

# Work–family boundary management styles in organizations: A cross-level model

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## Abstract

We develop a cross-level model and typology of work–family (W–F) boundary management styles in organizations. A boundary management style is the general approach an individual uses to demarcate boundaries and attend to work and family roles. We argue that variation in W–F boundary management styles (integrator, separator, alternating) is a function of individual boundary-crossing preferences (flexibility, permeability, symmetry, direction); the centrality and configuration of work–family role identities; as well as the organizational work–family climate for customization. The model assumes that an individual’s perceived control to enact a boundary style that aligns with boundary-crossing preferences and identities has direct effects on individual perceptions of work–family conflict and also moderates the level of work–family conflict of boundary management styles experienced across organizational contexts. We offer propositions relevant to future research and practice.

## Keywords

work–family boundary management, work–family conflict, work–family identities, organizational work–family culture

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Increasingly, as formal and informal flexibility between work and family roles become more common, individuals and organizations are enacting new boundaries around work and family relationships (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Bulgar, Mathews, & Hoffman, 2007; Kreiner,

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Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). Large organizations are making flexible work arrangements (e.g., flextime, telecommuting) available to growing numbers of employees for discretionary use (Kossek & Michel, 2010). Boundaries between work and family are increasingly blurring, as many employees are self-managing informal flexibility by responding to personal email, texts, and calls at work, or by working during personal time on weekends or during vacations (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008). Overall, the rise of portable digital technology facilitating e-work as well as the globalization of work systems make it increasingly possible to work anytime and anyplace (Perlow, in press).

Yet, many employees who originally embraced new technological tools like Blackberries, cell phones, or laptops, or flexible work arrangements that make boundaries between work and home more porous are finding that instead of eliminating work–family conflicts, these technologies and flexible policies can turn homes into electronic work cottages, expanding work into family time, and the reverse (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; Perlow, in press). Increasingly many individuals are finding it difficult to separate from work (or family) (Duxbury, Higgins, & Neufeld, 1998; Kossek & Lautsch, 2008), unless they actively seek to manage boundaries to do so. Given these trends, there is a need for improved theory to advance understanding regarding how individuals may best enact work–family boundaries in their employment settings (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1999; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005; Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2009).

Effectively managing boundaries between work and family does not rest solely with organizations nor with individuals, but occurs *in situ*. By this we mean, that whether individuals' boundary management styles relate to positive work and family outcomes such as reduced work–family conflict may be a function of individual preferences in relation to the social contexts in which these styles are enacted. Yet it is only relatively recently that researchers have begun to study how

individuals manage work–family role boundaries nested in organizational work–family cultures or climates.<sup>1</sup>

The study seeks to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we integrate individual and organizational perspectives on boundary management to develop a cross-level model. Typically, boundary management issues have been examined in separate individual and organizational streams. Studies conducted at the individual level focus on boundary management preferences, conflicts and tactics, and control. For example, one literature stream examines individual preferences for integration and segmentation of boundaries in relation to the management of work–family and other personal life roles (Mickel & Dallimore, 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). A second stream investigates boundary work tactics and strategies for managing conflicts that violate values. As illustration, studies by Kreiner et al. (2009) examined boundary work tactics and identified how people resolve work–family conflicts and boundary violations. A third stream draws on job control theory (e.g., Karasek, 1979) to examine perceived control over work–family relationships (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006) and how this relates to whether boundary styles correlate with positive outcomes (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2011).

Regarding organizational influences, Litrico and Lee (2008) found that organizations vary in the degree to which they exploit or explore workers' needs to control work–life relationships. Perlow (1998) conducted a qualitative study examining managerial cultures of boundary control that create a social order and hegemony of working time taking precedence over personal time. Similarly, Kossek, Noe, and Colquitt (2001) noted that organizational climates are often developed governing cross-domain boundary management dynamics. For example, climates can be negative where one role dominates and the demands of another role are expected to be sacrificed. An example is where work dominates and home life routinely adjusts around work

demands. This study also identified positive and supportive cross-domain climates where individuals are able to share concerns across roles without jeopardy. Despite growing development of individual and organizational research on work–family boundary management, there has been limited synthesis of individual and organizational streams.

