker et al., 2012; Roy, 2016). However, our empirical material has indicated that the real estate agents rather let their imbalance continue. Thereby, we find it of great interest to investigate why this is the case. In the following, a few reasons that became evident from the interviews are highlighted as responses to our second research question: *Why do the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed?*

4.2 Alternative view on work-life balance

Instead of integrating, separating or searching for support in order to obtain balance as suggested in the literature, our findings illustrate how the real estate agent rather let their lack of work-life balance proceed. This becomes even more interesting due to the real estate agents’ expressed dissatisfaction with their imbalance. This section in the analysis, therefore, aims to answer our second research question that is outlined above. This will be made through analysing how the real estate agents view themselves. When analysing the material, it became salient that the real estate agents use what could be argued to be various justifications, in order to legitimize their lack of work-life balance. These justifications seem to be permeated by the concept of identity work. We believe that by interpreting the identity work of the real estate agents, we can make sense of why they let their lack of work-life balance proceed. By investigating how the real estate agents perceive themselves, our aim is to enhance a deeper understanding of the choices they make. To clarify the upcoming section, a brief overview of

the term identity will be given which will provide a lens for analysis. In the analysis, the assumption has been made that identity is an ongoing process that is constructed in social interactions. Identity includes one's self-view and is a response to the question of "who am I". Thus, this raises wonderings of "how should I act" (Alvesson, 2004). The answers to these outlined questions affect the thoughts, feelings, and values of an individual. Furthermore, it is suggested in the identity literature, that one's identity work is formed through "social groups and how other relates to us is crucial for how we see ourselves" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 188).

This second part of the analysis seeks to make sense of why the real estate agents let their lack of balance proceed, by discussing their self-view in terms of egoism, altruism, importance and blindness. Metaphors based on egoism, altruism, importance and blindness will be used throughout the analysis to create a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon discussed and facilitate for the understanding of the reader. However, firstly there will be a presentation of the identity construction based on the uncertain environment the real estate agents operate in.

4.2.1 I am a real estate agent

This paragraph seeks to give the reader a pre-understanding of the real estate agents' identity constructions. This is done with the ambition to facilitate for a deeper comprehension of the upcoming analysis where other identity positions are discussed.

When conducting the interviews, it could be argued that there were implications of the respondents viewing themselves in terms of their profession. This suggests that being a real estate agent is an important part of their identity work. The evidence of this self-view can be clearly seen in the statement by Real estate agent B: *"The profession of being a real estate agent has a great importance in my life, it is a part of who I am and of my personality. It is my identity."* In support, Real estate agent E describes how he views himself: *"I always am the real estate agent."* This self-view is confirmed by Real estate agent C who, when asked a question that had nothing to do with his profession, answered: *"I feel like I have answered on everything I can as a real estate agent."* This implies that Real estate agent C views himself primarily as a real estate agent even when this was of less relevance in the conversation we had at the moment. Furthermore, Real estate agent A tells us about a previous profession which he could not identify with, but that the new occupation as a real estate agent has become an important part of his identity. The section has portrayed that the respondents view themselves as real estate agents. This has been shown in the quotations where the respondents

have explained that being a real estate agent is a vital part of who they are and something they identify with. In this sense, it can be interpreted that viewing oneself as a real estate agent is meaningful for their identity constructions.

During the conversations with the real estate agents, it became evident that they operate in an uncertain and changing environment, with insecure salaries, unstable business conditions and fickle preferences from their customers. An unsafe situation, as the one that real estate agents face, is explained by Alvesson (2004) to trigger identity work. Based on this reasoning, the identity construction can be seen as vital for real estate agents. Therefore, to reconnect to the title of this paragraph, it can be interpreted as the respondents' answers to the question of "who am I" in terms of *I am a real estate agent*. These findings could be said to create a foundation for the reader in order to understand the importance of identity work for the real estate agents. Expressed in other words, this section outlines the point of departure in order to understand that the identity work of being a real estate agent is of great significance. The implications of the real estate agents' identity constructions will be further analysed from different perspectives in the upcoming paragraphs, with the purpose to comprehend why they let their perceived imbalance proceed.

4.2.2 Aspirations of becoming the chosen one

From the interviews, it appeared that a common assumption within the real estate industry was that it is of significance to be successful as a real estate agent. The general findings in the empirical material showed that by being chosen you felt confirmed as a person and were distinguished from other real estate agents. During the conversation regarding success, Real estate agent A explains the importance of being chosen by the customers: *"It is also very much more important to be chosen, to become their real estate agent (...). It is much more about being chosen as a person."* A parallel argument is put forward by Real estate agent F who tells us about success:

"To constantly bring in new business - that is what drives me. When someone hires me, I always get a receipt (...). So this is still a driving force, to get that confirmation through the job."

Also Real estate agent H agrees and supports the importance of being chosen:

"You become very happy when you are chosen, of course that is a direct confirmation that you are good at what you do. It is like a kick, that someone tells you they want to hire you - that makes you very happy (...). If you are not chosen, you become super sad. Sometimes you take it extremely personal."

These quotations could be argued to show how success lies in confirmation from the customers regarding you as a person. This suggests that being the chosen one is appealing for the identity of the real estate agents, which will be discussed further in a paragraph below.

