The Antinomies of Autonomy: The Social Structures of Stressors in Ireland and Denmark

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Autonomy is Good. Autonomy is Important.

- **Life Conditions**
  - Freedom & Choice, Life Goals, Aging, Health Outcomes, Psychological functioning, Aging…

- **Working Conditions**
  - Job Quality *[job control, freedom]*
  - Job Strain (Karasek 1979), Lower Stress Levels, Job Satisfaction [*decision latitude, skill discretion*]
  - Learning opportunities & Organisational Innovation [*influence*] (Arundel et al. 2007, Holm et al. 2010)
  - Meaning & Dignity [agency] (Sherman 2007, Hodson 2001)

- Kohn (1976) 'self-direction' key aspects shaping impact of working conditions on workers.

- 'Autonomy could be the key to workplace happiness' (World Economic Forum, 2016).

Important ✓ Always Good?

- Psychosocial risk profile (Eurofound 2015, WHO 2010)
- Autonomy Paradox (van Echtelt et al. 2006)
- Project Time (Shih 2004)
- Time Work (Moen et al. 2013)
- Unpredictability of knowledge work (O'Carroll 2015)
- Reinforcing Gender Roles (Lott and Chung 2016)
- Stress of higher status (Schieman et al. 2006)
- Overload of requirements (Warr 2007 Vitamin Model)
- Boundarylessness (Allvin 2008)
- De-synchronised rhythms (Lund et al. 2011) and low associational control (Hvid et al. 2010)

Research Objective

- Explore dynamics of IT working lives across different national settings, to analyse the role of context in the social structuring of autonomy, and its stressors.

    – Unpacking (locating) work autonomy.
    – How dynamics of autonomy are shaped by organisational and institutional context?
    – How are these processes translated into stressors?

Methodology

- Comparative Case Study (instrumental)
  - Similar building blocks of IT work & Autonomy

- Semi-structured interviews with IT workers in Ireland (n=17) and Denmark (n=14)

- Theoretical framework linking 'capabilities' (Hobson 2014) & stressors (Wheaton 1999) via 4 R's: rules, requirements, responsibilities, and resources (Allvin 2008, Giddens 1984) of autonomous positions.

- 4 key instruments:
  1. Career & Employment History Grid
  2. PWE Survey
  3. Job-related feelings Survey (Warr et al. 2015)
  4. Discussion framed by key bargains of post-industrial work: effort (work-pay), boundaries (work-time), employment/career (pay-time) (Ó Riain, Behling, and Byrne 2016).

