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Managing a sustainable career in the contemporary world of work: personal choices and contextual challenges

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Pathways to Career Sustainability Among the Self-employed and Wage Workers: A Study of Flexitime, the Work-family Interface, and Health During Parenthood*

ABSTRACT

Pressure for employees to prolong their careers while achieving a satisfactory work-life balance and remaining healthy has spurred interest in the notion of career sustainability. In this study, we examined differences in the career sustainability of the self-employed and employees during parenthood, which is a life stage in which concerns for career sustainability are perhaps most pronounced. Building on the principles of conservation of resources (COR) theory, we proposed that the resourcefulness of work environments explains differences in the work-home interface and health status (as prerequisites of sustainable careers) between the self-employed and employees as well as any changes in the sustainability of their careers across the parenthood life stage. We used multi-wave data (2001-2015) from the HILDA survey in Australia. Results showed that self-employed parents are richer in the flexitime resource than employees, leading to lower levels of work-family conflict and higher levels of work-family enrichment, and ultimately better health. Moreover, the self-employed experienced less variability in their health status over time compared with employees. We conclude that the self-employed are able to build more sustainable careers than employees. Practical implications and potential avenues for future research are discussed.

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Employees are confronted with an intensified workplace characterized by pressing demands, often resulting in high levels of job strain (Kubicek, Paškvan, & Korunka, 2015). Intensification of job demands creates challenges for employees to achieve a satisfactory balance between work and family life and also impairs employees' health (OECD, 2017). Concerns are being raised about how employees can overcome the detrimental effects of job demands and find a good work-life balance while remaining healthy throughout their career (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015). These concerns have spurred interest in managing careers, which is currently reflected in a growing body of research on career sustainability (e.g., De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015, 2017; De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2018; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014; Van Engen, Vinkenburg, & Dikkers, 2012).

Sustainable careers are those that fit into employees' broader life context and promote individual well-being, such as good health, over time (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015; Kossek et al., 2014). Indeed, health is a key indicator of career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2018). We concur with Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) that a work-home perspective to sustainable careers is imperative because "a sustainable career requires a sustainable nonwork life" (p. 378). For many individuals, a satisfactory work-life balance may be the single most important part of remaining healthy throughout the course of a career. Importantly, organizations can support the sustainability of individuals' careers and lives by offering flexible work arrangements to their employees (De Vos et al., 2018). Surprisingly, only a limited amount of organizations adopts flexible scheduling. A study across 1,051 American organizations with 50 or more employees showed that only 11 per cent allow most or all employees to adjust their worktimes (starting and ending) on a daily basis, while 42 per cent of organizations offer *some* employees this flexibility (Matos, Galinsky, & Bond 2016).

The lack of autonomy and flexibility among employees motivates people to start their own business (Benz & Frey, 2008; Brenner, Pringle, & Greenhaus, 1991). The self-employed constitute an increasingly large share of the work force, with 16 per cent in European countries and ten per cent in Australia (OECD, 2018), and they play a prominent role in economic development (Van Praag & Versloot, 2007). The self-employed, therefore, make a non-negligible group that deserves attention in terms of career sustainability. Although differences between the self-employed and employees—also in terms of autonomy and flexibility—are widely documented (Hessels, Rietveld, & Van der Zwan, 2017; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Stephan & Roesler, 2010), it remains elusive how the self-employed manage their careers and how sustainable their careers are in comparison with those of employees.

We posit that the challenges of achieving career sustainability, in particular those related to being and remaining healthy, do not apply equally to

the self-employed and employees. The aim of the present paper is to examine the pathways through which both the self-employed and employees achieve career sustainability. Importantly, we compare these occupational groups during years of parenthood, which represents a life stage in which sustainability is increasingly problematic (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Our study examines how the careers of parents in self-employment and in paid employment evolve over time in relation to key prerequisites of sustainability. To this end, we first compare the self-employed and employees in terms of health status and examine their possibly distinct pathways to health via flextime and the work-home interface. Health is a key indicator of career sustainability because it is important not only for one's individual prosperity but also for the welfare of other stakeholders such as the organization or family and friends (De Vos et al., 2018). Second, we uncover change patterns in our study variables over time and investigate whether the self-employed and employees exhibit time trends that differ from each other. Third, in response to a call by Stephan (2018) to focus on variability of entrepreneurs' mental well-being, we compare the stability of health of the self-employed and employees and investigate predictors of health stability across the parenthood life stage.

Our aim is to contribute to theory and research on career sustainability in at least three noteworthy ways. First, research on career sustainability has put a premium on work flexibility, the work-home interface, and employee well-being (i.e., health). Our model integrates these key concepts and examines their interplay in order to elucidate the process of career sustainability. Second, we use multi-wave (longitudinal) data that covers up to 15 years to advance our understanding of what makes careers more sustainable on the long term and what triggers changes in the sustainability of careers across the lifespan. We study individuals in a life stage in which concerns for career sustainability are perhaps most pronounced, namely during parenthood. Third, we compare employees with the self-employed, which is a relatively understudied group in research on career sustainability. Our study addresses recent calls in the literature on career sustainability for research that considers different worker types and adopts a long-term perspective (see De Vos et al., 2018), as we compare two occupational groups on key work-based predictors of health as well as in terms of change patterns and variability in health over the years.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Preservation and generation of resources across one's career are important for assuring sustainability in one's career (De Vos et al., 2018). Thus, for a better understanding of the career sustainability differences between employees and the self-employed, in particular in terms of remaining healthy, it is imperative to compare the resources they have at their disposal. It has long been established that the self-employed possess more job

resources than employees (Eden, 1975; Benz & Frey, 2008; Hamilton, 2000; Hundley, 2001; Hyytinen & Ruuskanen, 2007; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001). In this study, we focus on flextime as a resource and aim to understand its impact on the sustainability of careers. In building our conceptual model, we draw on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002) and its premise that resources are at the core of understanding well-being. Here, we follow De Vos and colleagues (2018), who posited that COR theory provides a lens for investigating the mechanisms that underlie sustainable careers.

