

Reconciling Home and Work During Lockdown: The Role of Organisational Segmentation Supplies for Psychological Detachment and Work-Home Conflict

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Abstract. When the lockdown was introduced to limit the spread of the coronavirus, many employees were forced to work from home, thus facing challenges to detach from work and balance work and home responsibilities. As physical boundaries between work and non-work became non-existent, organisational norms supporting segmentation between the two domains became more important than ever before. This study aimed to examine the effect of organisational segmentation supplies for psychological detachment and work-home conflict among employees with different boundary management preferences. A sample of 172 employees from one private sector organisation responded to a questionnaire measuring segmentation supplies, segmentation preferences, psychological detachment and work-home conflict. Moderated mediation analysis revealed that segmentation supplies had a protective effect on the work-home conflict, which was partly mediated by psychological detachment. Employees' segmentation preferences did not moderate this effect. Results show segmentation supplies by the organisation to be a valuable resource when working from home that helps to psychologically detach from work and balance work and home responsibilities even for employees who prefer to integrate work and home life.

Keywords: psychological detachment, segmentation preference, segmentation supplies, work-home conflict.

Namų ir darbo derinimas karantino metu: organizacijos teikiamų atskyrimo išteklių reikšmė psichologiniam atsirbojimui bei darbo ir namų konfliktui

Santrauka. Dėl koronaviruso plitimo įvedus karantiną ir perėjus prie nuotolinio darbo, daugelis darbuotojų susidūrė su papildomais iššūkiais atsiriboti nuo darbo laisvalaikio ir derinti atsakomybę darbe ir namuose. Išnykus fiziniams riboms tarp darbo ir namų, svarbesnės nei anksčiau tapo organizacinės normos (atskyrimo ištekliai), palaikančios

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atskyrimą tarp šių gyvenimo sferų. Šio tyrimo tikslas buvo ištirti organizacinių atskyrimo išteklių efektą psichologiniam atsiribojimui nuo darbo bei darbo ir namų konfliktui tarp darbuotojų, turinčių skirtingas darbo ir namų ribų valdymo preferencijas. 172 vienos privataus sektoriaus organizacijos darbuotojai atsakė į klausimyną, kuriame buvo vertinami atskyrimo ištekliai, atskyrimo preferencijos, psichologinis atsiribojimas bei darbo ir namų konfliktas, klausimus. Moderuota medicininė analizė atskleidė, kad atskyrimo ištekliai turėjo apsauginį efektą darbo ir namų konfliktui, ir šį efektą iš dalies paaiškino psichologinis atsiribojimas. Darbuotojų darbo ir namų atskyrimo preferencijos šiam poveikiui reikšmės neturėjo. Rezultatai atskleidžia organizacijos teikiamų atskyrimo išteklių vertę dirbant iš namų. Darbo ir namų atskyrimui palankios normos organizacijoje yra sietinos su geresniu psichologiniu atsiribojimu nuo darbo bei mažesniu darbo ir namų konfliktu net ir tarp tų darbuotojų, kuriems priimtinau šias sritis integruoti.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: psichologinis atsiribojimas, atskyrimo preferencijos, atskyrimo ištekliai, darbo ir namų konfliktas.

Introduction

The pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 is more than just a medical problem. When the lockdown was introduced as a preventive measure to limit the spread of coronavirus, many employees were forced to work and spend their non-work time in the same home space. Working from home has certain benefits, including cutting down the commuting time, helping families save on food, clothing, and transportation (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017). However, it also erases physical boundaries between work and home domains and allows various work-related issues to permeate more easily into the non-work domain (Ashforth et al., 2000). Diffused boundaries are related to lower psychological detachment because reminders about work-related issues frequently interrupt leisure time (Park et al., 2011). Consequently, it creates additional challenges for employees struggling to balance work and home commitments, as less time and resources remain available to respond to the demands at home (Dettmers, 2017).

Because both the pandemic and lockdown were unexpected, organisations could not adequately prepare to initiate new work arrangements to respond to the epidemiological situation. However, previous research has shown that organisations differ in their segmentation supplies, that is, the degree to which dominant norms within an organisation promote segmentation (vs integration) of work and non-work domains (Kreiner, 2006). Organisations with high segmentation supplies allow or even encourage their employees to forget about work during their free time by, for example, limiting work-related communication after working hours. In this way, employees are enabled to erect time boundaries between the work and home domains, which might be even more relevant during the lockdown, when physical boundaries are non-existent. Therefore, we expected that segmentation supplies provided by the organisation could be an important resource that helps employees psychologically detach from work and reduce work-home conflict during the lockdown.

The boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000) offers a valuable theoretical foundation for understanding the work-home conflict during the lockdown. According to this theory, employees balance their work and home responsibilities by managing the strength (i.e., flexibility and permeability) of physical, temporal, and psychological boundaries between work and home domains, which places them somewhere along the

work-home segmentation and integration continuum. Boundary management strategies of segmentation and integration both have positive and undesirable consequences. For example, the integration strategy allows easier transitions from work to the home domain and vice versa. Still, it is also related to a higher frequency of interruptions, as permeations from the work domain (e.g., emails and calls) interrupt the home domain activities (e.g., leisure time with one's family). Moreover, interruptions do not allow an employee to psychologically detach from work, as reminders about work are always present (Park et al., 2011).