PI Workplace Bargains

WORK

Effort Bargain

Boundary Bargain

Emp Bargain
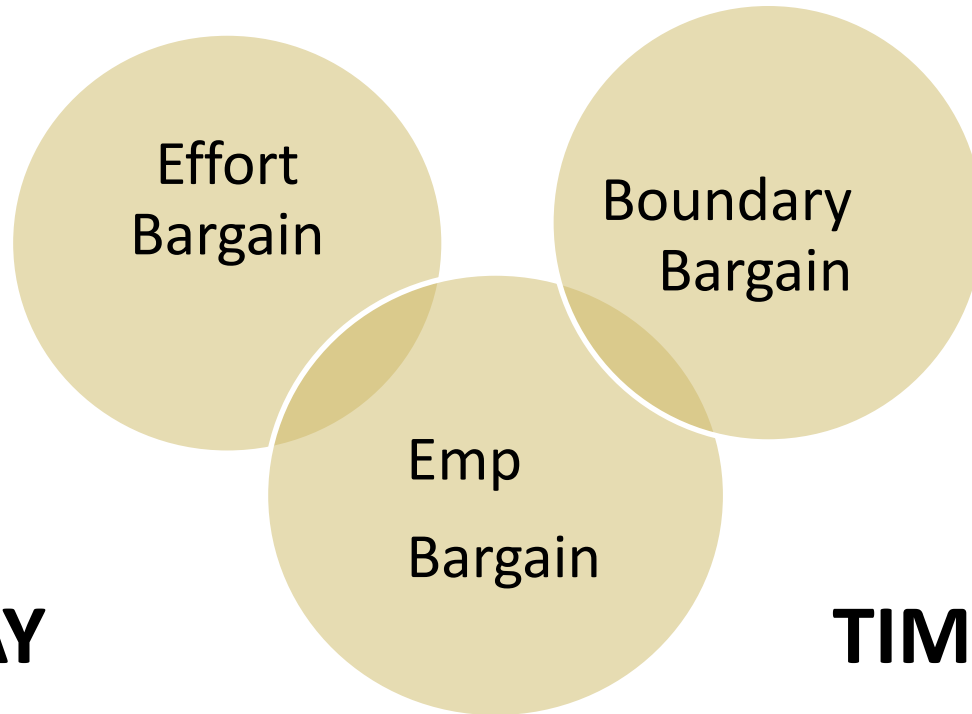
PAY

TIME

Participant Positions

Denmark	Ireland
Tech Lead	Senior Compliance Office
Chief Tech Officer/Architect (2)	Head of IT
Modernisation Specialist	Consultant (4)
Software Developer (3)	Chief Information Officer
Chief Financial Officer (CFO)	Technical Trainer
IT/System Consultant (3)	Senior Tech Writer (2)
IT Project Manager	Software Developer
Senior Developer/Advisor (2)	Project Manager (2)
	Editor
	CEO/VP (2)
	Head of Professional Services