COR theory postulates that people actively strive to retain, protect, and build resources. The types of resources that can be lost or gained are objects (e.g., house), conditions (e.g., marriage), personal characteristics (e.g., self-esteem), and energies (e.g., time). Objects and conditions are categorized as contextual resources (i.e., those that can be found in the social environments of the individual), while personal characteristics and energies are personal resources that are proximate to the self (see also Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Importantly, those are resources to the extent that they are also instrumental in attaining further resources. The concept of a *gain spiral* in COR theory entails that resources can generate new resources. However, individuals may also find themselves in a *loss spiral*. Because individuals are motivated to maintain their resources, they will experience stress if their resources are threatened or lost, increasing the likelihood of additional resource loss. Importantly, a central tenet of COR theory is that people are not equally vulnerable or resilient to stressful circumstances. Individuals with a larger pool of resources are more likely to avoid problematic situations and, when they do face resource drains, they are less negatively affected because they possess substitute resources. Thus, whereas individuals with few resources are forced to invest in the prevention of losing additional resources, those who already possess resources can invest in accruing more resources. The gain and loss spirals in COR theory imply that “over time, those in resource rich environments are likely to accumulate resource gains and those in resource poor environments are likely to accumulate resource losses” (Hobfoll, Stevens & Zalta, 2015, p. 177), and these processes can impact one’s career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2018).

The work-home resources (W-HR) model is a more specific model derived from COR theory that postulates that people derive resources from their work and home environments that lead to the development of other resources (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). We build on this model—and the COR principles underlying it—for several reasons. First, it offers a basis for investigating how flextime as a contextual work resource contributes to better health. In the W-HR model, health is conceptualized as a relatively durable personal resource that individuals aim to develop and maintain over time through utilization of resources that they have access to in their environment (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Second, this model explicates the enriching and depleting relationships between the work and home

domains and proposes that contextual work resources, such as flexible scheduling, improve outcomes for family life and may diminish work-family conflict triggered by contextual work demands. Thus, the processes in the work-home resources model enable us to examine the roles of both work-family conflict and enrichment in relation to career sustainability.

Our reasoning in this paper starts from the notion that the self-employed and employees are occupational groups that differ in how resource rich their work environments are. We build on COR theory and the W-HR model, also a resource conservation model, to posit that structural contextual resources in the work domain facilitate employees to achieve a good health status. Here, we specifically focus on flextime as a contextual work resource. It has been argued that resource poor environments undermine resilience of individuals (Hobfoll et al., 2015). In a similar vein, we build the case that work environments that do not offer flexibility to schedule work in ways that meet one’s personal needs may undermine career sustainability. Put differently, flextime may be a starting point for building a sustainable career. If employees and the self-employed do not find themselves in environments that are equally rich in this resource, then their work-home interface and health status may not be comparable either. Moreover, the loss and gain spirals in COR theory imply that differences between employees and the self-employed will increase over time, thus explaining why one occupational group is better able to build a sustainable career than the other. Our conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.1. In the sections below, we build and formulate hypotheses that specify the various pathways through which type of employment relates to health in our model.

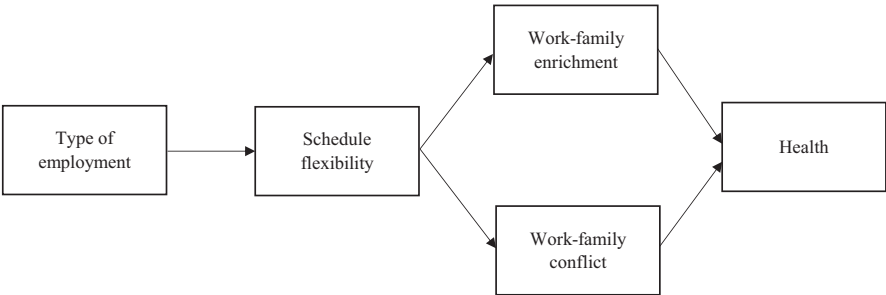


Figure 2.1 | Pathways to career sustainability

2.2.1 Type of Employment and Career Sustainability

The occupational health literature is replete with research on the well-being of employees, yet relatively little is known about the health of the self-employed (Van der Zwan, Hessels & Rietveld, 2018; Stephan & Roesler, 2010). In order to gain insight in the sustainability of the careers of the self-employed and how it compares with those of employees, we need

to examine the nature of their occupations. It appears there are substantial differences with regard to the demands of the job. For instance, the working hours of the self-employed are longer than those of employees (Eurofound, 2017; Hyytinen & Ruuskanen, 2007). In addition, uncertainty is strongly associated with being self-employed (Stephan, 2018). Moreover, the self-employed have high levels of responsibility, in such a way that “they must bear the costs of their mistakes while fulfilling lots of diverse roles such as recruiter, spokesperson, salesman, and boss” (Buttner, 1992, p. 224). Despite the stressful nature of their job, however, the self-employed report less work-related (Hessels et al., 2017) and life-related stress (Baron, Franklin, & Hmieleski, 2016) and less risk of illness (Yoon & Bernell, 2013) as well as higher levels of work satisfaction (Van der Zwan, Hessels & Rietveld, 2018) and life satisfaction (Stephan & Roesler, 2010) compared to employees. These results seem to go against the ubiquitous notion that self-employment is one of the most stressful jobs (Cardon & Patel, 2013). Not surprisingly, then, scholarly interest in the mental health and well-being of the self-employed is growing (Stephan, 2018).

Even though the self-employed shoulder high levels of responsibility and face other job demands, their work environment is rich in resources (e.g., autonomy). As they are their own boss, the self-employed have substantial decision authority and control over how their work is scheduled. Indeed, a vast body of research has found significant differences in the level of job control between the self-employed and employees (Eden, 1975; Benz & Frey, 2008; Hamilton, 2000; Hundley, 2001; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001). COR theory proposes that being in a resource rich environment may contribute to a better health status in three ways. First, individuals in resource rich environments can focus on the accumulation of resources because they encounter problems less often. Second, those individuals are better able to handle stressful situations that pose a threat to their resources and thus their health. Third, if their resources do get lost, they have substitute resources to protect their health. Thus, we argue that the self-employed work in an environment that offers more resources compared with that of employees and they are therefore in better health than employees.

Hypothesis 1: The health of the self-employed is better than the health of employees.

To address whether the self-employed have more sustainable careers than employees, we build on the notion of gain and loss spirals in COR theory and investigate health on the longer term. As noted earlier, individuals in self-employment have higher levels of job control and decision-making authority (Eden, 1975; Hamilton, 2000; Hundley, 2001; Hyytinen & Ruuskanen, 2007; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001), while employees are often subject to the decisions of others and thus lack such resources at work (Benz & Frey, 2008). It follows that the self-employed are working in a resource rich environment. Importantly, the resource reservoir that they have at their

disposal grows over time. In contrast, employees are operating in a resource poor environment and are more likely to develop stress and accumulate resource loss. Due to these gain and loss spirals, the disparity between those in research rich and research poor environments expands across the lifespan (Hobfoll et al., 2015). Both occupational groups face major challenges in multiple life domains, yet they are not equally equipped to handle stressors and remain healthy throughout their careers. Thus, we expect that the difference in health between the self-employed and employees (see Hypothesis 1) will increase over time.

