

“Living the dream” - a psychoanalytical exploration of franchisee autonomy

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Abstract

The notion of autonomy is widely drawn upon as a contributor to motivation, satisfaction and performance in franchise systems, yet autonomy lacks sufficient theorisation and is often treated as a black box. We thus remain ill-equipped to explore further the role of autonomy within the franchise organization and to answer questions about how autonomy is experienced, fulfilled and sustained by franchisee business owners. This paper employs a psychoanalytical lens, drawing on the work of Lacan, to offer a deeper psychologised explanation of autonomy. From this theorisation, our findings provide an insight into how the quest for autonomy plays an important role in enabling the franchising format and keeping alive the dream of being your own boss, but at the same time the ongoing struggle to craft oneself as autonomous creates tensions and anxieties. The study provides an important addition to economic explanations of franchising.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; autonomy; self-employment; creative struggles

1. Introduction

For over three decades scholars have sought to understand how franchise organizations can balance franchisee autonomy and franchisors' needs for uniformity across units (Dant & Gundlach, 1999; Davies et al., 2011; Pardo-del-Val et al., 2014). Although scholars point to how franchisee autonomy can positively influence unit-level outcomes (Croonen et al., 2016; Colla et al., 2019; Hizam-Hanafiah and Li, 2014; López-Bayón, S. and López-Fernández,

2016), there remains much debate and a recognised need to more fully understand franchisee autonomy within a system designed around compliance (Dada, 2018; Croonen et al., 2016).

Within the broader literature scholars have pointed to how autonomy remains insufficiently theorised and is all too often treated as a black box (Campbell, 2009; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Medvetz, 2013). This is evident in the variety of definitions of autonomy within franchise research, ranging from a broader consideration of independent thought and action (Pizanti and Lerner, 2003), to a focus on certain local decision-making or adaptation freedoms (López-Bayón, S. and López-Fernández, 2016; Colla et al., 2019; Cox and Mason, 2007). It also explains why studies often rely on objective measures of autonomy and survey instruments that include measures relating to feeling autonomous over one's life, over one's business, or over decision making (e.g. Dant and Gundlach, 1999; Hizam-Hanafiah and Li, 2014).

A lack of theorisation and reliance on objective measures of autonomy means we know little about how franchisees experience autonomy within a system designed around compliance (Croonen et al., 2016). It also means we remain ill-equipped to answer questions such as: What does autonomy mean to franchisees? How is autonomy experienced and fulfilled by franchisees? How do franchisees sustain the idea of autonomy and to what effect? This paper argues that there is a need for new approaches that enable further insight into how autonomy plays out in the lives of franchisees.

In order to address these questions and to further theorise the experience and fulfilment of autonomy we turn to two influential bodies of work that acknowledge autonomy as a central facet of Western liberal discourses and that focus attention on the importance of language (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1989; Campbell, 2009). The first body of work, inspired by the work of Foucault, conceptualises autonomy as discursively constructed and highlights how the pervasive valorisation of autonomy is problematic as expectations and aspirations for autonomy are always bounded and constrained (Moisander, Groß, & Eräranta, 2017; Vallas &

Cummins, 2015). Although this area of work is useful in surfacing tensions in the construction of an autonomous self, it does not go far enough to enable us to fully address our questions of how autonomy is fulfilled and sustained by franchisees alongside compliance with the franchise format. A second body of work extends Foucauldian insights through application of the psychoanalytical tradition (Gabriel, 1999; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998). The work of Lacan (1966, 1977), especially, offers a new avenue for exploring autonomy as discursively constructed and psychically experienced.

Through focusing on franchisees who operate small-scale, single-outlet, regional businesses the paper draws on the work of Lacan (1966, 1977) to explore how the psychoanalytical tradition can help develop a richer understanding of franchisee autonomy. Through an exploration of Lacan's notions of desire and lack, the paper reveals how on one hand the quest for an autonomous self underpins the success of the franchise format, thus providing a new way of understanding franchisee motivation and satisfaction (Bennett et al., 2010; Hizam-Hanafiah and Li, 2014). On the other hand, the paper reveals how the continual work to construct oneself around autonomy is replete with deep rooted tensions and anxieties, thus also providing a new avenue for exploring conflict and tensions in the franchisor-franchisee relationship (López-Fernández and López-Bayón, 2018).

2. Literature: from franchisee autonomy to psychoanalysis

2.1 Franchisee autonomy

Franchising presents an intriguing context for discussions on autonomy. On one hand, autonomy has been found to be influential for attracting aspiring franchisees (Bennett et al., 2010) as well as increasing franchisee performance, motivation and satisfaction (Colla et al., 2019; Hizam-Hanafiah and Li, 2014; Dada, Watson and Kirby, 2012). On the other hand, there continues to be much debate and discussion on franchise autonomy (Dada, 2018), as the levels

of, and desire for, autonomy varies considerably across franchisees (Croonen et al., 2016), and franchisee autonomy has also been found to be a source of conflict within the organization (López-Fernández and López-Bayón, 2018).

One of the recognised challenges in moving forward discussions on autonomy in the franchise context is that there remains little challenge to constructions and conceptualisations of autonomy within franchise research (Croonen et al., 2016). To help conceptualise autonomy, we turn to recent philosophical discussions which problematise objective notions of autonomy and point to how autonomy is constituted through discourse (Barclay, 2000; Christman, 2004; Mackenzie, 2008). Within this body of work, the movement towards defining oneself through autonomy has arisen within a broader backdrop of the emergence of enterprise discourse which celebrates the autonomous and self-governing individual who is willing to take on increasing levels of self-responsibility (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1989; Campbell, 2009). Studies that draw on a discursive perspective of autonomy, often influenced by the work of Foucault, provide a foundation to discussions on why the desire to construct oneself around autonomy might be evoked by organizations and why we might see notions of autonomy echoed by individuals as they describe their experiences of working in particular organizations (Fournier & Grey, 1999; Moisander, Groß, & Eräranta, 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). This body of work, and a focus on the importance of language and discourse, a perspective recently introduced to franchise research (Dada and Onyas, 2021), provides an important foundation to understanding autonomy as more complex and multifaceted than previous considered. The body of work inspired by Foucault, however, does not go as far as explaining how autonomy is experienced and sustained by individuals as they work within the constraints of an organizational environment. Another body of work extends Foucauldian insights through application of the psychoanalytical tradition (Gabriel, 1999; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998). The psychoanalytical tradition, especially the work of Lacan (1966, 1977), acknowledges the important role of

discourse and pervasive liberal ideals and through this offers new avenues for exploring franchisee experiences of autonomy, as well as how, and the difficulties with which, autonomy is fulfilled and sustained by franchisees alongside compliance with the franchise format.