Karasek (1979) D-C Model
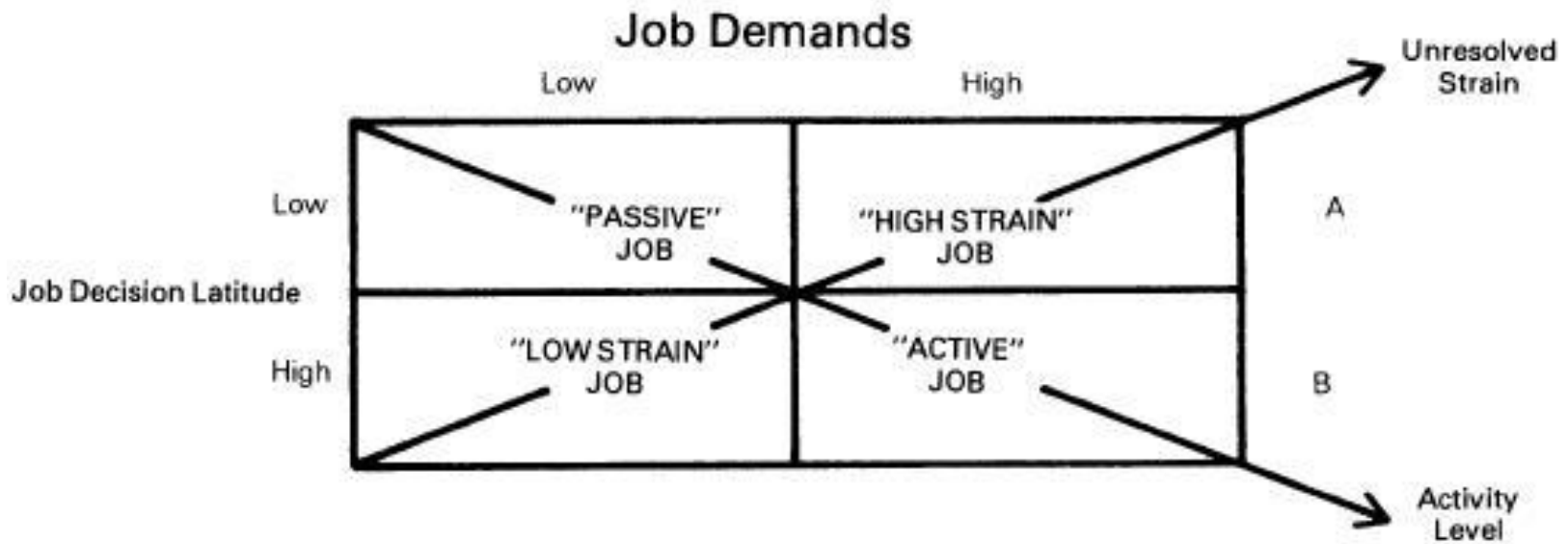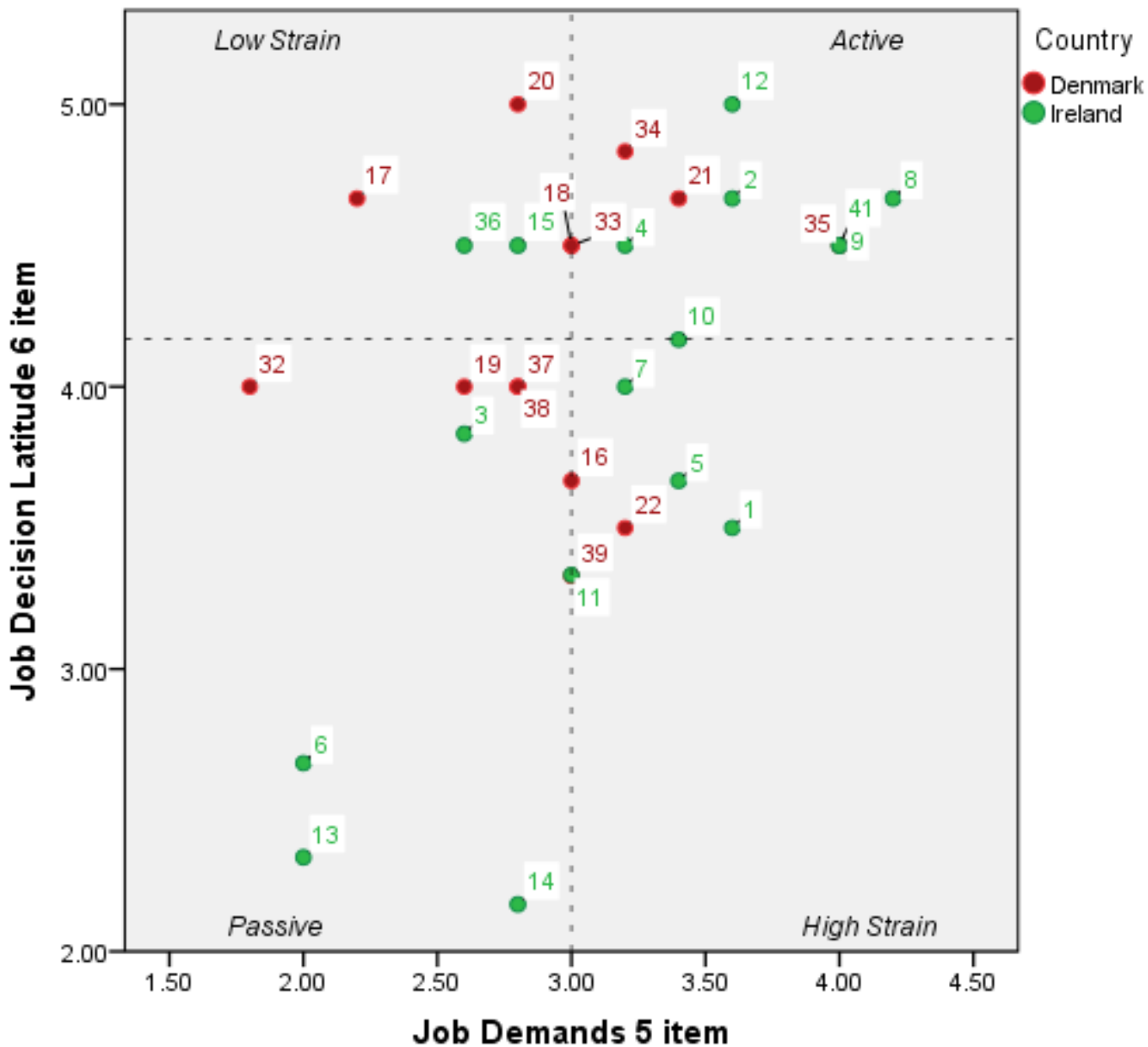

Figure 1. Job strain model.

Figure??: Participant D-C Model 6*5

Job Decision Lat & Job Demands Correlation

	Ireland	Denmark
Pearsons *r*	.66**	.11
n	17	14
non-random samples, however correlation for the Irish sample is significant at the .01 level.		

