

Work-Family Blurring in Two Local Organizations:
Findings of Studies Conducted in February and March of 2004
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Human Resources Department managers at two local companies were kind enough to help us recruit their employees for a study of work-family boundaries. The purpose of this study was to understand the linkages between work and family life and their implications for well-being in both realms. We would like to offer our sincere thanks to those managers for helping us conduct the study, and especially to the 85 employees who donated their time to complete our lengthy questionnaire. We mentioned in the study that those interested in our findings could read a report on the study, when they became available, by viewing our website. This is that report.

Using an adapted version of the recently developed Work-Family Integration-Blurring Scale (the WFIBS, by Desrochers, Hilton, & Larwood, in press), along with measures of work-home integration, opportunities and preferences for work-home segmentation, work-family conflict and balance, and self-concept structure, we examined the characteristics and implications of work-family boundaries. Our aim was to validate the WFIBS, which measures work-family blurring by asking respondents to rate their agreement with statements such as “In my life, there is a clear boundary between my job and my family” and “It is often difficult to tell where my work life ends and my family life begins.”

Characteristics of the Sample and Other Descriptive Statistics

Tables 1 and 2 show the characteristics of the 85 participants and their average scores on some of the demographic variables and key variables of interest. Most of the participants (75) came from one of the companies—a mid-sized manufacturing company in Los Angeles County—and only 10 participants were from the other company—a small manufacturing company in Los Angeles. The majority of study participants were male. The sample can be characterized as mostly white and middle-class, in that there were few other races or ethnic groups in the sample, and most participants were well-educated professionals and had moderate or high personal and household incomes. The sample can also be characterized as having family responsibilities, since most were married and had

young children at home. Finally, participants tended to work long hours, tended to work few if any hours at home, and tended to make few work-family transitions when working at home. The remainder of Table 2 shows the mean scores of key variables in the study, and will be discussed in detail below.

Validating the WFIBS

Table 2 shows that participants on average reported moderate levels of work-family blurring, suggesting that blurring was not a major concern for the majority of the sample. We sought to show that work-family blurring, as measured by the WFIBS, is associated with working at home, work-family role transitions, integrated work and home boundaries, work-family conflict and balance, and a feeling of confusion about how to define oneself. Our reasoning was based on boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Boundary theory proposes that people vary in their work-family integration; some have integrated work-family lives and some have more separate or segmented work-family lives. An advantage of an integrated work-family arrangement such as working at home is that it makes it easier to transition or switch between work and family roles, but one disadvantage is that it can lead to work-family blurring. Table 3 shows that, as expected, the WFIBS was positively correlated with hours worked at home and the number of work-family transitions made at home.

In boundary theory, integration is said to occur when work and home boundaries are highly flexible and permeable, and segmentation occurs when these boundaries are inflexible and impermeable (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). We measured work and home flexibility by asking study participants to rate their agreement with statements such as “My employer allows me to carry out non-work projects during spare time at work,” and “My family allows me to carry out work projects during spare minutes at home.” Work and home permeability were similarly measured by rated agreement with statements such as “I hear from my family while I am at work,” and “I hear from people related to my work when I am at home” (these come from Clark, 2002). Participants on average reported high levels of home border flexibility and moderate levels work border flexibility and work and home border permeability. By combining these four scales, we created an overall measure of work-home integration. We measured segmentation, the opposite of integration, by asking about agreement with items such as “My home life

allows home issues to be kept away from work” and “Where I work, people can keep work matters at work” (these come from Kreiner, 2001). Participants reported moderate levels of work segmentation from home and higher levels of home segmentation from work. By combining the work and home segmentation scales, we created an overall measure of work-home segmentation. Table 3 shows that, as expected, the “integration” scale was positively correlated with the WFIBS, whereas the “segmentation” scale was negatively correlated with it.

Boundary theory also suggests that work-family blurring can lead to higher work-family conflict, lower work-family balance, and confusion about which identity, or role-related aspect of oneself (e.g., self as parent, spouse, student, or worker), should be most important at a given moment (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1998). The latter issue was assessed indirectly through Cambell et al.’s (1996) self-concept clarity scale. Our reasoning was that since people’s self-concept, or overall view of themselves, is comprised of their different identities, confusion about which of these identities is most important should produce confusion about the overall self-concept. Since self-concept confusion is the opposite of self-concept clarity, we scored Campbell et al.’s scale so that higher values would represent greater self-concept confusion. Table 2 shows that participants tended to have low levels of self-concept confusion. We measured work-family conflict by combining Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian’s (1996) validated work-to-family and family-to-work conflict scales. Multiple role balance was measured using Marks and MacDermid’s (1996) scale, which assesses people’s feeling of commitment to all of their roles. Table 2 shows that participants reported moderate levels of work-to-family conflict, low levels of family-to-work conflict, and moderate levels of balance among their life roles. Table 3 shows that, as expected, we found that work-family conflict and self-concept confusion were positively correlated with work-family blurring, and multiple role balance was negatively correlated with work-family blurring.

