INTEGRATION OF WORK AND HOME: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON BOUNDARY PREFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, social-cultural and economic developments have affected the relation between the worlds of work and ‘home’, i.e. the domestic, private domain. Over the last forty years, women massively (re)entered the labor market. Consequently, nowadays many people have to fulfill the needs of both paid employment and home (e.g. Van der Lippe, Jager & Kops, 2003; Winslow, 2005). In addition, flexible work arrangements and the use of technological developments such as laptops, e-mail and mobile phones, increases the permeability of the work-home boundaries (Chesley, 2005; Valcourt & Hunter, 2005). As a result the span of work tends to spread into the homes of individuals (Ahrentzen, 1990; Hill, Hawkins, & Miller, 1996; Perin, 1998; Chelsey, 2005).

As a consequence of the intertwining of the two domains, ‘the myth of separate worlds’ is no longer accepted within society and scientific research (Kanter, 1977; Morf, 1989). Today, the relation between work and home is typically analyzed from the perspective of an ‘open-system’ approach (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which assumes that events in one domain have a positive or negative effect on the other domain (Staines, 1980; Campbell Clark, 2000).

Theoretical and empirical research has addressed the relation between work and home, its antecedents and consequences for the working and personal lives of individuals. The focus of interest has shifted over the years however (Lewis, 2002; Burk, 2004). At first, researchers focused on possible conflicts between the work and home domain (e.g. Pleck, Staines & Lang, 1980; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992a; Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Later on, the notion of balancing work and family life came into perspective as well (e.g. Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman, 2001; Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003).

Though fruitful and insightful, neither the concept of conflict nor that of balance appeared sufficient to reveal the processes by which balance and conflict may occur (Campbell Clark, 2000). In addition to these concepts that shed light on the outcomes of the relationship between work and home, a new focus, which also clarifies its dynamics and processes, was needed. More recently, a theory that attempts to understand why and how individuals combine work and home in different ways has been deployed in the work-home research: Boundary Theory (Nippert-Eng,
Boundary theory looks at the relationship between work and home by focusing on the boundaries that divide the two domains, the ease and frequency of crossing boundaries, and the meanings individuals assign to both domains. The starting point of the theory is the assumption that the ‘strength’ of the boundaries is an indicator for the extent of integration or separation of the two domains, and the ease of alternating between them. Two boundary characteristics determine the strength of the boundaries: flexibility and permeability.

Flexibility can be defined as the degree to which the boundaries are adaptable to the needs of work and home (Hall & Richter, 1988; Ashforth et al., 2000). For instance, an employee who has a flexible work schedule that enables her to pickup the children from school has flexible temporal boundaries.

Permeability is the degree to which a person physically located in one domain (i.e. the home domain) allows psychological and behavioral elements from another domain (i.e. the work domain) to enter (Hall & Richter, 1988; Ashforth et al., 2000; Frone, 2003). This boundary characteristic demonstrates to what extent individuals allow boundaries to be porous to intrusions, distractions or interruptions of other domains or domain members. Thus, permeability demonstrates individuals’ actual behavior in allowing or rejecting work to enter the home domain and vice versa (Pleck, 1977; Eagle, Miles & Icenogle, 1997; Kossek et al., 1999). For instance, someone who performs work activities at home has a permeable spatial home boundary.

Having permeable boundaries between work and home does not imply that someone desires to receive work related phone calls or to think of work when she is at home. It might very well be that someone prefers not to perform work activities in the evening, but that work conditions necessitate her to do so anyway. This study focuses on the preferences of individuals for the permeable or impermeable nature of the boundaries between work and home.

Consciously and subconsciously individuals have preferences on the extent that work and home may or may not intermingle, and where and when to draw the line (Nippert-Eng, 1996a, Campbell Clark, 2000). For instance, individuals might be willing to work from home during

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6 Campbell Clark (2000) introduced Border Theory that shares some assumptions with Boundary Theory, but focuses on how individuals try to achieve balance between work and home instead. Both theories have an additional value towards each other.

7 Hall & Richter (1988) introduced the use of the concept of boundaries in work and home research. For an overview of the use of the concept in the social sciences, see Lamont & Molnár, (2002) recently explored. Nippert-Eng reintroduced Hall & Richter’s concept of boundaries in work and home research (Hall & Richter, 1988; Nippert-Eng, 1996a,b).
weekdays, but may draw the line at working in the weekends. These boundary preferences may often take a physical expression in daily practices, such as not answering emails in the weekends.

Individuals differ in their boundary preferences. Some individuals may prefer to integrate work and home; others may prefer to separate them. Some like to socialize with their co-workers outside working hours, whilst others may prefer to separate co-workers from their friends. Some may be willing to telecommute from home, whereas others prefer to separate work space from personal space. Nippert-Eng (1996a) places these variations on a continuum and calls it the ‘integration-segmentation continuum’\(^8\). At one end of the continuum, individuals perceive all facets of work and home as “fully integrated and no distinction is made between home and work” (Nippert-Eng, 1996a:5). At the other end of the continuum individuals perceive and deal with work and home as two mutually exclusive domains.

Up till today, research on the determinants of boundary preferences is limited. As a consequence, we know little about why some individuals prefer to integrate work and home, while others prefer to separate the two domains. Only a handful of studies have addressed the boundary preferences of individuals and their determinants.