Hypothesis 2: The disparity in health between the self-employed and employees increases over time.

By its very nature, a sustainable career is one “in which employees remain healthy” (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015, p. 224) and the stability of one’s health over time is thus a key indicator of career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2018). Remaining healthy is a challenge for the self-employed because ambiguity and uncertainty are a given in entrepreneurship (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). As Stephan (2018) noted, “entrepreneurs’ experience may be highly variable, and may include spikes of high and low mental well-being” (p. 34). Nevertheless, they may develop resilience over time by means of working in a resource rich environment. Hobfoll and colleagues (2015) define resilience as “the ability of individuals or human systems to absorb stressors and return to their original state when that stressor is lifted without creating permanent damage or harm” (p. 174). We posit that the resilience process is central to achieving sustainability in one’s career. COR theory sheds light on how one’s position in a resource rich versus poor environment influences one’s stability in health across the lifespan. To build resilience over time, individuals need to work within a resource rich environment, have access to the resources in that environment, and be able to generate more resources while being protected against resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2015). As the self-employed work in a richer resource environment, they acquire gradually the resources for resilience in terms of mental and physical health. The work environment of employees is less resourceful and they are therefore more heavily affected by adversity and stressful circumstances. Thus, we argue that the self-employed are better able to build resilience than employees, which is reflected in higher stability in health over time.

Hypothesis 3: The health of the self-employed is more stable over time than the health of employees.

2.2.2 Flextime and Work-Family Conflict and Enrichment as Mediating Mechanisms

In the preceding sections, we argued that the self-employed are healthier than employees and that their health status is also more sustainable over time. However, since prior research on the relationship between self-employment and well-being is relatively scarce, mechanisms that could account for any differences in well-being between employees and the self-employed are yet left unexplored (Van der Zwan, Hessels & Rietveld, 2018). Here, we aim to elucidate the process by which type of employment affects health, focusing on schedule flextime and the work-home interface as mediating mechanisms that explain any differences in the health status of the self-employed and employees.

One job resource that stands out when comparing the work environment of individuals in self-employment to that of employees is the flexibility to rearrange their work schedules. The self-employed have high levels of job control and decision-making authority (e.g., Benz & Frey, 2008) and are less constrained by the need to coordinate with coworkers and conform to organizational work routines. Accordingly, a large body of research shows that the self-employed have higher schedule flexibility compared to employees (Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Hundley, 2001; Golden, 2001). This flextime resource is instrumental in fulfilling needs in the nonwork environment, and it has therefore been widely studied in research on work-life balance (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). It has been argued that goals change over the life span and the value of a particular resource for assuring career sustainability is likely to vary depending on personal circumstances (De Vos et al., 2018). Flextime may be particularly valuable as a resource during the parenthood life stage, when individuals have greater family responsibility (see Shockley & Allen, 2007).

In line with the theory from the work-home resources (W-HR) model (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), which proposes that resources in the work environment (such as flextime) can bring about positive outcomes in the family domain, research has reported mostly beneficial effects of schedule flexibility on employees' work-home interface (Anderson, Coffey & Byerly, 2002; Hammer, Allen & Grigsby, 1997; Kelly, Moen, & Transby, 2011; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; for a systematic review, see Nijp et al., 2012). The majority of those studies, however, are focused on work-family conflict rather than work-family enrichment. Our study investigates how flextime relates to both work-family conflict and enrichment. The W-HR model sheds light on the ways in which flextime may diminish depleting work-home processes and promote enriching work-home processes. The flextime resource has the ability to facilitate outcomes in the home domain (i.e., lead to work-family enrichment), for instance when individuals gain quality time spent with family members. Moreover, the flextime resource can help individuals deal with job demands that would otherwise deplete one's resources and impair outcomes at home (i.e., work-family conflict).

Thus, on the basis of the W-HR model, we expect that flextime as a resource reduces work-family conflict and increases work-family enrichment.

Depleting and enriching work-home processes may be strong predictors of health. A large-scale study across a variety of European countries concluded that poor work-life balance poses serious risks for people's health (Lunau, Bambra, Eikemo, Van der Wel, & Dragano, 2014). Resources get lost in the process of juggling dual roles, such as work and family, leading to a deterioration of health (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). Depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and unhealthy behaviours (e.g., substance abuse) are some of the commonly reported adverse outcomes of work-family conflict (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). However, resources may also be gained rather than lost through multiple role enactment. The process of work-family enrichment entails that resources are accumulated (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), which makes individuals better equipped to handle stress and improve their health. Indeed, meta-analytic studies have shown a positive relationship between work-family enrichment and physical and psychological health (McNall, Nicklin, & Masuda, 2010; Zhang, Xu, Jin, & Ford, 2018). Thus, we expect that work-family conflict and enrichment are predictors of health status. The previous arguments lead us to put forward two parallel mediation hypotheses.

Hypothesis 4a: The association between type of employment and health is mediated in serial by flextime and work-family conflict.

Hypothesis 4b: The association between type of employment and health is mediated in serial by flextime and work-family enrichment.

Thus far, we proposed that the self-employed have more schedule flexibility and are therefore less likely to experience work-family conflict and more likely to experience work-family enrichment than employees, which explains why they are in better health. We have also proposed that the disparity in health between the self-employed and employees expands over time. If the flextime resource and its effects on the work-home interface are indeed explaining why the health of the self-employed and employees are different, then change patterns in these concepts over time (i.e., gain and loss spirals) should explain why the difference in health between these occupational groups increases over time. Put differently, the process by which type of employment affects health may be contingent on time such that the disparity between the self-employed and employees increases as their tenure increases.

We posit that the self-employed gain experience over the years on how to effectively employ the flextime resource that is available to them. Over time, they may find more opportunities for rearranging their work schedules and become more successful in utilizing this flexibility to meet their work-life goals. In contrast, employees, who are low on the flextime

resource, are more vulnerable to additional resource loss and may become pessimistic about their capabilities to successfully adapt to work and family demands. Work-family conflict entails a situation in which resources are drained (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), and those who experience work-family conflict repeatedly may over time become more negatively affected by this stressful situation in terms of impaired health. In sum, we expect that resources evolve in a cycle and explain the growing disparity in health across years; that is, differences between the self-employed and employees in flextime and a satisfactory work-home interface become larger over time and health becomes more strongly impacted by the work-home interface over time.

Hypothesis 5a: Time moderates the indirect effect of type of employment on health via flextime and work-family conflict such that this relationship is stronger for those who have been working for a longer period of time.

Hypothesis 5b: Time moderates the indirect effect of type of employment on health via flextime and work-family enrichment such that this relationship is stronger for those who have been working for a longer period of time.

