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Mobile workers' Boundary Work: The Fluidity of Time, Space and Objects

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Abstract

We examine the configurations of the boundary management tactics of time, space and sociomateriality at the behavioural level as they are shaped by and contribute to the boundary management strategies of segmentation and integration at the conceptual level. Theoretically the paper is framed by boundary theory and sociomateriality, methodologically it employs a qualitative approach. Our analysis focuses on the temporal, spatial and sociomaterial practices that mobile workers use to distinguish between work and nonwork as well as their conceptual preferences for segmentation or integration. Some research participants' accounts indicate congruence between the conceptual and behavioural levels, but others report a variety of segmenting and integrating behaviours despite showing a conceptual preference for segmentation or integration. These research participants do so as part of their everyday boundary work; there is little indication of struggle in their accounts. We contribute to knowledge by identifying the fluid configurations of boundary management tactics within a boundary management strategy.

Key words: boundary work, mobile worker, sociomateriality, space, time

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*In the first decade of the new millennium,
work can be done anytime, anywhere, by anybody.*

(Hecht and Allen, 2009: 839)

Introduction

In her seminal book, Christena Nippert-Eng (1996) describes how individuals construct boundaries between work and home, identifying a continuum of ideal-type boundary management strategies. On the one end is *integration* with individuals fostering overlaps between the two domains through the way in which they use time, space and objects, and on the other is *segmentation* with individuals separating them (eg Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2006; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015). Recent work has examined the area between those two ends – hybrid boundary management strategies in which elements of integration and segmentation are combined to a greater or lesser degree (eg Rothbard *et al.*, 2005; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Increasingly, advances in mobile technologies enable people to work at different times and in multiple spaces across a working day or week (Baruch, 2001; Duxbury *et al.*, 2014). Many have become mobile workers – individuals that work seemingly fluidly across time and space – using spaces that are dedicated primarily to one domain (such as an institutional or a home workspace) but also in public spaces and means of transportation (see Ng, 2016) that can be used for both work and nonwork purposes. As such, the concept of work is being decoupled from time and space (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), becoming increasingly malleable and ‘liquid’ (Bauman, 2000).

In such a fluid environment, individuals experience significant blurring between work and nonwork as conceptual structures between the domains get eroded. To maintain some distinction between work and nonwork, individuals have been found to structure their activities according to time (e.g. Tietze and Musson, 2003), technology (Nansen *et al.*, 2010) or the use of objects and spaces (e.g. Fonner and Stache, 2012). Yet, mobile technologies increasingly contribute to further blurring of time, space and objects, enabling individuals to work at any point in a 24-hour period and in a multitude of spaces (Hecht and Allen, 2009). Gadgets such as smart phones and tablet computers are no longer only used for activities in one domain, but across work and nonwork (Author 2) as individuals use the same device to check up on email for work and to connect with family and friends through social media (eg Sayah, 2013). The question, therefore, is how individuals configure the boundaries between work

and nonwork in such an environment using the time, space and objects to preserve some coherence of their experiences.

In this empirical paper, we seek to explore this question based on interviews with mobile workers from a range of backgrounds, including higher education, marketing, HR, law, financial services and the public sector. While some research participants use segmentation or integration in a relatively clear manner, hybrid strategies are more common, constituted by a fluid array of different boundary management tactics. For example, an individual may segment conceptually but use integration temporally, spatially and/or sociomaterially in a variety of configurations. This phenomenon has already been reported by Duxbury *et al.* (2014) through the notion of ‘struggling segmentors’, referring to individuals who are not able to distinguish sufficiently between work and nonwork and consequently experience boundary conflict. However, we have found that our research participants reported being happy with the degree of segmentation and integration and employ such a mix of segmenting and integrating behaviours out of choice. Hence, our main interest is in how mobile workers achieve coherence in the light of such fragmented and perhaps confusing social practices relating to time, space and objects in their boundary work. Better understanding of how these dimensions are employed purposively provides insights into how individuals distinguish between work and nonwork, which is pertinent because of an increasing blurring of boundaries between the two life domains as outlined above.