Second, we hope to contribute by enriching the discussion of boundary management styles in several respects. While most studies focus on segmentation and integration as the predominant boundary management styles (e.g., Desrochers, Hilton, & Larwood, 2005; Matthews, Barnes-Farrell, & Bulger, 2010), we incorporate and examine the implications of a new style, “*alternating*,” originally identified by Kossek and Lautsch (2008). Most studies depict individuals as either work- or family-centric, overlooking that growing numbers of individuals may have configurations that are *dual-centric*. We develop hypotheses that *dual-centric* individuals use *alternating* boundary management styles. We examine how individuals whose identities involve different levels of focus on work, family or both, may enact different patterns of boundary management. We argue it is useful to separate out and delineate the directions and symmetry of boundary-crossing behaviors (e.g., work to family; family to work) as recurring patterns. By *symmetry*, we refer to the evenness of work–family and family–work interruptions. For some individuals, family interrupts work and work interrupts family in relatively equal amounts. For others, one domain such as work (or family) may routinely interrupt family (or work) more than the reverse. These patterns would reflect asymmetry or unevenness in boundary interruptions. Overall, we develop a more nuanced and complete examination of boundary management styles and their antecedents than is available in prior research.

Third, drawing on control theory by Karasek (1979), we theorize that the extent to which individuals perceive that they have control over their own boundary management style will both have direct effects on work–family conflict as

well as moderate the effects of this style across organizational contexts. Few studies have attempted to identify the outcomes of different boundary management styles, but results so far are mixed. Hecht and Allen (2009) found that boundaries which are more permeable and permitting of role integration, were associated with high inter-role conflict both at home and at work. Voydanoff (2005) also reports that multi-tasking at home is linked with increased work-to-family conflict and stress. However, Ilies, Wilson, and Wagner (2009) have shown that integration has the potential to foster positive spillover from work to home in cases where the work experience and attitudes are positive. Kirchmeyer (1995) also found that perceptions that organizations embraced multiple roles rather than work–life separation were associated with higher organizational commitment. We believe that the perceived control to manage boundaries consistent with identities may help explain why in some cases a given style could have a positive effect, and in others a negative outcome.

We narrow the scope of our paper to focus on W–F boundary management and not the broader term of “work–life.” Our assumption is that boundary management theory needs to be developed focusing on specific role relationship boundaries. This demarcation of our paper’s confines is based on the belief that the meaning of a role and its identity salience shapes boundary enactment. This belief is consistent with research by Huffman, Youngcourt, Payne, and Castro (2008) who found that, although correlated, work–family conflict and work–nonwork conflict measures are consistently and differentially related to many outcome measures in a pattern varying by whether the individual cares for dependents or not. We do use the term “family” broadly as it has expanded over the years (Rothausen, 1999) to refer to not only an individual’s household (people with whom individuals live) or kin (people to whom individuals are related by blood), but also to include people with whom

individuals have developed social relationships of a familial type such as unmarried partners and very close friends. Such partner and friend relationships involve ongoing mutual dependence, which is a hallmark of “family.”

We also restrict our examination to individual and organizational determinants of boundary management style for parsimony. We assume family determinants and constraints are partially captured in the individual’s antecedents of work–family boundary management style. We also assume a focused approach on work climate for boundary control is needed for model development. Certainly, other aspects of work climate such as diversity, inclusion, and social supportiveness may be relevant as well, but in this paper our focus is on work–family boundaries.