2.2 Psychoanalysis: Desire and Lack

The work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1966, 1977) has recently gained ground in studies of careers and organizations (Arnaud and Vidaillet, 2018; Sievers, 2018; De Board, 2014; Arnaud & Vanheule, 2013; Driver, 2017; Fotaki et al., 2012) as well as small business and entrepreneurship (Metallo et al., 2021; Scharff, 2016; Olaison & Meier Sørensen, 2014). An important aspect of Lacan's (1977) work is to point to how, from early childhood, we become embedded in the 'discourse of the environment', and thus in the social world of linguistic communication and intersubjective relations. From an early stage we craft a sense of who we are and who we want to be through the desires offered in available discourses. This desire for an 'imaginary self' leads to the subject becoming enslaved to idealised images that are captured within discourse but remain elusive in their realisation. For Lacan, this 'lack' plays an important role in the continuation of our desires, as lack is necessary for our desires to persist.

Lacan (1977) highlights the complexity of our relationship with lack, and the tensions that surface as we strive to be the self that we desire. As we approach what we believe to be the object of desire, the flaws become apparent (Driver, 2009). At such moments, anxieties are heightened as we confront the realisation that the perfect self may be unattainable (Brown & Starkey, 2000), and our desires are 'exposed as a sticky and disgusting remainder' (Lacan, 1977: 268). Rather than constructing the self as a subject of lack (du Plessis, 2015), maintenance of desires and belief in their attainability provides the motivation to continue on the quest. Thus, an experience of 'lack' does not lead to rejection of the desired object but instead motivates continued effort towards its attainment (Felluga, 2015). The tensions

experienced in this quest are key to empirical enquiry since they provide an avenue for scholars to access underlying tensions and contradictions as one experiences, or glimpses, lack. As such, it offers a new way of helping us to understand how the desire to be an autonomous subject might underpin the success of ostensibly autonomous forms of work that act as ‘a lure or trap’ (Roberts, 2005: 635). We build on these ideas by putting desire and lack at the centre of our study on autonomy and through our empirical data to reveal such tensions in individuals’ accounts.

3. Context and Methods

3.1 Context

The study is based on interviews with franchisees from an organization that we refer to here as FranchiseCo. FranchiseCo is an established franchise organization based in the UK. The interviewees are with franchisees who operate legally independent businesses under the FranchiseCo name, selling products to businesses within a geographic territory which they are to cultivate. Although franchising is often associated with companies such as McDonalds, KFC and BurgerKing which all require considerable investment, the majority of franchised businesses, including that of our study, appeal to a broader range of individuals who make a more modest investment (usually around £20-50k), and then run a small business under the franchise brand within their defined area (BFA, 2018).

Franchisees in FranchiseCo have freedom to make local level decisions at the same time as being required to act in accordance with stipulations designed to protect the brand. Franchisees sell a range of FranchiseCo products to businesses within a variety of sectors. In an annual planning meeting between each franchisee and the franchisor, a regional sales and marketing strategy for the following year is agreed that outlines which sector(s) franchisees will target, together with a proposed schedule of franchisee marketing activities and sales targets, which are reviewed every quarter with the franchisor. Franchisees have freedom to market and sell to

businesses within other sectors if new opportunities arise within their regions. FranchiseCo has agreements in place with a number of key suppliers with whom the franchisor has agreed pricing for franchisees, but also maintains a list of approved suppliers with whom franchisees have flexibility to negotiate their own prices. FranchiseCo thus provides franchisees with a degree of local level flexibility similar to other franchise organizations (Colla et al., 2019; Cox and Mason, 2007).

3.2 Franchisee sample

FranchiseCo has 45 franchisees in total, 20 franchisees were selected for interview. Interviewees were selected from a list of all franchisees and chosen to represent a variety of prior experiences, time within the franchise, and geographical regions around the UK. Franchisees' experience ranged from 6 months to 8 years. Franchisees with less than two years' experience typically ran their businesses from home, with more established franchisees leasing premises to enable them to keep products in stock to provide faster delivery times to their clients. Franchisees' businesses were small in operational nature and of a size typical of many franchise organizations within the UK (BFA, 2018), with all franchisees owning one outlet, turning over less than £250k, employing less than 5 employees and operating within a clearly defined region.

3.3 Data Collection

Recent studies which have drawn on psychoanalysis offer an insight into ways that scholars can study lack (Driver, 2009, 2013; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). As lack surfaces in ordinary speech and in everyday conversations (Arnaud, 2012; Driver, 2013), everyday narratives elicited during interviews provide an important source for examining the different ways individuals manoeuvre and navigate lack.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, in addition notes were written up soon after the interviews. During the interviews, interviewees

