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Paradoxes of late-modern autonomy imperatives: Reconciling individual claims and institutional demands in everyday practice

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Abstract

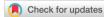Governmentality studies and social theories agree that in contemporary societies the idea of autonomy is no longer simply an ideal or an individual aspiration but a social obligation. In an attempt to clarify the meaning of autonomy in this day and age, this paper asks how individuals perceive and negotiate the various dimensions of autonomy and how this affects the functioning of late-modern institutions. The empirical insights derived from a qualitative study provide a differentiated picture of how individuals pursue their claims to autonomy and comply with institutional demands for autonomy in everyday practice. By presenting seven types of late-modern "autonomy managers," the analysis evinces a usurpation of autonomous agency that renders individuals the institutional editors of the contemporary contradictions, deficits, and tensions that occur in their everyday interactions. This comes at the price of notionally free but exhausted actors running short of all kinds of resources.

KEYWORDS
acceleration, agency, autonomy, governmentality, late modernity, work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th century, individuals have experienced a liberation from social constraints and, in part, even economic compulsion as a result of increased public welfare in Western liberal democratic societies. This has enabled them to pursue their personal ambitions and live a life according to their own ideas. This "promise of autonomy" (Rosa, 2013, p. 295) has come with the possibility—*but also the challenge*—to choose one's spouse, beliefs, way of life, and occupation. Accordingly, numerous sociological diagnoses agree that, in late modernity (i.e., the period succeeding classical modernity at the end of the 1970s), people are "obliged to be free" rather than merely given the choice to be free (Rose, 2017, p. 306). Furthermore, autonomy is no longer conceived exclusively as an individual claim in contemporary Western societies but has additionally become an indispensable source of legitimization and an essential condition for the functioning of social institutions (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Honneth, 2002). Public agencies, private enterprises, and guidebooks encourage and oblige late-modern citizens to seek self-realization, be creative, lead a healthy lifestyle, and protect themselves against life's contingencies in a self-responsible way (Bröckling, 2016; Lessenich, 2011).

With respect to the history of public action, this development requires a new type of state that warrants and manages the conditions to allow, encourage or even force people to act in such a way (Rose, 1995) as opposed to a deregulated, lean state like the kind that is often suggested by liberal thinkers; and it requires new techniques, such as new public management, that provides for the control and supervision of these emergent activities. Consequently, the idea of *self-responsibility* as the key concept of the new activation regimes of Western welfare states, in close alliance with ideas such as prevention and self-help, is rife in legal texts and public programs (Lessenich, 2011).

However, the expected pursuit of self-responsibility on the one hand and authenticity and self-realization on the other does not necessarily lead to a "good life." On the contrary, the obligation of self-determination is often perceived as one reason for the rising rates of depression and burnout as it has been observed across different employment sectors during the last decades (Schmiede, 2011; see also Neckel & Wagner, 2013). In this sense, Ehrenberg (2009) views depression as a symptom of the excessive and often contradictory demands of autonomy. Moreover, the vast increase in options that arises from the erosion of traditional patterns and social obligations does not necessarily amount to an increase in individual freedoms: the fact that *everything could be different* does not imply that individuals have the will and resources to actually (re)define their lot. Some authors argue that while the social and political imperatives to act and decide "autonomously" (i.e., to take full responsibility for one's decisions) are increasing, the *resources* required to meet these criteria are diminishing. For instance, Lessenich (2011, p. 315) outlined how many members of "neosocial" society lack the necessary resources to promote their competitiveness and maintain their health and employability. In the context of rapid social change, it seems to have become almost impossible to develop and pursue a long-term life plan. People in very different circumstances thus tend to perceive their lives as more and more heteronomous (Rosa, 2009a). Instead of being enabling, the current dynamics of acceleration, precarization of work, and neoliberal transformation of the welfare state actually seem to undermine the conditions for independent life plans (Dörre, Lessenich, & Rosa, 2017; Sennett, 1998). Therefore, Bohmann, Börner, Lindner, Oberthür, and Stiegler (2018, p. xvi) speak of a crisis of late-modern autonomy. As a result, as will be shown below, every single person is tasked with negotiating and mediating the emerging conflicts biographically and managing the arising systemic paradoxes self-responsibly, since "[r]isks and contradictions go on being socially produced; it is just the duty and the necessity to cope with them which are being individualized" (Bauman, 2000, p. 34).

Governmentality studies (Bröckling, 2016; Rose, 1996) have analyzed the techniques of self-design, self-optimization, self-organization, and the like and uncovered the neoliberal kernel of the predominant discourses in accordance with critical theories of (late) modernity. These analyses have illustrated the palpable turn of the conditions of autonomy from a horizon of possibility to a state of coercion often to the detriment of individuals as a distinct characteristic of late modernity. However, even though the (discourse analytical) examination of political programs and cultural models certainly produces valuable insights into contemporary technologies of government

and regimes of subjectification, it does not provide an empirically grounded understanding of what the people who are subjected to these regimes actually think and do (Bröckling, 2016, p. xiii). It is therefore promising to combine a critical examination of autonomy in public discourse with an empirical reconstruction of everyday orientations, experiences, and practices.

Therefore, this paper asks to what extent and in what ways these advanced liberal autonomy imperatives interfere with individual work- and lifeworlds in Germany. How do individuals perceive and negotiate the different dimensions of autonomy at the workplace and beyond in their family lives and in dealing with welfare institutions, and how does this affect the functioning of late-modern institutions?

To better answer this question and operationalize autonomy, we deem it useful to disaggregate the concept of autonomy into five sub-dimensions that correspond to the different levels of observation at hand, a decision that will be elaborated below (Section 3.1). Before we do so, the following section introduces a three-stage model of autonomy from which our basic analytical concepts—namely, individual *claims* to autonomy and perceived institutional *demands* for autonomy—will be mapped out.