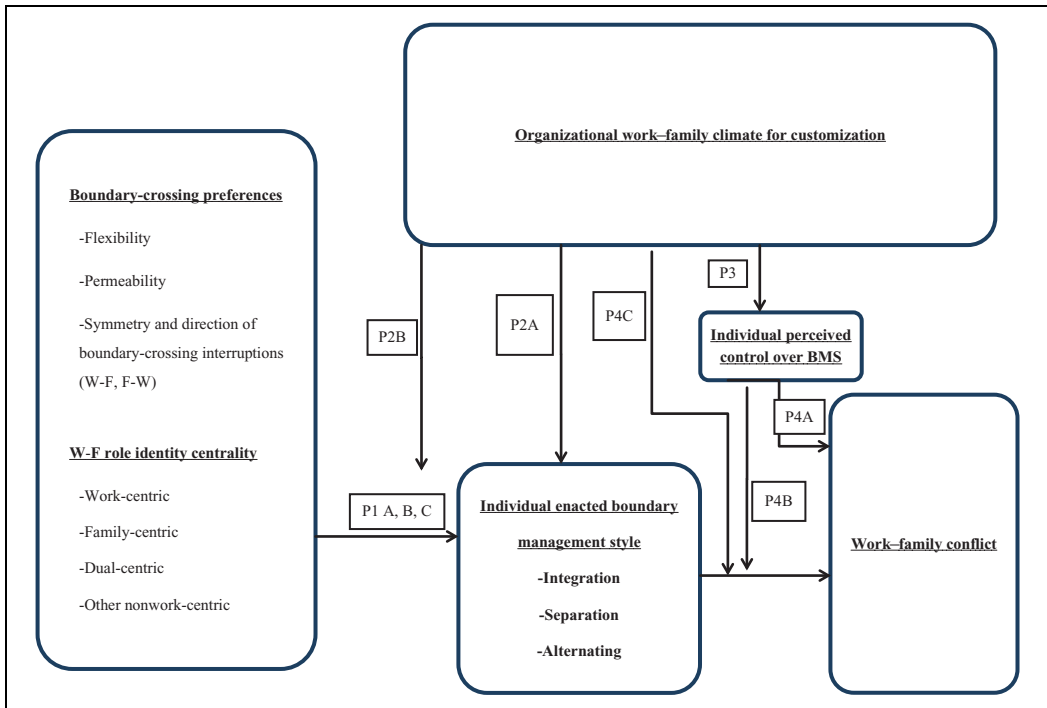
This paper is organized as follows. We begin with a brief overview of our model before moving on to introduce prevailing theory on work–family boundaries. We examine individual and then organizational factors that shape boundary management styles, before exploring the moderating effect of perceived control. We close with discussion of the future research implications of the model.

## Model overview and background

We define boundary management styles as the general approach an individual uses to demarcate boundaries and regulate attending to work and family roles. This construct is developed drawing on Katz and Kahn’s (1978) theory of role taking, and integrating this work with research on job control (Karasek, 1979) and psychological boundary management (Kossek et al., 2006). As Katz and Kahn’s model of role theory (1978) argued, when individuals enact multiple roles with different expectations in one or more social systems, interference between roles can increase psychological distress (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Recent work–life developments noted in our introduction suggest that work and family subsystems for many individuals are increasingly overlapping. This

generally results in increased crossing of role boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000) and greater self-regulation of the synthesis of work–non-work roles (Kossek et al., 1999). Most research has described how individuals enact boundary crossings, often focusing on preferences for integration and segmentation (Rothbard et al., 2005). We argue that the boundary management literature should also look at role-taking behaviors (Katz & Kahn, 1978), the idea that individuals make choices in taking on roles that are salient with important role identities (Thoits, 1991). Perceived boundary control, as well as the organizational context for boundary control in which boundary management styles are enacted, are also important influences on role-taking and enactment. Thus, as Figure 1 suggests, work–family boundary styles are a function of individual boundary-crossing preferences and identity, along with the organizational work–family climate for boundary control. Linkages between style types and work–family outcomes such as work–family conflict are moderated by individual perceptions of control over boundary management styles and the organizational climate for boundary control.

Our model in Figure 1 describes the organizational and individual antecedents of boundary management styles. In this model we argue that individuals vary in how they manage work–family boundaries and to understand these differences and whether this enactment leads to positive outcomes, we have to look at boundary enactment in relation to feelings of control as well as in an organizational context. This view is also consistent with Ilies et al. (2009) who maintain that the way individuals manage work–family roles is influenced by both job characteristics and individual differences. We assume that positive outcomes are more likely to occur when individuals enact boundary management styles that are congruent with their personal boundary management values and identities, and when they feel in control of boundaries because the organizational climate supports their preferred boundary style.



**Figure 1.** A cross-level model of work-family boundary management styles in organizations.

### Boundary theory

Boundary theory examines the different approaches, or boundary management styles, through which individuals establish, keep, or alter boundaries around a domain such as a role as a means to create order (Ashforth et al., 2000). A role is defined as the expectations placed on members of a social system (Katz & Kahn, 1978). A key challenge many working individuals face today is how to manage the relationships between the responsibilities of the work role (e.g., showing up on time and performing one's job well) and those of the family role (e.g., providing care for family members from child care to emotional support to carrying out other domestic chores). The relationship between work and family roles may be shaped through boundary management or boundary work, which entails the active steps that individuals may take to shape the nature of the boundary

between their roles through psychological, physical, or time borders (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Two characteristics of boundaries that individuals may alter and that are highlighted in work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) are boundary permeability and flexibility.