Findings

- Autonomy is relational and context dependent. A "contested terrain" - actively negotiated, managed, and affected by social structures.

- Antinomies of Autonomy: conditions of high work autonomy which challenge or reduce a worker's sense of discretion, freedom, and self-regulation.

- 3 Key Negotiations for IT workers:
  1. Between Autonomy and Anarchy (labour process)
  2. Between Freedom and Responsibility (working conditions)
  3. Between Employability and the Self (employment)

1. Between Autonomy & Anarchy

- Negotiating the interactive and interdependent relations of the IT labour process

- Mechanisms affecting balance:
  - Deadlines: fact and fiction ('make numbers work')
  - Colleagues: unpredictability (in the way of 'real work')
  - Managers: setting the tone ('managing the ocean')

- Institutional Differences: Contesting deadlines, managers more autonomy in IE
  - IE: negative (erratic individuals or bureaucratic constraints)
  - DK: a necessary resource (ensure efficiency, control demands)

- Antinomy: Interdependence (linked to boundarylessness)

Management

I would get anxieties and panic attacks....the things that generate the stress and the pressures tend to be the behaviours of the source of demand, whether the source of demand is your internal or external customer or your boss....It is if whoever you are dealing with has unrealistic expectations or is moving the goalposts every few weeks that you don't know where you stand...if your success is dependent on other resources that you don't have control over. They are more likely to cause the stress (Luke, Consultant, Ireland).

The more control I have over my own work the higher risk of stress... as a project manager the only thing you basically use is yourself...you involve yourself, your feelings, your attitude and so on. And it is really demanding and it can be very stressful...I pretty much plan my own day... the responsibility of the employer is to facilitate that I don't end up being stressed. And I have daily talks with my boss, she is a team leader, if I feel that I have a lack of resources or if there is a person in my project who doesn't really work good I talk with her. We have these sessions... on a daily basis that is what she gives to prevent stress...it is up to me how often I go in (Jens, IT Project Manager, Denmark).

...the manager...protected us quite well...project managers need a big bank because you have all this water here and you just have to make certain that you drip it down to the developer here because if they get a drop at a time they can develop a lot faster than if you just give them the ocean...they just have to guard against all the requirements...micro manage them a little bit...this is what makes a good project manager (Henning, Tech Lead, Denmark).

I think you cannot really function...if you do not take much notice of the private life of your employees...He [manager] knows it would give a very bad image if he pressed someone to be present when they actually had something else to do in their private life so he will try not to enforce that (Herman, Senior IT Advisor, Denmark).

2. Between Freedom & Responsibility

- Negotiating engagement & disengagement with work (Intensification and extensification of working time)

- Mechanisms affecting balance:

  - Re-Regulation of Work Time
    - individual v organisational 'time-work'

  - ICT & Market Rhythms
    - Internalised responsibility ('pre-empting', working on holidays)
    - The Smartphone Analogy
    - Expectations – accessible = available

  - Non-work Time & Space (Constructing 'clear demarcations')
    - Children – avoid being 'consumed' by job, 'going nuts'...
    - Clothes & De-Syncing Phones, Laptop out of view
    - Commute – Boundary, Transition, Office

- Institutional Differences: Individual ('force balance') v Collective Nature of Strategies
- Antinomy : Boundarylessness (linked to interdependence)

Time

I was expected to be available 24 hours. So it is demanding... I have to be very careful about managing my time in order to achieve that [balance] (Peter, Software Development Engineer, Ireland.

...it is all consuming ....there is an expectation because you have your phone with you, why didn't you respond to that email?...You don't ever have an end to your working day...it is hugely flexible and it allows you to pick up stuff...But it can completely invade people's lives...people feel that they shouldn't have missed something so it gets into their mind set... companies are so global now that it doesn't matter what part of the world you are in, you are accessible (Rebecca, IT HR Consultant, Ireland).