After a brief discussion of our data sample and methodology, Section 3.2 introduces seven types of late-modern agency that result from our empirical analysis. The closing discussion refines the theoretical assertions of late modernity. It hypothesizes that today's autonomy regime renders individuals the editors of late-modern organizations, constantly adjusting and mending volatile contradictions and institutional defects. Another key finding is that different groups of actors have different opportunities to cope with the autonomy dilemma illustrated in this paper. These differences point to the structural inequality aspect of late-modern autonomy.

2 | AUTONOMY AS A NORM, AN INDIVIDUAL CLAIM, AND AN INSTITUTIONAL DEMAND IN THE HISTORY OF MODERNITY

As a sociological concept, autonomy refers to the drawing and negotiation of boundaries between society and its members (Franzen, Jung, Kaldewey, & Korte, 2014, p. 6). This hints at the fact that autonomy is a relative concept and that individual autonomy is a result of a person's social position, his or her means to pursue an autonomous life, the hegemonic autonomy norms, and the perceived constraints and demands. Hence, for the purposes of our study, it is analytically useful to distinguish between three different *modes of autonomy* that correspond to different stages of modernity: (a) the idea of autonomy (as a norm) dominant in the early stages of modernity; (b) individual autonomy claims at the micro level; and (c) institutional(ized) demands with respect to autonomy that have come to prevail more recently. Depending on the level of analysis, we speak of *claims to autonomy* or, in short, *autonomy claims* when referring to aspirations formulated by individuals and of *demands for autonomy* or *autonomy demands* when referring to the social expectations linked to autonomous agency that is inculcated in individuals "from above." This distinction has guided our empirical analysis. Although these modes emerge in different historical stages of modernity that Peter Wagner (1994) modeled most prominently in his *Sociology of Modernity*, none of them has totally disappeared. So, in contemporary society, they can be empirically observed alongside each other.

Autonomy as a normative value is closely related to the early stages of modernity during the era of the Enlightenment. Although there were no social institutions at the time that provided the respective interpretations to make sense of things such as a political position, a religious stance, or consumer choices, the very idea of autonomy was formulated in the *U.S. Declaration of Independence* in 1776 by postulating the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable individual right (Taylor, 1989, ch. 17). During this period, claims to autonomy were more of a fighting creed than a social and institutional reality.[1] They were met with considerable political, religious, and social opposition and, more importantly, lacked the institutional underpinning to truly give individuals the freedom of choice, such as markets to allow for producer and consumer choices or a Democratic party system. As Wagner (1994, p. 4) would have it, in the first phase of modernity, autonomy was a powerful normative principle, an agent of change, but not yet a way of life or an institutional reality.

By the mid-twentieth century, this situation had changed significantly. During "organized modernity" (Wagner, 1994, p. 74), the normative principle transformed into an individual claim *and* an institutional reality. Culturally, individuals habitually incorporated the claim to autonomy into their normative expectations and social practices. By that time, in so-called Western societies, it was not just the male bourgeois entrepreneur but (increasingly) women and workers who also assumed and claimed that it was their individual right to decide where and with whom to live, which occupation to pursue, what clothes to wear, whom to love, what to believe in, and whom to vote for. However, this liberation came at the price of a "disciplinization by modern institutions" (Wagner, 1994, p. xii). This ambivalence finds its most popular expression in Giddens' (1984, p. 25) concept of the "duality of structure," which emphasizes that institutions are "always both constraining and enabling" human agency, but in a strikingly similar way also in Foucault's (1977) conception of the duality of repressive and constitutive aspects of power. Most significant for this development within the second period of modernity was the social institution of puberty and adolescence as a phase of individual "positioning" and the corresponding conception of a "standard biography" or a regular (standardized) life course (Kohli, 2007). Hence, autonomy, at least in the sense developed by and within the institutions of "organized modernity," was supposed to consist in the definition and pursuit of individually determined but quite robust and institutionally framed norms and goals. After choosing a career, establishing a family and becoming a political and religious citizen, one's position was supposed to be stable and settled, so one's life could develop along expectable paths of professional and family "careers" (Rosa, 2013, pp. 226–231).

In the third stage, processes of progressive acceleration and dynamization have changed the social and institutional fabric quite significantly once again. Given these more recent changes, autonomy, according to many analysts, comes down to a number of institutional(ized) demands, which dominate the life worlds of most people in late modernity. Companies, for example, ask for total commitment from their employees, who are likewise supposed to be able to motivate themselves, find creative solutions and act self-responsibly (Bröckling, 2016). Public health care systems ask their patients to lead a healthy lifestyle, and state pension schemes prefer to envision their future clients as self-responsible provident creatures (Lessenich, 2011). We use a broad sociological conception of institutions covering both the ideas and principles that structure human cooperation, and the organizations implementing these principles. However, since we access the institutionalized demands via organizations and the individuals acting therein, when we speak of institutionalized demands it mostly refers to the demands on individuals that are enforced by the respective organization. It is important to note that the theoretical concept of institutions implies that they have both enabling and constraining effects. Yet, the relationship between the opportunities and constraints that has been characterizing "organized modernity" now shifts towards a new balance given the profuse institutionalization of autonomy demands: the political and the digital revolutions around 1990 induced new levels of performative social competition and hence new pressures to consistently optimize and readjust behavior. This has resulted in a social environment in which the speed of social, technological and institutional change and the level of social contingency are outpacing the speed of generational exchange (Rosa, 2013, pp. 231–250). Individuals are now forced to reposition themselves within all areas of autonomous agency—not only in work and family life but also in terms of consumer choices and political position—in an ongoing performative mode. This increasing (and increasingly demanded) flexibilization exposes the "standard biography" to risks, ruptures, and precarious options (Sennett, 1998). According to contemporary observers, the capacity to act autonomously has become a major precondition for systemic legitimation and reproduction and an inescapable pressure, thus challenging individual ideas of autonomy. The primary emphasis of social imperatives has shifted towards an obligatory structure of autonomy-related competencies, be it in (paradoxical) terms of "organised self-realisation" (Honneth, 2002), the "reflexive imperative" (Archer, 2012) or heteronomous self-control (Pongratz & Voß, 2003). However, the most striking difference to "organized modernity" is that late-modern shifts in the institutional fabric themselves are undermining the conditions of individual autonomy (Honneth, 2002), and many societal actors increasingly appear to be running short of the *resources* necessary to realize these institutionalized demands for autonomy.