Kossek, Noe and DeMarr (1999) propose that those without extended family or child minding facilities will more likely prefer integration of work and home. In contrast, Clay (1995) found that women who do have children or others to care for prefer more integration then men. Desrocher and Sargent (2004) found that employees, who experience much blurring of the work and home boundary, were more likely to prefer integration of work and home. Nippert-Eng suggests that individuals draw their boundary preferences in interaction with their physical, temporal and cultural environments. When these environments change, it is likely that the way in which the work and home domains are perceived also changes. For example, someone may prefer more separation between work and home when children are born.

Additional research is required to fill the existing theoretical and empirical gaps in our knowledge of boundary preferences. The purpose of this present chapter is twofold. Firstly, we aim to expand our knowledge of which boundaries between work and home employees prefer. Secondly, we examine which employees prefer permeable or impermeable boundaries. Chapter three till five will elaborate on the results of this exploratory study. In exploring these issues, we will address the following questions:

\(^8\) The concepts ‘segmentation’ and ‘separation’ are both used in work-family research. We use the term ‘separation’ since it expresses more activity.
THE INTEGRATION OF WORK AND HOME

1) Which boundaries between work and home do employees prefer to be permeable?

2) Do employees differ in their boundary preferences? And if so, what are the work and non-work characteristics of employees who prefer permeable or impermeable boundaries?

Though the present study does not attempt to identify the mechanisms which might influence boundary preferences, the data does offer some indications for preliminary findings which we will discuss at the end of the chapter.

In the following methodological section we outline our study and research site. In the next sections, we shall present the results of a qualitative analysis of 24 interviews with employees of a Dutch multinational, after which we will give a brief synthesis of these results. We conclude with conclusions and discussions.

METHODS

Research site
This study was undertaken within a Dutch multinational in the telephone and communications industry. This company was selected for its job variety in knowledge based versus industrial, manual work. The company employs over 20,000 people. We selected employees from four departments, which varied from traditional to modern as far as working time arrangements, work content, degree of autonomy, task complexity and work pressure was concerned. The more traditional departments comprise mainly manual and administrative jobs; whereas the more modern departments comprise mainly management and computer jobs (see chapter one).

In each department six employees were selected for a low-structured interview (in total twenty-four employees). The selected respondents varied by gender and age and by job level (high, middle, low). We aimed to ensure an equal range of job level, gender and age factors among the twenty-four respondents. Each employee was interviewed for an average of two hours regarding how he or she combines work and home. The approach of the interviews was to allow the respondents to talk about whatever comes to their mind on the subject, using a checklist of open questions when needed (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

The employees interviewed consisted of twelve men and twelve women. Thirteen employees are married, eight live together with their partner and three employees are unattached. Seven employees have children under 18; these respondents are all married. The average age of the
employees is 37; the youngest is 27 and the oldest employee is 53 years old. They work on average for 11 years within the organization, employment varying between 2 years up to 39 years. Nine employees work at low job levels, six at middle job levels and nine at high job levels. Employees who work at the higher job levels work as marketing managers or specialists. Those who are working in middle job levels work in sales support, administrative jobs or supervise a small group of employees. Employees at low job levels are mechanics or operators.

Outline of the study
This exploratory study consisted of three methodological steps. Firstly, we explore the boundaries between work and home in our interview material. Secondly, we explore which boundaries employees prefer to be permeable. In this section we will address research question one. Thirdly, we examine which employees prefer permeable or impermeable boundaries. Here we will address research question two.

ANALYSIS

Boundaries between work and home
Regarding the analysis of the boundaries between work and home in our interview material, we conformed to the basics of the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We selected and coded all text fragments in which the employees mentioned what they thought pertained to their work, what belonged to their personal lives and how the two may or may not intermingle. Through this process of inductive and open coding of the interview protocols, while allowing new categories to emerge from the material (“emergent categories”), we found four boundaries between work and home that seem relevant to our respondents. Two of these boundaries comprise two parts.

1) The time boundary between work and home: working time and personal time
Apart from their scheduled working hours, employees have their own ideas about their working hours. The employees discussed the time they wanted to go home after a day of work, whether this is a fixed time for each day, and whether they are willing to do overtime work.
2) The spatial boundary between work and home: workspace and personal space
When individuals work while they are at home, either by telecommuting or by taking work home at the end of a working day, work enters the personal space of the home. Our respondents hold clear opinions about the desirability of bringing work into their homes. They talk about bringing work home, about interruptions by family members, about the comfort of being available for home issues, and of being able to work without interruptions by co-workers and meetings.

3a) The mental boundary between work and home: thinking about work at home
Combining work and home may entail that people are physically present in one domain (e.g. home), while mentally engaged in another domain (e.g. work). The desirability of thinking about work while at home was a prominent issue for our employees. They talked about thinking of work when they were trying to sleep, during dinner or other engagements, and whether this was desirable or something to avoid.

3b) The mental boundary between work and home: thinking of home at work
Conversely, people may be physically present at their work place, while thinking about their personal life. The desirability of thinking of home while at work was less prominent in the discussion than its counterpart, thinking of work while being at home. Our respondents talked about worrying and thinking about family members and friends, holidays, and about simple practicalities like what to eat later that evening.

4a) The social boundary between work and home: communicating with co-workers on personal matters
Co-workers by definition belong to the work domain. However, when co-workers become friends and/or personal issues are discussed, the personal and the professional become intertwined. Our employees have clear thoughts about the desirability of such integration. They discussed if it was sensible to talk about private matters with co-workers, whom to talk to and to whom it is better not.