On the contrary, segmentation complicates transitions between the domains, but it also reduces interruptions because of fewer permeations (Ashforth et al., 2000). Previous research has shown that permeations such as having a work computer at home or using smartphones to deal with work-related issues at home are related to impaired psychological detachment and higher exhaustion (Derks et al., 2016; Sonnentag et al., 2011). Moreover, psychological detachment from work is of paramount importance to recover from job demands and strain, including strain caused by additional challenges that emerged during the pandemic (Michel et al., 2021; Shifrin, 2021). Therefore, a lack of segmentation between work and home domains might reduce the ability to recover, leading to higher work-family conflict (Dettmers, 2017).

As recently noted by Cho (2020), higher work-life integration is unavoidable during the lockdown, as work tasks are to be performed while physically being at home. Such integration is related to more frequent interruptions, which is known to reduce an employee's ability to function in both work and non-work domains (Kerman et al., 2021). On the other hand, this effect might depend on norms within the organisation. Kreiner (2006) introduced the concept of segmentation supplies referring to certain organisational norms (i.e., keeping work matters at work, preventing work issues from interfering into employees' home lives), which encourages employees to separate work and home domains. As such, organisation norms might help employees reduce the permeation of work into the home domain interrupting them during leisure time. Therefore, we expect segmentation supplies to have a positive effect on the work-home conflict through higher psychological detachment and we raise the following hypothesis:

H1: Organisational segmentation supplies are related to a lower work-home conflict through psychological detachment.

Although organisational norms are a powerful factor in shaping employee behaviour, individuals differ in their preferences to separate or integrate work and home domains (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner, 2006). While some employees are more willing to keep work and home life as separate as possible, others are on the other side of the continuum and are more eager to integrate the two domains. Employees who are more willing to integrate versus segment their work and home domains are less disturbed by various permeations from work when they are not working, as they can return to their preferred domain more easily (Ashforth, 2000). Unsurprisingly, a recent study by Schieman and colleagues (2021) showed that working from home due to the pandemic has reduced the

work-life conflict of workers who prefer to integrate work and life. Even more so, a study by Derks and colleagues (2016) showed high daily work-related smartphone use to be related to lower work-home conflict among employees with low segmentation preference.

Furthermore, it is not mere organisational norms that encourage segmentation, but congruence between supplies on the part of the organisation and individual preferences that reduces work-home conflict by allowing employees to employ their ideal boundary management strategies (Kreiner, 2006). Recent research by Basile and Beauregard (2021) have shown that a misfit between organisational norms and employees' preferences might even result in segmentation oversupply, which increases rather than reduces work-home conflict. For this reason, we expect segmentation supplies to have a more substantial effect on psychological detachment when they correspond to the boundary management preferences of an individual employee. Thus, our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: The indirect effect of organisational segmentation supplies on the work-home conflict through psychological detachment is moderated by segmentation preference: the effect of segmentation supplies on psychological detachment will be more salient when the segmentation preference is higher.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 172 employees (106 females and 66 males) from one private sector organisation providing financial services. The average age of study participants was 35.3 years ($SD = 8.7$), average tenure – 8.6 years ($SD = 7.0$). In addition, 36% of the sample reported that they had never worked outside of the office before the pandemic, and 11% had been working outside of their offices at least once a week.

The study was conducted in August 2020, when all participants were required to work from home because of the pandemic situation caused by the COVID-19 virus. The participants received an invitation to fill out an online survey via the management staff. Participation was voluntary, and participants were not reimbursed for taking part in the survey.

Measures

Segmentation supplies and *segmentation preference* were measured using an eight-item questionnaire developed by Kreiner (2006). As this scale was originally designed to measure boundary management when working in the office, some items were inappropriate for the pandemic because they equated being at home with leisure. Thus, they were adapted for the current study by rephrasing “being at home” to “not working”. Four items were used to measure segmentation supplies provided by the organisation (sample item: “My workplace lets people forget about work when they’re not working”), and four items measured individual segmentation preference (sample item: “I don’t like to have to think about work while I’m not working”). Participants were required to rate their agreement

to each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 – totally disagree to 5 – totally agree. Both subscales had good internal consistency (provided in Table 1).

Work-home conflict was measured by the 8-item negative work-home interference scale obtained from the SWING questionnaire (Geurts et al., 2005). A sample item is: “You find it difficult to fulfil your domestic obligations because you are constantly thinking about your work?”. The items had to be rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 – never to 5 – always. The analysis of the scale’s reliability showed good internal consistency (provided in Table 1).

Psychological detachment was measured by four items obtained from the Recovery Experience Questionnaire developed by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). A sample item is: “During time after work, I distance myself from my work”. The items had to be rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 – totally disagree to 5 – totally agree. Scale reliability analysis showed good internal consistency (see Table 1).