The health of the self-employed and employees is unlikely to be static. A prerequisite for a sustainable career is a sense of well-being, which is obtained by preserving one's physical and mental health (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015; De Vos et al., 2018). Thus, it is important that individuals do not only have high levels of health aggregated across years but also are able to keep variability in health to a minimum. We have proposed that the stability in health status is higher among the self-employed than among employees. Central to this proposition is the notion that resource rich environments are stable environments, and those who live in such environments "have high rates of resilience, even when faced with significant short-term, or single episode, life adversity" (Hobfoll et al., 2015, p. 176). Across the lifespan, the work environments of the self-employed are characterized by higher average levels of the flextime resource than those of employees. In addition, their work-home interface is on average more satisfactory than that of employees, with lower levels of work-family conflict and higher levels of work-family enrichment aggregated across years. These mean levels are a fertile ground to build resilience and thus enable individuals to remain healthy across the parenthood life stage.

Hypothesis 6a: The association between type of employment and stability in health is mediated in serial by average levels of flextime and average levels of work-family conflict.

Hypothesis 6b: The association between type of employment and stability in health is mediated in serial by average levels of flextime and average levels of work-family enrichment.

2.3 METHOD

2.3.1 Sample

Data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey were utilized for our analyses. HILDA yearly follows more than 12,000 Australians and reports on their well-being levels, labor market status, family life situation and many other (employment) characteristics. The HILDA project started the data collection process in 2001 among a nationally representative sample of Australian households. We used fifteen years of data (2001-2015) for the present analysis. HILDA is a household-based (one-person and multi-person) survey, and is representative of all Australian households. Individual interviews with household members were conducted with individuals aged 15 years and over. Mainly face-to-face interviews were used to collect the data, while phone interviews were conducted in only 0.5 per cent to 10.1 per cent of the instances, depending on the wave (Summerfield et al., 2016). The household response rate, defined as the percentage of households for which interviews were completed with at least one household member, was 74 per cent (own calculations, based on Summerfield et al., 2016). A detailed description of the sampling methodology is provided in Chapters 7 and 8 of Summerfield et al. (2016).

Our estimation sample contained panel data including 43,752 person-year observations. In total 8,655 persons were included and hence, the average number of years an individual was observed was 5.06 on average. Differences between our estimation sample and the number of observations available in HILDA can be explained by the following selection criteria. First, and most importantly, to identify the parenthood life stage, individuals without children were excluded for further analyses. That is, our sample included parents only. Second, about 90 per cent of the individuals across the fifteen waves responded to questions about flextime, work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, and health. These questions were recorded using a separate paper-based questionnaire (Summerfield et al., 2016). This self-administered questionnaire includes questions that respondents may feel uncomfortable with to answer in the presence of an interviewer (Watson & Wooden, 2015). Third, case wise deletion of missing data was used when at least one of the variables under investigation had missing values.

2.3.2 Measures

The following variables are available for each of the fifteen years under investigation (2001-2015).

Type of employment. Participants were requested to self-classify themselves in terms of their employee status (i.e., self-employed or employee). We then distinguished employees (coded as 0) from the self-employed (coded as 1).

Health. Participants assessed their health status using the item “In general, would you say your health is ...” with possible answers ranging from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*. A single-item measure of current health status is very common and the validity of such measure is recognized across a large body of literature (Bowling, 2005; Lee, Walker, & Shoup, 2001).

Flexitime. The availability of schedule flexibility was measured using the following three items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.82$): (1) “I have a lot of freedom to decide when I do my work,” (2) “My working times can be flexible,” and (3) “I can decide when to take a break.” Responses were given on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Work-family conflict. We measured work-to-family conflict with the following four items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$): (1) “Because of the requirements of my job, I miss out on home or family activities that I would prefer to participate in,” (2) “Because of the requirements of my job, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured,” (3) “Working leaves me with too little time or energy to be the kind of parent I want to be,” and (4) “Working causes me to miss out on some of the rewarding aspects of being a parent.” Answers were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Work-family enrichment. Individuals responded to the following four items on work-to-family enrichment (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$): (1) “Working makes me feel good about myself, which is good for my children,” (2) “My work has a positive effect on my children,” (3) “Working helps me to better appreciate the time I spend with my children,” and (4) “The fact that I am working makes me a better parent.” Similar to the scale for work-family conflict, responses were given on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The multi-item measures for work-family conflict and work-family enrichment have been validated in earlier research (see Marshall & Barnett, 1993).

Control variables. In our models, we controlled for gender (female = 0; male = 1), age, the square of age, and education (at least post-secondary education = 1; secondary education or lower = 0). These demographic variables have been included as control variables in numerous previous studies with self-assessed health as the dependent variable (Böckerman & Ilmakunnas, 2009). Given the substantially higher demands of the self-employed (Eurofound, 2017; Hyytinen & Ruuskanen, 2007), we controlled for the total number of working hours per week, to enable a fair comparison between the two occupational groups. We also controlled for industry (distinguishing between 19 industries in total). Moreover, we controlled for job tenure as indicated by the number of years in the current business for the self-employed and the number of years in the current job for employees. Working hours and job tenure were logarithmically transformed to make their distributions less skewed. Finally, we controlled for the specific HILDA wave (15 waves/years in total).

2.3.3 Analyses

We tested our hypotheses using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Note that the estimated coefficients in an OLS regression inform us about the impact of a one-unit change in an independent variable on the change in the conditional mean of the dependent variable. Because of repeated measures for individuals in our dataset, we clustered standard errors by individual respondents (see Kakarika, González-Gómez, & Dimitriades, 2017). Our hypotheses require distinct analysis techniques for testing. First, Hypothesis 2 states that health differences between the self-employed and employees will increase over time, in line with an interaction effect. To test for moderation, we computed a product term between type of employment and job tenure (see *Control variables*); hence, the time aspect reflects the number of years in the current business (the self-employed) or job (employees). Second, our model is a multiple mediator model with a blend of serial and parallel mediation processes. Indirect effects and the associated bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were obtained using the methods described in Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Hayes (2017) involving 5,000 bootstrap samples.¹

Our set of hypotheses implies a model with both moderation and mediation properties. Hypothesis 2 articulates an interaction between type of employment and job tenure in predicting health, while Hypotheses 4a and 4b put forward a mechanism linking type of employment to health. Accordingly, Hypotheses 5a and 5b suggest that the indirect effects are conditional on job tenure. We followed a stepwise approach and ran separate regressions with product terms that enabled us to investigate whether any of the indirect paths from type of employment to health are moderated by job tenure (i.e., time). If any of the paths is moderated, it implies that the indirect effect of type of employment on health is a function of time, and our model can be recast in terms of *moderated mediation* processes (Hayes, 2017).