With this in mind, there seem to exist two possible forms of experiencing one's life course in late modernity that form the opposing poles of a continuum. One is the conception of the *surfer* as suggested by Gergen (2000, p. xviii): A surfer is someone who masters the waves; a person not in control of the overall direction but who can exercise choices and movements, thus providing an almost perfect fit between the claims and demands of autonomy as defined above. However, this requires a high level of cultural, economic, social, and physical (body-related) capital. In contrast, individuals who lack these resources are in danger of becoming *drifters* in Sennett's sense (1998, pp. 28ff.). A drifter either lacks the resources to make profitable or informed choices or lacks actual options altogether. He or she is simply subject to the unpredictable and sometimes wild currents of the waves and hence is not an "autonomous" subject in any significant sense, irrespective of whether or not he or she is *held responsible* for his or her positioning.

These two metaphorical figures give us a rough indication of the problem at hand; however, the dualism they suggest is far too simple to be able to cover the complex and diverse incongruencies between individual autonomy claims and the perceived institutional autonomy requirements as they actually exist. To date, little is known about actual social practices and the various types of drifters and surfers because existing studies tend to omit the potential contradictions that lurk underneath the incessant invocations to become an "entrepreneur of one's own life" (Bröckling, 2016, p. viii), a self-responsible member of society, as well as the individual ideas and actual opportunities of how to lead an autonomous life. To tackle this gap in empirical studies, the remainder of this paper presents the results of our empirical investigation into this domain in order to suggest an empirically based typology of late-modern autonomy.

3 | AUTONOMY REVISITED—EMPIRICAL APPROACH AND RESULTS

To examine who can actually be considered an "entrepreneurial self" and how people cope with the manifold expectations of autonomy, it is necessary to go beyond the reconstruction of rationalities of government (Bröckling, 2016) and the examination of economic constraints. It appears particularly fruitful to look at the individual claims and ideas within various social milieus and examine actual living conditions. We therefore analyzed current forms of autonomy in terms of (a) perceived institutional demands for autonomy, (b) subjective claims to autonomy, (c) individual opportunities, and (d) everyday practices, with a focus on work and welfare provisions. This approach does not just take into account the presumption that it is actually becoming more difficult to comply with institutionalized autonomy demands but also accounts for the possibility that external imperatives for self-determination might conflict with the claims and needs of individuals. Using this analytical heuristic, we examined the reciprocal relationships as well as the discrepancies between social demands, individual claims and opportunities as well as practices of autonomy.

We therefore combined a discourse analysis of public semantics of autonomy with problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000). The discourse analysis carried out in the first step aimed at an empirical reconstruction of the different semantics of autonomy in German public discourse.[2] The subsequent interview study allowed us to examine the ways in which people in Germany perceive autonomy as a social expectation, the ideas of autonomy they express, and to what extent they are able to comply with autonomy demands.

In the following, the results will be presented in two steps. First, we outline the conceptual dimensions; and second, we present our empirical findings.

3.1 | The five facets of personal autonomy

Given the aforementioned shift in the *meaning and scope* of autonomy, it is no surprise that the *concept* of autonomy is quite fashionable at the moment, not only within the social sciences but also in public debates, where

it structures the socio-political controversies of many different discourses on topics such as assisted suicide, abortion, data-protection policies, or social transfers. Induced by the emergent activating welfare state, calls for expanded self-responsibility, as an extremely curtailed version of autonomy, often contradict the autonomy claims of patients, journalists, and consumers. These highly divergent notions render autonomy a vague and contentious concept. We argue that the concept of autonomy applies differently within various societal sub-spheres, which is why we include different spheres in our analysis.

Since autonomy refers to the drawing and negotiation of boundaries between society and its members, different groups of actors might perceive late-modern appeals to autonomy quite differently because institutional requirements might not apply to all actors to the same extent or might not have the same validity for everyone. Whereas most elite actors experience autonomy as context-driven freedoms that provide them with a certain scope for action, workers or overtaxed consumers might experience very different forms of autonomy, such as the freedom of choice or self-responsibility, while formulating other personal ideas of autonomy (i.e., social security or private autonomy). Hence, depending on the level of analysis and the actor who is speaking, the term assumes different meanings.

The use of the term *autonomy* (as well as the terms *freedom* and *liberty*, which are often used synonymously) is not only extremely vague in public debates, its meaning also varies within recent specialized debates in the social sciences and humanities. To systematize these different and sometimes contradictory meanings and thus render the term feasible for empirical analysis, we have differentiated five conceptual dimensions as suggested by Rainer Forst. According to Forst (2005, p. 226, emphasis in original) these dimensions form the basis of an "*intersubjectivist concept of political liberty*" which is intended to be universal in scope. Following our own empirical analysis of the different autonomy semantics in public discourse (see note 1), we slightly amended this theoretical concept to include self-responsibility and private autonomy as additional dimensions of autonomy. Empirically, each of the five dimensions can occur as individual claim and institutional demand. For reasons of clarity, Table 1 streamlines the results of our discourse analysis and combines them with the analytical concepts developed in Section 2. This heuristic provides the basis of our interview study.