Research context: Trends in teleworking / mobile working

Changes in the nature of work since the 1990s have been profound and unprecedented (Block, 1990), with some even announcing the disappearance of work as such (Rifkin, 1995; Aronowitz and Cutler, 1998). Legal, economic and demographic factors play an important part, such as higher inclusion of women in the workforce (*National Research Council*, 1999). More important, however, appear to be technological factors, such as the versatility of digital communication technologies and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) (Negroponte, 1995; Stewart, 1997). On the one hand, such developments have led – and are expected to lead – to significant job losses; predictions over the next two decades are job losses of 47% in the US (Frey and Osborne, 2013), 35% in the UK (Frey and Osborne, 2014) and 54% in the EU (Bowles, 2014). On the other hand, technology makes populations more connected and mobile (*The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2014). As a result, the IT industry not only creates millions of jobs, but also contributes to a rapid change in the composition of workforce and affects modes of professional cooperation and organizational forms – a trend to which organizations contribute by encouraging staff to work in a mobile fashion.

The intensification of teamwork, the rise of virtual organizations and the popularization of contingent employment – at least partly associated with the new technologies – have been perceived as game-changers on par with the emergence of bureaucracy in the late 19th century (Guest, 1997; Ulrich, 1997). As the connection between a place of work and its content becomes more tenuous both physically and conceptually, work becomes increasingly perceived in terms of activity rather than a designated space. Emerging institutional forms, such as the gig economy, minimize entry boundaries (Sundararajan, 2015) and maximize mobility for a variety of social actors, not least single parents and those with caring commitments. At the same time, new flexible forms of cooperation, such as crowdsourcing, enable hyper-flexible working arrangements (Massolution, 2013). In one way or another, the traditional modes of professional attachment are in retreat with potentially significant effects on individuals' boundary work.

Theoretical underpinnings

This paper draws on boundary theory, which seeks to explain how individuals 'construct, maintain, negotiate and cross the boundaries' between different domains of their lives (Duxbury *et al.*, 2014: 571), typically between work and home or, more generally, work and nonwork. In her seminal book, Nippert-Eng (1996) identifies two ideal-type boundary management strategies by which individuals make such distinctions conceptually. Segmentation means that different life domains are clearly bounded with individuals using time, space, technology and communication as cues for drawing and maintaining boundaries (Fonner and Stache, 2012). Integration means that different life domains are largely integrated with individuals not experiencing much distinction between them. For example, a study of teleworkers has found that in addition to spatial integration through a home workspace there is temporal integration with individuals merging work and family schedules (Tietze and Musson, 2003) or sociomaterial integration with individuals working in home clothes (Author 2). More commonly, however, individuals will operate a hybrid strategy that is constituted of elements of segmentation and integration, recognizing the overlap between domains as work may be 'heavily infused' by nonwork and vice versa (p10) or there may be a relative balance between the two.

Thanks to advances in mobile technologies, boundaries between life domains have become increasingly permeable (Halford, 2005), enabling individuals 'to be physically located in [one] domain but psychologically and/or behaviorally involved in another [...]' (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000: 474). Social interaction with colleagues and clients is facilitated through information technology (such as email and video conferencing) when individuals work remotely (Author 3). On the one hand, such permeability allows individuals to coordinate different commitments (e.g. Olson-Buchanan and

Boswell, 2006) such as combining work with childcare, the care of elderly or disabled relatives or, in the case of the so-called 'global nomads', a desire to travel the world and experience new cultures. On the other hand, such permeability can also 'disrupt, erode and reconstitute the temporal and spatial divisions between work and' nonwork (Duxbury *et al.*, 2014: 571). This is particularly pertinent as the work domain tends to permeate the nonwork domain to a greater degree than vice versa (Hecht and Allen, 2009), thereby leading to concerns about work-life-balance (eg Kreiner, 2006) and the implications on individuals and organizations more generally (e.g. Reid and Ramarajan, 2016).