Finally, Hypotheses 3, 6a and 6b take the stability (or variability) of health as the dependent variable. For each individual we identified the time spells in self-employment and in paid employment. We calculated the variation in health over time for each spell using the standard deviation of the health variable. To test this set of hypotheses, we used the same conceptual model as in Figure 2.1 but replaced current health status with the variability of health over time (that is, the standard deviation of health) and we replaced the mediators with their average values across years in self-employment or paid employment.

1 In fact, our model is a specific case of Model 81 in Hayes (2017).

2.4 RESULTS

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 | Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables

	M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Type of employment	0.17	0.38	0	1										
2 Health	3.56	0.84	1	5	0.03									
3 Flextime	4.14	1.82	1	7	0.36	0.06								
4 Work-family conflict	3.77	1.47	1	7	-0.06	-0.16	-0.16							
5 Work-family enrichment	4.81	1.19	1	7	0.02	0.11	0.12	-0.23						
6 Gender	0.54	0.50	0	1	0.12	-0.04	0.07	0.13	0.01					
7 Age	40.33	7.85	15	64	0.11	-0.06	0.07	-0.03	0.02	0.06				
8 Education	0.32	0.47	0	1	-0.05	0.11	0.06	0.05	0.03	-0.07	0.10			
9 Working hours (log)	3.53	0.54	-4.61	4.97	0.07	-0.01	0.01	0.31	0.04	0.51	0.10	0.00		
10 Job tenure (log)	1.28	1.44	-3.95	3.83	0.12	0.01	0.07	0.03	0.01	0.09	0.28	0.08	0.14	

Note. Type of employment is coded as 1 = self-employed and 0 = employee. Gender is coded as 1 = male and 0 = female. Education is coded as 1 = post-secondary education, 0 = otherwise. Pearson correlations are presented, except with the following variable pairs, for which Spearman’s rho is given: type of employment-gender, type of employment-education, and gender-education. All correlations have *p*-values < .05, except for the working hours-flextime and job tenure-health variable pairs (indicated in italics).

About 17 per cent of our observations refer to self-employment. Table 2.1 reveals a positive correlation between type of employment (self-employment versus paid employment) and health ($r_s = .03, p < .001$). Flextime is negatively related to work-family conflict ($r = -.16, p < .001$) and positively related to work-family enrichment ($r = .12, p < .001$). Finally, work-family conflict and health are negatively related ($r = -.16, p < .001$), whereas there is a positive relationship between work-family enrichment and health ($r = .11, p < .001$).

Table 2.2 provides tests of Hypotheses 1 (Model 1), 2 (Model 2) and 3 (Model 3). We found a significant association between type of employment (self-employment versus paid employment) and health ($B = 0.11, p < .001$; Model 1), indicating that the health of the self-employed is better (0.11 points, on average, on a 5-points scale) than employees’ health, lending support for Hypothesis 1.

Table 2.2 | The effect of type of employment on health

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Health (H1)		Health (H2)		SD of health (H3)	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Type of employment	0.113***	0.022	0.088***	0.024	-0.031**	0.010
Type of employment × Job tenure (log)			0.016	0.012		
Gender	-0.039	0.021	-0.039	0.021	0.012	0.008
Age/10	0.199**	0.070	0.202***	0.070	-0.053*	0.026
(Age/10) ²	-0.036***	0.009	-0.036***	0.009	0.003	0.003
Education	0.169***	0.021	0.170***	0.021	-0.002	0.008
Working hours (log)	0.002	0.014	0.001	0.014	0.003	0.009
Job tenure (log)	0.005	0.005	0.002	0.005	0.019***	0.005
Number of observations	43,752		43,752		8,354	
R ²	0.03		0.03		0.01	

Note. Type of employment: 1 = self-employed, 0 = employee. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female. Education: 1 = post-secondary education, 0 = otherwise. Industry and wave number were controlled for. The intercept is not reported. Age was divided by 10 to obtain more easily interpretable coefficients. Average values were calculated for age/10, (age/10) squared, education, and working hours across years in self-employment or paid employment; the maximum value for job tenure was taken.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

The (relatively small) effect sizes as found in the present study are comparable to those found in other studies on self-assessed health (Monden, 2010). This ‘total effect’ of type of employment on health is decomposed into direct and indirect effects in Hypotheses 4a and 4b. In Model 2, we did not find support for an increasing health disparity between the self-employed and employees over time. That is, the coefficient of the interaction term between type of employment and job tenure was positive but non-significant (*B* = 0.02, *p* = .19), indicating that the number of years in the current business (self-employed) or job (employees) did not impact the relationship between type of employment and health. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. The dependent variable in Model 3 of Table 2.2 is the variability of health (i.e., standard deviation). It was revealed that the self-employed experience less variation in their health over time than the employees (*B* = -0.03, *p* = .002), which is in support of Hypothesis 3.

Hypotheses 4a and 4b focus on the indirect effects that run from type of employment to health through the mediators. These indirect effects can be estimated using four regressions (see Table 2.3) in which each mediator acts as the dependent variable (Models 1-3) and with health as the dependent variable while controlling for all mediators (Model 4). We observed a significant association between type of employment and flextime (*B* = 1.50, *p* < .001), indicating that the self-employed have more schedule flexibility (1.50 points higher, on average) than employees. In turn, flextime was negatively associated with work-family conflict (*B* = -0.14, *p* < .001) and positively associated with work-family enrichment (*B* = 0.08, *p* < .001). If one compares

two individuals with below-average flextime (one *SD* below the mean) and above-average flextime (one *SD* above the mean) the estimated coefficients imply a difference in work-family conflict and work-family enrichment of 0.51 and 0.29, respectively. Finally, we found a negative association between work-family conflict and self-assessed health ($B = -0.09, p < .001$) as well as a positive association between work-family enrichment and self-assessed health ($B = 0.05, p < .001$). The differences in health are 0.26 and 0.12 for individuals with below-average and above-average values for work-family conflict and work-family enrichment, respectively. Given that the multiple pathways of influence between type of employment and health are significant, the results in Table 2.3 provide preliminary support for Hypotheses 4a and 4b.