The history of ideas, as Berlin (2002[1969], p. 15) convincingly argues in *Four Essays on Liberty*, is marked by a negative and a positive sense of this "protean word." Whereas the positive sense of the term "liberty" alludes to the freedom *to* be one's own master and live one's own life, in the negative sense of the term, *autonomy* or *freedom* refers to the "area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons" (p. 15). At the heart of this most basic dimension of the concept, which has formed the prevailing notion of liberty in the history of ideas since the Renaissance (Berlin, 2002[1969], p. 21), lies the idea of (a) *private autonomy* in the absence of external constraints. Empirically, individuals formulate this first dimension exclusively as an autonomy claim, such as scientists (re)claiming their freedom of research or recipients of social benefits rejecting welfare-state paternalism (see Table 1).

However, private autonomy is not everyone's primary concern. Contrary to the liberal understanding of autonomy, there are situations or goals that justify interference, and in which intervention by others can condition the ability to act autonomously—that is to say, provide the social (and thus planning) security and material resources to do so. According to this interpretation of autonomy as (b) *social autonomy*, derived from Berlin's positive

TABLE 1 Conceptual dimensions of autonomy and their discursive use

	Individual claim	Institutional demand
Private autonomy (negative freedom)	✓	
Social autonomy	✓	
Moral autonomy	✓	✓
Ethical autonomy/authenticity	✓	✓
Self-responsibility	(✓)	✓

sense of freedom, it is not the absence of interference that enables freedom of action but the "social conditions necessary for the development of the capacity of autonomy and for the possibility of its exercise" (Forst, 2005, p. 237). For Marshall (1950), welfare programs that help to avoid social hardship are best suited to provide the social conditions that enable people to use their other freedoms and follow their goals. In current debates, this conceptual dimension serves to promote the adequate social participation of precarious workers and excluded persons. However, most often, individuals refer to this social notion of autonomy (social security) to articulate an embedded autonomy claim that emphasizes the societal and institutional requirements of autonomy, such as a guaranteed minimum income.

The public debates we analyzed disclose two further, substantially different, conceptions of the positive notion of autonomy: moral and ethical autonomy. First, according to Forst (2005, p. 230), (c) *moral autonomy* means that "[w]herever the actions of a person affect others in a morally relevant way, they must be justifiable on the basis of reciprocally and generally binding norms." In the history of ideas, this conception is closely linked to Rousseau and Kant, both of whom emphasized that individual liberty can only unfold in the context of reasonably justifiable and collectively binding norms. In this sense, moral autonomy comes closest to the original meaning of the term *autonomy* as self-rule.

While *moral autonomy* highlights the general good, (d) *ethical autonomy* gives prominence to the individual good, that is, the possibility and desire to shape one's own way of living (Forst, 2005; Anderson, 1994, p. 232). As Charles Taylor (1989) demonstrated in the realm of ideas, this conception of autonomy is closely related to the idea of authenticity as the kernel of individual self-determination. Authenticity, Foucault (1984, p. 351) reminds us, means "that we have to create ourselves as a work of art." Although, of course, specific concepts of an ethical lifestyle do not have to conflict with collective self-rule and a partial or complete congruence between both is therefore conceivable, late modernity's plurality renders a conflictive relationship rather plausible (Parthe, 2011, pp. 16–35). This is also the way in which it is typically problematized in public discourse, for example, when individual claims to realize an authentic lifestyle contradict the perceived institutional autonomy demands or other, possibly more hegemonic ways of living. At the same time, individuals face ethical autonomy as a demand, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) show. They argue that from the late 1960s onwards, in the course of the capitalist appropriation of the Left's critique, authenticity became an important resource of contemporary cultural capitalism, a process that transformed authenticity into a commodity.

(e) *Self-responsibility*, the fifth and final conceptual dimension, represents the most recent and prominent, although skewed and extremely curtailed, use of autonomy since it seems to be wide of the original understanding of autonomy as individual self-determination. It primarily appears to be an institutional demand whose current prominence is closely linked to the emergence of a so-called activation regime (e.g., the appeal to provide privately for the contingencies of life via private insurance or to permanently improve one's own employability). So when speaking about people as both authors *and* addressees of autonomy in order to envision the overall social meaning of autonomy in late modernity, it is useful to include it as part of our multifaceted concept. In forming "the most recent stage of the metamorphoses of capitalism's regulation through the welfare state" (Dörre et al., 2017, p. 59), self-responsibility is paradigmatic of a normative shift in the political economy of the welfare state and directly threatens its constitutive task of compensating for social risks and providing social security and thus social autonomy (Bothfeld & Betzelt, 2011, p. 16). In contrast to the other dimensions, this mainly ascriptive conception of autonomy isolates one's self-controlling potentials from the social, material, and political prerequisites of the previous four dimensions. Instead, a self-responsible person follows dictated aims and motives that are thus very likely to contradict his or her remaining private, ethical, moral, and social autonomy claims. All in all, such an "activist" ethic of autonomy (Rose, 2017, p. 306) bears "disciplinary rather than supportive effects" because the self-responsibility imperative, in cutting the level and duration of benefits and implementing strong conditionality criteria, holds people accountable regardless of their resources, means, and convictions (Bothfeld & Betzelt, 2011, p. 28). Thus, self-responsibility stands in sharp contrast to the other dimensions reconstructed above. Whereas the single conceptions constitute closely intertwined dimensions of one broad multi-dimensional

concept of autonomy that build on each other in several respects, self-responsibility is likely to imply a rather conflictual relationship.