In this context, the notion of *boundary work*, the 'never-ending, hands-on, largely visible process through which boundaries are negotiated, placed, maintained and transformed' (Nippert-Eng, 1996: xiii) becomes pertinent. It is a mental activity in which individuals employ integration and segmentation at both the conceptual and the behavioural level. Individuals will employ such boundary management tactics in terms of time, space and objects in accordance with their preferences, contextual factors and the needs and expectations of others (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). For example, individuals may make themselves unavailable at certain times (temporal), work flexibly across different spaces (spatial) or use objects differently for work and nonwork purposes (sociomaterial). As such, boundary management tactics are used 'to organize potentially realm-specific matters, people, objects, and aspects of self' (Nippert-Eng, 1996: 7) within personal and/or institutional constraints but with varying outcomes (see Duxbury *et al.*, 2014).

Specifically, time has been conceived as 'one of the major structuring devices for human activity' (Michelson and Hearn, 2006: 5) and particularly the domain of work. Traditionally, work has been temporally bounded into a 9-5 working day or a particular shift pattern, enabling individuals to clearly distinguish between work time and nonwork time. As such, a typical day used to be structured according to a substantial period of work (eg 9am to 5pm in the office) followed by a substantial period of nonwork (eg family time or leisure activities from 5pm to 9am). Mobile technologies, however, have eroded such temporal boundaries as many office-based workers can work at any point in a 24-hour period (Hecht and Allen, 2009) – or may even be required to do so when interacting with colleagues or clients located in different time zones. Moreover, working days tend to become more fragmented with individuals spending shorter periods of time on work and nonwork activities dispersed across a longer 'working day'.

Similarly, 'social processes are also spatial processes' (Herod, 2003: 112) and therefore 'integral to, [and] an active element in, all social life and activity' (McGrath-Champ, 2006: 121). As with time, the traditional working day used to have clear spatial boundaries with work taking place in a particular

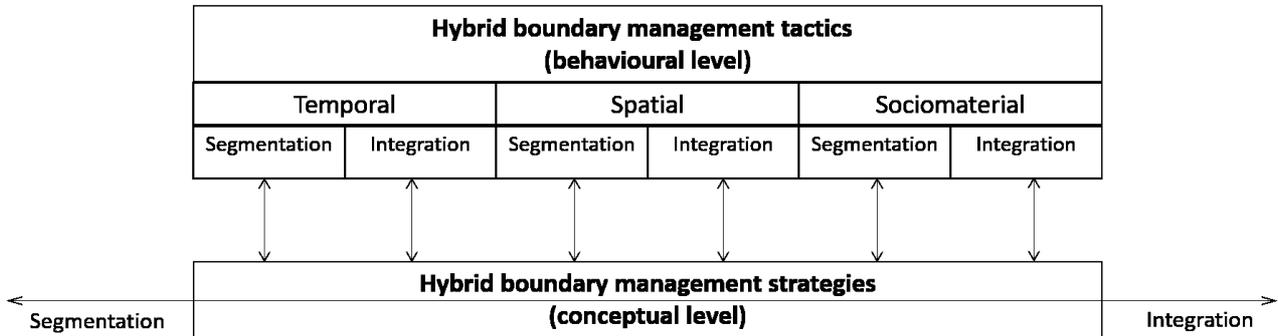
location (eg office, factory) and nonwork happening elsewhere (eg home, public places). An individual would work while in the workspace and engage in nonwork activities outside of the workspace. However, mobile technologies have also eroded the spatial boundaries between work and nonwork as ‘work’ can happen almost everywhere now with the support of mobile technologies (Hecht and Allen, 2009; Sayah, 2013). With organizations becoming increasingly cost conscious, office staff may even be encouraged to work outside of the institutional workspace, for example in hot-desking facilities and/or their own home.