Another aspect of aspiring to become the chosen one concerned the importance of being distinguished from others. The evidence of the importance can be clearly seen in the statement made by Real estate agent G who has worked in the business for many years: *"When I am chosen, it is still an adrenaline rush; it is a real ego-boost to get chosen when you have been in competition with four or five other real estate agents."* In a similar manner, Real estate agent J explains what success is for him:

"When you get recommendations I feel that I have been successful (...). Because it happens that someone tells you that they think that another real estate agent was better. Of course it is a disappointment and you wonder if you could have done something differently. Why did they not choose me? Did they not like me? So you begin to examine yourself. All of my confirmation actually originates from being chosen. My confirmation is when someone says that we choose you, you may sell my apartment! Then I feel wow, what a blast! This is what I am working for."

The reasoning above could be argued to demonstrate that success is constructed as being the chosen one. The point of departure for being the chosen one is expressed by Real estate agent H: *"Everybody wants to be with a winner. If I would sell my resident, I would want to hire someone who is good and successful."* This quotation implies that, in order to be the chosen one you need to be a winner. According to the respondents, a winner and a successful real estate agent was defined in terms of closing many deals and selling a huge amount of objects. When asked about how to become this winner and to be successful Real estate agent C claims:

"A successful real estate agent is that everything is on top, to always be on top and always be able to get new customers to sell to, and to sell as many objects as possible after all. You cannot sit and wait for someone to come and want to sell something, you have to constantly be on the move."

To be the chosen one, the real estate agent has to become a winner which means closing deals and selling many objects. The overall answer that summed up how to become this winner was expressed by the real estate agents to be that they needed to constantly be available and work a large amount of hours.

The paragraph has aimed to show how success is constructed for the real estate agents. The construction can be argued to be created in the social interactions within the industry since all real estate agents interviewed pointed in the same direction of what they aspire to become. To put it differently, we mean that the construction of success seemed to be a generally accepted definition within the agencies, where the majority of the real estate agents thought of success in similar terms. This implies that the social interactions are a co-creator of what is desirable for the real estate agents' identities. Expressed in other words, it can be understood as the real estate agents having an aspirational identity to become the chosen one. By this, we refer to that the real estate agents have an aspiration, and are striving towards becoming the one the customers choose. Nonetheless, to become the chosen one is not without struggles. Rather it was implied that this meant sacrifices for the real estate agents. By this, we refer to how the previous analysis has demonstrated that the real estate agents neglect their private life such as family, friends, exercising and other interests to the priority of their work. To reconnect to our second research question, why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed, the section above has outlined that one possible explanation could be through the justification of becoming the chosen one. In this regard, it seems the real estate agents let their imbalance proceed by partly sacrificing their private life to become the chosen one, and thereby reinforce the identity of being successful. In other words, work-life balance struggles are justified due to the real estate agents' aspirations of becoming the chosen one, which is believed to be achieved through constant availability and a significant amount of working hours.

The findings of this section could be argued to spring from egoistic reasons, since the purpose for the real estate agents of becoming the chosen one, is for their own benefit. This self-interest was also shown in the conversation with the real estate agents regarding their desire to

have a career, where they stated that it was important to become someone. However, the empirical material has also shown other aspects of the real estate agents identity work which could not be explained by this egoistic view. This implies that the interpretation above is not enough. Therefore, in the following paragraph another interpretation is presented where identity work is portrayed as springing from altruistic needs. Thus, there are other nuances of the identity work of real estate agents that can help enhance our understanding for why they let their lack of work-life balance proceed.

4.2.3 The Good Samaritan

In the interviews, it also became salient that the real estate agents seem to view themselves as helpful, generous, kind to others and unselfish. This was described in terms of helping and support customers and taking the time to solve the customers' problems on the expense of the real estate agents' private lives. These key features could, therefore, be interpreted as the identity construction of the real estate agents deriving from altruistic thoughts. This means that the real estate agents prioritize others without requiring any services in return. These nuances were seen in the interviews and showed characteristics that could be argued to be similar to *the Good Samaritan*. The Good Samaritan was first mentioned in a religious context and described as someone who helped others in need in an unselfish and compassionate way. He was portrayed as a dedicated man who sacrificed his life for helping others. In the following, quotations where the real estate agents describe themselves as what could be suggested to be similar to the definition of the Good Samaritan will be discussed.

Real estate agent D explains that he is always available since he is kind and wants to support his customers. He gives the following example:

"Generally there are two kinds of sellers. It is the hunter and the farmer. The hunter goes out and makes quick profits and then you loose the customer. The farmer cultivates contacts that come back year after year. And I aim to become a farmer. I want the clients who come to me to be happy. (...) I have one weakness in life and that is that I am too kind, I am always there for others."

A parallel argument is put forward by Real estate agent I who describes that he is a helpful person and wants to help the customers by stressing that:

“For me it is all about service and helping people, to sell your home can be a very big decision and a huge deal for many. Therefore, you have to be focused on helping the customers.”

Likewise, Real estate agent B says that a driving force is that you always want to help others and ensure that everybody is happy. Real estate agent G agrees and highlights that: *“It is an embedded part of who you are, that you want to be all things to all people.”* These extracts from the interviews show tendencies of what could be understood as altruism. To clarify, the real estate agents seem to believe that they possess goodness and view themselves as kind and helpful.