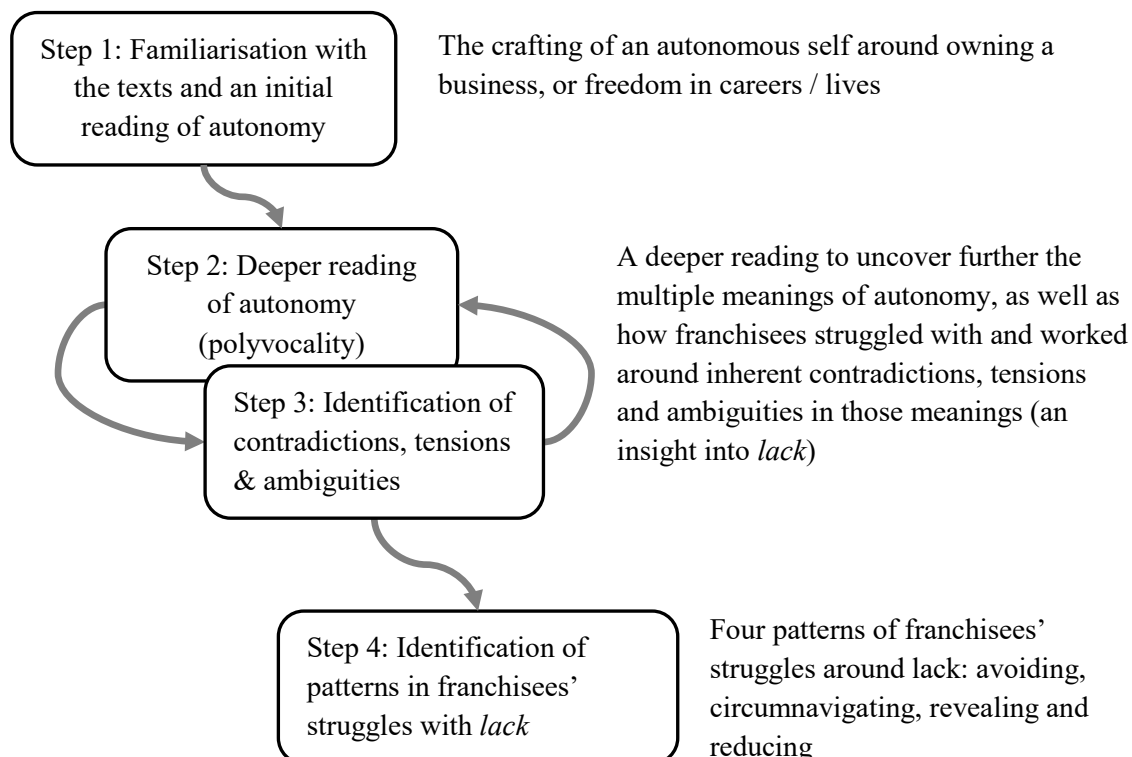
were asked broadly about their move into franchising and their experiences as business owners. The interviewer purposefully engaged in more natural conversation with interviewees to enable them to talk about themselves and their business, questions were also open-ended to allow them to talk undisturbed even where contradictions emerged and interviewees circled around topics (Gabriel, 1999). Through doing so, we assumed the role of ‘fellow traveller’ (Driver, 2017; Gabriel, 1995) by which we mean we allowed participants to tell and embellish their own stories in their own words, to produce richer narratives of personal experiences as they constructed a sense of self as franchisee.

3.4 Data analysis

Following other studies in the psychoanalytical tradition (Driver, 2013; 2017), we adopted what has been referred to as a Lacanian approach to analysis (Brock, 2016; Frosh and Saville Young, 2017) in order to make visible the often invisible limitations of language (Parker, 2010). We used a four-step process of analysis, illustrated in figure 1 below. The first step was a familiarisation with the narratives by reading through the interviews on several occasions and identifying moments in the texts where franchisees worked to construct themselves around autonomy, these were moments where franchisees spoke about the autonomous self, often couched around the desire to own their own business or having control over their lives. The second and third steps were conducted in iteration. The second step involved a more in-depth reading of the texts through an interpretive lens to reveal deeper insights into the different ways autonomy was constructed by franchisees. A Lacanian interpretation focuses on surfacing multiplicity and polyvocality of language that might not be visible on first reading (Frosh and Saville Young, 2017). It is also important to ensure interpretations of participants’ constructions of autonomy were considered within the wider context of participants’ stories and lives (Neill, 2013; Parker, 2010). The third step involved a closer examination of how constructions of autonomy contained contradictions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, as well as

moments of anxiety and tension. These moments of tension, are important to interpreting the texts through a psychoanalytical lens, as ambiguities arising through lack are revealed in the airing of frustrations or by circling around unavoidable failures or painful ideas (Gabriel, 1999). Such moments bring to the fore tensions in attempts to create a coherent construction of the self (Hardy, 2001; Lacan, 1977). With the broader context of franchising and our participants stories in mind, iterating between steps 2 and 3 helped to reveal struggles with *lack* as participants worked to construct themselves around multiple meanings of autonomy. The final step was to explore patterns in participants' struggles with *lack* as participants worked to construct themselves around autonomy. Categorisation of these struggles enabled us to identify four different themes in how individuals navigated encounters with *lack*. These four themes form the basis of our analysis and are explored further below.

FIGURE 1: Four step process of analysis



4. Analysis: encounters with lack

In our analysis we firstly explore the different ways in which autonomy reveals itself in the narratives of franchisees and we then use interview material to explore four struggles of navigating breakdowns in the imaginary order (or *lack*). The four struggles occurred across the interviews, rather than being associated with particular participants. Table 1 provides an overview of the four struggles. In the first struggle, *avoidance*, participants present themselves through a well-worked coherent story that echoes the liberal ideal of the autonomous self; lack is avoided. *Circumnavigation*, arises as the franchise context enters into the narrative, and where participants recognise a gap between who they are and who they want to be; participants circumnavigate franchisor controls in order to keep the autonomous self alive. The third struggle, *revealing*, emerges as participants reflect on their move into franchising and demonstrates greater uncertainty over the autonomous self; lack becomes ever-present. In the fourth struggle, *reducing*, participants seek to present stability and coherence as they narrate the organization as providing a basis for experiencing an adequate, if not ideal, autonomous self.

TABLE 1 – Overview of Four Creative Struggles with Lack

	Avoiding lack	Circumnavigating lack	Revealing lack	Reducing lack
When this struggle arises in the narrative	Presenting the enterprising self	As the organization enters the narrative	On reflecting on the move into franchising	Justifying the move into franchising

The imaginary character	'Successful' business owner	Independent, autonomous business owner	Uncertainty over what they are chasing	Quasi-independent business owner
Presence of lack	Not present, focus is on who one wants to be	Organization comes between the subject and their desires	Anxiety increases as the fantasy is challenged and lack is revealed	Recasting fantasy and desire to reduce anxiety
Desire for autonomy and relationship to franchisor	Desire as something achievable within the franchise environment	Double edged sword of the franchise organization – provides a means as well as an obstacle	Desire for autonomy questioned, relationship to franchisor seen as unavoidable	Desire contextualised within the franchise environment

4.1 Presenting the autonomous self

Participants express their desires to create a better self, a self that is more autonomous and in control. The inherent desire to be autonomous is narrated through aspirations for business ownership, for freedom from employment, as well as the promise of control over one's life. As Participant 12 stated "I want to grow the company and have employees and all that sort of stuff [...] I want to be the owner of a successful business", thus echoing the liberal discourses of growth and success. The element of being in control of one's life also plays an important role for Participants 10 and 3: "I wanted to break away from employment, to start my own business, to take control of my life and to build something that has real value" (Participant 10), "It's the freedom that comes from owning and building my own business" (Participant 3). For others it was about being able to take control through supporting their family, "I have always had aspirations to start my own business, to do my own thing and to build something that supports my family". As Lacan (1977) and Zizek (1989; 1997) note, realising one's self through such

desires is an impossible endeavour as those desires remain part of the symbolic order, entirely captured through discourse, thus remaining unachievable. In the following sections we look more closely at the different ways in which our participants navigate lack and in so doing revealing a variety of struggles as they work around contradictions and tensions in their continuous search for the autonomous self.