Material aspects of such boundary work are relatively well established through the concept of sociomateriality, which regards ‘the social and material [...] *constitutively entangled* in everyday life’ (Orlikowski, 2007: 1437, emphasis original). It focuses on the practices that individuals use to accomplish work in a situated manner using human and non-human (ie material) aspects (Fenwick *et al.*, 2012). In office work, for example, individuals use objects (such as buildings, rooms, desks, chairs, mugs) and technology (such as telephones, computers and printers) to perform their tasks and interact with others (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). The crossing of boundaries between domains has been associated with such objects (such as calendars, clothes), physical spaces (such as commuting or opening / closing the office door) as well as rituals (such as tidying a desk, changing one’s clothes) that support a conceptual distinction between work and nonwork. However, individuals may now use similar or sometimes even the same objects for both work and nonwork, such as smart phones, tablet computers and laptops (see Author 2), thereby weakening sociomaterial boundary management tactics in addition to temporal and spatial aspects as outlined above.

Nevertheless, there is a tendency to conceptually use segmentation (eg Ammons, 2013), integration (eg Hecht and Allen, 2009) or a hybrid strategy (eg Rothbard *et al.*, 2005) in line with individuals’ preferences and needs, providing some flexibility and control over their lives (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Author 3). Yet, current conceptualizations of boundary work imply congruence between the conceptual and the behavioural level with individuals preferring segmentation (or integration) conceptually also demonstrating mainly segmenting (or integrating) behaviours (see Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). However, the fragmentation of the social world in late modernity renders individual identities likely to be forged from multiple elements for the benefit of particular, often short-term ‘projects’ (Gabriel, 2005) rather than representing a unified and coherent strategy. At the very least, the analytical lenses applied to better understand boundary management strategies in the case of mobile workers – the harbingers of liquid modernity – should accommodate and remain sensitive to potential misalignment between them. Therefore, given the hybrid nature of boundary management strategies, we allow for a possibility that at the behavioural level a mix of segmenting

and integrating aspects in terms of time, space and sociomateriality is employed that are not congruent with the conceptual strategies as visually represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hybrid boundary management strategies and tactics



Specifically, while individuals may tend towards segmentation or integration at the conceptual level (shown at the bottom of the figure) at the behavioural level (pictured at the top) individuals have a flexible mix of both segmenting and integrating practices in terms of time, space and objects at their disposal. It is thus possible that, for example, temporal integration is practised in conjunction with conceptual segmentation or even that time is used in both a segmenting and integrating manner – and, importantly, that such behaviour is a matter of choice (cf Duxbury *et al.*, 2014). The arrows in the figure may be somewhat misleading (a limitation of attempting to portray a complex social phenomenon in two dimensions) in that not all practices may be used in both segmenting and integrating fashions but rather in congruence with the conceptual level. Nevertheless, such fluid configurations of time, space and sociomateriality at the behavioural level remain ill understood, particularly when not supporting the predominant conceptual boundary management strategy. Through the analysis below, we seek to gain better understanding of the patterns of temporal, spatial and sociomaterial configuration in terms of congruence and flexibility amongst mobile workers to gain insights into the extent to which individuals use these tactics purposively to meet specific needs and what difference such a potentially fragmented and confusing mix of temporal, spatial and/or sociomaterial boundary management tactics makes to their experiences.

Methodology

Our study uses a qualitative and interpretive methodology (Kostera, 2007) to examine how mobile workers create and maintain the boundaries between work and nonwork. Since the fluidity of work times, work spaces and work objects is rendered possible through mobile technologies and phenomenological reinterpretation of the concept of work, we focus on time, space and

sociomateriality as they are shaped by and contribute to conceptual boundaries between the work and nonwork domains. We are interviewing mobile workers, focusing on their experiences of working at different times and in multiple spaces across a working day or week and reflections on how effectively they perceive the boundaries between work and nonwork to be. The research is ongoing, and to date we have conducted 20 interviews with individuals from a range of professional and institutional backgrounds as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Interviewee profile

