



Work-family boundary strategies: Stability and alignment between preferred and enacted boundaries



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 July 2012

Available online 27 November 2012

Keywords:

Boundary management

Boundary theory

Work and family

Work–family interface

ABSTRACT

Are individuals bounding work and family the way they would like? Much of the work–family boundary literature focuses on whether employees are segmenting or integrating work with family, but does not explore the boundaries workers would like to have, nor does it examine the fit between desired and enacted boundaries, or assess boundary stability. In this study, 23 respondents employed at a large Fortune 500 company were interviewed about their work–family boundaries before and after their teams underwent a cultural change initiative that sought to loosen workplace norms and allow employees more autonomy to decide when and where they performed their job tasks. Four distinct boundary strategies emerged from the data, with men and parents of young children having better alignment between preferred and enacted boundaries than women and those without these caregiving duties. Implications for boundary theory and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last several decades in the United States, work and family domains have undergone significant change. Separate spheres ideology that was put firmly in place during the Industrial revolution (Gutman, 1988), where employment took place outside the home, and home was a “safe haven” from the demands of work, has been eroding at a fast pace. Globalization, declines in manufacturing and rising service sector employment, growth of nonstandard schedules, and technological developments (such as cell phones, wireless internet, and laptops) have made it easier for work to intrude on family and home life. Likewise, women, especially mothers of young children, are in the labor market in increasing numbers (Cohany & Sok, 2007), and while men are gradually doing more, women still do the majority of childcare and homemaking tasks (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). As such, work can become increasingly blurred with the non-work domains of family and personal life.

Investigating how work, family, and personal life come together is a thriving area of study. Scholars commonly examine how work and family realms conflict or enhance one another, or whether or not individuals feel balanced between their multiple roles (see Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Although useful for understanding how individuals feel about their work–family intersection, these concepts do not reveal how people *interpret* the expectations and responsibilities in each domain. For example, when assessing conflict or spillover, scholars assume that any intrusion from one domain to another is grounds for potential problems. However, individuals may not agree on what constitutes an intrusion or could feel that some intrusions are more problematic than others: the same set of objective work–family demands and responsibilities may be viewed differently and result in different appraisals. To understand how individuals subjectively perceive family, work and personal domains, the boundary work or “boundary management” literature fits best. According to this scholarship, individuals set boundaries between work and home that fall along a continuum ranging from segmentation (where work and family are kept firmly segregated) to integration (where work and family are entirely blended) (Nippert-Eng, 1996). While there is a growing body of research that fleshes out the boundary strategies or styles that individuals have (Bulger, Mathews, & Hoffman, 2007; Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012), less is known about the

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degree of alignment between preferred boundaries and actual boundaries, and whether or not boundaries are stable over time. This study begins to address these gaps. Specifically, I use data from two teams of workers employed within a large Fortune 500 company that was undergoing an internal cultural change initiative. I tracked the work–family boundaries that workers desired and created before and after the change in workplace norms, whether or not desired and actual boundaries aligned, and if boundaries and boundary fit altered when workplace norms changed.

2. Literature review

Nippert-Eng's (1996) *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries in Everyday Life* is considered a foundational conceptual work in understanding how work and life are cognitively bounded using external and internal markers. She found that work–family boundaries come in four different forms (cognitive, physical, temporal, and behavioral) that combine to create “personal realm configurations” (6) that can be arranged along the segmentation to integration continuum (Nippert-Eng, 1996). In its purest form segmentation is the complete physical, behavioral, mental and temporal separation of home and work roles (i.e. never the two shall meet), such that home and work are not only physically separate but all objects, people, and thoughts associated with one domain do not carry over into another. At the opposite end of the continuum is integration, which is the complete blurring of home and work roles and domains. While it is theoretically possible for individuals to fall at either extreme end of the continuum, in actuality most men and women fall someone in-between due to structural constraints and expectations associated with each domain (Nippert-Eng, 1996: 6). Although boundary theorists argue that boundaries are constantly being formed and shaped by respondents and their social environment (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996), there is some evidence that work–family boundaries are relatively durable and not subject to much change. In their longitudinal study of Canadian employees, Hecht and Allen (2009) found that enacted boundaries were relatively stable at two time points measured over the course of a year.

Recently, scholars have begun to theoretically and empirically unpack the continuum with many different labels attached to the configurations in the middle are a mix of segmentation and integration (Bulger et al., 2007; Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; Kossek et al., 2012). Similar to the work–family conflict literature, where it is common to assess directionality (Bellavia & Frone, 2005), boundary scholars have grown increasingly sensitivity to whether or not individuals integrate or segment from work-to-family and family-to-work (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; Kossek et al., 2012).

Boundary scholars (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005; Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999; Kreiner, 2006; Nippert-Eng, 1996) are also careful to conceptually distinguish between desired and actual boundaries. While cognitive, physical, behavioral and temporal elements meld together to comprise both forms of boundaries, “enacted boundaries” are the actual demarcations that individuals create or have between core life domains, while “boundary preferences” are the boundaries they desire. However, little empirical attention has been devoted to separating preferences from enactments. Some researchers (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; Kossek et al., 2005) argue for an intertwined approach where preferred boundaries form an integral component of enacted boundaries. Ammons (2008) urges a slightly different perspective, and proposes that boundary preferences and enactments are distinct and inter-related concepts and that it is their intersection, alignment, or “boundary fit” that drives outcomes such as work–family conflict and work–family balance.

As social constructions, boundaries are shaped by individual needs and desires, but they occur within a constantly changing society and are shaped by cultural and institutional arrangements and practices (Mills, 1959; Moen & Chermack, 2005). Thus, they may or may not be consciously created by individuals. Structural conditions and norms present in the home and workplace influence both enacted and preferred boundaries by offering possibilities, constraints and/or resources; as such, these conditions can either enhance or exacerbate perceptions of boundary alignment. Likewise, when surrounding influences are altered, it can cause individuals to reassess work–family boundaries and boundary possibilities. As Nippert-Eng (1996) wrote: “Changes invoke new, modified understandings of what home and work mean. They may also change the available ways in which we carry out these understandings” (p. 15).

A boundary fit approach diverges from the growing body of boundary research which adopts a person–environment fit perspective and examines alignment between individual boundary preferences and the boundaries supported in the external environment or workplace context (see Fig. 1). In the person–environment approach, scholars find that when available environmental conditions, or workplace policies and practices, align with boundary preferences, it results in “boundary congruence” (Kreiner 2006) which bolsters mental health (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999), reduces work–family conflict (Chen, Powell, & Greenhaus, 2009) and results in higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005).

Boundary work remains a promising and relatively uncharted area of study. There are several theoretical works that examine boundary preferences, enactments, environmental conditions, and how they are intertwined (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kossek et al., 2005) but few empirical pieces test these models. Also lacking, are studies that examine the stability of boundary preferences and enactments (for exception, see Hecht & Allen, 2009). What is thriving are studies that examine outcomes associated with boundaries (Bulger et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2009; Kossek et al., 2012; Kreiner, 2006; Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011; Rothbard et al., 2005). However, additional work remains to be done in each of these areas.

This paper adds two contributions to the boundary work literature. First, it treats boundary preferences and boundary enactments as distinct concepts and assesses boundary fit. Second, it evaluates the durability of boundaries when the norms around a core domain, work, are altered, and individuals are given more control over their work-related boundaries. Studying the longitudinal stability of enacted and preferred boundaries in a time of flux allows us to see how stable boundaries are, and provides insight into how easy it is to change them. My results indicate that boundary work scholars should continue to move

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