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Boundary/Border Theory and Work-Family Integration¹

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Researchers have long recognized that work and family are not “separate spheres”, but are interdependent domains or roles with “permeable” boundaries (Kanter, 1977; Pleck, 1977). Some have gone beyond recognizing this linkage to advocate initiatives that allow working families to integrate these domains (e.g., Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2001). But others have expressed concerns over the blurring boundary between work and family that workers can experience if there is too much work-family integration in their lives, which can occur if arrangements such as working at home and using mobile technologies tend to keep work constantly accessible (Chesley, Moen, & Shore, 2001; Galinsky & Kim, 2000; Shamir, 1992). Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) and boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) address the integration and blurring of boundaries in work and family life. These theories contribute to the study of work-family linkages by describing the conditions under which varying degrees of work-family integration are likely to improve or diminish individual well-being. Both address how people construct, maintain, negotiate and cross boundaries or borders, the “lines of demarcation” (Clark, 2000) between work and family. Next, we examine the theories more closely.

Boundary theory is a general cognitive theory of social classification (Zerubavel, 1991; 1996) that focuses on outcomes such as the meanings people assign to home and work (Nippert-Eng, 1996) and the ease and frequency of transitioning between roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). In contrast, work-family border theory is devoted only to work and family domains. The outcome of interest in this theory is work-family balance, which refers to “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict” (Clark, 2000, p. 751). It also differs from boundary theory in that its definition of borders encompasses not only those psychological categories but also tangible boundaries that divide the times, place and people associated with work versus family.

Aside from these and other minor differences, the two theories share a set of propositions (Clark, 2000; Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2002; Nippert-Eng, 1996):

¹ Material in this article also appears as part of the Sloan Work-Family Encyclopedia at http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/rft/wfpedia/wfpBBTent.html

- keeping work and family separate makes it easier to manage work-family borders;
- integrating work and family facilitates transitions between these domains;
- either strategy can improve the well-being of employees, depending on the characteristics of employees (e.g., time management skills, being a “self starter”, or social influence at home and work), the idiosyncratic meanings they attach to work and family (e.g., the extent to which they see these as similar roles), their preferences for integration versus segmentation, contextual factors (e.g., “family friendly” workplace norms and policies, long or irregular work hours, or social support from supervisors, coworkers and family), and the fit between their preferences and the boundaries allowed by their social context.

Integration versus segmentation. Boundaries are clearer and more easily maintained when roles are separated. On the other hand, more integrated role sets can make role transitions less difficult, but they can also confound the demands of these roles, increasing the chance of role blurring. Work-family blurring, or work-family boundary ambiguity, can be defined as the experience of confusion or difficulty in distinguishing one's work from one's family roles in a given setting in which these roles are seen as highly integrated, such as doing paid work at home (Desrochers, Hilton & Larwood, 2002). The integration-segmentation distinction is not a dichotomy, but a continuum in boundary theory.

Integration is believed to occur through two mechanisms: flexibility and permeability. Flexibility refers to the malleability of the boundary between two or more role/domains—its ability to expand or contract—to accommodate the demands of one domain or another (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Hall & Richter, 1988). For example, a female telecommuter might be called upon to play the role of mother at any point or place during the day. Permeability involves the extent to which a boundary allows psychological or behavioral aspects of one role or domain to enter another (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Hall & Richter, 1988; Pleck, 1977). For example, a call center operator who is not allowed to accept personal calls nor visitors at work has an impermeable work role boundary. When two or more roles or domains are flexible and permeable, they are said to be blended (Clark, 2000) or integrated (Ashforth et al., 2000). Researchers propose that work-family blurring is more likely to occur in integrated domains (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). In contrast, Nippert-Eng (1996) argues that when boundaries are highly segmented, they are “thickened” by the presence of distinct schedules, behaviors and people in each domain, so that transitions between domains requires more effort.

Boundary crossing, role transitions, and boundary work. Ashforth (2001) argues that role transitions involve crossing role boundaries, and he draws a distinction between “macro role transitions” and “micro role transitions.” Macro transitions are the sequential (and often permanent) exiting from one role and entering of another over time, such as promotion (Ashforth, 2001) or downward job transitions (Sargent, 2001). Micro role transitions involve switching back and forth among one's currently held roles. For example, on workdays, employees may move from the roles of parent to spouse at home, transitioning to employee after the commute to work, and switching back to spouse or parent after the commute home. Because working parents who telecommute can switch within the home from work to family roles, these micro role transitions can be made more easily and more frequently. This is partly because “getting ready” for work and transportation to work are less salient (though home workers still

need to be psychologically ready to work). But the extent of integration also depends on one's boundary work—the mental and behavioral activities that make up the "the strategies, principles, and practices we use to create, maintain, and modify cultural boundaries" (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p. 7). Nippert-Eng posits two forms of boundary work: placement, which "draws the line between realms"; and transcendence, which keeps the boundary "in place by allowing us to jump back and forth over it" (p. 8). For example, a telecommuter may "draw the line" by asking not to be called at home during late hours unless there is a serious problem that demands immediate attention. Thus, with effort, employees can maintain a clear work-family boundary that is adaptive to their needs, even in highly integrated arrangements such as working at home or running a family business. However, there are some occupations such as a Priest or an on-call medical doctor where boundary work is difficult, because these workers have little control over the placement and transcendence of work-nonwork boundaries. One mechanism that aids in placement and transcendence (boundary crossing) are transition rituals. Transition rituals such as putting on professional clothes or packing a briefcase are habitual, patterned behaviors signifying to the individual (and sometimes to others) that he or she is in the process of exiting one role and preparing to enter another (Ashforth et al., 2000).