Another aspect that could be interpreted as showing how the real estate agents perceive themselves as helpful is the one concerning unselfishness. During the conversation with the real estate agents, nuances were seen that could be argued to show that they thought of themselves as unselfish. As illustrated earlier in the analysis, this was shown in how they sacrificed their private lives, for example, time with family, friends, and exercising for the customers' sake. The unselfishness and self-sacrificing are also portrayed in the conversation with Real estate agent J:

"Above all, it is a fact that my clients have hired me to do a good job and then it requires me to be available. So then I think that it is for their sake. But it certainly is a pressure. If it is of crucial importance for my customer, I will always answer the call. If it only concerns me, I do not always answer and then I take the phone call the day after."

This quotation shows that Real estate agent J experiences an obligation to be there for the sake of the customers, even though this entails a feeling of pressure. This implies that there is a struggle for Real estate agent J that comes with his desire to be available. A similar statement is made by Real estate agent C who explains that he is available even though he has other private obligations: *“I notice that the customers appreciate that I am available. As soon as you notice that they appreciate this availability, you want to continue to be kind and helpful to them.”*

This quotation suggests how Real estate agent C views himself as kind and helpful. He explains that he is kind and helpful since he notices that the customers appreciate it when he is available, which can be interpreted as an unselfish action springing from altruistic thoughts. By receiving confirmation for his good deeds, he is encouraged to continue strengthening these aspects of himself. Real estate agent F further elaborates on this unselfishness by claiming that he is available since he wants to support and help the customers:

"I think I can be pretty good at making my clients trust me, that I can help them and be there for them. If someone is waiting to hear from me, then of course, I want to reach out to them."

This reasoning also strengthens the notion of these justifications being a matter of identity work. By this, we want to refer to that the real estate agents relate to themselves as helpful, kind and unselfish individuals (see definition of identity in Alvesson, 2004). As mentioned in the introduction to this section, this self-view could also be argued to derive from altruistic needs where the real estate agents make sacrifices for their customers' sake. It is suggested in the identity literature, that one's identity work is formed through "social groups and how other relates to us is crucial for how we see ourselves" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 188). Through the quotations above it became evident that the customers have expectations of the real estate agents to be available and to help. By being nice and helpful towards their customers, the real estate agents are then fulfilling the expectations of the customers as well as their own altruistic needs. This suggests that the identity of being nice and helpful is being reproduced in relation to others (Alvesson, 2004). Thus, the identity of being kind and helping works as another justification for why the real estate agents let their imbalance proceed, where the private life is sacrificed for the work life in order to make customers satisfied. By this, we refer to that the real estate agents perceive themselves as kind and helpful and that this self-view causes a behaviour of helping customers, to the sacrifice of private life, in order to create a coherent identity.

While this paragraph has aimed to show an altruistic aspect of the identity work of real estate agents, yet another dimension was found when analysing the empirical material. This implies that the altruistic perspective is not enough in the comprehension of the interviews. Instead, aspects were shown that could be argued to derive from the need for individuals to construct an identity of being important. In contrary to the previous dimensions, egoism and altruism,

importance refers to that the real estate agents believe that they serve a higher purpose in other people's lives.

4.2.4 Messiah

From the descriptions given by the respondents of the meaning of being a real estate agent, there were signs that could be interpreted as viewing themselves as important in other people's lives. These signs were expressed in terms of creating faith and trust for their customers. Furthermore, it seems like the real estate agents viewed themselves as individuals who relieve the customers from anxieties and have a supportive function in the biggest decisions in their lives. By looking closer at our empirical material it revealed nuances of real estate agents describing themselves in terms that were somewhat similar to the definition of *Messiah*. Messiah is a character that was mentioned for the first time in a religious context. He is defined as a person whose purpose was to create happiness and prosperity. The definition implies that Messiah was someone who was important and created faith in other people's lives. Real estate agent B explains the importance of having a meaning for others:

"If we are looking at the depression scale, the emptiness and lack of meaning are big reasons for this [depression]. So I think that work is a joy when you realize that you fill a meaning for others."

Real estate agent J further tells us about how important he is for the customers by explaining the significance of creating faith in the customers' lives: *"These people think it is very important to sell and feel 'okay I can trust you'. It is mostly a commission of trust that you get, something more than just selling things [objects] expensive."*

This statement suggests that creating faith and trust are aspects that serve a higher purpose than just selling objects, and contributes to the importance of being a real estate agent.

Another dimension of this importance regards being there as a key-person in life-changing situations for the customers. The evidence of what could be understood as that the real estate agents view themselves as a key-person for others, is outlined in the following quotation: *"I am important for the customers. They are in the process of selling an apartment; it is a big part of their lives, with important decisions and so on!"* (Real estate agent D)

This statement is also confirmed by Real estate agent G who explains that he is of significance for other people in big decisions: *“For me, the real estate agent profession is about helping customers in the biggest deal of their lives.”* In support, Real estate agent I highlights that he is important in the process for the customers when selling or buying an apartment by saying:

“It [selling your home] is so huge and I think it is quite valuable when I as a real estate agent actually contact the customers, keep them updated and do not think ‘whatever, I can call them tomorrow’. Instead I think about how the person who is sitting and waiting for my call feels. Although it may seem like a small thing from the outside, it is perhaps a big deal for someone who is in the process of buying or selling.”