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9Being physically present in one domain, while being mentally engaged in another is commonly defined as ‘mental spill over’ in the work-family literature (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Freedman & Greenhaus, 2000 in Cardenas, Major & Bernas, 2004).
4b) The social boundary between work and home: socializing with co-workers outside working hours

Most of our respondents see meeting co-workers outside official working hours as a step towards friendship, and most have clear opinions about the desirability of mixing work and social contacts. They talk about becoming friends, crossing a border, birthdays and Friday drinks.

Employees’ preferences on the four boundaries between work and home

In the previous section, we described four boundaries that emerged from our interviews. Though these four boundaries are relevant for all twenty-four employees, we found that the preferences of the employees with respect to these boundaries are not alike. Some employees prefer impermeable boundaries that separate work and home; others prefer permeable boundaries that allow integration of the two domains. In this section, we explore which boundaries employees prefer to be permeable (research question one).

For this purpose, we coded and classified the preferences of each of the twenty-four employees regarding the time, space, mental and social boundaries between work and home, on a three point scale which was derived from the previous discussed ‘integration-segmentation continuum’ within Boundary Theory: 1) integration, 2) separation and 3) positions in between (Nippert-Eng, 1996a). When a boundary was preferred to be permeable, we coded the boundary with a ‘+’. When a boundary was preferred to be impermeable, we coded with a ‘−’. Whenever we found that a boundary was neither preferred to be permeable nor impermeable, but somewhere in between, we coded it with a ‘±’. For example, employee x likes to work at home. He prefers a permeable spatial boundary and therefore it was coded with a ‘+’. His co-worker, employee y, does not want to work at home. She prefers an impermeable spatial boundary and was thus coded with a ‘−’. The following shows the diversity in the boundary preferences among the twenty-four employees.

1) The time boundary: working time and personal time.

Fifteen out of twenty-four respondents prefer a permeable time boundary. These employees are willing to do overtime work. For Susan, a 28-year-old product manager, work only ends when the job is done:

‘When you are working and you are enjoying yourself, you just want to continue with it. Ha-ha, I just want to stay at work and don’t want to go home at all. I do have a very nice life outside work, but eh... well, it’s just nice to finish it all and to get the appreciation for it. It’s just a kick. I work
around ten hours a day. But I don’t consider the extra hours as overtime. No, I don’t think like that at all. They expect me not to as well, I think. I don’t get paid extra for overtime, it doesn’t exist here. No, it does exist but not for me.10

Nine respondents prefer an impermeable time boundary. When entering their workplace in the mornings, they have already decided on the finishing time. In contrast to the respondents with a permeable time boundary, for these employees, work ends when the clock indicates the end of the working day:

‘I always try to avoid overtime. This is a fundamental issue for me. (...) I mean, I get paid for so many hours and I work so many hours. For me, that’s just the limit. I have a pretty enjoyable personal life, which is in fact far more important to me than work.’ (Rick, a 39-year-old employee financial administration)

For none of the twenty-four employees were working hours considered to be unlimited. All employees perceived a limit to the number of hours they are willing to work. For employees with a more permeable time boundary, this limit may extend to 50-60 hours a week; for others the limit may be 40-42 hours a week.

2) The spatial boundary: workspace and personal space

As with their preferences regarding working hours, our respondents differed in their preferences to physically separate or to integrate work within their homes. Nine of our respondents were willing to telecommute or to take some work home at the end of the day. Lenny, a 34-year-old administrative assistant, regrets the fact that she has no opportunity for telecommuting:

‘I wish I could telecommute at home; it sounds wonderful! (...) You’re at home, at your own place that is nice. My kittens nearby..., I think I’ll really like it. And if I could do it full time, I would like to do it full time.’

Seven of our respondents prefer not to perform work tasks at home on a regular basis, but like to telecommute occasionally when they have work to finish and do not want to be disturbed by colleagues. Eight respondents state that they never engage in work activities while they are at home. They want to strictly separate their workspace from their personal space.

10 Employees who work in high level jobs (in salary scales 10-13) can choose between a contract that excludes the payment of overtime but includes a higher pay, and a contract with strictly defined working hours. The salary is lower for the latter, but working overtime is paid out. Employees who do not work in high level jobs can not choose between contracts; they have a contract with strictly defined working hours.
‘I prefer to work at the office, and just to be home at home. A simple clear separation. It is an advantage. When I was a student, I used to study all day, in the weekends... It all intermingled. Yes, I do read some papers sometimes, or bring something home, but that is very rare. I just don’t do that.’ (Wendy, a 39-year-old financial assistant)

3a) The mental boundary: thinking about work at home

Five employees do not object to thinking of work when they were at home. These employees experience a great deal of mental spill over from work to home, but this is not considered as a burden. Thinking about work is considered to be a fun creative process:

‘I think of my work when I’m at home, it just continues. I don’t mind, I see it as a creative process. You just reflect on how you may solve a problem. Yes, and this thinking, it doesn’t just stop when I come home. It goes with little jumps, when I’m in bed or in the morning under the shower or ehh. (...) I think it has to do with my commitment towards my job. It is just a part of my life. I guess that even if I would work behind a garbage truck, I would still feel this same commitment. I think if I wouldn’t have this commitment I would not enjoy my work.’ (Michael, a 35-year-old annalist)

Ten employees do not mind thinking about work occasionally, as long as the mental spill over is not excessive: it is essential for them to maintain control about their thoughts of work. Nine employees prefer to mentally detach themselves from their work when they go home. Preferring no mental spill over does not imply however that employees succeed in their preferences. Four of the twenty-four respondents report too much mental spill over from work to home. Martin, a 27-year-old manager finds himself thinking about work a lot while he is at home:

‘Sometimes I lay in bed at night and my thoughts are all tumbling through my head, you know? That happens a lot. I do not take my work physically home with me, but mentally I do. I think about it. Sometimes I even fidget while I sleep. It's not all bad because you can come up with a solution for your problem, but it is irritating. Well, it is part of the job…. You try to... The only thing you want is a good night’s sleep’

3b) The mental boundary: thinking of home at work

The employees differ again in their willingness to think of home while they are at work. Eleven respondents do not mind thinking about their personal lives from time to time, five respondents do not mind think of their personal lives a lot during working hours.
‘I do think of my personal life at work, but not in a bad way. To be honest, I’d think it would be strange if I was only occupied with work at my work place and only with home at home. They are just both a huge part of your life. So I do not consider the two to be separated.’ (Eva, a 50-year-old management assistant)

Six respondents prefer an impermeable mental boundary when they are at work. These employees enjoy the simplicity of being merely occupied with work and being able to set aside thoughts of home for a moment. Anneke, a 28-year-old product manager says:

‘Actually, I do not think about my personal life at all while I’m at work. I find that a pleasant aspect of work. Yes, I even forget about my personal life. My friends no longer ring me at work (…); they know that I’m not up for a nice long chat.’

4a) The social boundary: communicating with co-workers on personal matters

The twenty-four employees differ as well in their preferences towards discussing personal matters with co-workers: twelve respondents like to discuss personal issues with their co-workers, whereas the other twelve prefer to keep personal issues private. For Martin, a 44-year-old analyst assistant, it would feel unnatural to separate work and personal issues:

‘I do discuss personal issues with my colleagues. (…). You do have a life outside work and it shouldn’t be completely separated. I mean, if it would be, you would live in a schizophrenic world. Thus I do like it that we can talk about all that personal stuff.’

When the boyfriend of Linda, a 32-year-old customer advisor, experienced a burnout, she was glad she could share her story with her co-workers.

‘When my boyfriend got a burnout, I immediately told my colleagues, because it did bother me in the beginning of course. So yes, everybody was allowed to know. Other people tell things as well. Babies are a big topic for us you know eh… ha-ha... The men tell in the most explicit words about the delivery of their wives. So we are rather open towards each other.’

For twelve of our respondents there is a clear line between social chitchat with co-workers and discussing genuine personal issues. Eddy, a 44-year-old mechanic makes a clear distinction between co-workers and friends.

‘I don’t like to consider my colleagues as friends; colleagues are colleagues. You know, friends differ from your colleagues, and I like to keep it that way. Don’t misunderstand me, I do like to
talk about eh... nice stuff or about work. But real personal issues, no, that’s different. I like to keep that separated. Holidays and that kind of stuff, yes, but problems at home, no way. No, that’s the limit, I think....’

4b) The social boundary: socializing with co-workers outside working hours
Six of our respondents meet their co-workers regularly outside work hours. These employees all mention that they are open for friendship with co-workers, and that some of their co-workers indeed have become friends.

‘I don’t like to keep my work and personal life separated. No, because I can have great social contacts with colleagues outside work hours. We play sports together and we went to an opera once. You get to know your colleagues in a whole different context. These contacts bring me friendship.’ (Michael, a 35-year-old analyst)

Eight respondents occasionally meet their co-workers outside work hours for a lunch or a dinner, but they do not regard their co-workers as friends. These meetings are often work related. Nine respondents do not wish to socialize with their co-workers after work.11

‘Well, my private life is of no one’s concern. I’m in control of that. OK, they are my colleagues, but that’s about that. And they have asked me: ‘why don’t you come for a drink?’ Well sorry, but these people mean very little to me. I have drinks with my own friends in my own free time. With friends I choose, and not because I have to be social with colleagues.’ (Rick, a 39-year-old employee financial administration)

In this section we have coded and classified the boundary preferences of each of the twenty-four employees. For some they indicated a preference for separating work and home, for others a preference for integration. The respondents differed in their preferences on all of the four boundaries between work and home. The next step in our analysis was to examine if these variations in the boundary preferences were clustered among groups of employees in any way.

Classification of employees and their boundary preferences
In this section we will explore which employees prefer permeable or impermeable boundaries. In order to answer this second research question, we continued the previous analysis and assessed the ‘permeability/impermeability scores’ of the boundary preferences for each respondent individually. We found that some respondents, who prefer permeable boundaries on some

11 One employee: non-respondent
aspects, prefer permeable boundaries on other aspects as well. Other employees prefer permeability of some boundaries, but not of others. A number of respondents do not prefer permeable boundaries at all. Using the three-point scale outlined above as an instrument, our respondents could be ranked into three groups and be placed on the integration-segregation continuum, consistent with Boundary Theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996a). We have called them respectively (1) **integrators**, (2) **jugglers** and (3) **separators**. Table 2.1 shows the employees as clustered and coded according to their boundary preferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boundary preferences</th>
<th>Group 1: <strong>integrators</strong> (n = 9)</th>
<th>Group 2: <strong>jugglers</strong> (n = 7)</th>
<th>Group 3: <strong>separators</strong> (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+: 31</td>
<td>+: 12</td>
<td>+: 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>±: 14</td>
<td>±: 16</td>
<td>±: 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−: 6</td>
<td>−: 11</td>
<td>−: 35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* + = preference for permeable boundary, − = preference for impermeable boundary, ± = mixed preference.