Additionally, we measured several *background factors*, including age, organisational tenure, and prior experience of working outside of the office. All of the measured background variables had only trivial correlations ($r < 0.2$) with the main study variables. For this reason, they were not included in further analysis.

Data analysis

For data analysis, we used SPSS and the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2018). Where applicable, a bootstrapping approach with 5000 bootstrap samples was used to estimate the confidence intervals. To test H1, we conducted a simple mediation analysis with PROCESS (model 4), where segmentation supplies were included as an independent variable, psychological detachment – as a mediator, and work-home conflict – as a dependent variable. To test H2, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (model 7) which included segmentation preference as a moderator of the path between segmentation supplies and psychological detachment.

Results

Descriptive statistics and relationships between the study variables are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations between the Variables (N = 172)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
Work-home conflict	2.00	.80	(.93)			
Psychological detachment	3.26	.84	-.57***	(.89)		
Segmentation supplies	3.58	.79	-.51***	.61***	(.91)	
Segmentation preference	3.79	.75	.04	.19*	.10	(.77)

Note. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients are presented on the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

To test H1, regarding the mediation of psychological detachment for the relationship between segmentation supplies and work-home conflict, we conducted a simple mediation analysis with Process (model 4). As it was expected, the indirect effect of segmentation supplies on work-family conflict through psychological detachment was significant ($a*b = -0.064$, $SE = .015$, 95%, $CI = [-.09; -.03]$), although direct effect remained significant as well ($c' = -.063$, $SE = .019$, 95%, $CI = [-.10; -.02]$). Thus, our first hypothesis was confirmed.

To test H2, regarding the conditional effect of segmentation preference on the indirect effect of segmentation supplies on work-home conflict through psychological detachment, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (model 7). Unstandardised regression coefficients of this model are provided in Table 2. Contrary to our expectations, the interaction between segmentation supplies and segmentation preference was non-significant in predicting psychological detachment and subsequent work-home conflict. Thus, our second hypothesis was not supported.

Table 2

Unstandardised Regression Coefficients in the Moderated Mediation Model

Outcomes	Psychological detachment		Work-home conflict	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Predictor variables				
Segmentation supplies	.04	.09	-.06**	.02
Segmentation preference	-.07	.08		
Segmentation supplies x segmentation preference	.01	.01		
Psychological detachment			-.40***	.07
F	36.71***		48.65***	
R ²	.37		.37	

Note. $N = 172$.

** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$

Discussion

In this study, we examined the role of segmentation supplies for employees' ability to detach from work and thus reduce the work-home conflict. Results have shown that norms within the organisation that encourage employees to separate work and home domains are related to both higher psychological detachment and lower work-home conflict while working from home. These results are in line with the Boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), suggesting that both segmentation and integration of work and non-work domains have their costs and benefits. As the lockdown has diminished the physical boundaries between the two spheres, segmentation supplies provided by the organisation enable employees to maintain temporal boundaries, thus allowing them to detach from

work during their leisure time (Park et al., 2011). Additionally, this leaves the person more time and energy that might be spent for non-work related activities.

Furthermore, according to our findings, the effect of segmentation supplies for psychological detachment and subsequent work-home conflict was unrelated to the boundary management preference of individual employees. Such results are in contrast with the theoretical considerations provided by Kreiner (2006) and several empirical studies conducted before the pandemic (Basile & Beauregard, 2021; Derks et al., 2016) that emphasised the importance of fit between employees' boundary management preferences and norms within the organisation. Possibly, our results could have been affected by the pandemic, when for most people, both work and personal life had to take place in a limited space of their homes. With the disappearance of spatial boundaries between work and private life, organisational norms that allow time boundaries to be maintained have become relevant even for those employees who prioritise the integration of work and non-work. This has important practical implications as it shows that employees might benefit from organisational policies encouraging respect for leisure time, even if they are more prone to integrate work and non-work domains.

Several study limitations need to be acknowledged. First, this was a cross-sectional study; therefore, further longitudinal evidence is necessary to test the direction of the effects. Second, our sample was somewhat limited as all our study participants worked in the same private sector organisation. Therefore, we cannot rule out that the results of our study, which are in contrast with previous studies (Basile & Beauregard, 2021; Derks et al., 2016), are determined by the specifics of the organisation or industry and not by the context of the pandemic. For this reason, further studies with more heterogeneous samples are needed to generalise the results. Finally, as recently noted by Vasiri and colleagues (2021), changes in work and home roles during the pandemic have not been uniform for all employees. Therefore, studies employing a person-centred approach might be more appropriate to study differences within the sample.

To conclude, the sudden shift to working from home has changed the boundaries between essential areas of life, thus challenging workers to maintain a proper balance between work and home domains. In such a context, organisations that were able to offer more segmentation supplies had an advantage. Employees who felt that their organisation supported the separation of work and non-work were better able to detach from work and reconcile these two spheres of life during the lockdown. Keeping in mind that some employees will not return to the pre-pandemic way of working when the epidemiological situation recovers, it makes sense for organisations to reconsider norms related to the balance between work and non-work.

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