Table 2.3 | *The indirect effect of type of employment on health*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Flextime		WFC		WFE		Health	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Type of employment	1.496***	0.037	−0.065	0.038	−0.032	0.031	0.058**	0.022
Flextime			−0.138***	0.007	0.079***	0.006	0.017***	0.004
WFC							−0.091***	0.005
WFE							0.050***	0.006
Gender	0.031	0.039	−0.011	0.035	−0.007	0.029	−0.040*	0.020
Age/10	0.426**	0.126	0.403***	0.108	−0.162	0.090	0.229**	0.068
(Age/10) ²	−0.046**	0.016	−0.063***	0.014	0.020	0.011	−0.041***	0.009
Education	0.382***	0.037	0.234***	0.033	0.001	0.028	0.178***	0.020
Working hours (log)	−0.215***	0.029	0.857***	0.027	0.109***	0.022	0.082***	0.014
Job tenure (log)	0.041***	0.009	0.012	0.008	−0.010	0.007	0.005	0.005
Number of observations	43,752		43,752		43,752		43,752	
R ²	0.22		0.13		0.04		0.07	

Note. Type of employment: 1 = self-employed, 0 = employee. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female. Education: 1 = post-secondary education, 0 = otherwise. WFC = work-family conflict. WFE = work-family enrichment. Industry and wave number were controlled for. The intercept is not reported.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

To examine our mediation hypotheses directly, the specific values of the indirect effects and the inferential tests for these indirect effects were obtained using the approach advocated by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The *total indirect effect* quantifies how type of employment relates to differences in health through all mediators at once, and it can be calculated by the sum of five specific indirect effects of type of employment on health. However, we formulated hypotheses only regarding the pathways of influence of type of employment to health through flextime and work-family conflict (Hypothesis 4a) and through flextime and work-family enrichment (Hypothesis 4b). Table 2.4 lists the estimates of the total indirect effect, the

two specific indirect effects that we hypothesized, and the three remaining indirect effects. The lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence intervals are also provided in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 | Indirect effects of self-employment on health

	Estimate	95% CI lower limit	95% CI upper limit
Total indirect effect	0.054	0.046	0.063
Type of employment → Flextime → WFC → Health (H4a)	0.019	0.017	0.021
Type of employment → Flextime → WFE → Health (H4b)	0.006	0.005	0.007
Type of employment → Flextime → Health	0.025	0.018	0.033
Type of employment → WFC → Health	0.006	0.003	0.010
Type of employment → WFE → Health	−0.002	−0.003	0.001

Note. WFC = work-family conflict. WFE = work-family enrichment.

A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the total indirect effect based on 5,000 bootstrap samples did not include zero (95% CI of [0.046, 0.063]). The confidence intervals of the indirect effects through flextime and work-family conflict (95% CI of [0.017, 0.021]) and through flextime and work-family enrichment (95% CI of [0.005, 0.007]) also did not include zero. Hence, Hypotheses 4a and 4b were supported.

Hypotheses 5a and 5b focused on the growing disparity in health between the self-employed and employees. Although we did not find a significant interaction when testing Hypothesis 2, it is possible for distinct paths in the mediated sequence to be moderated and hereby influence the outcome (Hayes, 2017). To test whether any of the pathways in our conceptual model (Figure 2.1) are contingent on time, we included interaction terms with job tenure in each of the regression models shown in Table 2.3. The results are presented in Table 2.5. Model 1 investigates flextime as the dependent variable and tests the interaction effect between type of employment and job tenure. Model 2 and Model 3 take work-family conflict and work-family enrichment as dependent variables, respectively, and focus on the interaction between flextime and job tenure. Model 4 regresses health on the predictor variables and incorporates product terms between work-family conflict and job tenure and between work-family enrichment and job tenure. As can be seen in Table 2.4, only one pathway was significantly moderated by job tenure (i.e., number of years in the current business or job); that is, the negative association between flextime and work-family conflict became stronger over time ($B = -0.01, p = .004$).

Table 2.5 | The moderating role of job tenure

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Flextime		WFC		WFE		Health	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Type of employment	1.541***	0.042	−0.061	0.038	−0.033	0.031	0.058**	0.022
Job tenure (log)	0.045***	0.010	0.055**	0.017	−0.017	0.015	0.022	0.021
Flextime			−0.125***	0.008	0.077***	0.007	0.017***	0.004
WFC							−0.086***	0.006
WFE							0.050***	0.007
Type of employment × Job tenure (log)	−0.029	0.021						
Flextime × Job tenure (log)			−0.011**	0.004	0.002	0.003		
WFC × Job tenure (log)							−0.005	0.003
WFE × Job tenure (log)							0.000	0.003
Gender	0.031	0.039	−0.011	0.035	−0.008	0.029	−0.040*	0.020
Age/10	0.420**	0.126	0.393***	0.108	−0.160	0.089	0.232**	0.068
(Age/10) ²	−0.045**	0.016	−0.062***	0.014	0.019	0.011	−0.041***	0.009
Education	0.381***	0.037	0.233***	0.033	0.001	0.028	0.178***	0.020
Working hours (log)	−0.215***	0.029	0.857***	0.027	0.110***	0.022	0.081***	0.014
Number of observations	43,752		43,752		43,752		43,752	
R ²	0.22		0.13		0.04		0.07	

Note. Type of employment: 1 = self-employed, 0 = employee. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female. Education: 1 = post-secondary education, 0 = otherwise. WFC = work-family conflict. WFE = work-family enrichment. Industry and wave number were controlled for. The intercept is not reported.
p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < 0.001.

Because one of the paths is moderated, the indirect effect becomes contingent on the moderator such that the type of employment-flextime-work-family conflict-health relationship may differ in strength as a function of time. To formally test whether this indirect effect is conditional on time, we used conditional process analysis and assessed the indirect effects at one *SD* below and one *SD* above the mean of the tenure variable (Hayes, 2017). The index of moderated mediation was estimated at 0.0015 with a 95% CI of [0.0008, 0.0022], which indicates that the indirect effect of type of employment on health via flextime and work-family conflict depended on time.² The indirect effect was 0.017 with a 95% CI of [0.015, 0.019] for lower (− *SD*) levels of tenure, while the indirect effect was 0.021 with a 95% CI of [0.019, 0.023] for higher (+ *SD*) levels of tenure. Thus, the relationship became stronger as job tenure increased. These results are partially supportive of Hypothesis 5a and not supportive of Hypothesis 5b.

2 The time contingency was incorporated in the model by means of an interaction between flextime and job tenure in predicting work-family conflict.

We conducted four regressions to test Hypotheses 6a and 6b. Results are presented in Table 2.6, analogous to Table 2.3. Models 1 to 3 predict average values (across years in self-employment or paid employment) of flextime, work-family conflict, and work-family enrichment, respectively. The dependent variable in Model 4 represents the variability in health over time. Type of employment was significantly related to average flextime ($B = 1.53, p < .001$). We also found a negative association between average flextime and average work-family conflict ($B = -0.16, p < .001$) and a positive association between average flextime and average work-family enrichment ($B = 0.09, p < .001$). Average levels of work-family conflict were positively associated with health status variability ($B = 0.01, p = .01$), but we did not find a significant association between average levels of work-family enrichment and variability in health status ($B = 0.003, p = .37$).