Employees, who preferred at least three of the six boundaries to be permeable, were classified as ‘integrators’. In contrast, employees who preferred at least three of the six boundaries to be impermeable were classified as ‘separators’. Employees in between were classified as ‘jugglers’. The most extreme integrator prefers five permeable boundaries. The most extreme separator prefers all six boundaries to be impermeable. The group of integrators, which consists of seven employees, expressed thirty-one times a preference for permeability of the six boundaries and six times a preference for impermeability. In contrast, the group of separators, which consists of eight employees, expressed only five times a preference for permeability of the 6 boundaries whereas the expressed thirty-five times a preference for impermeability.

Members of the ‘**integrator group**’ (n = 9) prefer predominantly permeable boundaries between work and home; they are prepared to integrate their work with their personal life. These employees are willing to work overtime and most are willing to work at home. They communicate at work about personal matters and they have friends among their co-workers. As Susan, a 28-year-old product manager, says:

‘I don’t mind working extra or taking work home. I like to work from home occasionally as well. I worked last Sunday and I didn’t mind because I like my job. If I had a nine to five job, you know
clocks...boring, I couldn’t stand it. I kind of like it when it (work and personal life, RdM) intermingles’.

The interviewees who tend towards integration attach great importance to their work as a means to develop their career, increase their social contacts, and enhance their feeling of self-esteem. These were all mentioned as attractive aspects of work. Yet, even though work is highly appreciated, its value in comparison with home does pose a problem. Rethinking the value of work is usually not a brief moment of reflection, but is experienced as a major issue in life. Sarah, a 32-year-old marketing manager reflects:

‘What do I want in life? Do I want to come home exhausted every night and not feel like talking to my partner, call my mother or visit my friends? I want to do all of that; I want to have 36 hours in a day.’

Separators (n = 8) predominantly prefer impermeable boundaries; they prefer to separate work and home as much as possible. This results in strictly separated working hours and no enthusiasm for working overtime. Separators have little or no personal contact with co-workers outside the office and they usually do not discuss personal matters with co-workers. Anton, a 53 year-old floor supervisor, tells:

‘I never work when I am at home. I don’t want that. I want to keep my work and my personal life strictly separate. My home belongs to me. In my home I control how I spend my time. And work is here in the office. For me, these are two completely separate worlds’.

Among the group of separators, we found two respondents (both female, one with children) for whom work is clearly a matter of secondary importance. In sharp contrast with employees who tend to integrate - who are still struggling with the importance of work in their lives - for these two separators, home takes precedence over work. Janet, a 30-year-old secretary, clearly favours her personal life over her work.

‘My personal life is more important than my work. Yes clearly. My work is a side issue. Therefore I’m able to do other things. The point is how important your work is for you and how important your personal life is. For me, my personal life is more important. When you only focus on that what is really important, your social surroundings, I think it will be easier to realize that there is a boundary: up to here and no further. I start at 8 o’clock in the morning and simply leave at 4.30 in the afternoon.’
Integrators and separators are situated at opposite positions on the ‘integration-segmentation continuum’ (Nippert-Eng, 1996a). In the middle of this continuum, we placed a third cluster of respondents, the **jugglers** \( n = 7 \). These are employees who prefer permeable boundaries on some aspects and impermeable boundaries on other aspects. Though the ‘integration-segmentation continuum’ must be seen as a scale with numerous positions, jugglers differ from the separators and integrators in that they primarily try to adopt the middle course. The jugglers vary in their preferences towards working hours and telecommuting. Some jugglers are willing to do overtime work, to take work home or to telecommute, while others jugglers are not. Though some respondents tell about occasional contacts with co-workers outside the office, personal matters are generally not discussed with co-workers.

For jugglers, home is the more important domain, but work is appreciated as well. Work receives all their attention if necessary, provided it does not threaten their home life. For example, if a project needs to be finished outside working hours and the home front does not object, jugglers will be happy to comply. As Frank, a 45-year-old floor supervisor explained:

> ‘Whenever I can continue and finish my work, I will do it. And when I'm needed at home, well yes, I am needed at home. But... (name of spouse) is used to that, she has never put a stop to it. When I have to work longer so I can nicely finish it, okay. Yes and if there is an important appointment at home, for example for school I will be home. There’.

To summarize, we have distinguished two typical groups: the integrators and separators, as well as a third group with mixed boundary preferences: the jugglers. Now we will explore these clusters of employees in more depth by looking at their demographics, family contexts and work contexts. The following section describes the family contexts, after which we will describe the work contexts.

**Family context**

Table 2.2 shows the demographics and family characteristics of each employee cluster. The **integrators** comprise a group of mainly younger employees in their 20s and 30s (six women, three men). Six integrators live together with a partner, two are married and one is single. Only one integrator has children under the age of eighteen. Most of them have a partner with a fulltime job. Though most integrators have a partner, many of them experience that the way they prefer to combine their work and personal life is independent of their partner. Arjan, a 27-year-old manager living together with his girlfriend who has a fulltime job as well, tells us:
‘I don't have to deal with her job, we have no children yet and that kind of stuff. You know it doesn't matter all that much. Okay, it can lead to discussions like 'clean up your mess' or 'give a hand’.