The citations above have aimed to show that the real estate agents view themselves as important for other people, by explaining that they have a key-role in large decisions in the customers’ lives. By being part of these life-changing situations, the possibility to always be available becomes legitimized since the real estate agents believe that they serve a higher purpose for the customers.

Real estate agent F gives another example of a different situation where he is important for customers and claims: *“You are someone who steps in and offers relief or who is there as support in situations such as deaths and divorces.”* The evidence of this self-view can furthermore be argued to be seen in the statement by Real estate agent B, who describes who he is:

“In this profession you always get a lot of projections of feelings, you meet people who are going to move in together out of love, move apart because of divorce or death, and it becomes so emotional and such an important deal in life. I have been a sounding board, mentor, psychologist, photographer, mediator, and communicator (...). So today, you are of course a key role and a provider of safety.”

These quotations could be argued to show another aspect of this higher purpose, namely being there as support and relieve the customers from anxiety that follows from strenuous situations. Hence, it could be said that the real estate agents view themselves as crucial in other people’s lives by being there and support the process where money and overwhelming feelings are

often involved. This description of importance shows several similar characteristics with Messiah, for example guiding and creating faith in people's lives.

However, the construction of being important also causes sacrifices for the real estate agents. This has been outlined in an earlier paragraph in the analysis, *Struggles of being it all*, where the real estate agents sometimes have to cancel plans with family and friends for the sake of their customers. For example, one real estate agent described how he had to sacrifice his long-distance relationship with his partner due to the importance of always being available for the customers (Real estate agent C). Another sacrifice was also clearly exemplified by Real estate agent H:

“I was standing at my friends’ wedding in the middle of the day when the sun was shining, drinking champagne. Then my phone is calling 16 times from the same number, and it turns out to be a customer who has lost his key to the apartment (...). Unfortunately, this leads to that I have to leave the wedding for a while and solve the situation.”

These statements illustrate how their view of being important for the customers, entails sacrifices in the private lives of the real estate agents. The metaphor of Messiah can facilitate for us to make sense of the real estate agents' self-views. Expressed in other words, Messiah was a person who sacrificed his life for the good. Although this is an extreme comparison, there are tendencies of this sacrifice in our empirical material. By this, we mean that the real estate agents view themselves so important for the customers, that they sacrifice time with family, friends, exercising and other interests. This self-view of being important, in other words, their identity (see Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016), serves as one justification for why they let their lack of work-life balance proceed. Expressed differently, they justify working long hours and irregular shifts due to their view of being of crucial importance for their customers. By letting this lack of work-life balance proceed, it could be argued that an ultimate sacrifice is made by the real estate agents since they give up their balance for the sake of the customers. This becomes even more striking since they all expressed a wish to achieve work-life balance.

While providing several different dimensions that have helped to understand the nuances of the findings, there was still one last aspect in the empirical material that could not be explained by the previous metaphors. The following paragraph aims to demonstrate a final perspective that can facilitate for answering our second research question. In contrary to

previous paragraphs that have sought to present egoism, altruism, and importance, this last section highlights how blindness can work as a basis for yet another justification for why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed. This final dimension differs from the other justifications by presenting a more future-oriented interpretation. It was developed as an attempt to explain the nuances in the empirical material that could not be explained by the other justifications mentioned.

4.2.5 Spellbound by a dream of paradise

Several of the real estate agents put forward that they were not satisfied at the moment with who they are, due to their lack of work-life balance. This was seen in how the majority of them expressed a wish to become better partners, parents, relatives, and friends. At the same time, it seems like the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance go on due to hopes for a better future. During the interviews several real estate agents expressed what could be perceived as focusing on their future, without reflecting on their present situation to the same degree when talking about what could be improved. This could be argued to suggest that the real estate agent wear blinders, where they do not see their current situation clearly. When describing how to reach a balance in life, they all painted a picture of a brighter future, which was explained in terms that could be suggested to be similar to the one of *paradise*. Paradise is defined in religious terms as a place of peace, harmony and happiness which is free from diseases and death. It is seen as springing from a human's deepest dreams and desires, and is perceived as the final destination in order to reach a state of happiness and joy. The implications of dissatisfaction of who they are can be clearly seen in the statement by Real estate agent A:

"You have just got home from work and the first thing I do is to answer the phone with my children standing and drawing my leg. I really cannot stand for it, because it is not how I want to live my life."

The reasoning made by Real estate agent A seems to suggest that his private life has to stand aside for his work, since he chooses to answer work-related calls when spending time with his children. On a more theoretical level, it may be interpreted as the real estate agent perceiving an identity struggle. By this, we mean that the identity of being a real estate agent hinders him from being the father he wants to be. This can be understood as that the desired identity of the real estate agent is on hold, since he expresses dissatisfaction with who he is at the moment. This could be argued to imply that he has an aspiration of becoming someone else.