3.2 | From productive to tedious: Empirical manifestations in the interplay between individual autonomy claims, institutional demands and everyday practice

Although the aforementioned governmentality studies and research in the sociology of work very poignantly describe the functionalization of autonomy claims through major social subsystems, the question of the implications at the individual level remains. This is exactly where the second part of our analysis comes into play by asking how normative programs and institutionalized demands interact with individual experiences, orientations, claims, and practices. Following our discourse-theoretical analysis, we will present our findings on the everyday practices and orientations of actors within different subfields that were addressed in a comprehensive interview study. We conducted 45 problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000), covering actors of varying social status and from different social spheres (labour, media, politics, science, consumption, and social welfare).[3] The interviews took 60–90 min. Each interview started with open questions regarding the interviewee's biography, current position, and involvement. Our interview guideline then helped to cluster the conversations in several thematic parts covering practices of autonomy with respect to politics, work, consumption, media use and (when applicable) welfare. For instance, we asked the interviewees to describe how they organize their working day and what kind of problems and pressures they are facing. Since different social positions shape diverging collective experiences, the interviewees were systematized according to a heuristic that allowed us to distinguish between three types of actors: those with leading positions in academia, public administration, politics, and so on; those who carry the corresponding roles as readers, voters, workers, or clients—so-called basic actors; and those in precarious positions who lack the general repertoire of the basic actors in at least one respect. We used the tools of *documentary analysis* (Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl, 2010) as our method of choice to interpret the empirical material since this type of analysis extends beyond the explicit and manifest meaning to unearth the implicit and "hidden" meanings inherent in the interviews.

The formulation of social types from our empirical data builds on Nohl's (2010, 2012, pp. 50–57) work. The relational typology we have developed not only allows the different orientations with respect to the diverging facets of autonomy to be compared but also allows different matches between autonomy demands and claims as well as patterns of realization to be related to each other. In combining these two dimensions into one typology, the emerging pattern has allowed us to identify seven types, each defined by its specific handling of late-modern autonomy demands (Table 2). This classification is neither the only possible typology, nor is it possible to quantify the frequency of a particular type on the basis of our sample. The respondents' personal autonomy claims correspond with, or diverge from, the perceived demands to act autonomously from the respective institutional context in which they act. However, things become more complicated when considering their potential to fulfill these demands, namely, the material and social resources and institutional support a person receives and that allow them to live up to those external expectations.

3.2.1 | The successful (self-)entrepreneurs (A1)

This group of mostly well-trained lower and upper middle-class representatives (such as employees in the service and knowledge sector) is rather content with the social circumstances in which they live. Accordingly, the relationship between their own autonomy claims and the perceived demands as well as their scope of action is largely harmonious. Thus, the respondents that are characterized by this pattern have widely accepted the post-Fordist deregulated working conditions of which they are a part. Although they do not expect to change the social

TABLE 2 Empirical types of coping with autonomy claims and demands and their prospects of successful realization

		Complete congruence	Partial congruence	Non-congruence
Congruence between subjective claims and social demands	Complete congruence	A1 The successful self-entrepreneurs	B1 The struggling self-entrepreneurs	
	Partial congruence	A2 The ambitious shapers	B2 The pragmatic shapers	C2 The overtaxed non-compliants
	Non-congruence		B3 The struggling precarious workers	C3 The rebellious non-compliants
		Agency in compliance with social demands		

conditions, they consider their own situation to be produced by individual decisions and personal effort. Among their conceptions of autonomy, self-responsibility and a decent, socially acceptable way of living (moral autonomy) feature most prominently, as evidenced in the following quote from a service-sector employee who dismissed employer-financed training programs:

> *Personal initiative, I want it, I do it, and I figure out how to do it without begging at my employer's door and constantly asking, "Can you pay for this, can you pay for that?" Instead I pay for it on my own. That's what employers want, isn't it? This personal initiative, self-responsibility. (AB35G, own translation)*

Successful (self-)entrepreneurs manage to adapt to the respective institutional appeals such as self-responsibility, creativity, or self-management, and beyond these demands they resist developing personal claims of autonomy. "In my work life, my own expectation is mainly to achieve the success that my company expects of me," the same respondent argued. A typical employee practice to meet various expectations and to advance one's career is to work overtime without compensation. This brings them empirically close to the subjectification regime of the "entrepreneurial self" diagnosed by Bröckling (2016). Given this type of employee's tendency to work overtime while trying to achieve a proper work–life balance, the only tension an individual with this orientation faces is the blurring of the boundaries between labour and leisure.

3.2.2 | The struggling self-entrepreneurs (B1)

Apart from an (imminently precarious) employment situation, which renders social security a vital autonomy claim, this group nevertheless resembles the first type with respect to the congruence of perceived autonomy demands and individual claims, the only difference being the partial non-compliance with social demands. In contrast to the *successful (self-)entrepreneurs*, these individuals fail to develop successful strategies to meet these imperatives of self-responsibility in their everyday routines, even though they have managed to internalize the dominant expectation of self-responsibility. Traditional hierarchies and authoritarian structures feature heavily in their professional setting and prevent them from advancing their own professional career according to their personal ideas. Paradoxically, self-responsibility becomes an unfulfilled claim for this group, as in the case of an employee who felt "thwarted all the time" (AB45G) because he was prevented from taking on greater responsibility. Here, the corporate structure conflicts with the employee's ideas; others fail because of individual dispositions or an inability to meet social expectations. All are united in the vigorous endeavor to comply with the parameters of a meritocratic

society. They therefore tend to internalize their failure and explain it by personal weaknesses, as shown in the example of a long-term unemployed 60-year-old:

> Like I said, it's not that my degree course was not my thing. The professors were also really excellent and so on. The conditions at the time when I started studying were still ideal. ... It was not the university's fault nor the professors'. Maybe I'm just a little slow. [Laughs] That I didn't follow through on it. (P33M, own translation)

This type illustrates the fact that the imperatives are not limited to those in positions of more responsibility, as in A1, but also concern basic actors and even persons in precarious employment situations along with the long-term unemployed.