These employees do not have to choose between work and family; anything is possible as long as you do not cross your own biological and psychological boundaries. Monique, a 33-year-old supply manager, tells us:

‘You know, until now I didn’t have to make a lot of choices, I can do pretty much any thing I want. But when you have children, I think it will all be very different. I don’t know what I will do if it comes to that. But I do think about it, a lot. But for now, it’s not necessary. And my husband and I, we do not have a typical male-female labor division, so everything is possible.’

Table 2.2 The demographics and family characteristics of each employee cluster (n = 24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification of boundary preferences</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Children under 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrator F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrator F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juggler F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggler F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>Juggler M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juggler M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>S</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggler M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Ma</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separator M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separator F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The *jugglers* are generally older than the integrators. Most of them are in their thirties and forties (five men, two women). Six are married and one is single. Three of them have children under 18. Though the jugglers experience few restrictions from home, they have some family responsibilities. Partners are supportive, but their needs or wishes - or those of the children – may come before the job. Henk, a 44-year-old controller, tries to balance his preferences and needs for home and work:

‘Give and take, that’s all. My wife knows my job is important, and well, that means that I have to invest my time and energy in it. This may imply that I can’t make it in time for a birthday party or something like that. But when it matters I’m always there. (...) I have three children and I love being able to spend so much time with them. In the past I used to come home when they were already fast asleep’.

Jugglers experience few conflicts in combining work and home. This may be the result of giving and taking as well: their boundary preferences often aim at finding a compromise between work and home. Jugglers come to a compromise easily; all five married employees take some work home to finish the job while being near the other family members.

*Separators* (five women, three men) are generally one generation older than the jugglers and two generations older than the integrators; seven out of the eight separators are in their forties and fifties and 50s. Seven out of eight live together with a partner (four of them are married) and one employee is single.

Two employees have no children and three employees have children older than eighteen; these employees all report few restrictions from their personal lives. Three employees have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification of boundary preferences</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Children under 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separator</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separator</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>L</td>
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<td>Separator</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separator</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* F: female; M: male; S: single; Ma: married; L: living together
Chapter 2

40

Children under eighteen. They talk about family responsibilities; the practical and psychological need of taking care of the children:

‘When a colleague is ill, we feel a lot of stress. And eh... well yes, in such a case I’m not always flexible since I want to go home on time. Yes, my opinion is that if you have children … then it’s my right... (...) I have two grownups who are already living on their own, but I still have a little nine year old. I’m a real mother-hen, as they say.’ (José, a 49-year old data input employee)

Work context

Table 2.3 shows the job characteristics of each employee cluster. The integrators have worked for the telecom organization for an average of four years. All but one can be considered to be knowledge workers at higher job levels (levels 9 to 12). All integrators, except two, have flexible working hours. This means they can start late or leave early on their own account to compensate for previous worked hours. All integrators can work at home occasionally if they so desire. These knowledge workers all have a high degree of task autonomy. Six of the nine employees experience some work pressure, one employee experiences a lot of work pressure and two experience no work pressure at all.

Table 2.3 The job characteristics of the employee clusters (n = 24) (table will be continued at page 40)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification of boundary preferences</th>
<th>Job level</th>
<th>Years of employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Integrator</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrator</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrator</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggler</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggler</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 2003, the year of the interviews

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Many integrators prefer permeable boundaries between work and non-work because they simply enjoy working: work is a pleasant part of life and there is no need for shielding off work from home. Most integrators are in an early stage of their career. Work is an enjoyable and absorbing instrument that enables them to explore and develop their abilities. Some integrators tell that they worked too hard because of their work involvement. As a consequence they now prefer more separation of work and home. Linda, a 32-year-old customer advisor, tells:

‘I used to pull a lot of work to myself. (...) I wanted to show everybody how good I was. Now I think I have to enjoy myself first and if my manager appreciates it as well, fine. It was fun though, working really hard with a group of other young employees till late in the evening. So, that seemed really important at the time. And what also mattered, well home, my boyfriend and I, that was already there and it seemed that there was no need for investing in that.’

Though many integrators prefer their work to be a significant part of their lives, it must be noted that this is expected of them as well. In line with previous research (Perlow, 1998), we found that many of our high job level integrators feel pressured to work overtime. Sometimes this pressure comes from their manager and sometimes from their young co-workers. Practicing a ‘nine to five mentality’ is not easily accepted in the integrators’ work situations in which the work tasks and

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13 2003, the year of the interviews
temporal and physical boundaries are not strictly defined. Echtelt, Glebbeek and Lindenber
g(2006) define this as the “autonomy paradox” of employees working in jobs with a modern Post-
Fordist job design. They say that this can have negative consequences for reputation and career
chances, whereas hard work and commitment are appreciated. Setting impermeable boundaries
may therefore require courage to withstand the culture on the work floor.

The jugglers vary considerably in length of service: two of them have worked less than five years
for the organization, one employee for six years, one for twelve years, and two for over twenty
years. Their job levels diverge as well (levels 5 to 12), though most of them work in
administrative jobs at lower job levels than the integrators. All except one have some opportunity
to schedule their own working hours. Most have fixed working hours with a small variability
allowed in their scheduled starting time. Three employees report a medium degree of task
autonomy, three employees a high degree of task autonomy and one employee reports little to no
task autonomy. Four out of seven employees experienced minimal to some work pressure; one
employee experiences a lot of work pressure and two experienced no work pressure at all. Most
jugglers state that their work does not take too much effort and that they are able to combine work
and home. Though none of the jugglers prefers a high extent of integration of work and home,
many of them prefer to telecommute regularly or to finish their work at their homes. Tom a 49-
year-old senior manager, and Eddy, a 44-year-old mechanic tell:

‘When I’m not able to finish my work, I’ll leave for home on time anyway. With the use of my
laptop I can finish it in my own home.’ ‘I do not have a separate office; she (spouse, RdM) doesn’t
like that. When my work is done, I play some games on my laptop… If I had a separate office I
would spend my whole evening upstairs. So my computer is in the living room, in the mean
time we can chat a little’.