Table 2.6 | The indirect effect of type of employment on the variability of health

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Average flextime		Average WFC		Average WFE		SD of health	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Type of employment	1.532***	0.036	0.040	0.038	-0.100**	0.032	-0.026*	0.011
Flextime			-0.157***	0.011	0.094***	0.010	-0.002	0.003
WFC							0.013***	0.003
WFE							0.003	0.004
Gender	0.061	0.036	0.110**	0.035	-0.051	0.029	0.011	0.008
Age/10	0.397***	0.107	0.408***	0.109	-0.072	0.095	-0.057*	0.026
(Age/10) ²	-0.045**	0.013	-0.058***	0.014	0.001	0.012	0.003	0.003
Education	0.371***	0.035	0.213***	0.033	0.036	0.028	-0.004	0.008
Working hours (log)	-0.257***	0.039	0.785***	0.036	0.199***	0.033	-0.009	0.010
Job tenure (log)	0.075***	0.018	-0.019	0.016	-0.039**	0.014	0.019***	0.005
Number of observations	8,354		8,354		8,354		8,354	
R ²	0.29		0.14		0.03		0.02	

Note. Type of employment: 1 = self-employed, 0 = employee. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female. Education: 1 = post-secondary education, 0 = otherwise. WFC = work-family conflict; WFE = work-family enrichment. Industry and wave number were controlled for. The intercept is not reported. The dependent variables are average flextime (Model 1), average work-family conflict (Model 2), average work-family enrichment (Model 3), and the standard deviation in health (Model 4). Average values were calculated for age/10, (age/10) squared, education, and working hours across years in self-employment or paid employment; the maximum value for job tenure was taken.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2.7 shows the results of formally testing Hypotheses 6a and 6b and presents the estimates of the total indirect effect, the two indirect effects as hypothesized, and the three remaining specific indirect effects. The indirect effect through flextime and work-family conflict was significant (95% CI of $[-0.005, -0.002]$), but the confidence interval for the indirect effect through flextime and work-family enrichment included zero (95% CI of $[-0.001, 0.001]$). Thus, Hypothesis 6a was supported while Hypothesis 6b was not.

Table 2.7 | Indirect effects of self-employment on the variability of health

	Estimate	95% CI lower limit	95% CI upper limit
Total indirect effect	−0.005	−0.013	0.003
Type of employment → Flextime → WFC → SD of health (H6a)	−0.003	−0.005	−0.002
Type of employment → Flextime → WFE → SD of health (H6b)	0.0005	−0.001	0.001
Type of employment → Flextime → SD of health	−0.002	−0.011	0.006
Type of employment → WFC → SD of health	0.001	−0.0005	0.002
Type of employment → WFE → SD of health	−0.0003	−0.001	0.0003

Note. WFC = work-family conflict. WFE = work-family enrichment.

2.4.1 Additional Analyses

In addition to health (used in the analyses above), De Vos and colleagues (2018) consider happiness as another key indicator of career sustainability. To test whether our results can be replicated in terms of happiness, we focused on life satisfaction, which is a commonly used measure of happiness (or, equivalently, subjective well-being) (Cho & Tay, 2016). Here, we found additional evidence for our hypotheses using life satisfaction rather than health status. Participants’ life satisfaction was measured using the single item “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life? Pick a number between 0 and 10 to indicate how satisfied you are”. Similar to our health measure, it is very common to use a single-item measure of life satisfaction and the validity and performance of our measure has been demonstrated in the quality of life literature (Cheung & Lucas, 2014; Li, Zhou, & Leung, 2011; Lucas & Donnellan, 2012). In terms of Hypothesis 1, we found that the self-employed are more satisfied with their lives than the employees ($B = 0.09, p = .01$). We did not find support for Hypothesis 2 with a non-significant interaction term ($B = 0.02, p = .10$). Hypothesis 3 was supported for life satisfaction: the self-employed experienced less variation in life satisfaction compared to the employees ($B = -0.06, p < 0.001$). Hypotheses 4a and 4b were supported as well. The mean indirect effect of self-employment on life satisfaction through flextime and work-family conflict was 0.04 (95% CI = [0.04; 0.05]), and through flextime and work-family enrichment 0.01 (95% CI = [0.01; 0.02]). Hypothesis 5a was partially supported, because the index of moderated mediation was 0.003 with a 95% CI of [0.002, 0.005]. Hence, the indirect effect of type of employment on life satisfaction via flextime and work-family conflict depended on time. Hypothesis 5b was not supported: the index of moderated mediation was non-significant (95% CI = [−0.005; 0.012]. Finally, Hypotheses 6a and 6b were supported (indirect effect through flextime and work-family conflict was −0.01 (95% CI of [−0.02, −0.01]), and through flextime and work-family enrichment −0.002 (95% CI of [−0.005, −0.001])).

In the current analyses we did not distinguish between self-employed individuals employing others and those who work on their own account (i.e., solo self-employment, without employees). Previous research, however, has shown differences between the two groups in terms of (mental) health (Beutell, Schmeer, & Alstete, 2014; Hessels, Rietveld, & Van der Zwan, 2017). For a more nuanced understanding of career sustainability among those in self-employment, we distinguished between two groups (having employees or not). The most important findings were as follows. It was found that both those with employees ($B = 0.14, p < .001$) and those without employees ($B = 0.07, p = .01$) had better health than employees, which was explained by the mediators in our models (the 95% confidence intervals did not include zero). In both comparisons, the product terms with job tenure had non-significant coefficients (with employees: $B = 0.02, p = .33$; without employees: $B = 0.01, p = .59$). Both groups' health was less variable over time than employees' health ($B = -0.05, p < .001$ for both with and without employees), which was explained by average levels of flextime and work-family conflict, but not by average levels of flextime and work-family enrichment.