Importance to Work-Family Studies

Boundary and border theory can be applied to a range of work-family topics. In this section we highlight the importance of the theories to the study of work and family.

- **Working at home:** While working at home can reduce time-based work-family conflict by saving time that might otherwise be spent in preparation for and transportation to work, it can exacerbate other aspects of work-family conflict (Nippert-Eng, 1998). People who do some or all of their paid work at home can simultaneously experience both work cues and family cues; although these may involve different behaviors, the fact that these behaviors are situated in the same place and often at the same time can make the salience of work and family roles seem equivocal (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Desrochers et al., 2002), which sets the stage for work-family blurring. On the other hand, working at home can be beneficial in that it allows one to spend more time at home with loved ones.
- **Working with family:** Working with a spouse or other family member, whether it involves running a family business (Marshack, 1994) or working for the same employer at the same job site (Moen & Sweet, 2002), can mean that work-related behaviors and family-related behaviors are so enmeshed that accomplishments and failures in one domain are nearly inseparable from those in the other. This can blur work-family borders, but it can also help balance work and family by giving family members a greater awareness of the worker's job demands (Clark, 2002).
- **Flexible scheduling:** While working at home or working with family can increase both the flexibility and permeability of the work-family boundary, flexible scheduling allows flexible but impermeable boundaries. Thus, employees can adapt to the changing demands of work and family while minimizing the chance that distractions from home will interfere with work life and distractions from home will interfere with home life (Clark, 2002a; Rau & Hyland, 2002).

- Mobile telecommunications technology and on-call work arrangements: Technology such as laptop computers, cell phones and pagers can help in coordinating schedules and saving time; but to the extent that such devices keep work concerns almost constantly salient and accessible, they can lead to greater stress (Chesley, Moen, & Shore, 2001; Galinsky & Kim, 2000; Shamir, 1992).
- Workplace culture: Many organizations implement family friendly policies such as flextime because they help recruit better talent as well as increasing productivity and reducing absenteeism; but because middle managers often demand that employees work long hours, more for the sake of “face time” than productivity, they tend to extend the temporal boundaries of work time, cutting into family time (Hochschild, 1997). Thus, organizational culture and human resource management practices can impede or enable boundary work.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Qualitative research. Nippert-Eng's seminal study of employees at a U.S. research laboratory is a detailed qualitative analysis of the content and context of the experience of the work-home boundary. Her interviews and observations of home and work environments examined how people symbolically use self-relevant objects (e.g., calendars, keys, and reading material) and actions (e.g., conversation topics, commutes and taking phone calls) to carve out work-family boundaries. Her work demonstrates that boundaries are maintained through proactive boundary work, which is especially challenging for people who do a portion of their work at home. It also shows us that people differ in how they mentally draw the line between work and family, with some favoring segmentation and others favoring the integration end of the continuum. Finally, Nippert-Eng's study shows that this cognitive boundary is influenced by the structural characteristics of work and home such as the physical environment, the social environment, and the cultural assumptions tied to each of these domains.

Quantitative research. In one of the few studies to test work-family border theory, Clark (2002a) constructed measures of the perceived flexibility and permeability of employees' work and family lives, seeking to find out which combination of flexibility and permeability would best help them balance work and family. She found that high flexibility and low permeability were associated with the lowest levels of work-family conflict. Findings from Rau and Hyland's research suggest that this link between high flexibility, low permeability and low work-family conflict may be influenced by the preferences of workers. Based on boundary theory, Rau and Hyland (2002) posited that, compared to the standard 9 to 5 work arrangement, job applicants' relative preferences for jobs offering flextime or those offering telecommuting would depend on their current levels of work-family conflict. Consistent with their hypotheses, Rau and Hyland found that applicants with higher work-family conflict preferred jobs that offered flextime, and those with low work-family conflict preferred jobs offering telecommuting. This suggests that the relationship between boundary characteristics (flexibility and permeability) and work-family conflict may vary with employees' boundary preferences. These preferences and the fit between preferences and perceived boundary characteristics have received special attention in two recent studies. A study by Edwards and Rothbard (1999) has implications for boundary theory because they studied, among other issues, the extent of work-family segmentation in university employees. The findings revealed that how much segmentation employees preferred, and the fit

between actual and preferred segmentation predicted well-being outcomes. They found that a “good fit” predicted greater well-being outcomes such as work and family satisfaction, anxiety and depression. Interestingly, they also found that those whose work and family lives were highly segmented, and who preferred it that way, had greater overall well-being than those who had low segmentation and did not value segmentation. A subsequent study by Kreiner (2002) examined this fit from the perspective of boundary theory. His study of university alumni replicated Edwards and Rothbard’s results by showing that a good fit between actual and preferred levels of segmentation was associated with greater job satisfaction and lower stress. He also found that the relationship between fit and stress is partially mediated by work-family conflict.