I use quite a lot of time, not alone but with my whole team to understand...what are they going to do for quite a long time...what is the timeframe of what they are working with, when are they expected to deliver. So when somebody comes up with a new plan I don't compensate by working more, I give a feedback saying if I had to do this it would require that we rearrange our plans...most people here works 40 hours...We don't want that [crunch time] because it is highly unproductive and the more you use it the more you wear out your people...It may give you more hours...that is not a quality stamp....you are bad at your management.(Casper, Chief Architect, Denmark).

...when I come to work, I am working. I am not doing anything else until I leave so that is more separated. I have my work life from 8:00 until 4:00 and then I have my family life. And that is a normal thing...In [previous employer] my boss said to me, "I want you to have your spare time when you have your spare time because otherwise you are going to burn out". He thought that if I worked too much my brain would be fried ..For many it is when you are on the job, you are on the job. When you are not, don't fucking bother me (Simon, Full Stack Developer, Denmark)

...I think organisation is more efficient...so you can focus on your programming. You don't need to use a lot of extra spare time to think about everything else. It is not the single one who is more efficient...it is more that the environment is more efficient...working less might give you a better possibility to plan better because you need to plan better (Karl, CTO, Denmark).

3. Between Employability & The Self

- Negotiating employment security in an individualised and insecure industry.
- Mechanisms affecting balance:
  - Networks & Reputation: 'lack of future' & self-employability
  - Emotional Labour: 'It's important what people think of you' & '...smile, keep working, send your invoice in...'
  - Gendered Roles & Expectations (meeting irregular and market led demands)
- Institutional Differences: security linked to broader welfare state, childcare as stressor in IE
- Antinomy: Fusion (linked to boundarylessness & interdependence)

Employment

... permanent doesn't mean a whole tonne anymore...you never think that you are secure in anything...I think I am just doing my own forward planning (Rebecca, IT HR Consultant, Ireland).

...the worries about changing jobs have been about progression...not looking necessarily at your job security as within a single company, it is across the industry. You know you are going to be able to move onto something else...You have to keep up skills...If I just sat on my laurels and didn't learn anything new that would be a greater impediment to my job security than the company I was working for (Peter, Software Development Engineer, Ireland).

You constantly have to evolve or change in this business or you will die. And I think my little life bulb moment in the USA, seeing a room full of people who could be replaced by five kids from Ireland, that was a lesson I didn't lose. If you are not constantly innovating, if you are not constantly evolving....It is a cruel business (Derek, Head of Professional Services, Ireland).

LinkedIn is fantastic for IT..it is very transparent...Your reputation speaks for itself and you can in some ways manage your own reputation as well if you update your profile...it[reputation] is absolutely important, you stand over your work and you will be found out pretty quick because there is nowhere to hide. You have got to deliver...you are only as good as your last work and anyone can see ..(Paul, Principal Tech Writer, Ireland).

...the company you work for is just a place where you sit and work... Somebody knows somebody....it is personal stuff and personal contacts. It is important what people think of you...very important...(Lars, Senior Developer, Denmark).