3.2.3 | The ambitious shapers (A2) and the pragmatic shapers (B2)

In contrast to the *successful (self-)entrepreneurs*, these two types, which consist of the self-employed, employees, civil servants, and managers, are keen to play a part in the social and political construction of society—a fact that is reflected by their positive claims of moral autonomy that are likely to diverge from the dominant (neoliberal) demands of autonomy. In the pragmatic version (B2), the shapers struggle and partly fail to realize their ideas of excellence and participation, which is why they strategically adapt their claims or try to shift their autonomy claims to the private sphere. By comparison, the ambitious shapers defend their aims and ideals against any opposition. The following quote from a dean who was supposed to implement cutbacks is prototypical of this orientation:

> In my view, this is actually a task that involves actively shaping things, but you can interpret it this way or that. Most faculties here at the university did not tackle this task in this pro-active sense. ... Although, on the one hand, we are scandalizing it all the time, but then, at the same time, it gives us cause to consider internally, what works well here and what does not? ... And then, when you decide to change it a little bit, you obviously have to develop creative ideas about how to do that. (WiE23G, own translation)

The dean reinterprets the budgetary rigor imposed on his faculty as a task to manage change actively instead of administering scarcity, while at the same time criticizing the more passive approaches of his colleagues.

Within this type (A2), two different autonomy dimensions become clear, reflecting different but intertwined motives. Respondents with moral autonomy claims that are interpreted as socio-political responsibility ground their aspirations in a normative-political way and develop their own standards that they conceive of as mutually justifiable and collectively desirable:

> During the last eight years as team leader, I've essentially done what I did previously with clients who were seeking advice, that is, I applied a specific idea, for me a humanistic one, in how I treated them, and today I do the exact same thing with my team members. (WE12G, own translation)

In doing so, the respondent, team leader in a German federal employment office, resists the demands and standards of his organization.

Self-realization and authenticity are the second motivational driving forces. Thus, with a view toward the "compatibility of inner experiences and outward actions" (WE12G), ethical autonomy, as explained above, is the major individual autonomy claim here. Although most respondents interpreted it as a challenge to combine the claim to shape the moral fabric of our social interactions and the imposed (potentially conflicting) autonomy demands at the level of the immanent meaning, many cases were characterized by frustration

culminating in cynicism in the face of ever-growing demands. Thus, a ruined work–life balance is especially typical of respondents whose accounts feature the described characteristics, owing to the fact "that the people, or many of them at any rate, are sort of at the end of their tether, and therefore can't be pushed on endlessly" (WiE23G), as poignantly summarized by the dean introduced above.

In light of these frictions, it is not surprising that some interviewees among the ambitious and pragmatic shapers take a critical view of their working environment and the accelerating pace that marks life in general. At the organizational level as well, the destructive effects of ubiquitous hyper-activity are noticeable, as another dean complained:

> *Conferences are organized that nobody really needs. That no one goes to, which then unfortunately only take place for their own sake and which take place because it was in a research proposal, and then they actually produce neither added value in terms of networking nor anything extra in terms of knowledge. (WiB29M, own translation)*

As the examples show, the shapers' status-related leeway proves to be extremely useful, given that a greater workload and a willingness to engage (at least partly) in self-abandonment do not only allow the individuals who fall in these two categories to redress the discrepancy between individual autonomy claims and institutional autonomy demands, but their notionally non-conformist claims also generate the required innovations for a "dynamic stabilization" of social institutions—a dynamic that is thought to be at risk (Rosa, 2009a).

3.2.4 | The overtaxed non-compliants (C2)

Whereas the previous two types more or less manage to bring institutional demands in line with their autonomy claims, this group of actors lacks the means necessary to meet the various autonomy demands and their own claims to autonomy. This holds true particularly for those (mostly women) who face a manifold burden given their professional obligations and family commitments. In this vein, the overtaxed non-compliant struggles to bring her or his inner expectations in line with external ones, a situation often linked to and aggravated by precarious employment. A freelancer described her situation as follows:

> *[T]o rock all the housework, take care of a child and at the same time also make arrangements for free-lancing. During my parental leave, I retained two-three clients. You use any small break while the baby is sleeping to somehow continue working. You skip the walks, put the baby on the balcony so that it has some fresh air, and then return to the computer. So this … breakthrough, where you say you can start your own agency or establish something, that's impossible, at least not as a mother with three kids. (P46G, own translation)*

For this freelancer, the idea of setting up her own small business and fulfilling her desire for professional self-fulfillment founders on the lopsided allocation of reproduction work, a lack of alternatives for childcare and therefore time, and absent financial support (e.g., through tailored opportunities for business startups). In terms of her everyday practice, an incrementalist strategy helps her cope with her particular situation: Without a realistic chance of meeting all of the contradicting expectations at the same time, she untangles and divides the different claims and demands of autonomy and reinterprets them as consecutive aims—children first, career second. This time-management strategy allows her to set aside her private autonomy claim, an arrangement that tends to be quite precarious.

The enforced situationalism of this paradigmatic case points to the complex interrelations of social change, welfare-state retrenchment and a changing work environment that render autonomy (both personal and as a functional resource) more and more important. Thus, the *overtaxed non-compliants* find it particularly hard to

fulfil their autonomy claims, especially with respect to authenticity and self-realization, given the daily conflicts, financial uncertainty and missing resources that they face. For representatives of this type, it becomes increasingly difficult to formulate and pursue long-term goals and commitments, which is incompatible with the modern ideal of individual ethical autonomy (Rosa, 2009b, p. 100; Sennett, 1998). So, paradoxically, they seem to "feel pressed to speed up in response to the social change around them" but lack the resources to meet the inflationary demands that mark the ubiquitous competition regime (Rosa, 2009b, p. 98). This "time poverty" (Wajcman, 2015, p. 66) results in a permanent struggle to maintain and enhance one's capacities to act, as is vividly described by the freelancer introduced above:

> And now it's like there is some kind of a … downward spiral. You feel like you no longer have any real courage, well, (…) to accomplish anything. Now that you've got kids, you can't somehow make them disappear, that is impossible, and too often we receive too little external support. … And right now there's the decision, where I say, okay, I'll spend more time with my children and as a result my main working hours are reduced. (P46G, own translation)

Instead of material inequality, the major disparity this type faces is the missing chances to pursue their personal autonomy aspirations and life plans.