Pseudonym	Age band	Industry	Employment status
Felix	40-49	Public sector	Employed
Dennis	40-49	Public sector	Employed
Gina	30-39	Public sector	Employed
Carl	30-39	Higher education	Employed
Adam	60-69	Marketing	Self-employed
Barry	40-49	Law	Self-employed
Agnes	60-69	Higher education	Employed
Bernadine	20-29	Higher education	Employed
Claire	20-29	Higher education	Employed
Daphne	40-49	Higher education	Employed
Eve	40-49	Higher education	Employed
Florence	40-49	Higher education	Employed
Edgar	40-49	Financial services	Employed
Grace	40-49	Public sector	Employed
Hazel	30-39	Public sector	Employed
Nathan	20-29	Marketing	Employed
Clarissa	50-59	Adult learning	Self-employed
Gavin	30-39	Technical consulting	Employed
Emma	30-39	Marketing	Self-employed
Wilbur	60-69	Human Resources	Self-employed

As such, our research participants can be described as knowledge workers whose main ‘tool of the trade’ is their brain, which facilitates integration of work and nonwork as Barry comments: ‘I think I never entirely forget about work. ... If you’re very mentally engaged in anything ... it’s very hard to keep it within the prescript working hours.’ Even so, our research participants reported relatively bounded work times with none so far reporting on working regularly outside an 8am to 10pm window. The majority use three types of workspaces – institutional workspaces (eg office, client organisation, outside venue), home workspaces (often in the form of a dedicated home workspace) and public spaces (such as public transport, cafés, hotels). Our main analytical interest is in the latter two because of a stronger physical integration of the work and nonwork domains as well as increased temptation to use time and objects flexibly and potentially excessively.

Data analysis uses abductive grounded theorizing, a hybrid research strategy that involves systematic combining of the theory and data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This means that the analysis is informed by extant research and that theoretical themes emerging from the data are studied alongside existing theory in an iterative fashion (Reichert, 2010). Following Dubois and Gadde (2014), we started off with a rough framework of the boundary management strategies of integration and segmentation (Nippert-Eng, 1996) as well as the boundary management tactics of time, space and objects (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009) that we applied to the interview transcripts. When scrutinizing the ongoing analysis, we noticed that while most of our research participants had a relatively clear conceptual position, the reported behaviours were more varied, often without clear segmenting or integrating preferences but, interestingly, with no significant indication for boundary conflict.

The analysis presented below focuses on two individuals, detailing their boundary management strategies and behaviours. Adam's account indicates a preference for conceptual segmentation and reports on segmenting behaviours across time, space and objects, thereby implying congruence between the conceptual and behavioural levels. This configuration is present in about 25% of our research participants across age groups and professional backgrounds. In contrast, Daphne indicates a preference for conceptual segmentation but reports on a variety of segmenting and integrating behaviours in terms of time, space and objects as well as a mixture thereof. In her case, conceptual segmentation is not supported by segmenting behaviours but by a flexible and fluid array of behaviours that may be segmenting in some instances and integrating in others. This configuration is present in about 60% of our research participants. These two cases have been selected because they constitute clear examples of the configurations of conceptual and behavioural levels of their boundary work. We faced a difficult choice as to whether to illustrate the congruence and flexibility of boundary management strategies and tactics using only a small amount of data or whether to use examples from across the dataset to show how individuals report different behaviours. We have decided on the former because it shows different configurations of individuals' boundary work as discussed next.

Configurations of hybrid boundary management strategies

Our dataset contains two main configurations of boundary management strategies. Firstly, there is congruence between a conceptual tendency towards segmentation or integration. Secondly, there is fluidity between the conceptual boundary management strategies and the behavioural boundary management practices. We will now introduce these three configurations in turn using one individual each (Adam and Daphne respectively) to illustrate these manifestations.

Configuration 1: Conceptual and behavioural congruence

Despite significant integration of time, space and objects in their lives, several research participants distinguish between work and nonwork both conceptually and behaviourally. For example, they will set themselves clear temporal boundaries through a relatively set start and end point of their working day. An indication in our data is that these research participants start the account of their working day with the point at which they are ready to start working; they do not mention getting up or having breakfast. Self-employed marketing professional Adam is a good example for this strategy:

Excerpt 1:

Author 1: So what's your typical working day like?