It is important...did your job and did it well and you have a track record to prove it...it matters...it is very well known with a lot of developers but that is something you have to cash in on... because it fades...(Sven, Lead Developer, Denmark).
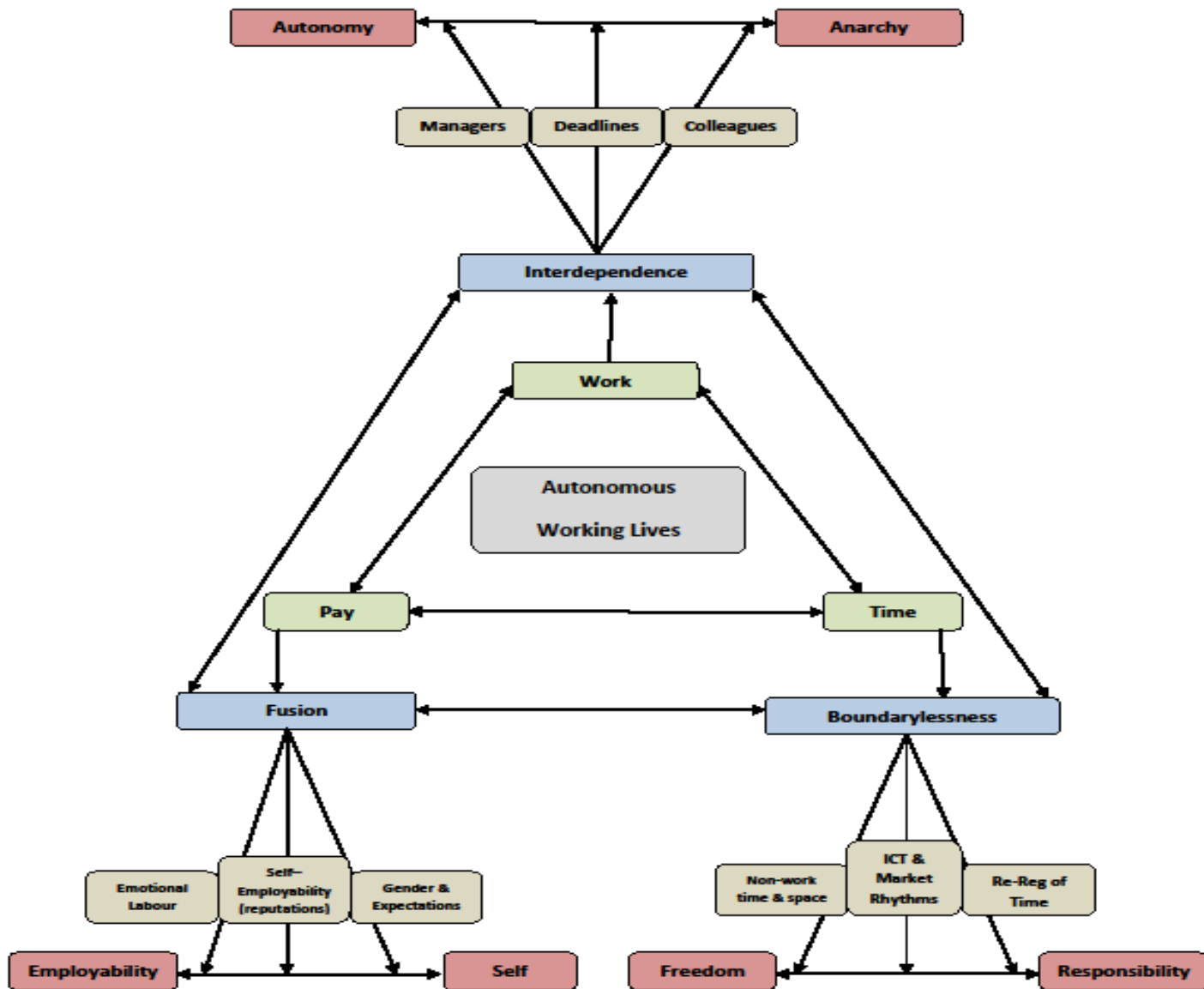
Conclusions

- The dynamics, rhythms, and antinomies of autonomous IT working lives are socially structured.

- The balances between manageable and unmanageable working patterns are based on individual, organisational, and institutional contexts.

- Boundaryless working time and interdependent labour prices present unique demands and pressures – often impinging on a sense of self-regulation (e.g. 'making hours' and making numbers 'work').

- Employment Bargain – the emotional labour of employment security in IT (risk of fusion).

- Denmark – some institutional and normative checks on antinomies.

Institutional Differences

- Collectively sourced strategies to manage the mechanisms linking the antinomies.
  - Norms around time (bounded, tax & balance)
  - A 'good' manager
    - Private lives of workers
    - More bounded time means organisational 'time work'
    - Acknowledging and acting on unrealistic deadlines
  - Limits imposition of interdependence & role expectations
- Gender: incompatible roles? paradox in DK? More capabilities, similar barriers

Thank You!

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MACRO

Institutional Structure:
legislation, policies,
welfare state, norms etc.

Antinomies: boundaryless rules, work-life
conflict, interdependent responsibilities,
employment requirements, fusion, low status
control etc.

**Shaping Workplace & Organisational
Features**

Capabilities: work-time
norms, security,
balance, expectations,
childcare, gender,
resources etc.

**Post-Industrial Work
Bargains:**

- Effort: tasks,
control, pay,
relations etc.

- Boundary: work
time, balance,
intensity, porosity
etc.