3.2.5 | The struggling precarious workers (B3) and the rebellious non-compliants (C3)

These two types, mostly precarious workers or those in search of work, perceive the normative social expectations and institutionalized autonomy demands—above all, self-responsibility—as clearly contradicting their private autonomy claims. Given their employment status, they are less likely to bring the omnipresent flexibility and creativity demands in line with their own claims. Instead they feel pressured by the overall social and economic environment to subordinate their own desires and adjust to the prevailing conditions in a way that is compatible with the labour market. One of our unemployed interviewees concluded that "one first and foremost has to be willing to accept everything and behave according to the rules" (P38M), whereas another emphasized in the same vein that "as a temporary worker, you have to be low-maintenance" and should "keep your mouth shut" (P41G).

As a result, there is hardly any chance to realize one's own autonomy claims, such as social autonomy, professional self-realization or moral autonomy (i.e., notions of excellence). This autonomy conflict hints at the "disempowering context of 'Othering'" (Wright, 2016, p. 239), which increases the social distance between those who are in a position to play the game and those on the sidelines.

Reluctantly, the *struggling precarious workers* attempt to counter this pressure and pursue strategies to improve their employability. They keep hoping for a better position and an opportunity to achieve their aspirations in the future. The *rebellious non-compliants*, by contrast, have deliberately ceased to comply with the imposed expectations and shifted their ideas and authenticity claims beyond the sphere of gainful employment, accepting financial losses and other inconveniences as the price they have to pay for the moral integrity gained in the process.

A female long-term unemployed social education professional is a case in point. After losing her job as a nursery-school teacher and deputy manager because she did not share the headmaster's ideas and approach, she received basic support for job seekers, a social benefit introduced in 2005 as part of a large-scale welfare-state reorganization and retrenchment. Her refusal to give up her own conceptions of good pedagogical practice (moral autonomy) explains her reasons for leaving the workforce. Referring to her experiences in the day-care center, she said:

> So, one thing that I've repeatedly noticed is that most people want lickspittles. Even in the kindergarten [classroom], it was always expected that you should say "yes" to everything and simply do what you were

told. … I can't switch off my sense of justice and my desire for harmony … and just do what someone de-
mands of me. … I could never work like that, better to not work at all. … I didn't want to be responsible in
that way for keeping children like that. (P39G, own translation)

This case is illustrative of the non-compliants' prioritization of their own aspirations and ideals, which allows them to resist the demands imposed upon them in order to realize their own ideas of ethical autonomy and moral values instead. Once again, as was previously shown for the pragmatic shapers, the non-compliants combine two general modes of handling the conflicts that stem from the discrepancies between institutional demands and their own claims to autonomy, one strategy being more geared toward idealism and moral autonomy, the other more toward authenticity. In the case of more idealistic respondents, the perceived contradictions might translate into motivation for political action (e.g., by running voluntary organizations that assist the unemployed), whereas the social pedagogue tries to solve her inner conflict in an authentic way that allows her to remain true to herself. In this sense, she continues seeking an activity that is compatible with her ideals, interests, and abilities. This includes thinking about options that depart from the officially prescribed path beyond gainful employment:

It's not the case that I absolutely have to work. Especially if the alternative is earning 1300 euros for
forty hours. I'd rather not work and make ends meet with less money. I would rather look for a farm or a
commune somewhere or do my own thing where I don't have to stress myself out so much. (P39G, own
translation)

4 | DISCUSSION

Building on a three-stage model of modernity and the observation that the capacity to act autonomously has become a major precondition for systemic legitimation and reproduction in late-modern society, this paper has examined the relationship between individual autonomy claims and institutional autonomy demands as well as the respective opportunities and strategies to realign these two sets of demands. Across different social strata and societal sub-spheres, the empirical evidence clearly shows that the interviewees in our study face different forms of late-modern autonomy imperatives, particularly at the workplace, namely, the requirement to exercise professional or administrative discretion even in positions where this is unexpected (self-responsibility) or the increasing demands to act authentically as touted by marketing strategies or guidebooks. These are exactly the kinds of institutional autonomy demands that governmentality studies so often refer to. Most of the institutions in which our interviewees operate function as a kind of "transmission belt" that passes the autonomy demands formulated in social discourse on to the individual level (Lessenich, 2011), in this case the major demand being self-responsibility. The results suggest that there is indeed a hegemonic neoliberal mode of subjectification that equips late-modern subjects with an idea of how to act within the social framework. However, at the individual level and with respect to everyday practice, the transmission of these ideas is not as smooth as governmentality studies and sociological diagnoses of our time would have us believe. Once we consider the different analytical categories jointly, we see certain limitations to the proclaimed entrepreneurial self. To gain a clearer picture, our analysis has accounted for five different conceptual facets of autonomy as well as a person's specific social, material, and financial conditions and resources given that both are directly interrelated. Existing theoretical metaphors and typologies have failed to cover this variety and complexity.

The analysis shows that, while the modern ideal of autonomy has become a cultural principle that promises self-realization and increasing personal liberty, for some the opportunities to act are limited and tend to be perceived as social and economic pressures. Although this might not be a surprising result, it allows for a stronger empirical differentiation with respect to both the individual dimensions of autonomy and the question of who is affected in which way. Even though the entirety of social personnel in late modernity, from managers to the

long-term unemployed, face major institutional autonomy demands, people differ in the way they receive and react to these demands. In a regular, stable position, private networks and the required financial (informational, personal etc.) resources enhance the individual's prospects of meeting the perceived institutional requirements (the successful self-entrepreneurs as well as the ambitious and pragmatic shapers), but those in less comfortable circumstances often are less well equipped to do so (especially the overtaxed non-compliants and precarious workers). In order to fully understand the implications of this observation it is helpful to transpose Massey's (1994) argument on inequality and (im)mobility, which is an important aspect of autonomy. For it is not only economic factors that explain the higher level of dependency of some of our respondents. Rather, autonomy's social gradient results from their social position within the family, workplace and so on. The different types of autonomy managers we identified point to the fact that people's opportunities to pursue their private autonomy claims and the perceived institutionalized autonomy demands vary extremely: "some are more on the receiving-end of it than others, some are effectively imprisoned by it" (Massey, 1994, p. 149). Those at the receiving-end we call editors, because they enjoy extended freedoms and have the feeling that they are fully in charge of their decisions. Those at the other end of the spectrum lack these editorial capacities, that is, they experience the new form of autonomy as a constraining structure and feel rather driven by third-party autonomy expectations instead of proposing and enforcing their own ideas of how to live autonomously.