4.2 Struggle one: 'it's the best thing we have ever done' – avoiding lack

In the first struggle participants protected the self through creating coherence around who they are and their experience of autonomy. Coherence was articulated through the achievement of dreams. Some spoke explicitly of achieving their dreams, without embellishing on the content: “It’s the best thing I’ve ever done” (Participant 1), “I’ve achieved what I always wanted to achieve, it’s a great feeling” (Participant 7). Other participants were more specific and highlighted what they describe as the ‘dream life’ which is seemingly linked to notions of economic autonomy or autonomy as self-direction. For example, Participant 11 referred to economic autonomy in their comment, “I’ve never looked back on what I’ve achieved, I’ve created a highly profitable business that allows me to lead the life I always dreamed about” and participant 12 referred to the importance of self-direction “It’s great to own your own business and be in control”. Also, whilst wealth did not feature in more abstract presentations of the dream, the ability to afford luxurious holidays or homes was presented as evidence of the dream attained. For example, participant 16 commented “The business has grown beyond our expectations [...] when we have the time, we can now afford more luxurious holidays we used to only dream about” and participant 17 stated, “we are now at the stage where we can move house and buy a bigger house”.

Interviewee 12 provided an extended explanation in which he portrayed the dream achieved through material wealth and countered as ‘myth’ the excessive hours of work that might contaminate the dream. The extract is interesting both in how it constructed coherence in who

they are and in what this emphatic coherence reveals in psychoanalytic terms, as we shall discuss.

And as I keep saying to other franchisees who call me, it's the best thing we've ever done. We've moved house twice. We've actually just bought another second house which really is a dream house in an area where we've always wanted to live and we just bought that house last week so it's the best thing we've ever done.

There are always people who say "I should have done this, I should have bought that, I should have done this" but we did buy it and whenever new prospective franchisees call me I tell them it's been the best thing we've ever done ... I never work weekends ... There is a myth that you need to work 60, 70, 80-hour weeks, in our case that's not the case.

(Participant 12)

The narrator here is emphatic in asserting coherence and admits no ambiguity: the extract rings with confidence in that a clear storyline is pursued. The extract is presented as a well worked story, told over time to other franchisees and evidenced by recent purchase of a dream house. Furthermore, success is related to an essentialised characteristic – the personal ability to spot and pursue opportunity – a level of competence in autonomy that is particular to the speaker.

The successful business owner is one captured through the liberal discourse of the self-made man that forms a central tenet of the liberal ideal, whilst the authentic subject who is defined through contradictions and tensions remains missing from these articulations (Driver, 2009).

The confident and vehement rendition creates 'a harmonious whole [which] is rendered possible' (Zizek, 2001: 90) and alerts the psychoanalyst to focus on what is not spoken. As

Lacan states, such narrations of achievement are often 'compensation for loss' (Lacan, 1977).

Lack is ever-present, yet is avoided for fear of the anxiety that it provokes and the challenge it presents to the maintenance of who they are and who they want to be. This is evidenced in

Participant 12's repetition on a number of occasions through the interview "it's the best thing

we've ever done". The assertion possibly reminds himself as much as the researcher that this is the case; at the same time such renditions help to avoid focusing on lack that would give rise to anxiety.

When presenting the autonomous self, the focus is on coherence. Ambiguity is not permitted in this struggle as it recognises and brings to the fore elements of lack. Such stories of the self have been carefully crafted and rendered such that lack, and the ambiguity that its recognition would bring, is submerged to the listener, to the reader, and especially to themselves.

4.3 Struggle Two: 'Whose business is it?' – Circumnavigating lack

Whilst the previous struggle focused very much on the individualised self, the second draws in the franchise context. We see how the franchise context, in this case the tie to the franchisor, creates moments of anxiety in the quest for the autonomous self. In particular, we see here participants reconciling notions of control and freedom to avoid lack. The franchise organization is narrated as an obstacle that needs to be circumnavigated to keep the dream alive and to allow participants to continue to constitute themselves as subjects of as yet unfulfilled desire (which is narrated as remaining in control), rather than as subjects experiencing lack, narrated here as a lack of control.

As such, this leaves participants juggling between visions of themselves as autonomous in their decision making capacity as franchisees versus the actions of others or contextual events which threaten this desire and imaginary self by constraining what actions are possible. Participant 7 illustrates some of the tensions that lie between the vision of independence and the constraints imposed on her. Ambiguity is evident as her narrative shifts between 'my company' and being 'back in corporate'. Having control and being able to grow the business is juxtaposed with feelings of her being out of control and continually threatened in her position as autonomous business owner. The ambiguity is, however, contained as she circumnavigates the lack which her narrative reveals. That is, after elaborating the frustrations she minimises the extent of the

problem as relevant only to ‘a small part of her role’ and, ultimately, ‘little niggly things’. Instead, she moves to focus on the approach she adopts in ‘my company’.