- Employment:
security, career,
upskilling,
occupational
expectations etc.

**Experience of Working
Conditions**

**Stressor
Manifestation**

**Work-Related Psychological
Outcomes**

**Manifestation of
Strain/Stress**

**Work-Related Feelings (Warr et al.
2014)**

**Individual Personality &
Resources (Elastic Limits)**

Discrete Disorders

MICRO

PWE Questions – Decision Lat/Autonomy

- Are you able to choose or change your order of tasks? [job control]
- Are you able to choose or change your methods of work? [job control]
- Can you decide where you worked? [freedom]
- Can you decide when you worked? [freedom]
- Are you able to apply your own ideas in your work? [discretion]
- Can you influence decisions that were important for your work? [influence]

PWE Questions – Demands

- Does your job involve working at very high speed? [quant]

- How often do you not have time to complete all your work tasks? [quant]

- Does your job involve complex tasks? [cognitive]

- Is your work emotionally demanding? [emotional]

- Does your work require that you hide your feelings? [emotional]

JOB RELATED FEELINGS SECTION

Warr et al. (2014) Operationalised

- <u>For the past month</u>, how often you have felt the following while working in your job. Focus is on how work makes you feel not an assessment of general mental health.

  HAPA [excited, enthusiastic, inspired, joyful]
  HAUA [anxious, tense, worried, nervous]
  LAPA [relaxed, calm, at ease, laid back]
  LAUA [depressed, dejected, despondent, hopeless]

  Pleasant Scoring (1: Never...7: Always)

  Unpleasant Scoring (7:Never...1: Always)

Job-Related Affect Quadrant Means

JOB-RELATED FEELINGS (N=31)								
	HAPA		HAUA		LAPA		LAUA	
Mean	4.35		5.82		3.97		6.65	
Minimum	2.25		3.75		3		5.25	
Maximum	6.75		7		6		7	
	DK	IE	DK	IE	DK	IE	DK	IE
Mean	4.55	4.18	6.07	5.62	4.34	3.67	6.55	6.73
Minimum	2.25	2.25	5	3.75	2	2.25	5.5	5.25
Maximum	6.25	6.75	7	6.5	5.75	6	7	7