Conclusions

Work-life researchers and consultants often use terms like “work-life balance” and “work-life integration” interchangeably, but boundary theory suggests that these are very different concepts, with different implications for psychological well-being. Whether role balance is seen largely as a lack of work-family conflict (Clark, 2002) or as

equal emotional commitment to all of one's life roles (Marks & MacDermid, 1996), this is very different from the combination of highly permeable and highly flexible work-home borders that define work-home integration in boundary theory (Ashforth et al, 2000; Clark, 2000), and these differences are borne out in the findings of this study.

Consistent with boundary theory, the blurring of work and family roles happens when people work at home, when they feel that their work-home lives are highly integrated, and when they feel that there is little opportunity for separation between work and home. Work-home blurring is associated with a sense of confusion about how to define oneself. The last finding warrants further comment. Although a correlational study such as this one does not allow us to determine the causal direction of this, or any other association that we have found (does work-family blurring lead to self-concept confusion, or is it the other way around?), boundary theory suggests that it is role integration and blurring that produces confusion about which identity is most relevant at given moment. We should also emphasize that most of the participants in this study scored fairly low on the self-concept confusion scale, and even those with high scores on this measure cannot be fairly characterized as lacking self-awareness. Rather than being an indicator of self-awareness, higher levels of self-concept confusion indicate a lack of clarity, confidence, and consistency about how to define oneself (Campbell et al., 1996).

Taken together, our findings provide evidence that the WFIBS does indeed measure work-family blurring. Thus, we feel it is ready for wider use. We believe that, by including this brief measure in their survey questionnaires, researchers and management consultants interested in work-family issues may gain insight into the psychological benefits and costs of practices such as: working long hours, formal telecommuting arrangements, and informally taking work home; bringing one's children into the workplace; or working with a spouse or relative for the same employer or in a family business. But use of the WFIBS can only facilitate such insight if it is used in conjunction with established measures of stress and well-being as well as measures of work and family antecedents and consequences such as work-family conflict, spillover, work hours, time management, time spent with family, caregiving, work and family satisfaction, and work performance.

References

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Table 1. Frequencies of Responses to Categorical Demographic Questions.

	Frequency
Gender	
Male	54
Female	31
Race/Ethnicity	
White	66
Black, Hispanic, Asian, Other Race/Ethnicity	17
Education	
No College Degree	12
Bachelor's Degree	37
Graduate Degree (Master's or Higher)	36
Personal Annual Income	
\$25,001-\$35,000	3
\$35,001-\$45,000	2
\$45,001-\$55,000	4
\$55,001-\$65,000	7
\$65,001-\$75,000	11
\$75,001-\$85,000	8
\$85,001-\$95,000	15
\$95,001 or more	33
Household Annual Income	
\$25,001-\$35,000	1
\$55,001-\$65,000	3
\$65,001-\$75,000	8
\$75,001-\$85,000	7
\$85,001-\$95,000	8
\$95,001 or more	56
Marital Status	
Married	69
Not Married	13
Parental Status	
Parent	66
Not a parent	19

Number of Hours Worked at Home	
0	24
1-5	32
6-10	18
14-23	8
30-45	3
Number of Work-Family Transitions When Working at Home	
0 (did not work at home on that day)	60
1 (switched from work task to family task or vice versa)	16
2 (switched from work to family and back, or vice versa)	8
Location of Study	
Small Company	10
Mid-Sized Company	75
Type of Work that Professional Does	
Management	30
Sales	11
Marketing	14
Engineering	10
Manufacturing	3

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for wives and husbands scores on the measures.

	Mean	SD
Age	43.07	9.32
Age of youngest child	8.61	8.02
Weekly Work Hours	49.15	9.11
Hours Worked at Home	6.02	8.22
Work-Family Blurring	2.83	1.13
Permeability of Work Border	2.95	0.87
Permeability of Home Border	3.15	0.97
Flexibility of Work Border	2.89	0.82
Flexibility of Home Border	3.57	0.63
Work Environment Allows Segmentation	2.80	1.00
Home Environment Allows Segmentation	3.66	0.84
Work-to-Family Conflict	3.17	1.15
Family-to-Work Conflict	1.71	0.69
Balanced Commitment to All Life Roles	3.02	0.58
Self-Concept Confusion	2.04	0.69

All variables other than age, age of youngest child, and work hours are on a scale of 1 to 5, so that higher values indicate higher levels of the variable.

Table 3. Correlations of Work-Family Boundary Variables.

	Blurring	Hours Worked At Home	Work-Family Transitions	Work-Family Integration	Work-Family Segmentation	Work-Family Conflict	Multiple Role Balance
Blurring	--						
Hours Worked At Home	.45	--					
Work-Family Transitions	.24	.37	--				
Work-Family Integration	.45	.44	.20	--			
Work-Family Segmentation	-.55	-.50	-.25	-.34	--		
Work-Family Conflict	.43	.39	.12	.28	-.59	--	
Multiple Role Balance	-.28	-.15	-.14	-.24	.46	-.57	--
Self Concept Confusion	.29	.19	.07	.26	-.32	.42	-.48

N= 85. Statistically significant correlations are in **bold**. All correlations at or above .22 are statistically significant a $p < .05$; correlations at or above .28 are significant at $p < .01$; correlations at or above .37 are significant at $p < .001$.