The identity struggle described above could be argued to be in line with what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016, p. 273) suggest in their book *Managerial Lives*, namely “Handling identity friction is to cultivate hopes of a better future.” The authors emphasize that hopes for a better future can facilitate for individuals to endure present struggles. While their book considers identity struggles for managers, this reasoning could help underline why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed. During the conversations with the real estate agents it became salient that several of them did not take any action for achieving a balance at the moment, rather they let the imbalance proceed. This was seen in the statement by Real estate agent A who expresses a desire to change now, but is not actively taking actions to achieve this change at the moment: *“I evaluate everything each week. What should I become when I grow up? (laughter).”*

This statement suggests that the real estate agent instead expressed a more future-oriented approach, by questioning what he wants to become when he “grows up.” The hopes for a better future is further illustrated when Real estate agent C explains that he had a plan of working hard a couple of years and then have the opportunity to ease off. Likewise, Real estate agent G supports this view and says he has a hope for a better balance when starting a family. Nevertheless, Real estate agent A, who already has children is still struggling with the balance and have an aspiration of doing something about this in the future: *“I handle the imbalance, or well, I should say that I have plans to handle it.”* Real estate agent H puts his faith into the technological development when talking about how to become more balanced:

“I have a hope that it will become better. For example, we have got new systems now; I think that this will release a large amount of time. We have some functions with the bidding and other things that will get better than they are today, and all those things will release time which will not be at the expense of the customers.”

This is further exemplified in a statement by Real estate agent D, who shows a hope for the future when telling us: *“I shovel the work away and think that it eventually will get better. It will probably become better.”*

The argumentation outlined above could be suggested to illustrate that the real estate agents are not satisfied with who they are at the moment, but that they hope that their situation will become better. By this, we want to highlight that the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed since they put faith into a brighter future. What has been described above

could also be seen as identity work for the real estate agents. In other words expressed, the real estate agents shape their future “I” by explaining who they want to be and to become. As mentioned previously in the analysis, the real estate agents described that they wanted to become better parents and friends. This was also shown in the conversation with Real estate agent E who explains his aspirations of being able to be with his son in the future: *"Maybe I can structure my object viewings on Sundays, so I can go and watch my son's game and become a good soccer dad."* Expressed differently, the real estate agents are striving for another identity construction and are living on the hope for a better future “I”. This can be interpreted as a justification for why they let their lack of work-life balance proceed.

The empirical findings that have been outlined above could be argued to show a somewhat paradoxical picture of the phenomenon examined. This is since the real estate agents, on the one hand, could be argued to be well aware of their situation and express dissatisfaction with their balance. On the other hand, it seems like they are blinded by future hopes, which distracts them from taking actions in their current situation. This is further shown in the conversation with Real estate agent J, who throughout the interview expresses a discontent with his work-life balance. However, after the interview he displays tendencies of surprise regarding his current lack of balance:

"I get an eye-opener when you ask me these questions. You realize that, after all, you actually work quite a lot (...). So then you have to think about who am I and why am I doing this. So now I am completely blank." (Real estate agent J)

The quotation could be argued to portray how Real estate agent J, even though reflecting on his present imbalanced situation, at the same time is blinded from taking action at the moment. This blindness could be interpreted as being *spellbound by a dream of paradise*. The metaphor *spellbound by a dream of paradise* can enable for us to understand the empirical material for why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed. To put it differently, we mean that the real estate agents view their present situation as temporary, with a dream of a more balanced future. Expressed more in detail, it can be interpreted as a *spellbound* where the real estate agents are blinded by a hope for a better future which distracts them from striving towards a more satisfying current work-life balance. It seems like they all have an aspiration of becoming someone else in the future, where a better balance is achieved. This desire is described in terms that are similar to the one of paradise, such as a

future with reduced struggles where they can live a balanced life. Furthermore, this can also be interpreted as an aspiration to become the parents and friends they wish to be. The identity work of the real estate agents could be seen as having great importance for the acceptance of a lack of balance. Through their future and aspirational identity, they are able to cope with their current imbalanced situation. To conclude, one could resemble this situation with a Cinderella story, where a miserable life is rewarded with a fairy-tale end. Speaking in more specific terms, the lack of balance that the real estate agents perceive shows similarities with the one of Cinderella, where she always had to work and serve her evil stepmother and stepsisters. At the end, however, the hope of a ball at the castle makes her blinded from her struggles in life. Thus, we believe that the real estate agents let their imbalance proceed due to being spellbound by a dream of paradise.

5. Discussion

This chapter aims to discuss our two research questions based on the findings from the analysis above. We will divide the discussion into two sections, where each part is guided by our research questions. Initially, we will start to discuss our first research question. This reasoning will serve as a foundation for the second research question, where we will put forward our contribution to the field of work-life balance.

How do real estate agents perceive their work-life balance in practice due to the possibility of being available 24/7?