When I deal with [FRANCHISE] head office it does sometimes feel a bit like, it is the one bit of my role that is back to being the corporate thing, where you are working in another company, where I just can’t say ‘no we are not going to do that’ or ‘yes, we are going to be [*pause*]’ because you are kind of working with other people and they all have different ideas, we all have different demands [...] that’s the only time that the politics come in and all that kind of corporate stuff [...] but it’s such a small part that it doesn’t particularly matter [...] obviously in my company I don’t have any of that, if something isn’t working right, we’ll change it, we’ll move it we’ll improve it, we’ve got a book keeper, I want her ideas, I want her to tell me if something can be done differently. Compared with so many companies, they are so good that it’s actually OK, because I’ve worked in some companies that are an absolute nightmare, but actually they’re alright, it’s only little niggly things”

For this participant, when the franchise context comes into the conversation it is narrated as something that needs to be circled to provide a way for her to be able to continue living the desire of the autonomous individual. Much emphasis in this section of narrative is placed on ‘in my company’ where the participant is able to illustrate well the quest for the idealised autonomous self. The franchise context moves back stage where it is positioned as an obstacle that at times can interfere with her quest for autonomy and independence. The narration of franchisor obstacles plays an important role in holding together the narrative, and is presented as something which, if only it could only be removed, would help to restore the harmony which they seek. There is, however, another tension in that the obstacle is also the provider of the opportunity and the participant quickly qualifies the obstacle as being on the whole ‘good’ and ‘actually ok’, diminishing such challenges as ‘only little niggly things’, thus allowing the

narrative to gain coherence, rather than providing space for the emergence of lack and the franchise context taking centre stage in blocking the way to an imaginary self.

In this second abstract, from Participant 16, circumnavigation is illustrated through a narrative prompted by a quarterly meeting in which participants were told what they ‘needed’ to do. This particular incident had stood out for several participants who drew on it to describe their experiences. At the heart of this quote is the tension that exists between the imaginary self, as autonomous business owner, and the subject position which is created for them:

At the quarterly meetings, [DIRECTOR] likes to remind us what we should be doing, “this is what you need to focus on”, he pushes you, in a nice way, in a sort of guiding way, although I do often ask the question “Whose business is it? Who paid the money?” [...] I suppose that is because [DIRECTOR] put a lot of money into it and so did a couple of others and it is their baby [...] but it’s entirely up to you what you do [...] I can understand why they do it and I can understand that they need to do it

In this excerpt, ambiguity is pronounced and the pronouns are illuminative as the narrative commences with the managing director instructing the ‘you’ of the participants on what they must do, giving way to a specific position of participants which they see as undermining their control and autonomy. Indeed, the participant highlights ‘Whose business is it? Who paid the money?’ emphasising not only how ownership of the business is an essential part of the imaginary self, but also how that same ownership is an indication of an inherent right to be autonomous. As the participant attempts to circumnavigate franchisor constraints and to be able to continue in the quest, ‘you’ becomes re-voiced from that addressed in the imperative voice to a more generalised ‘you’ more in control of their activity. This is interjected with a statement justifying the seizing of control by the franchisor based on their investment and financial risk, ‘their baby’. However, this is immediately countered by the control they have assumed as business owners, ‘but it’s entirely up to you what you do’, which is used to confirm

that they remain in control and autonomous and to enable the narrative to continue. Indeed the actions of the managing director are positioned merely as a fleeting interference in their desire to become autonomous.

Through these extracts, as in others coded under this struggle, the narrative tone is less confident than that found in the first struggle. These are not presented as well worked stories widely recounted but rather as relatively fleeting thoughts of the moment which encapsulate the inherent ambiguities – illustrated for example through ‘I did sit down and think one day’. The contradiction between working with the organization, or being ‘in corporate’, and the autonomy of ‘my business’ are juxtaposed and moved between within the narrative. However, narrators work to rationalise and minimise feelings of lack, to create coherence from ambiguity, through showing the lack of autonomy as trivial or reasonable.

4.4 Struggle three: ‘I’d have been better off being employed’ - Revealing lack

Ambiguity arises more prominently in the third struggle as participants come to a point in their stories where they reflect on their move into franchising. It is during this part of the conversation where lack emerges in the differences between their expectations and how they feel as business owners, ‘It does feel much more like a job than I thought it would, I don’t feel like I am the director of a company’ (Participant 7); ‘It’s not what I expected really, I thought it would feel very different, but it’s very much like having a job except there isn’t anyone to kick you up the backside’ (Participant 18); ‘I don’t feel like an employee anymore but I don’t feel like I’m truly a [pause] I don’t own my own business’ (Participant 14), ‘It’s a strange feeling really, it’s kind of my business, but I’m also working for the franchisor’ (Participant 4); ‘Being a franchisee is different to what I had imagined it to feel like, I’m not really an employee but also I’m not an independent business owner’ (Participant 1). Participants are indicating how they expected it to feel ‘different’; this creates anxiety as it reveals how participants are questioning what the autonomous self as business owner should feel like.

It many ways it could be seen that these participants are experiencing what Žižek (1989: 160) calls a moment of “‘c’est ne pas ca!’”, or “that is not it!”; at such times confrontation of that which is not ‘it’ does not undermine desire, but underpins the journey to discover what ‘it’ is. This is a key facet of Lacan’s (1977) notion of lack that plays an important role in how we frame autonomy. In these moments when lack emerges, we see how participants actively, and openly in the interview situation, work to create coherence through working through alternative meanings and revisiting what it is they want to be. We illustrate this active working using further extracts from the interviews.

Our interview with participant 10 provides an insight into how business ownership is not what was expected and how the revealing of lack creates a heightened sense of anxiety. In this particular example, the desire created by owning a business, the working effort extracted as one gets ‘sucked into it’ and the associated riskiness are juxtaposed with the safety, security and relative ‘cushiness’ of employment. In such reflections, desires for an autonomous self have lost some of their lustre and moments of lack start to appear. Such moments of lack are indicated by the way in which the participant flirts between questioning what it is he desires (which requires long working hours and worries over maintaining sales) and the autonomy and responsibility of his own business. In questioning his desires the idea of not minding the effort and having done the right thing is interspersed with what are presented as occasional thoughts (‘sometimes I think’) of regret as the participant faces lack. However, the participant also quickly moves to excluding and containing these thoughts as disruptions in his quest for the autonomous self:

“[...] any bit of business that comes through we’d work until mid-night to get it done, but I don’t want to be working 18 hours a day. I’ll work 12 but that is about my maximum. I was doing 38 hours or 37 and a half hours when I worked full time. You do get sucked into it but because it is your own you don’t mind doing it. Sometimes I think maybe I’d

have been better off just staying where I was in my nice cushy job, with a salary. But then when I look back at how we have moved things on and where we might be in 3-4 years' time. That is when I realise I am doing the right thing. I can only say that now because the sales are there and there is money in the bank and everything is going swimmingly. Sometimes I think maybe I'd have been better off being employed and I wouldn't have all this hassle or worry." (Participant 11)