2.5 DISCUSSION

This study compared two occupational groups—the self-employed and employees—on key prerequisites of career sustainability during the parenthood life stage. We used health as a key indicator of career sustainability, in line with previous research (De Vos et al., 2018). Our aim was to elucidate the process by which working parents remain healthy throughout their careers. Parenthood is a life stage in which career sustainability is increasingly problematic due to high levels of family responsibility (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Van Engen, Vinkenburgh & Dijkers, 2012). As a family-friendly arrangement, flextime may be a critical resource for parents to manage the work-home interface and build a sustainable career. We observed that parents in self-employment had better health than parents in paid employment, which could be attributed to differences in the resourcefulness of their work environments. Specifically, we found that parents in self-employment were higher in the flextime resource than parents in paid employment. Schedule flexibility enhanced experiences of work-family enrichment and decreased experiences of work-family conflict, ultimately affecting their health status. Surprisingly, we did not observe a growing disparity in health between these occupational groups over time (which would be in concordance with the loss and gain spirals in COR theory). Yet, an explanation for this finding might nonetheless be found in adaptation theory (Ritter et al., 2016). Adaptation theory posits that individuals are able to adapt to stressors over time (i.e., adjust to resource loss), and thus return to preexisting levels of well-being. Indeed, a recent longitudinal research from Matthews and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that the negative relationship between work-family conflict and well-being on the

short term became less negative on the long term. Still, the self-employed showed higher stability in health than employees during the parenthood life stage. We conclude that the work environments of the self-employed allow them to build more sustainable careers than their counterparts in paid employment are able to do. Our supplementary analysis indicated that this conclusion holds for both the self-employed with and without personnel.

The present paper responds to numerous calls in the growing body of research on career sustainability (see De Vos et al., 2018). First, we examined the interplay between key concepts in this literature—namely flexibility, the work-family interface, and health—to enhance our understanding of how career sustainability can be achieved. Drawing on COR theory, we identified the resource environment of individuals as a key antecedent of career sustainability. We believe that our theorizing on how the flextime resource can bring about good health and help individuals remain healthy on the longer term moves research on career sustainability forward. Second, our longitudinal dataset to study the careers of the self-employed and employees during the parenthood life stage is an important step forward in research on career sustainability. Our results suggest that the process of career sustainability is conditional on time (the number of years in the current job), but more research is needed that investigates how resources evolve in cycles such that differences between those in resource rich and resource poor environments increase over time.

Importantly, our study acknowledges the changing needs of individuals in different life stages and was specifically focused on how working individuals can remain healthy during the parenthood life stage. We compared the pathways of parents in self-employment and parents in paid employment towards sustainable careers. Little is known about the work-home interface and health of the self-employed, as most of this scholarly work has focused on employees (Jager, Kelliher, Peters, Blomme, & Sakamoto, 2016; Munkejord, 2017). Our examination of the self-employed has provided us with a better understanding of how employment type influences outcomes related to the work-home interface and health. We contend that further theoretical development of career sustainability as a concept should reflect the fundamental roles of time, life stage as well as type of employment. Moreover, we, like others (De Vos et al., 2018), see great potential in COR theory and its principles, in particular the notions of loss and gain cycles (Hobfoll, 1989) and resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2015), for helping scholars understand what makes careers sustainable across the lifespan.

2.5.1 Practical Implications

Our study has a number of important implications for practice. We have focused on the parenthood life stage and can offer insights as to what can help make this life stage less problematic in terms of achieving career sustainability. In particular, the results indicated that flextime is a critical resource that reduces work-family conflict and fosters work-family enrich-

ment, in turn positively affecting health status. However, the implications of this result are different for the self-employed and employees. It is of utmost importance that the self-employed conserve the flexibility resource over the years in order to build a sustainable career in which they can remain healthy. It must not be forgotten that this occupational group is frequently burdened by uncertainty (McMullen & Shephard, 2006) and operates in a complex and frequently changing environment (Baron, 2008). Without flexibility, the self-employed find themselves in high-strain jobs characterized by high demands combined with low job control (Stephan & Roesler, 2010). We recommend the self-employed to be mindful of the beneficial effects of flextime and actively strive to hold on to this resource, which should enable them to experience an active job situation that fosters career sustainability. Our results are promising in this regard, as they suggest that the self-employed learn to better employ the flextime resource over the years to reduce work-family conflict.

We also see practical implications for organizations and employees. The notions of boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1994) and protean careers (Hall, 2004) capture the increasing flexibility of careers over the last couple of decades. Contemporary careers are less strongly tied to one or a small number of organizations, and it is the employee “who steers his/her career in the preferred direction and who needs to make sure that it stays aligned with the demands from the labour market and his/her own physical and psychological needs” (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015, p. 224). However, our results indicate that employees lack job control in terms of schedule flexibility and they may feel they are restricted in ensuring that their career fits their core life values. That said, we are by no means encouraging employees to become self-employed but merely provide them with an understanding that flextime may be a starting point for building a sustainable career. To that end, we recommend employees to be proactive and seek opportunities for crafting their own jobs and enhancing their resources at work, to offset resource losses in the future. Yet, in line with the notion that career sustainability is a shared responsibility between organizations and workers (see Veld, Semeijn, & Van Vuuren, 2015), we encourage organizations to offer their employees flexibility in rearranging their schedule, thereby taking responsibility in fostering individuals’ career sustainability. Moreover, as flextime lists the top three of individuals’ motivating factors in making career decisions (Global Candidate Preferences Survey, 2016), it is important for organizations to realize that flextime is a strategic tool in recruitment and retention, especially for those who are faced with high family responsibilities (Shockley & Allen, 2007).

2.5.2 Limitations and Future Research

We draw attention to some limitations of our study and directions for future research. First, we focused on availability of the flextime resource but do not know whether or to what extent employees and the self-employed actually

used their flextime options. As the frequency of flexibility use may influence the magnitude of associations (Lapierre & Allen, 2006), we recommend future research to include frequency of flexibility use for a more refined understanding of the effects of flexible working practices on the work-home interface and health.

Second, there may be limits to the generalizability of our findings due to the specifics of our sample. We focused on the parenthood life stage, yet in our sample of parents we did not distinguish among households on the basis of number and age of children. As these factors may influence parenting responsibilities, we recommend future work to distinguish between stages in the family life cycle. Moreover, we suggest that researchers test our model in other samples to see if our findings generalize to those without children, as parenthood represents a life stage in which flexibility is vastly appreciated (Shockley & Allen, 2007).

Finally, our data did not allow us to shed light on the employability of employees and the self-employed. That is, our study focused exclusively on well-being as a prerequisite of career sustainability and did not explore the aspect of security (i.e., employability) (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Akkermans and Tims (2017) noted that “it is not quite clear yet how workers can safeguard their work-home balance while simultaneously managing their employability” (p. 169). Similarly, our study leaves unanswered how the self-employed can endure a sense of job security while remaining healthy. Future work can focus on involuntary withdrawal and what happens in the aftermath of business failure for the self-employed (see Ucbasaran & Shepherd, Lockett, & Lyon, 2013). All in all, for a full-fledged understanding of career sustainability, we encourage researchers to compare employees and the self-employed on multiple indicators of career sustainability (see also De Vos et al., 2018).