A rhetoric of inherent necessities and must-dos stands in stark contrast to the modern promise of personal autonomy. However, the strategies to cope with this contradiction and to brake the rapid slide on the "slippery slopes" (Rosa, 2009b, p. 88) of late modernity differ widely according to the available resources and the respondents' social situation. This comes at a very high price. The current dynamics of social acceleration, precarization of work and neoliberal transformation of the welfare state actually seem to widely undermine the conditions necessary for a self-determined life. Benefit recipients in the neoliberal welfare state, for instance, lose the resources that are necessary to promote their competitiveness and maintain their health self-responsibly. Under these circumstances, for many the modern promise of autonomy indeed appears to fade behind the maelstrom of temporal, financial, and institutional cross-pressures (Sharma, 2014; Wajcman & Dodd, 2017). Those who derive their autonomy claims from the ideal that is typical of classical modernity tend to suffer from having to set aside their personal aspirations in order to satisfy the institutional demands (Gergen, 2000). This is likely to induce personal crises such as identity conflicts or stress-induced illnesses such as burnout. At the macro level, this transformation from social citizenship to active citizenship alters the very conditions of social inclusion. Therefore, paradoxically, the conformists who struggle to meet late-modern autonomy demands are likely to formulate personal claims of autonomy such as social security, which in classical modern times was conceived as a *precondition* to act autonomously (Marshall, 1950)—a precondition that is no longer being met.

When persistent stress and individual crises seem to be the major mode of handling the conflicts identified here, what do these tensions and conflicts between individual autonomy claims and institutional demands imply for the general functioning of social institutions? Is an institutional or societal crisis about to follow?

In attempting to arrive at an answer to these questions, our analysis of the institutional demands made upon individual actors has provided an instructive account of three major strategies. There are differences between the two idiosyncratic versions of aligning external expectations with one's own motivational basis, and these differences emphasize different dimensions of autonomy: an inward mode of retaining individual values (especially ethical autonomy) and an outward normative-political mode of coping with tension that is geared towards an overall reform of the situation (moral autonomy). The normative-political orientation of the latter seems to conflict with institutional expectations, as in the case of the employment officer and team leader who applies a humanistic instead of a neoliberal logic in his dealings with his co-workers. Although his nonconformist practices contradict the official principles guiding the operations of his employer, the federal employment office, they are nonetheless of functional importance to the organization and highlight the existence of contradictory institutional autonomy demands: it is this constant editing—his apparent opposition, not compliance, that bears witness to his motivation to work, his independence and a high level of reflexivity, all of which ultimately serve the organization's objectives.

The third and perhaps most common strategy (A1–B2) to meet the conflicting demands is simply the acceptance of the additional workload and responsibilities. To regard overtime or checking e-mail at night as an expression of one's own flexibility and autonomy with respect to time management can be extremely helpful, an attitude that is typically found among the better educated not only in our data but also in other studies (cf. Wajcman, 2015, ch. 3; Sharma, 2014). However, this hints at an apparent but fragile strategy suggesting that societal and corporate demands translate smoothly into individual preferences and practices while retaining the impression that one continues to act as a relatively autonomous person. This adaptive strategy has proven to be highly functional to institutions and are thus key to the contemporary autonomy regime.

If we turn to the social institutions that produce such tensions, these three strategies are extremely productive in that they create solutions and innovative practices in order to mitigate tensions and bypass deficits as well as missing resources. Instead of undermining the legitimacy and functionality of social institutions, today's workers, consumers, parents, and the unemployed are the bearers and editors of a societal conflict that has shifted to the micro level, even when they disagree with the dominant demands that they are faced with (see also Börner, Oberthür, & Stiegel, 2018). The analysis points to the fact that this permanent editing and mending is an interminable process and therefore an integral feature of the late-modern condition. The resulting pervasive (hyper) activity, however, tends to consume the creative potential, discretionary scope and resources of our respondents and makes genuine social change more and more unlikely. The result is a situation that resembles what has been referred to as "polar inertia" (Virilio, 2000) or "hyperaccelerated standstill" (Rosa, 2009b, p. 96). Given the fragility of the arrangement mentioned above, this renders a wide-ranging future crisis more likely than a revolutionary departure from the neoliberal regime of subjectification.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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NOTES

[1] An example being that the institution of slavery in the Unites States directly contradicted the Declaration's claims for equality and liberty.

[2] We analyzed 960 systematically selected articles from two major German daily newspapers (conservative and left wing, volumes 2006 and 2011). The analysis aimed at identifying the public uses of different meanings of autonomy and allowed us to reconstruct the context-specific meanings of autonomy in our fields of analysis (analogous to the interview study): labor, media, politics, science, consumption, and social welfare. It helped us to develop the five facets of personal autonomy presented in the next section based on Forst's popular distinction, which we modified according to our own findings.

[3] Most of the interviewees were recruited through directly addressing the organizations they represented or worked in; some of them responded to our public notices or on internal mail requests. Interviews took place in four different East and West German cities. Among the actors we spoke with were, for example, team leaders; clients of the federal employment office; members of the management of German newspaper publishers; employees of consumer protection organizations and their clients; and party members and professional politicians.

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