In this extract the confusion and dilemmas faced become evident as the desire of business ownership and what that may bring is juxtaposed with the safety and security of employment. His sense of self wanders from recognition of the true nature (and unattainability) of the desire for autonomy to defending that desire. In the initial part of this narrative, the interviewee is highlighting (although not directly spoken) a mismatch between his expectations and the reality he faces. He labours on the long hours he is working and then compares this with an employment contract of 37 hours. However, given the anxiety this obviously creates, he quickly switches to trying to rationalise this through highlighting how it is "your own" and the identity of business owner is used to justify the longer hours. Again, there is then another switch back to "cushy job, with a salary", indicating the foregone pleasure from the security of employment. These shifts in the narrative indicate inherent tensions and ambiguities which give rise to anxieties as the narrative reveals how he is questioning what it is he desires. This becomes a double-edged sword for the interviewee as neither of those positions quite offers what he is really looking for, which leads to a questioning of what it is he desires.

In the second example, we hear about Participant 18's early anxieties in the franchise. For this participant we see an insight into the tensions as she skips between moments of experiencing lack and then counters those with rationalisations based on past experiences. Whereas Participant 11 above was very much juggling with the autonomous self, for Participant 18 the desire manifests in a different way and the narrative suggests an underlying desire for a guiding

hand and compatriotism, with anxieties present during experiences of autonomy. In this narrative we see how the participant sways between glimpses of anxiety, 'there isn't anyone to kick you up the backside', and rationalisations based on previous experiences 'but then the last few jobs that I had I was senior enough' where she uses past experiences to alleviate these tensions:

'...before (I took on the franchise) I had this perception of it being scary and it being lots of responsibility and difficult and actually it's really very, once you have set up all the stuff it's very much like having a job except there isn't anyone to kick you up the backside, but then the last few jobs that I had I was senior enough that no one was telling me day to day you know ... I was a few months in and you get to know everybody else and you think, 'oh actually it's not so great', you start to see some of the problems, you learn some of the politics of the company, it's probably not that different from how I felt in some jobs ... there's nobody else there to say 'come on, have a good day, what are we going to do today', you know, you gotta kind of do it yourself, come on, let's get on the phones, so and so needs their quote, you've got an appointment today, you know, it was just like 'I've got to get an appointment', 'I can't be ill', 'I can't be off' and that was the end'

In a similar way to participant 11 above, this participant also reveals a desire for the safety and security of others, but here the anxieties of decision making autonomy and self-governance are more pronounced. We also see the veil of business ownership being lifted as the participant glimpses what 'it' might not be, in this case the autonomy that is experienced.

These examples highlight how participants attempt to create coherence as lack surfaces and desires are questioned. At such times, ambiguities are foregrounded in the narratives as participants struggle to understand what it is that is causing anxiety and at the same time attempt

to lessen those anxieties through once again reaching towards coherence through creative struggles with who they are and what it is they desire.

4.5 Struggle four: 'I was completely blind' – reducing lack

The fourth struggle arose as participants began talking more specifically about their role in the organization. Interestingly, none of the participants were asked why they did not choose to start an independent business, yet many of the participants steered the conversation to talk about why they chose not to go it alone.

In these sections of the text it is clear that, as participants attempt to justify their reasons for choosing franchising, experiences of lack emerge once again. Participants engage in an effort to reduce the emergence of lack by highlighting personal deficiencies which serve to rationalise and minimise their experience of lack. For Participant 5, the deficiency was narrated as lacking in confidence, “because I’m a woman I perhaps didn’t have the confidence [...] I needed to know it was a bit more certain”. For participant 3 it was not having an idea or the skills to start their own business, “I just knew that I couldn’t start it on my own, I just didn’t have the great idea, nor the skills that were needed”. For participants 13 and 14 it was the perceived risk of starting your own business “I just couldn’t risk it [starting my own business] from a family perspective” (Participants 13), “Looking back, it [*starting something on my own*] was just too risky, I couldn’t start something from scratch I wanted something that was more proven that I could start running with from the start” (participant 14). These comments highlight an internal struggle and anxiety with the choice they have made and an awareness of personal deficiency as an obstacle from the very beginning of their business ownership. Accordingly, participants seek to reframe their explanations in ways that reduce those anxieties and provide a more satisfactory explanation to themselves. We return to this point after examining two extracts in greater depth.

One common feature to this struggle is the use of time to show personal development and growth. Thus several participants talk of temporary obstacles operative “at the time” (participants 5 and 13) and “looking back” (Participant 14) and of a future offering possibilities freed from earlier constraints “what the future holds who knows” (Participant 3). This use of time is consistent with our understanding of the construction of the self since it introduces change, and that is positive change, yet as part of a trajectory and therefore not violating continuity (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). However, this narrative work not only constructs and maintains a sense of self but also performs psychological work in that it allows the desire to survive through creating a coherent, yet unspoken, quest for ‘maybe one day I’ll be able to go it alone’. The possibility remains that the autonomous self might one day be achieved, even perhaps as a shadowy presence that need never be acted on.

The extract from Participant 6 highlights the striving for an autonomous self in more detail. The focus for this participant is on highlighting the particularity of his situation – factors gravitating towards and away from success in a truly independent business. The extract emphasises some areas of ability whilst asserting that the narrator was ‘completely blind’ in others, especially as personal impediment prevented his ability to choose other options. The particular business arrangement offered something to ‘easily fit into’ and ‘be OK with’, however, the participant makes a point of how this was a temporary situation and leaves open avenues better suited to the imaginary:

I had a lot of technical knowledge, a lot of graphics design, a fair bit of savvy with regards to the internet, but in terms of sales, never had to do any; marketing, never had to do any; invoicing, chasing debts, never had to do any; so I was completely blind other than with [franchise] [...] I thought then that it would be better to buy an existing format and I’ll easily fit into that, do as they say and I should be OK kind of thing,

which has worked quite well [...] although having said that I probably wouldn't worry about getting involved in anything now, it's no longer an issue (Participant 6)

However, the temporal nature of the deficiencies was not common across all participants. For participants 2 and 9, their narratives highlighted the ongoing deficiencies of their situation and used the examples of others to justify the ongoing nature of this condition. From a psychoanalytical perspective, rather than keeping the desire alive through indicating its temporal nature, they are instead unconsciously continuing to legitimise and justify franchising as the most appropriate path for the autonomous self in order to reduce their sense of lack. Again, none of these participants were asked specifically about the reasons for choosing franchising, indicating the underlying anxieties and the need to use different tactics to defend their position and to reduce feelings of anxiety.

