

OMT Doctoral Consortium, AOM 2006
Summary of research project:
How Lawyers Manage Boundaries Between Work and Non-Work
Spela Trefalt, Harvard Business School

Many working individuals find it difficult to combine their work with their obligations and interests outside of work. This topic has been receiving significant research attention since 1970s. Research regarding competing demands of work and non-work life in large part focuses on constraints that organizations and cultures impose on individuals. The studies which explore variance at the individual level mostly focus on stable and hard-to-change variables such as personality, gender, or person-organization fit.

Recently, researchers started shifting focus to the effects of individual agency in combining work and non-work domains (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Poelmans, 2005). This shift is appropriate as many individuals in contemporary firms have the opportunity to make choices regarding their allocation of time and energy between work and non-work activities (Hodson, 2004; Poelmans, 2005) and negotiate idiosyncratic deals for themselves (Rousseau, 2005). In making such choices within the given constraints, some people struggle or even give up their careers, while others are able to combine work and non-work life in ways which leave them highly satisfied (Trefalt & Perlow, 2005).

There may be many reasons contributing to differences in experienced outcomes, but a particularly interesting and underexplored one is the *process* of combining work and non-work domains (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2002; Kossek et al., 2005; Kreiner et al., 2006; Poelmans, 2005). With my dissertation I will add to the growing body of work exploring the process of managing boundaries between different domains or roles. Like other researchers who study boundaries, I take a social construction approach, acknowledging the control individuals have over how they experience, interpret, and shape the world (Kreiner et al., 2006).

Individuals who work for pay outside of home engage in the process of *boundary work*, which consists of the strategies, principles and practices that individuals use to create, maintain and modify the boundaries between work and non-work (Nippert-Eng, 1996). This process takes place within some margins set by people and expectations at work and outside of work. Within those margins individuals try to enact their personal preferences for segmentation (separation) or integration (blurring) of work and non-work domains by constructing and maintaining rigid or flexible, permeable or impermeable boundaries.

With my research project I want to understand how individuals go about enacting their preferences, and how effective their various approaches – boundary work tactics – are (1) in enabling the individuals to enact their preferences and (2) in achieving other favorable outcomes, such as low work-life conflict, high work-life enrichment, low stress, and low turnover intentions.

The answer to the question “What works?” is without a doubt quite complicated. Effectiveness of particular boundary work strategies is likely context dependent, so that an approach that is very effective in one situation may fail entirely in another. Moreover, in order to be able to assess the effectiveness of different types of strategies, it may be important to differentiate between these types in a more nuanced way than was done so far. In order to gain understanding of the process of boundary work, qualitative research is needed (Kreiner et al., 2006; Rotondo, Carlson, & Kincaid, 2003). In order to link the process to outcomes, quantitative methods are necessary.

For that reason, I combine qualitative and quantitative research to explore the following research questions in two studies:

Study 1 – qualitative study:

- What is the individuals' process of managing boundaries between work and non-work?
What types of actions do they take? (What do people do to manage boundaries?)

- What kinds of issues are individuals considering in deciding what actions to take in a specific situation? (What aspects of the context matter?)

Study 2 – quantitative study:

- What kinds of consequences do they perceive their approaches to have? What approaches are more likely to lead to desirable consequences?

Rationale:

Answering these research questions is important for theoretical and practical reasons. On the theoretical side, I hope to further our understanding of the process of the boundary work between work and non-work life with Study 1. Study 2 would, to the best of my knowledge, link boundary work tactics would to outcomes of interest for the first time (cf. Kreiner et al., 2006). Existing research provides some insight into the effectiveness of organizational programs for work-life balance (Eaton, 2003; Perlow, 1997; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002) but we know little about what the individuals themselves can effectively do to alleviate the tensions they are experiencing.

On the practical side, the findings should be interesting both for individuals who are trying to balance effectively their own work and non-work, and for managers and firms which are trying to facilitate individuals' efforts and retain valuable employees.

Hypotheses/ Propositions:

This is an exploratory, theory building project, therefore I do not have explicit hypothesis or propositions. I anticipate, however, based on the prior literature and my own preliminary empirical work, that boundary work tactics will affect the boundaries (their location,

permeability, and flexibility), work-life conflict, work-life enrichment, stress, and turnover intentions.