Most separators have worked within the organization for a considerable number of years. Six
employees have been employed by the organization for a long time (four have more than fifteen
years of service, two have more than twenty-five years and thirty-five years). Two employees
have only worked for three years within the company. All separators have relatively low job
levels (level 7 or below) and work in administrative or manual jobs. Five separators report a
medium degree of task autonomy; three others report little or no task autonomy. The work
pressure experiences are diverse: two respondents experience much work pressure; three
experience only some, while three others experience no work pressure at all. Their work
arrangements are rather strict. None have the opportunity of telecommuting, four respondents
have fixed working hours, and three respondents have a small variability allowed in their starting times, and only one separator is flexible in his working hours.

For many separators, their preferences for impermeable boundaries are a clear statement towards the company. These employees recount their repeated disappointments in the organization to which they have dedicated themselves for so many years and in which sometimes even their parents or grandparents have worked in the past. A few years ago they were strongly committed to the organization – they say. They used to integrate work and personal life, although their work arrangements did not facilitate integration (fixed working times, no telecommuting). They used to work extra hours almost every day and were inclined to do everything for ‘their’ company. Els, a 40-year-old administrative assistant who has worked for over twenty years within the organization, was strongly committed to her work:

‘Earlier, I could not stop. When I went to bed I thought of the organization and the first thing that came to my mind when I woke up was the organization. I worked really hard. You used to get flowers when you had done something right. Then I was so proud.’

Recently, a dynamic profit-oriented business culture was introduced in the company. Reorganizations have become routine. Small rewards such as flowers and gift certificates have disappeared. These changes underscored the feelings of the separators that they are no longer appreciated for their flexible attitude. This has led them to the conclusion that it is not worthwhile to devote yourself intensively to your job. They feel the organization has let them down and with the change in the organizational culture; their willingness to integrate work in their home lives changed as well. Els gets emotional when she recalls:

‘You don't get flowers or something extra anymore, it is too expensive. (...) Now you are a number. Everything has to be done in a hurry. (...) Now when there is extra work I think “there will be another day tomorrow”. I always used to bring my work home. And worrying about it, did I forget something? But now I don't have that anymore. If my company had stayed more human, perhaps I would not think this way.’

Below we will combine the results and outline an abbreviated portrait of the integrators, jugglers and separators.
SYNTHESIS

Integrators
Nine employees of the twenty-four employees we interviewed were prepared to integrate work and home; they have predominantly preferences for permeable boundaries. Integrators, who are younger, experience few restrictions from their personal lives. Their parents are still young and do not need care, most partners have time consuming jobs as well and, except for one, they do not have children. Having few obligations outside the job makes it easier to act according their preferences and to integrate work with personal life. All integrators are at the beginning of their careers, and all but one can be characterized as knowledge workers at high job levels. While their personal lives provide few pressures, self-pressure to succeed and work pressures in the office are high among these early career employees. Although seven out of nine integrators officially have the opportunity to schedule their own working hours or to telecommute, the long hour’s culture deprives them of such autonomy. Six out of nine integrators feel the pressure of complying with working extra hours, at home or at the office. The combination of a personal life with low demands, strong work ambitions and a demanding work situation seem to induce preferences for permeable boundaries for the younger integrators. At the same time, this is also expected of them.

Jugglers
Seven of our respondents were neither willing to integrate nor separate their work and home lives and steered a flexible course. Most jugglers are older than the integrators and are in a phase when some major life events already have taken place: settling down, cohabiting/marriage and the birth of a first child. For all jugglers, home is the central domain, though work is important as well. Their home situation offers few, but some restrictions. Partners are supportive, but their needs or those of the children may have to come first. Most jugglers are successful in compromising between the demands of both work and home. When jugglers prefer permeable boundaries, the integration of work and home is used as an instrument to fulfill the needs of both work and home simultaneously (this applies for four men and one woman). Most jugglers have relatively low demanding work situations that help to combine work with the needs of home.

Separators
Eight respondents were not willing to integrate their work and personal life; they prefer predominantly impermeable boundaries. These employees are in general older than the integrators and the jugglers. Some separators have young children; others are older with adolescent children. Except for two (female) employees, the separators were at an advanced stage
of their careers. For most separators, their resistance towards integrating work and personal life is based on disappointment with their employer. This severe disappointment led to a change in their boundary preferences: five out of eight separators stated that they used to integrate work and personal life and that they are no longer willing to do that.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter explores the boundary preferences of twenty-four employees working in a Dutch multinational. Four boundaries that are relevant to the employees emerged from our interview material. For each of these boundaries, the employees have preferences regarding their permeable or impermeable nature. These boundary preferences indicate if individuals are willing to integrate their work and home lives, and if so to what extent. The four boundaries addressed time, space, mental overlap and social relations with co-workers.

In accordance with previous findings the respondents differed in the extent they prefer to integrate or separate their work and home (Nippert-Eng, 1996a,b; Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Campbell Clark, 2000). Analysis showed three groups with their own boundary preferences: integrators, separators, and jugglers. Each group of employees is situated at a specific position on the integration-segmentation continuum (Nippert-Eng, 1996a). Integrators prefer mainly permeable boundaries, separators mainly impermeable boundaries, and ‘jugglers’ are positioned in between.