Participant 2 shared a story about her friend's experience from a different context. The dangers of complete autonomy are highlighted in a narrative that culminates with those seeking autonomy consumed by the business they establish. These dangers are amplified as the experience stretches across domains of family life and mental health whilst the protagonist has no help internally within the business and has problems keeping up with that which is thrown at them externally. It is noteworthy that the evidence of another person, and in a different retail sector, can stand as proof of a wise decision and also that the evidence endures despite originating from the speakers' early experience with the franchisee during training.

I feel safer, the lady I trained with had an independent wine shop in Oxford, I think they were the only one around, and she said they nearly had a breakdown, the marriage took a big toll because they were working day in day out, they had no backup, any problem they had they had to sort it out themselves, any new legislation came through they didn't know about it [...] she said it just consumed them and they couldn't wait to get out of the shop (Participant 2)

The second extract also draws on others' experiences. It is in many ways the mirror image of the highly confident narrative we looked at under struggle one in which the narrator professed to frequently tell others of the best decision he had ever made. Here, instead, the participant's sense of self is challenged by friends who highlight both the costs and reduced freedom associated with franchising. That is, those friends' stories expose lack and such challenges create feelings of anxiety, provoking franchisees into legitimising their position and lessening feelings of anxiety caused by such lack. The following extract reduces lack by re-framing franchise fees as payment for professional services that would, even in other circumstances, be necessary. This framing implicitly challenges the idea that their route to business ownership was any more expensive, or any less autonomous, than other routes:

We have friends who want to start up a business [*and we suggested to try franchising*] "oh I am working for nothing" because "I'm going to have to pay fees and somebody's looking over your shoulder all the time"; they don't understand that you pay fees, but it's only like paying a marketing firm to do marketing, you would pay an employment firm to do all your employment law, you would pay a firm to do all your software for you [...] you are paying somebody to look after you [...] it's just a head ache, it's a big head ache [...] we do feel completely safe with [franchise] (Participant 9)

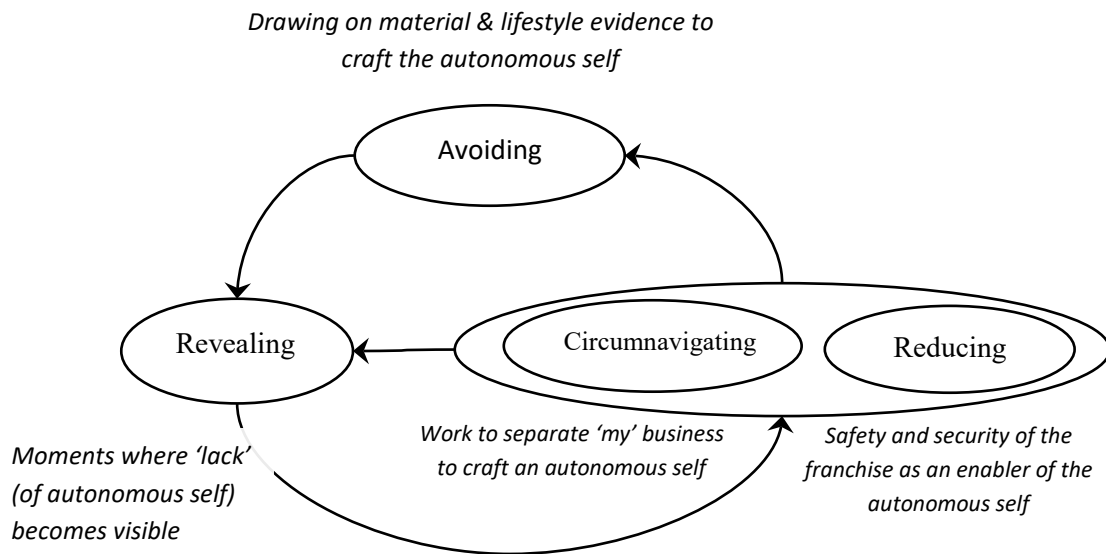
The data suggests that the existence and extent of lack driven by the desire for the autonomous self, captured through franchisee business ownership, is present in the narratives of our participants. Lack is also evident in how participants continually strive to create coherence around not only the autonomous self, but also the self within the franchise organization.

4.6 Summary

We have provided insight into four struggles as franchisees' work to bring into being a sense of autonomy. Our analysis can be related to the paradoxical nature of franchisee business ownership with which we opened this paper, and the key management challenge of balancing

autonomy and compliance (Dant and Gundlach, 1999; Davies et al., 2011). Experiences of autonomy that reveal its ambiguity are at the nexus of the contradictions and tensions. Our findings reveal how the paradoxical nature of franchising enables franchisees to weave notions of autonomy together with notions of success and safety to construct a sense of self as autonomous business owner. Yet it also reveals how both success and safety are equally caught up in the insufficiency of language and become additional signifiers drawn upon in attempts to capture the autonomous self. This insufficiency is revealed through the continual ebbing and flowing of the narrative, as we illustrate in Figure 2 below. For instance, during moments of *avoidance* franchisees construct the autonomous self through a desired business self where success is marked by material and lifestyle evidence. Yet in *revealing*, as lack is more openly evident, participants question their autonomous business self and together question what constitutes success and how this matches their current situation. Moments of *revealing* lead franchisees to work further to construct the autonomy self through *reducing* and *circumnavigating* where franchisees build further on the franchise context within which they have founded their business. In *reducing*, the suggestive safety of the franchise context is positioned as a necessary facilitator to experience the autonomous self. Yet in *circumnavigating*, the suggestive safety of the franchise context acts as an obstacle to achieving their underlying desires for autonomy, and the relationship to the franchisor becomes bitter-sweet.