The findings from the analysis showed how the perceptions of the premises of work have changed within the real estate agent business, due to changes in the use of technology. The development in technology has increased the real estate agents' availability which has blurred out the lines between working life and private life. This has led to both time-based and behaviour-based conflicts, resulting in sacrifices from the real estate agents when it comes to their health, relationships and the self. The result from the analysis portrayed how the real estate agents perceived a lack of work-life balance, where struggles were present. As mentioned earlier, traditional research has suggested different ways of achieving work-life balance. We have discussed how individuals can integrate or separate the work domain and the private life with the purpose to reach a balance (Guest, 2002, Sarker et al., 2012; Nam, 2013; Barber et al., 2016; Roy, 2016). Furthermore, the literature review has also shown that support can enable for achieving work-life balance (Ashforth et al., 2000; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). However, from our analysis, there were findings that did not align with the traditional literature. Even though, the real estate agents' expressed that their profession was like a lifestyle, which has been argued to be in line with the integration approach, the respondents did not perceive a work-life balance. To remind the reader, the integration approach means that individuals do not separate work and private life at all, and rather "live to work" (Sarker et. al, 2012, p.149). This could be argued to be the case since the real estate agents sacrificed their private life for work in many situations and did not have clear boundaries between the two domains. Instead, from the empirical material it could be understood as that a lack of balance was present in the lives of the real estate agents, and it rather seemed like they let an imbalance proceed even though they expressed that they were not satisfied with this. To clarify, the analysis showed how the real estate agents expressed a wish for more time for private activities and a better balance. This implies that the traditional work-life balance research is insufficient since it aims to explain how to achieve work-life

balance, but not why a lack of balance is accepted. This insufficiency created a curiosity for us to explore this phenomenon further, which urged for the creation of the second research question.

Why do the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed?

To answer our second research question, the analysis of the alternative view could be argued to show why the real estate agents let their lack of work-life balance proceed through various justifications as a part of their identity work. These justifications seem to have derived from different reasons namely the ones of egoism, altruism, importance and blindness. Four different justifications were developed based on these reasons since fewer interpretations were not enough in the understanding of our empirical material. By this, we refer to that the empirical material could be interpreted as the real estate agents showing strong aspirations of becoming chosen due to egoistic needs, and viewed themselves as kind and helpful based on altruistic thoughts. Furthermore, it could be argued that they related to themselves as important in other people's lives and shaped a future better "I" while blinded by paradise. In concrete terms, this could imply that the real estate agents legitimize their imbalance due to various identity constructions. Expressed differently, this suggests that the real estate agents let the imbalance proceed by believing that they are doing good and serving a higher purpose. This could be likened to that the real estate agents prioritize their identity construction over their balance, which suggests a theorization of the result of our findings. At the same time, however, it could also be understood as that the respondents accepted the imbalance since they viewed their present situation as temporary and were spellbound by dreams of a better future. This implies a paradox in the empirical material, where the real estate agents prioritize their identity construction while at the same time viewing this priority as temporary. To put it differently, one could wonder how the real estate agents will be able to achieve a future balance if they justify, legitimize, and adapt to their current situation. A theory that could help understand this paradox is the one of anthropological theory where sacrifices are emphasized (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, p.160-161). According to the authors, the point with this ritual is that the one, who sacrifices him or herself, will be rewarded in the future. In other words, we believe that the real estate agents sacrifice their present balance due to a desire of achieving balance in the future. This implies a way of "handling" the lack of balance through constructing a view of this being a temporary solution.

The findings from our empirical material can be further theorized. As mentioned earlier in the discussion, it is emphasized in traditional research that individuals can achieve work-life balance through separation, integration and support (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2000; Guest, 2002, Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; Nam, 2014; Roy, 2016). This implies that our contribution is an extension of the existing theory in that aspect that it outlines an alternative view of work-life balance, namely accepting imbalance. We have named this contribution *imbalance justification*.

In research conducted by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016), they investigated in how managers used identity construction as a way of coping with the demands of responding to organizational needs versus being authentic. In order to handle these struggles, "The individual is forced to engage in intensive identity work to maintain, repair, reinforce or revise the self-view in the light of what is, for them, an unfavourable social situation." (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 255) While their research is performed in a managerial context and first and foremost regards identity work, tendencies could be argued to be present that shows similar characteristics with imbalance justification. These tendencies concern that the real estate agents justify their imbalance through identity construction. To clarify this reasoning, the study undertaken by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) seeks to investigate in how managers handle identity struggles. Our thesis rather seeks to show how the real estate agents handle a lack of balance in their lives *through* identity work.

Another field of research that could help position our contribution, imbalance justification, is the one of psychology. More specifically, we refer to studies of defence mechanisms. Defence mechanisms are defined as unconsciously psychological strategies, which are created in order to cope with reality and maintain a positive self-view (Freud, 1955). This analogy from the psychological domain can be used in order to highlight our contribution. This refers to that imbalance justifications could be argued to resemble a defence mechanism, where the real estate agents unconsciously cope with their lack of balance through viewing themselves as for instance good, important, helpful and unselfish. The psychological approach put forward can facilitate for the positioning of our contribution to work-life balance theory. In concrete terms, imbalance justification could work as a defence mechanism and thereby enable for the real estate agents to let their lack of balance proceed.

In the following chapter named conclusion, the term *imbalance justification* will be further discussed in a broader context.

6. Conclusion

This chapter aims to present the consequences of our result and place them in a broader context. First and foremost, we will put forward a contribution to existing theory in the field of work-life balance. Secondly practical consequences for employees, clients, managers and relatives will be discussed. The chapter will end with a presentation of new questions that have been raised throughout the research process. To remind the reader, the purpose of this study is to nuance the understanding of the field of work-life balance, with the ambition to portray an alternative view.