Adam: A typical working day would be ... arrival at the home office at, you know, quarter to nine something like that, half eight quarter to nine.

While in other parts of the interview Adam concedes that he has regular breaks during the working day indicating integration, these research participants seem reluctant to let work invade nonwork time in the evenings or on weekends as Adam continues:

Excerpt 2:

Author 1: What time do you normally call it a day?

Adam: Ahm, it's very hard to tell in this sort of business. ... I would say on average about half five, six o'clock. Sometimes it is a bit before, it depends on the amount of work that is coming in. Ahm sometimes, ahm, I don't get all that work done, so I need to do a little bit in the evening as well.

The use of 'need' here may have a negative connotation as Adam describes that he sometimes has to work longer than his preferred end point. While these research participants will engage in work activities outside of their temporal boundaries, they do so reluctantly and only when circumstances dictate (as signalled by Adam's use of 'sometimes'). Indeed, Adam maintains that 'I'm not one of these people that think about work really in my leisure time', indicating conceptual and temporal segmentation between work and nonwork.

Similarly, these research participants use space strategically, particularly home work spaces and public spaces. Adam has provided the following insights into his spatial practices in relation to the family home:

Excerpt 3:

In my mind, I have my work spaces and my leisure spaces, they do overlap. ... One thing I've never done is somebody come to my house for a meeting. I always wanted to go to a [public] place or their office. It's partly it would infringe on home space

and partly it gets me out to go to a café or an office. ... It would infringe on my home space. And then my wife wouldn't be comfortable with that either. So no, I've never done that. That's a step too far.

While Adam recognizes that work and leisure spaces in his home can overlap (thereby indicating boundary blurring), he considers the family home to be out of bounds for work-related meetings. In other parts in the interview, he explains that he will go to client offices or cafés that he would not normally use for leisure purposes, thereby maintaining spatial segmentation between work and nonwork. Similarly, Adam recalls an incident when business meetings took place in a café that he often visits with his wife and how he experienced it.

Excerpt 4:

Adam: By and large, the places we tend to go for work are generally different. There is a garden centre nearby with a café. I go in there quite regularly with my wife, you know, to have a cup and then go in there. On two or three occasions, I had business meetings in there and this was strange. ... It's strange having a business meeting in a place where you normally go with your wife.

Author 1: What was strange about it? Can you describe it?

Adam: It, it just was an atmosphere of work came in there to a degree. And you didn't want that. Now there was a conflict there. Yes, it was to do with atmosphere. Ahm, [it was] not to do with the staff that recognized me ahm. I was wearing a suit whereas if I go with my wife it's just casual dress. So that was different. It was just a feeling of work creeping in there [laughter]. ... And I had the feeling I shouldn't really be here while I'm working, because this is my leisure space.

In this excerpt, Adam does not only talk about infringement of a spatial boundary (albeit on his own terms), but also refers to his clothes, a sociomaterial aspect. He distinguishes between the business dress ('suit') he wears for work meetings and leisure wear ('casual dress') he wears at social occasions, thereby using objects to distinguish between work and nonwork.

Overall, Adam exhibits segmentation at the conceptual and all aspects of the behavioural level. Throughout the interview, he refers to a particular mindset that helps him distinguish conceptually between work and nonwork, even though times, spaces and objects might be integrated in their actual use. For example, in the third quote above, he uses the phrase 'in my mind', which we take to be an indication of conceptual segmentation. As such, in Adam's case there is largely congruence between the conceptual and behavioural level of his boundary work; he experiences the work and nonwork domain differently and is uncomfortable when one impinges on the other. Adam is not alone with this preference; to some extent, such congruence is to be expected (Nippert-Eng, 1996) as behavioural boundaries simultaneously support and strengthen conceptual boundaries.