FIGURE 2: Franchisees' work to construct themselves around autonomy



We have turned to psychoanalytical theory to illuminate the anxiety that participants face as they bring a sense of autonomous self into being, demonstrating deeper and unvoiced psychological processes. We argue that by looking at autonomy as a problematic construct and moving from seeing it as unambiguously capable of measurement but instead seeing it as an ideal that is characterised alongside lack, we gain a deeper, if more complicated understanding of franchisee autonomy.

5. Discussion

Our study extends empirically the psychoanalytic tradition in small business research (Metallo et al., 2021; Scharff, 2016; Olaison & Meier Sørensen, 2014; Jones and Spicer, 2005). Our analysis has demonstrated and elaborated four struggles that franchisee business owners experience and articulate as they explain their situations. In doing so, our findings reveal a double-edged sword of autonomy within the franchise organization. On one hand the valorisation of autonomy underpins the success of the franchise format, with franchisees' struggles around *lack* enabling and motivating franchisees' participation in a system that is

built up around an ideal of the autonomous self. On the other hand, experiences of autonomy are also a source of psychological tension and anxiety, as franchisees continually work to construct themselves as autonomous. We discuss our contributions below, and further discuss the implications for franchise organizations.

Our first contribution provides a new theoretical grounding to discussions of autonomy as an important motivator and source of satisfaction for franchisees (Bennett et al., 2010; Hizam-Hanafiah and Li, 2014). At the same time, however, we also highlight the need to pay greater attention to both the valorisation of autonomy and the role of the psychological as we seek to explain the success of the franchise format. Commentators have highlighted the potency of autonomy, as well as the liberal ideal to which autonomy is strongly attached, that draws people towards forms of business ownership such as franchising (Croson & Minniti, 2012; ONS, 2017b; Moisander et al., 2017). Within franchise research, economists have focused especially on the role of financial investment, and the franchise payments structure, in maintaining commitment to franchising and as a means to maximise franchisee effort (Castrogiovanni et al., 2006; Combs & Ketchen, 1999; Davies, Lassar, Manolis, Prince, & Winsor, 2011; Lafontaine, 1992). We do not refute these reasons yet we believe that they should be supplemented through an understanding of the psychological investment in constructing oneself around autonomy and the idea of ‘living the dream’ as well as recognition of the role of *lack* in securing continued effort, even when aspects of activity do not (and cannot, we would add) live up to the dream of autonomy created by the liberal ideal. We place *lack* and the enduring absence of the ideal of autonomy at the centre of our study and instead of ‘being’ (Lacan, 1966) (in this case the autonomous business owner) emphasise a quest to become better and ‘other’ (Lacan, 1966). Franchisee business ownership offers a means to experience the desire, and the illusion, of the atomised autonomous self, and to glimpse what being autonomous might feel like. By working around lack, our participants maintain continuous

striving towards becoming better and more autonomous in their lives (Schwartz, 1987), perhaps experiencing what Lacan (1988) refers to as *jouissance*, where the continual struggle to define oneself as autonomous leads to a sense of enjoyment and a feeling of being alive. We thus fully acknowledge that autonomy is an important facet of being a franchisee but point to the need to more fully understand autonomy from a psychologised perspective to complement existing work on franchisee autonomous actions (Colla et al., 2019; Hizam-Hanafiah and Li, 2014; López-Bayón, S. and López-Fernández, 2016).

Our second contribution provides new insights into how the notion of autonomy is experienced and accommodated by franchisees (Croonen et al., 2016) and extends previous theorisation on autonomy as dynamic and fluctuating (van Gelderen, 2016). On one hand, our study shows how inconsistencies can be accommodated and accepted through the indeterminacy of ‘autonomy’, and absence of closure around precisely what it means. In our study we uncover the discursive slipperiness of autonomy as participants seek to articulate what it is to be autonomous, using expressions such as living the dream, freedom from a boss, the satisfaction of building something to provide for oneself and one’s family, or the achievement of personal wealth. Such statements echo readily available language of the entrepreneurial dream (Gill, 2014; Nicholson and Anderson, 2005). The plasticity of language allows for multiple meanings of autonomy, and thus opens different ways in which those meanings can be drawn upon as franchisee business owners use available ‘wiggle room’ (Clarke et al, 2009) to construct an autonomous self. Yet we also reveal how each articulation is met with tension and contradiction as franchisees continually work to construct themselves around autonomy. We see these tensions surface in *revealing*, but they are ever-present as franchisees work continually to construct themselves around autonomy. Our study thus adds a new dimension to understanding how autonomy might also be a source of tension within the franchise organization (López-Fernández and López-Bayón, 2018). Indeed, studies within the broader organizational

literature highlight tensions stemming from the valorisation of autonomy (Moisander, Groß, & Eräranta, 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Our study builds on this body of work and provides a new avenue for understanding challenges and tensions in the franchisor-franchisee relationship that might be more deeply rooted in how autonomy is psychically experienced. This is an area that warrants further investigation as it has important implications for franchisors as such tensions might manifest in different ways at different times during the course of franchisee business ownership that might not, on the surface, directly relate to tensions in constructing an autonomous self. Organizational scholars and practitioners are becoming increasingly aware of how organizations are psychically experienced (Arnaud and Vidaillet, 2018; Sievers, 2018; De Board, 2014; Arnaud & Vanheule, 2013; Fotaki, Long, & Schwartz, 2012) and there is an important opportunity to further explore these ideas within the franchising domain to understand more fully how franchisors might work with franchisees to enable them to thrive within the organization.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have made important contributions to the literature that further our understanding of how autonomy is experienced, fulfilled and sustained by franchisees. Our work points to the double-edged sword of autonomy as it plays an important role in the success of the franchise format, as well as being a source of tension and anxiety as franchisees continually work to craft an autonomous self. As the compelling nature of statements such as ‘be your own boss’ and ‘take control of your own life’, and the enlightened individual that these symbolise, become increasingly engrained across all forms of organizing, it becomes increasingly important that academics as well as practitioners work to further understand franchisees’ psychological investment in the creation (and enactment) of autonomous selves. This paper highlights an important opportunity to extend psychologised explanations and

psychoanalytic inquiry to other franchise organizations, including franchisees operating within larger franchise organizations, to build a more comprehensive understanding of franchisee autonomy.

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