Theoretical contribution

To reconnect to the purpose, our study has provided the field of work-life balance with a new and alternative view. In other words expressed, traditional theory provides a somewhat simplified picture of work-life balance, which our study seeks to broaden. We have therefore introduced the concept of imbalance justification. Our theoretical contribution has aimed to enhance the understanding of why a lack of work-life balance is sometimes accepted. Furthermore, it has widened the existing theory by presenting a new direction within work-life balance research, where the basis is not how to achieve balance. Rather, our study has derived from a perspective of lack of work-life balance, and investigated in why this imbalance can proceed. Another aspect that was brought forward in the context of work-life balance was how an identity perspective could work as a lens to understand the theoretical field in a more nuanced way. By using various justifications based on identity work, a lack of work-life balance can be accepted.

The findings from our study suggest that the comprehension of work-life balance is too simplistic. This refers to that an integration approach would, according to traditional theory, mean that balance is achieved. However, when digging deeper into the phenomenon, something else occurred. This suggested that the concept of work-life balance is much more complex than emphasized earlier and that the subjective dimension of it is even more meaningful than previously believed. In other words, a perceived integration between work and private life which would imply an achieved balance does not seem to automatically lead to this balance, according to our findings. Thus, an individual's subjective perception of integrating working life and private life, does not automatically lead to work-life balance. The implications of this are that individuals could have multiple perceptions of how to achieve work-life balance, and this varies between and becomes visible in different contexts.

Practical consequences

Our study has not aimed to be of normative character, however, we believe that it can enable for practitioners to enhance their understanding of work-life balance. Possibly, our study could initiate an increased understanding of the employees' self-view. First and foremost, this is of interest for employees since it could enable for an enhanced insight into their own work-life balance (or lack of it). This insight could also improve the employees' relationship with clients, where the demands of being available could be reflected upon to a larger extent. Secondly, our study could facilitate for the clients' understanding of the employees work-life balance, which could lead to an increased respect for the boundaries of the employees. Thirdly, managers could benefit from our findings since it could nuance their understanding of their employees' situations as well as their own, especially in professions with blurred out lines between work life and private life. Finally, since the concept of work-life balance also consists of a private sphere, we find it of importance to put forward the consequences for this dimension as well. By this, we mean that our study can facilitate for the families and friends to understand the work-life balance of the employee, which thereby can reduce tensions between the two domains.

Suggestions for further research

During the research, other interesting questions were raised that could not be included in the study due to the limited time and scope of our thesis. However, we regard these questions of significance for upcoming research within the field of work-life balance.

One aspect that our material showed indications of was the exercise of control from a management perspective. Expressed differently, the respondents explained that they had a significant amount of freedom and were their own boss, but at the same time, they could perform their work anywhere and anytime. This implied that they also did work all the time during the days and even nights. This finding could be argued to resemble a research conducted by Fleming and Sturdy (2011) where it is emphasized that employees experience even more control through their freedom. We, therefore, think that it could be valuable to study freedom around control in relation to work-life balance in order to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, this suggestion for future studies could also include aspects of a culture perspective. By this, we refer to that our empirical material showed nuances of normative control where it was emphasized that constant availability was a part of the culture within the industry.

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Appendix

The structure of the interviews in English

The aim with the interviews was to facilitate for an understanding of how real estate agents perceive work-life balance. In addition, our purpose with the interviews was also to investigate how the real estate agents handle struggles within work-life balance. The interviews took the form as the one of a semi - structured, in other words, the interviews were structured into themes with an open character. The ten interviews that we have conducted have all been structured in a similar way. Yet, it should be emphasized that the sequence of the question have varied, and follow-up questions have been created and removed depending on the conversation. All the themes in the interview guide have had the intention to enhance an understanding of work-life balance and thereby enabling the authors of the thesis to respond to the research questions. The themes that guided the interviews were; Background information, The profession of being a real estate agent, Availability, The private role and work-life balance. In each theme, there is outlined a couple of questions in order to demonstrate the characteristics of the discussion that took place within the themes.

Background information

We have stated all interviews by asking if we are allowed to record. Furthermore, we inform the respondents about the possibility to be anonymous. A closer description of the study was given to those who asked specifically since we had already sent a substantive email. The purpose of this theme was to provide a background understanding of our interview respondents, real estate agents. It was perceived to be beneficial to initiate the interviews with questions of a more simple character in order to create a comforting atmosphere that allowed the interview respondents to speak more freely. During this theme we discussed questions regarding; age, marital status and professional position.

The profession of being a real estate agent

Our intention with this theme was to enhance our understanding of the context in which real estate agents operate in. It was perceived to be meritorious to understand the underlying assumption of the profession. This enabled us to understand the context in a deeper manner which was beneficial in the upcoming analysis regarding work-life balance among real estate agents. We asked the respondents to describe a normal working day and what activities the

engaged in, this were made in order to create a more comprehensive picture of the profession and the context. Questions that were discussed in this theme were for example:

- How would you describe yourself as a real estate agent
- What are the pros/cons with your work?
- What is considered as success within the real estate agent business?

Availability

In order to facilitate for a more nuanced understanding regarding work-life balance in the context of the real estate agents it was considered logical to discuss questions concerning their view of availability in their profession. This theme was relevant in order to understand the lines between work and private life and how it was affected by technological devices. Questions that were included in this theme were for example:

- How do you use technology in your work?
- How often do you answer work-related emails or phone calls outside working hours?
- How many hours do you estimate that you work per day or week?