Configuration 2: Conceptual and behavioural fluidity

Given the trends in the wider work environment outlined above, we were surprised that most research participants employed a segmentation strategy (Nippert-Eng, 1996), distinguishing conceptually between work and nonwork. Academic Daphne puts it as follows: ‘I just feel like my work is – I find it very important, but it’s work, you know, and I also have another life.’ Yet, at the behavioural level, these research participants employ a mixture of integrating and segmenting practices throughout the working day or week in a fluid manner. In terms of time, some of these research participants have a strict morning routine that distinguishes between work and nonwork, as Daphne explains:

Excerpt 5:

Author 2: Could you describe your typical day when you’re working from home?

Daphne: When I work from home?

Author 2: Yeah, like, you wake up, what happens next?

Daphne: Oh yeah. Sure, sure. I wake up at about half past seven. ... Then I dress, shower, help the children. My two children, so ahm. And then they go to school [at] about half past eight. And then ... my husband makes coffee [laughter] ... and then leaves too. And then I start working, but when I’m at home I take like more time to read the newspaper and things. I start a bit [more] slowly, I think on average I start behind my computer at half past nine.

Such a morning routine might imply temporal segmentation with individuals spending time exclusively on nonwork activities before moving on to focus on their work, thereby exhibiting ‘chunking’ of activities that is often absent in integrating behaviours. But our research participants’ temporal practices tend to be more fluid. For example, later in the interview Daphne refers to the following incident.

Excerpt 6:

Daphne: ... And then my daughter has to go to hockey, so, I go to hockey. I take her, take my laptop with me [laughter], you know.

[...]

Author 2: How do you use your laptop?

Daphne: It’s a hockey place.

Author 2: Ah, okay.

Daphne: So, there is a café. I didn’t mention that [laughter], but there is a café at the hockey field. You know, ... field hockey.

Author 2: Okay, so [your daughter] is doing hockey and you are in front of your laptop?

Daphne: Yeah, yeah. And I watch how she is doing [laughter].

In this excerpt, Daphne’s behaviour is very much integrating. From a temporal perspective, she is working on her laptop while watching her daughter play hockey, integrating work into nonwork. From a spatial perspective, she is in a place that is usually not associated with work – a café beside a

hockey field – that enables her to be close to her daughter. From a sociomaterial perspective, she is using a work object (laptop) beside the nonwork activity of watching her daughter. In this example, time, space and sociomateriality cannot be distinguished; they are all part of Daphne integrating work with nonwork. Yet, in other parts of the interview Daphne also describes spatial segmentation in that she will only use her home office for work purposes, as the following excerpt indicates:

Excerpt 7:

Author 2: So, work is the only thing you do at this desk [in your home office]?

Daphne: Ahm, yeah.

Author 2: Okay, so you don't do anything else?

Daphne: No.

Author 2: So, you don't read a book or...

Daphne: No, no, no I would not [laughter].

Similarly, Daphne also refers to sociomaterial segmentation in the following exchange:

Excerpt 8:

Author 2: Is it possible that checking the emails is the last thing you do before you go to sleep?

Daphne: No, I don't. Well, I could if I wanted, but I don't do that [laughter]. I could even check it on my phone and then fall asleep, but no. I don't want to do that. I leave my phone downstairs to make sure that I don't do it in bed, you know. I find that is too, how do you say that, ahm, invasive. I want to keep it [laughter], I want to keep it outside of the bedroom.

In other words, Daphne reports on both integrating and segmenting behaviours across a working day or week in a fluid manner. On the one hand, she is clear conceptually about the distinction between work and nonwork and makes deliberate attempts to have some temporal, spatial and sociomaterial segmentation as seen through her morning routine, the exclusive use of her home office and the fact that her mobile phone is not being used in the bedroom. On the other hand, Daphne appears to be happy to integrate work and nonwork temporally, spatially and sociomaterially as epitomized in the hockey anecdote (Excerpt 6). There is no indication in the interview that this set-up is somewhat odd or strange to her; it is just what she does and appears to be comfortable with. Her personal situation may have a role here as she combines work with raising children and, therefore, may need to resort to more integrating behaviours with work invading nonwork (Hecht and Allen, 2009) and vice versa. Nevertheless, we consider individuals' choice and agency in this potentially confusing configuration as well as the conspicuous absence of boundary conflict as important features in our data as discussed next.