Methods:

I am conducting my dissertation research among lawyers in a large US law firm. Large law firms are known to impose significant demands on the attorneys that work there, from junior associates to partners (Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Saute, 1999). At the same time, legal work affords a high level of autonomy (where, when, and how the attorney completes the work), such that individuals can actively shape the boundaries around their work. While the fact that lawyers are an extreme case may limit the generalizability of the findings, extreme cases are helpful in theory building because the phenomenon under study is more visible there (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), I explore the details of the process attorneys use to create space for non-work in their lives (I ask them to describe two concrete instances in which they were facing a conflict between work and non-work; one that they feel got resolved particularly well, and one that they feel did not get resolved well at all). In addition, I ask about other approaches they use and decisions that they made in order to combine work and non-work life. I have conducted 22 interviews so far, and I plan to continue interviewing until I reach theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I will code the qualitative data to develop categories of boundary work using grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999/1967; Strauss et al., 1998). Existing research suggests classifications of boundary work into behavioral, temporal, cognitive, physical, etc. (Kossek et al., 2005; Kreiner et al., 2006). The data I have collected so far suggests other meaningful classification schemes. For example, boundaries could be classified into those the focal person desires to have, boundaries that other domain members expect the focal person to have, the boundaries that they negotiate for, and the boundaries that

they enact. The boundary work tactics then could be classified as those targeted at own cognitive boundaries, those targeted at others' cognitive boundaries, those employed in negotiations of boundaries, and those used in enactment of boundaries.

Once I categorize boundary work tactics based on the interviews, I will develop a survey instrument to measure the frequency of use of various categories of boundary work. In the survey I will also capture outcome variables of interest: work-life conflict, work-life enrichment, stress, and turnover intentions, using existing validated measures. Using the survey data I will be able to link boundary work strategies to outcomes, and thus start developing a theory about the effects of various approaches to boundary work on outcomes of interest. Specifically, I plan to use factor analysis to confirm underlying dimensions of various boundary work tactics. Further, I will use linear regression to establish a link between the frequency of use of various tactics and outcomes of interest.

Results:

Not available yet.

References:

- Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. 2000. All in a day's work: Boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(3): 472-491.
- Clark, S. C. 2002. Communicating across the work/home border. *Community, work & family*, 5(1): 23-48.
- Eaton, S. C. 2003. If you can use them: Flexibility policies, organizational commitment, and perceived performance. *Industrial Relations*, 42(2): 145-167.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. Building Theories From Case Study Research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4): 532.
- Epstein, C. F., Seron, C., Oglensky, B., & Saute, R. 1999. *The part-time paradox: Time norms, professional lives, family, and gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Flanagan, J. C. 1954. The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51(4): 327-358.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. 1999/1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Hodson, R. 2004. Work Life and Social Fulfillment: Does Social Affiliation at Work Reflect a Carrot or a Stick? *Social Science Quarterly*, 85(2): 221-239.
- Kossek, E. E., Lautsch, B. A., & Eaton, S. C. 2005. Flexibility enactment theory: Implications of flexibility type, control, and boundary management for work-family effectiveness. In E. E. Kossek, & S. J. Lambert (Eds.), *Work and life integration: Organizational, cultural and individual perspectives*: 243-261. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Press.
- Kreiner, G. E., Hollensbe, E. C., & Sheep, M., L. 2006. Boundary work tactics: Negotiating the work-home interface, *Paper presented at the Academy of Management meeting in Atlanta, GA*.
- Nippert-Eng, C. E. 1996. *Home and work: Negotiating boundaries through everyday life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Perlow, L. A. 1997. *Finding time: how corporations, individuals, and families can benefit from new work practices*. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press.
- Poelmans, S. A. Y. 2005. The decision process theory of work and family. In E. E. Kossek, & S. J. Lambert (Eds.), *Work and life integration: Organizational, cultural and individual perspectives*: 263-285. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Press.
- Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J. K., & Pruitt, B. H. 2002. *Beyond work-family balance : advancing gender equity and workplace performance* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rotondo, D. M., Carlson, D. S., & Kincaid, J. F. 2003. Coping with multiple dimensions of work-family conflict. *Personnel Review*, 32(3): 275-296.
- Rousseau, D. M. 2005. *I-deals, idiosyncratic deals employees bargain for themselves*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research : techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Trefalt, S., & Perlow, L. 2005. Learning from women who make it work: A call for dynamic flexibility. In K. D. Elsbach (Ed.), *Qualitative Organizational Research: Best Papers from the Davis Conference on Qualitative Research*: 227-251. Greenwich, CT: IAP - Information Age Publishing, Inc.