The private role

This theme intended to create an insight in how real estate agents viewed their private role. The reason for why the private role was considered to be vital was since it enabled us to understand the balance between professional life and private life. Questions that were discussed during this theme were such as:

- What is important to you in life?
- What moments or situations in your private life makes you stressed out?

Work-life balance

This theme was discussing the relationship between the professional life and the private life. The purpose of this theme was to approach how the real estate agents perceived their balance between work and private life. Questions that we touched upon during the interviews were:

- Can you describe a situation when your work and your private life have crashed? If so, what do you do to handle a situation like that?

- What actions do you take to try to “turn off” work when you get home? (If you even try to do this) How well do you succeed with this?
- How do you perceive your balance between work and life? How do you achieve balance or handle imbalance?
- How would you describe the ideal balance between work and life for you?

Ending the interview

In the end of the interview we always asked the respondents if they missed anything in the interview or if they wish to add something. We also informed the respondent that we would love to send them our finish thesis if that was of interest.

The structure of the interviews in Swedish

Syftet med intervjuerna var att skapa en förståelse för hur mäklare upplever work-life balance. Därtill avsåg även intervjuerna att närma sig hur mäklare hanterar konflikter inom work-life balance. Intervjuerna var semi-strukturerad, det vill säga att de var strukturerad efter teman med en öppen karaktär. De tio intervjuer som vi har genomfört har varit upplagda på ett liknande sätt. Dock bör det poängteras att ordningsföljden på frågorna har varierat och att uppföljningsfrågor har tillkommit och försvunnit beroende på hur konversation med de olika respondenterna har artat sig. Samtliga teman under intervjun har haft som avsikt att skapa en förståelse för work-life balance och därmed möjliggöra för författarna av uppsatsen att svara an mot frågeställningarna. De teman som väglett intervjuerna är; Bakgrundsinformation, Mäklaryrket, Tillgänglighet, Den privata rollen samt Work-life balance.

Bakgrundsinformation

Samtliga intervjuer har inletts genom att vi har frågat om det går bra att vi spelar in intervjuer. Därtill informerade vi respondenternas om att de kunde vara anonym. En närmre beskrivning av studien gavs till de som frågade specifikt eftersom vi redan hade skrivit ett innehållsrikt informationsmail tidigare. Avsikten med detta tema var att skapa en bakgrundsförståelse av våra intervjurespondenter. Det ansågs betydelse fullt att inleda intervjun med frågor av simplare karaktär för att skapa en förtroendeingivande atmosfär som tillät intervjurespondenterna att tala mer öppet. I temat diskuterades frågor som berörde; ålder, civilstånd och professionell position.

Mäklaryrket

Syftet med detta tema var att skapa en förståelse för den kontext som mäklarna är verksamma inom. Genom att förstå underliggande antagande om professionen underlättades vår kommande analys gällande work-life balance för mäklare. För att skapa oss en tydlig bild av yrket och sammanhanget bad vi samtliga respondenter att beskriva en vanlig arbetsdag och vilka aktiviteter de ägnar sig åt. Frågor som exempelvis diskuterade i detta tema var:

- Hur skulle du beskriva dig själv som mäklare?
- Vad är fördelarna/nackdelarna med ditt jobb?
- Vad anses vara framgång inom mäklarbranschen?

Tillgänglighet

För att närma oss en mer nyanserad insikt gällande work-life balance i kontexten av mäklare ansågs det logiskt att diskutera frågor som berörde deras syn på tillgängligheten i yrket. Frågor som berördes i detta tema var exempelvis:

- Hur använder du teknik i ditt arbete?
- Hur ofta svarar du på jobbmejl/ jobbsamtal/ annat jobbrelaterat utanför arbetstid?
- Hur många timmar uppskattar du att du arbetar per dag eller vecka?

Den privata rollen

Detta tema avsåg att skapa en insikt i hur mäklarna såg på deras privata roll. Anledningen till att den privata rollen ansågs som ett förtjänstfullt tema var eftersom det bidrog till en förståelse för balansen mellan yrket och den privata sfären. I detta tema diskuterade vi frågor såsom:

- Vad är viktigt i ditt liv utöver arbetet?
- Vilka moment eller situationer gör dig stressad i ditt privatliv?

Work-life balance

Under detta tema diskuterades relationen mellan yrkeslivet och privatlivet. Avsikten med detta tema var att närma oss hur mäklare upplevde deras egna work-life balance. Frågor som vi berörde under intervjun var exempelvis:

- Kan du beskriva en situation då ditt arbete och privatliv krockar/krockat?
- Vad gör du för att försöka stänga av jobbet när du kommer hem?

– Hur upplever du balansen mellan arbete och fritid i ditt liv? Hur uppnår du balans eller hanterar obalans?

– Hur skulle du beskriva din optimala balans mellan arbete och fritid?

Avslutning

Vi avslutade alltid intervjuerna med att fråga om respondenterna saknade någonting i intervjun eller hade någon aspekt de ville tillägga. Vi informerade även om att vi gärna skickade uppsatsen när den var färdig.