HAPA [excited, enthusiastic, inspired, joyful]
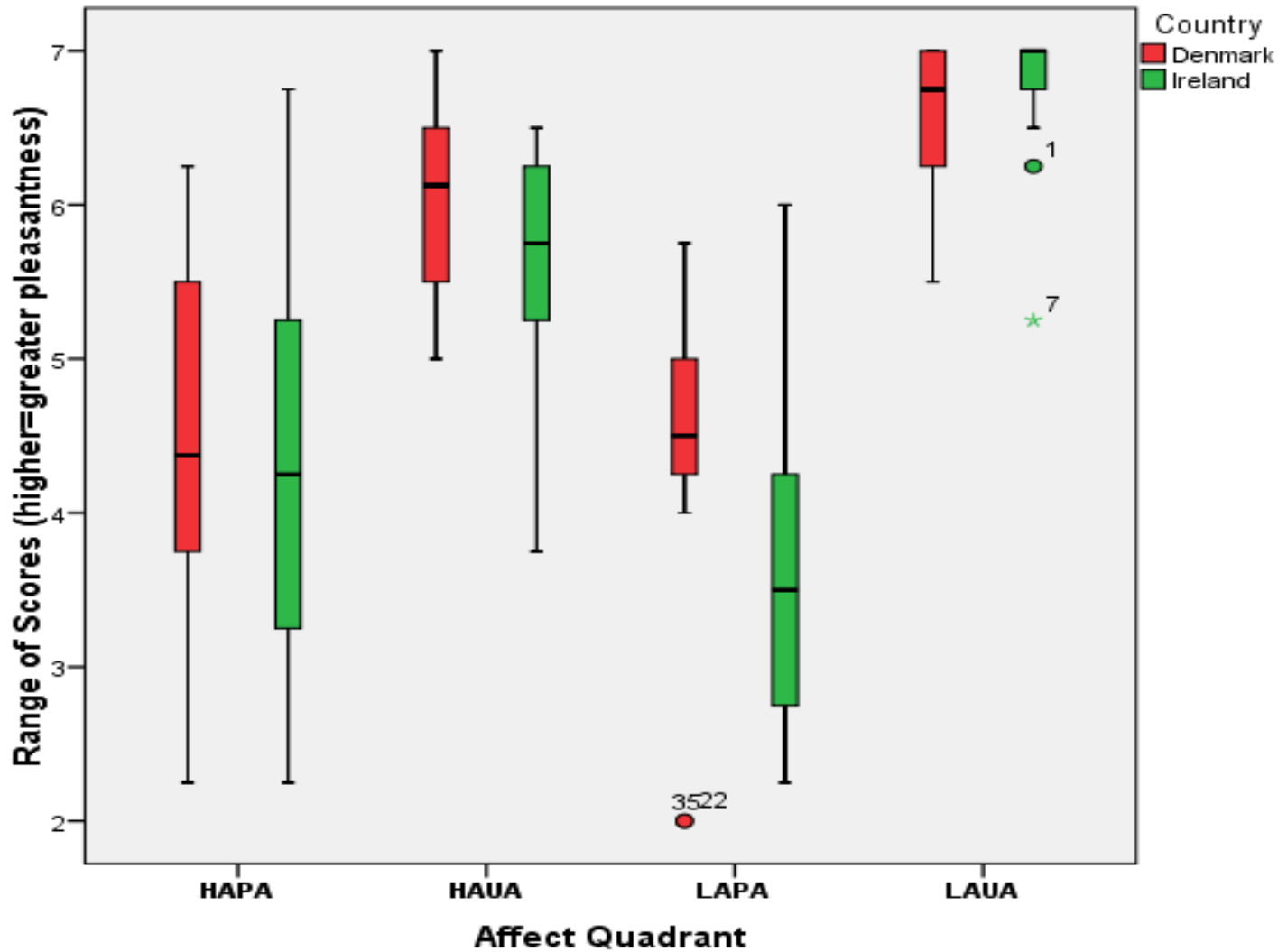**HAUA** [anxious, tense, worried, nervous]
LAPA [relaxed, calm, at ease, laid back]
LAUA [depressed, dejected, despondent, hopeless]

Pleasant Scoring (1: Never...7: Always), Unpleasant Scoring (7:Never...1: Always)

Affect Quadrants Boxplot

D-C Quads 6*5 Version by Job-Related Affect Quadrants

	HAPA	HAUA	LAPA	LAUA
PASSIVE (n=8)				
Mean	3.84	6.06	4.65	6.7
Minimum	2.25	5.5	3.25	5.5
Maximum	5.25	6.5	6	7
LOW STRAIN (n=4)				
Mean	5.12	6.19	4.31	6.9
Minimum	4	5.75	3.75	6.75
Maximum	6.75	6.5	5.25	7
ACTIVE (n=11)				
Mean	4.77	5.81	3.69	6.69
Minimum	3.25	3.75	2	6
Maximum	6.25	6.75	5.75	7
HIGH STRAIN (n=8)				
Mean	3.88	5.4	3.5	6.47
Minimum	2.25	4.25	2	5.25
Maximum	6.25	7	5.5	7

D-C Quads & Affect Quadrants by Country Mean

	HAPA		HAUA		LAPA		LAUA	
	DK	IE	DK	IE	DK	IE	DK	IE
PASSIVE								
Mean	**3.81**	**3.87**	5.94	6.19	4.62	4.69	6.37	6.94
LOW STRAIN								
Mean	4.87	5.37	6.25	6.12	4.62	4	7	6.87
ACTIVE								
Mean	4.9	4.67	6.25	5.46	4.2	**3.25**	6.5	6.83
HIGH STRAIN								
Mean	4.75	**3.35**	5.83	5.15	4	**3.2**	6.58	6.4

Participant Profile

	Total (n=31)	Denmark (n=14)	Ireland (n=17)
Age (mean)	48	49	48
Women (%)	23%	14%	29%
Children (% Yes)	81%	79%	82%
Third Level Qual. (%)	74%	50%	94%
Post Grad Qual (%)	35%	7%	59%