Although all our respondents have preferences of where to draw the line between work and personal life, integrators, jugglers and separators are each confronted with specific situations in their work and home lives. Boundary Theory presumes that individuals develop their boundary preferences in interaction with their environment (Nippert-Eng, 1996a,b). Our data suggest that the boundary preferences of employees do indeed relate to the specific situations they encounter. Depending on the phase of employees’ personal lives and careers, four mechanisms seem to relate to the boundary preferences of employees.

First of all, family responsibilities seem to relate to the boundary preferences. Previous research has indicated that family responsibilities, especially combining work with childcare, tends to produce work-family conflict (eg. Frone et al., 1992b; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) or combination pressure (Van der Lippe et al., 2003). Our data suggest that they influence boundary preferences as well. For the employees we characterized as jugglers, home responsibilities seem to induce preferences for permeable boundaries. Employees with responsibilities at home generally prefer permeability since it enables them fulfill the needs and demands for both home
and work. For instance, someone who takes his work home to finish at a later time is able to leave the office on time and to spend time with his children. However, for two employees home responsibilities were named as a motivation to separate work from home. And, for young employees having few home responsibilities meant having no barrier for acting out their preferences for permeability. Future research must further examine the relation between home responsibilities and boundary preferences.

Secondly, the importance of work seems to relate to the nature of employees’ boundary preferences. Employees for whom work is important for their self-esteem and who have a strong work ambition report strong preferences for permeable boundaries that allow work and home to overlap. However, when their work involvement becomes unhealthy, more impermeable boundaries are preferred.

Thirdly, job levels seem to relate to employees’ boundary preferences as well. Managerial, high-level jobs seem to induce boundary preferences aimed at integrating the two domains. For employees at high job levels it appears difficult to avoid integration of work and home. Both work arrangements - such as flexible working hours and opportunities for telecommuting- and a ‘long-hours culture’ on the work floor encourage the integration of work and home. Consistent with previous research (Swanberg, Pitt-Catsouphes, & Drescher-Burke, 2005), we found that our respondents in low-level jobs were given less control over their own working hours than respondents in high-level jobs.

Fourthly, negatively perceived events such as reorganizations appear to have a negative influence on the willingness of individuals to concede to the needs of work, let alone to allow work to integrate with their personal life. Previous research has already indicated that employees’ beliefs about their employer’s appreciation and concern strongly influence the employees’ commitment to the organization (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Our data suggest that the extent of perceived organizational support relates to the boundary preferences of employees as well. Particularly when their loyalties to a company are thwarted, if the company does not reward them for being flexible, or if their careers get stuck, people may respond by setting strict boundaries between their work and personal lives.

Though this study has defined and explored the boundary preferences of twenty-four employees working in a Dutch multinational, our findings must be seen as, and should be interpreted as preliminary. Since this is an exploratory study no direct relations can be established. Future qualitative and quantitative research must further explore and identify possible relations between work, home, individual characteristics and the nature of the boundary preferences.
Although we did not aim for generalizability, we wish to point out that the generalizability of this study is limited for a number of reasons. Our study concerns one organization; a different organization with different work situations might provide dissimilar or additional results. In addition, our qualitative research involved purposeful sampling to enhance our understanding of the complex process of boundary management (see also Patton, 1987). Though we expressed our desire for a variety in gender, job level, job content and work culture, the participants for the interviews were selected by the HRM managers of the four departments. There is an association between high-level jobs and youth and low-level jobs and age in the selection of the employees. It is therefore difficult to distinguish between age and job level effects. Further, our respondents have relatively few children under eighteen (seven respondents out of twenty-four). As with all research, but especially in case of interviews, we spoke to those employees who were willing to discuss how they manage work and home. Therefore, we do not know if and how the employees who did not participate in the interviews differentiate from our respondents.

The findings of this chapter can be seen as an addition to previous research on the work/home boundary (Nippert-Eng 1996a, Campbell Clark 2000, 2002, Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate 2000). Boundary Theory presumes that both integration and separation may be advantageous for individuals, depending on their work and home situation and individual preferences. This chapter has demonstrated that employees attain their boundary preferences in a continuous process of weighing up their own needs and preferences and those of their work and home environments. Almost all respondents at early and later stages of their personal and professional lives reflect on the boundaries between work and personal life. Boundary preferences are the product of an assessment of the equilibrium between the input and output of work and personal life: is there a balance between what I invest and what I get in return?

When reflecting on this equilibrium, younger employees perceive the balance between work and personal life as it is in its present state and its tenability for the future. They generally have strong work ambitions and still few home responsibilities. Many of our young employees see no need for impermeable boundaries between work and home in this phase of their lives. Later on in life, their home domain becomes more important and the needs of children and a partner must be fulfilled. When employees become more advanced in their careers, the equilibrium between work and home is no longer singularly based on the present moment. Fulfilled or unfulfilled career expectations, organizational and cultural changes are taken into account: older employees judge the legitimacy of their boundary preferences on the comparison of the present moment with a long-term career.
In this chapter we have aimed to shed light on employees’ boundary preferences, which partly define to what extent work may be integrated with home, and vice versa. In order to be able to thoroughly know why some individuals prefer to integrate and others to separate work and home, future research must therefore not only study the relations between boundary preferences and situational factors but also take a life course perspective into account.