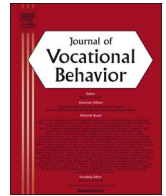




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Role identity salience and boundary permeability preferences: An examination of enactment and protection effects



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ABSTRACT

We examined two boundary management phenomena—the preferred enactment of a highly salient role across different domains through increased boundary permeability, which we call the *enactment effect*, and the preferred protection of a highly salient role from extra-role intrusions through decreased boundary permeability, which we call the *protection effect*. This study examined how role identity salience relates to boundary permeability preferences in the context of three salient roles: work, home, and military reserve. By incorporating three roles, we were able to determine whether the enactment and protection effects generalize to multiple domains. Based on a sample of 1758 surveys completed by Marine reservists, we found consistent support for enactment preference of a highly salient third role across multiple roles, protection preference of highly salient roles against permeations from a third role, and the dominance of the enactment effect as compared to the protection effect. We suggest that co-activation of roles explains why the enactment effect dominates the protection effect. Additionally, exploratory cluster analysis identified five role identity salience profiles that were consistent with the dominance of the enactment effect and also revealed the protection effect to have differential preferences for extra-role intrusions.

1. Introduction

A significant challenge facing many contemporary employees is how to manage the boundaries around their work and nonwork roles in a way that promotes positive outcomes at work and in other parts of life (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Matthews, Barnes-Farrell, & Bulger, 2010). Boundary management has received increasing attention in the literature because of two countervailing trends (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012). On the one hand, access to flexible work arrangements provides employees with additional discretion over when and where they work, presumably enhancing the control they have over their work role boundary. On the other hand, advances in information and communication technology (e.g., email, text messaging) can strain the boundary between work and nonwork roles when employees are expected by their organization to respond to work demands during traditional “nonwork hours.” Together, these trends require employees to manage the boundaries around multiple life roles on a regular basis.

Role boundaries are the socially constructed limits that individuals create for their various life roles to establish order and reduce

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uncertainty (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). One particularly important characteristic of a role boundary is its permeability. A role boundary is considered permeable when elements of another domain frequently cross the boundary and enter the role, and is considered impermeable when elements of another domain rarely cross the boundary and enter the role (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Individuals with impermeable role boundaries tend to separate, or segment, their life roles (“segmentors”), whereas those with permeable role boundaries tend to blend, or integrate, their life roles (“integrators”). Where individuals fall along the segmentation–integration continuum defines their boundary management style (Kossek et al., 2012).

Individuals develop preferences regarding how permeable their role boundaries should be because the permeability of their boundaries can influence their outcomes in multiple life roles. For example, less permeable work and home role boundaries are associated with lower work-family conflict (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010), presumably because the impermeability of the boundaries limits the extent to which other roles intrude into (and conflict with) the focal role. In addition, permeability preferences relate to the type of flexible work arrangement that promotes employees’ organizational commitment (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Employees who prefer a permeable home boundary are more committed when they have greater access to integrating policies such as onsite childcare (allowing them to blend work and home), whereas those who prefer an impermeable home boundary are more committed when they have greater access to segmenting policies such as flextime (allowing them to separate work and home).

Because of the central role that permeability plays in boundary theory and the work-family interface, the present study was designed to shed light on the factors that determine individuals’ preference for permeable or impermeable role boundaries. In particular, we examined the efficacy of two perspectives, which we call the “enactment effect” and the “protection effect,” in explaining the preferred permeability of role boundaries. Key to both perspectives is the belief that role identity salience—the importance that individuals attach to each of their role identities (Thoits, 1992)—determines the extent to which they prefer permeable or impermeable boundaries around their life roles (Hecht & Allen, 2009; Matthews et al., 2010; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

According to the *enactment effect*, individuals who strongly identify with a role are motivated to enact that role in various other domains because enacting a highly salient role is rewarding and intrinsically satisfying (Ashforth et al., 2000). Therefore, high salience of a particular role leads to the desire for permeable boundaries around *other* roles so that the highly salient role can be enacted in these other domains. For example, individuals with a highly salient work role enact the work role not only in the workplace, but also at home (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011) by increasing the permeability of the home role boundary, allowing them to talk about their work with family members, display work-related objects such as awards at home, and perform work-related tasks at home.

According to the *protection effect*, individuals with a highly salient role identity are motivated to protect that role from intrusions from other domains, leading to the desire for an impermeable boundary around that role (Clark, 2000). Because engaging in a highly salient role is rewarding, allowing activities from other domains to enter that role would require individuals to disrupt (at least temporarily) their participation in that role. Research suggests that individuals do protect their work roles from home-related permeations (Hecht & Allen, 2009; Matthews et al., 2010) and protect their home roles from work-related permeations (Hecht & Allen, 2009; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

Despite evidence supporting both the enactment and protection effects, there are three important limitations in the literature that we address in the present study. First, with one exception (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010), the enactment and protection effects have been tested by relating role identity salience to the actual (or perceived) permeability of role boundaries rather than to the *preferred* permeability of role boundaries. Although there is ample evidence linking preferred boundary permeability to actual boundary permeability (Adkins & Premeaux, 2014; Park & Jex, 2011; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011), we believe that relating role identity salience to preferred boundary permeability is a more direct test of the enactment and protection perspectives. The two perspectives assert that a strong role identity salience *motivates* individuals to construct a permeable boundary around other roles (enactment) or an impermeable boundary around the highly salient role (protection). We suggest that the motivation to construct a permeable or impermeable role boundary is manifested through a permeability preference that an individual strives to achieve. Because permeability preferences are likely to be the more proximal outcome of role identity salience (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010), and situational constraints prevent preferences from being achieved (Ashforth et al., 2000), relating role identity salience to actual permeability may not be as strong a test of the enactment and protection effects as relating salience to preferred permeability.

Second, we examined the relative strength of the enactment and protection effects, an unexamined and important question in light of the seemingly contradictory predictions that would be implied by the two effects. For example, high work role identity salience should lead an individual to prefer a permeable boundary around the home role in order to enact the highly salient work role at home. At the same time, high home role identity salience should lead an individual to prefer an impermeable boundary around the home role to protect the home domain from the encroachment of work. Because individuals often participate in multiple salient roles, it is important to understand which effect—enactment or protection—is stronger, or takes precedence. We used relative weight analysis and exploratory cluster analysis to assess the comparative strength of the enactment and protection effects.

Third, much of the research linking role identity salience with boundary permeability has been limited to two domains: work and home (Hecht & Allen, 2009; Matthews et al., 2010; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Park & Jex, 2011). This is not surprising because individuals spend most of their day either at work or at home (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a). However, boundary scholars suggest that life roles other than work and home may also be salient (Ashforth et al., 2000), and for some people, a “third” role identity may be even more salient than work and home role identities (Kossek et al., 2012). Although Kossek et al.’ (2012) findings support their contention that some individuals have “other life role centric identities” (p. 114), their study measured identity salience only for the home and work roles. Therefore, in addition to the work and home roles, we included a third role, that of the Marine

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