Discussion and conclusion

The extant literature implies congruence between the boundary management strategies of integration and segmentation and individuals' temporal, spatial and sociomaterial practices (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Such congruence is apparent in Adam's case, in which individuals' segmenting behaviours are shaped by and support in turn a conceptual distinction between work and nonwork. It is important to stress that Adam and our other research participants exhibiting congruence between the conceptual and behavioural levels exercise a certain degree of flexibility in their daily practices. For example, Adam outlined in other parts of the interview that he would hang out or bring in the washing, thereby integrating nonwork into an otherwise relatively rigid work schedule. Yet, individuals such as Daphne oscillate between segmenting and integrating behaviours in line with their needs at a given moment. In contrast to earlier research indicating a link between such fluid boundary management practices and boundary conflict (Duxbury *et al.*, 2014), there is no indication of the latter in Daphne's account and those of the other research participants using a similar, flexible configuration of segmenting and integrating boundary management practices. The question then is how in the absence of temporal, spatial and sociomaterial congruence these individuals create and maintain the boundaries between work and nonwork in a constructive way. Our data point towards two main issues.

Firstly, there appears to be a significant amount of cognitive boundary work with individuals referring to a particular mindset that helps them distinguish between the domains of work and nonwork. For example, they use expressions such as 'in my mind' (see Excerpt 3 above) about what activity is part of which domain. In an unquoted interview excerpt, Adam, for instance, outlined that he distinguishes cognitively between a phone call for work purposes and a phone call for nonwork purposes, even though these calls may take place in quick succession using the same space and the same objects. Put bluntly, it does not seem to matter to our research participants that some temporal, spatial and sociomaterial practices are integrating as long as they are clear in their mind where the boundaries are between work and nonwork. As such, in contrast to Nippert-Eng's (1996) conceptualization, our research participants' boundary work is largely invisible, taking place in people's heads without significant material manifestations. On the one hand, this is not surprising as mobile technologies and changing working patterns increasingly blur the boundaries between work and nonwork (eg Hecht and Allen, 2009). On the other hand, such a degree of cognitive awareness and absence of conflict is remarkable given that these individuals lead busy and complex lives.

Secondly, there seem to be perceptions of give and take in our data with individuals that use a flexible configuration seeming to be content to have longer 'working days' containing both work and nonwork

activities. In Daphne's case, there is acceptance that nonwork commitments may invade the work schedule and vice versa, which enables her to combine work and nonwork commitments and which may explain the absence of conflict. In contrast to some extant studies (eg Duxbury *et al.*, 2014), the 'invasion' of the work and nonwork domains in our data is bi-directional. Daphne seems to treasure the ability to spend time with her daughter during what is generally recognized as working hours and seems to be happy to make up for the 'lost' time by working on the side of the hockey field (see Excerpt 6) and/or outside of recognized working hours (unquoted interview data). However, such agency to configure one's working day flexibly depends to some extent on institutional factors (Nippert-Eng, 1996), particularly the availability of mobile working opportunities as well as the way in which organizational control over mobile workers is exercised.

However, our data provide but a snapshot into individuals' boundary work at the time of data collection and do not imply that our research participants have never experienced boundary conflict. Indeed, several accounts refer to past boundary conflict that was successfully resolved through changes to temporal, spatial and/or sociomaterial boundary management practices. As such, there is a possibility that flexible configurations of segmenting and integrating practices are the trigger for and/or the result of such resolution of conflict. Data collection and analysis are ongoing, and we will pay closer attention to such dynamics as analysis and interpretation of findings continues. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this paper point towards the importance of flexible configurations of boundary management practices in terms of time, space and objects as individuals attempt to work seemingly fluidly across time and space.

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