Research focusing on work-family blurring. Although work-family blurring is one possible consequence of highly integrated work and family roles (Ashforth et al., 2000), only a handful of studies have specifically measured this blurring. Desrochers et al (2002) have developed a three-item measure of work-family boundary ambiguity. Consistent with boundary theory, they found that greater work-family boundary ambiguity associated with greater work-family conflict, a greater number of work-family transitions made when doing paid work at home, and a higher number of hours spent doing paid work at home. Two other studies merit comment because they have collected both quantitative and qualitative data on perceived work-family blurring. Hill, Hawkins & Miller (1996) examined the impact of mobile telework on family life for workers at a large corporation. They found that, compared to office workers, mobile teleworkers reported greater flexibility. Some of the teleworkers reported that their families thrived as a result of this flexibility, but others “reported that their families struggled because workplace and schedule flexibility blurred the boundaries between work and family life” (p. 293). Although this study was not informed by boundary theory or work-family border theory, the findings are consistent with the proposition that work-family integration can have either positive or negative consequences for workers. Another study has similar implications. Ahrentzen (1990) examined the way that home workers create spatial, behavioral, temporal and social boundaries, as well as its implications for work-family role conflict and “role overlap”—a measure of the perceived blurring of work and family role boundaries in three separate domains: time, space, and the “mind.” She found that when home workers maintained a separate work space with restricted access from others in the home, rescheduled work and domestic activities, and added work-family transition rituals such as exercise they experienced less work-family conflict. Boundary theory suggests that these activities are types of “boundary work” that home workers actively pursue in order to maintain work-family boundaries.

Implications for Research and Practice

As discussed earlier, integration/segmentation is not an either-or proposition, but a continuum. It is also multifaceted, with underlying dimensions that include (but are not limited to) flexibility and permeability. Furthermore, whether integrative work arrangements are beneficial or costly for employees may depend on their boundary preferences, the extent of boundary work that they do, role conflict, and the fit among them. Not surprisingly then, the relationships between integration and individual well-being are complex. This complexity has implications for both future policy and future research on work-family integration.

To this end, researchers in this area are likely to make progress by taking an interactionist perspective. Research suggests that individual preferences are important; however, it is also apparent that human resource practices and organizational culture affect this fit process. Few studies have examined the dynamics of preferences. It is plausible to suggest that individual preferences are likely to change over time. These preference changes may relate to changes in job responsibilities or family responsibilities such as child care. In addition, research should examine the social construction of cognitive categories of meaning and its role in setting work-family boundaries. Greater attention also must be paid to the measurement of boundary characteristics, including the flexibility and permeability of boundaries and the perceived clarity or ambiguity of work-family boundaries. Another area worthy of further investigation is coping mechanisms such as boundary transition rituals. Intervention research that tests different transition strategies is likely to be helpful. Finally, contexts that are characterized by high levels of integration such as telecommuting, home entrepreneurship, family business, and two or more family members working for the same employer are likely to provide strong tests for boundary and border theories. More research is needed to address these issues.

On a more practical level, human resource practices such as work-family programs should be offered in ways that allow employees to have control in managing their work-family boundaries. This may be especially important for telecommuters and other employees who bring some of their work home. Findings from contemporary research informed by either boundary theory or work-family border theory suggests that, while integrative work-family arrangements can help employees balance work and family life (i.e., by scheduling work around family demands, spending more time with family, or reducing weekly commuting time), if work and family life become so highly integrated that the work-family boundary is blurred, it can lead to negative consequences such as work-family conflict, stress, depression and dissatisfaction with both work and family life. Supervisors can help reduce the chance of this work-family blurring by respecting the schedules that employees set for telecommuting or flextime work or by being supportive of employees in terms of shifting schedules to accommodate family needs. Individual employees can also minimize this blurring; those with flexible work hours may need to maintain a fairly consistent schedule that allows for specific blocks of "family time", and those who work at home can minimize work-family blurring through boundary work activities such as discouraging family members and visitors from interrupting one's work, working only in a particular room of the home, and keeping work-related materials separate from non-work materials.

In conclusion, boundary theory and work-family border theory have important implications for both research and policy on work and family. These perspectives address the construction of work-family boundaries as a complex interplay between employees' strategies and preferences, the social contexts in which they are embedded, and both the idiosyncratic and cultural meanings attached to work and family. These theories chart an interesting and worthwhile course for researchers and practitioners alike to navigate.

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