**Permeability.** Permeable boundaries allow aspects of one role, such as behaviors or emotions, to spill over into another (Clark, 2000; Hall & Richter, 1988), so that one may be physically located in one "role's domain, but psychologically and/or behaviorally involved in another role" (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 474). For example, W-F permeability may be enacted through involuntary interruptions, as when a work colleague may call during evening hours. We assume that not all interruptions are involuntary. An individual can play a role in W-F

permeability by giving out one's home number to a colleague or one's work email to a family member. Permeability also extends to include choices an individual may make to allow thoughts, feelings, or demands from one role to be assimilated into another role. For example, enrolling a child in an on-site daycare may enhance permeability if it means that the worker will think more about the child while working.

**Flexibility.** Ashforth et al. (2000) define role flexibility as the degree to which the boundaries of a role are elastic and mutable, so that it may be enacted in many different places or at different times. As Sundaramurthy and Kreiner (2008) explain, boundary flexibility answers the question of "when and where" a role can be enacted, while permeability tells us "what" the role is, at least in terms of the extent to which a "role allows elements of another role to integrate and assimilate with it" (2008, p. 417). Flexible roles tend to allow for greater ease of transitions between roles (Kossek et al., 1999). For example, the job of university professor would be viewed as relatively high on role flexibility because many tasks (e.g., writing, grading) could be set aside if necessary to meet the demands of another role (e.g., taking a sick child to the doctor). In contrast, the job of a waitress would be relatively low on boundary flexibility as it might be more difficult to restructure and set aside job tasks of taking and delivering food orders to take a child to the doctor during a shift. It would be harder to flexibly restructure the job role to make it up later in the day.

**Boundary management styles.** The styles individuals may employ to manage their work-life role boundaries have been typically described by work-life scholars as arrayed along a continuum, from integration to separation, with points along the scale reflecting different boundary characteristics that one might enact (e.g., Bulger, Matthews, & Hoffman, 2007). In this view, boundary flexibility and permeability together dictate whether roles are segmented or

integrated. Inflexible and impermeable boundaries exist between roles that are segmented, where there is little spillover from one role to another. Such extreme segmentation tends to exist for role domains and task demands that are very different from each other. For example, nursing an infant is a very dissimilar task from working as a painter on an auto assembly line. More similar roles are often integrated, with flexible and permeable boundaries to facilitate transitions and spillovers between the roles. For example, the nonwork categories of commuting and exercising can be combined by bicycling to work.

Kossek and Lautsch (2008) build on this approach and offer a nuanced array of boundary management style options. They identified three main boundary management styles: (a) separating work and life; (b) integrating work and life, and (c) a hybrid approach that involves alternating between the two prior approaches. These styles were exploratory and derived from a quantitative study of teleworkers and from grounded qualitative interviews with employees in other contexts (factories, self-employed workers, etc.) and not yet linked to a multilevel theoretical model. We incorporate these styles and consider next how their enactment may be shaped by individual and organizational differences.

## **Individual antecedents of boundary management styles**

In this section we examine two factors that shape how individuals manage work-family boundaries: individual preferences for boundary crossing; and the centrality of their work-family role identities.

### ***Boundary-crossing preferences***

Individuals vary in their preferences for how boundaries should be managed, as Nippert-Eng (1996) noted (see also Kreiner et al., 2009). She found that some people prefer to separate roles so that boundary crossings are

minimized. For example, these people might keep separate email accounts for work and family and try to conduct work at the workplace and take care of family matters only during breaks and nonwork time (see also Kossek & Lautsch, 2008). Others prefer integration such as blending work and family roles all day long. A parent may constantly trade text messages with children from the office. Or on vacation, an employee may prefer to monitor emails rather than come into work and have to prioritize hundreds of emails. Thus, individuals vary in their preferences for different types of boundaries between work and family roles, and for certain patterns of boundary-crossing interruptions.

Of course, it may not always be possible for individuals to enact the type of boundary management style they prefer. As Matthews and Barnes-Farrell (2010) note in their research, the flexibility of role boundaries will be shaped by both the ability and willingness of an individual to transition from one role to another, similar to the common observation in the work–family literature that work–life policies and benefits may offer options to individuals but there must also be a willingness to utilize them. Thus, both the individuals' preferences and the opportunities or constraints of the environment they are in are relevant in shaping the flexibility of work–family boundaries and the associated boundary management style that is enacted.

*Symmetry and direction of boundary-crossing interruptions.* One area the work–family boundary literature has been less developed in which we believe is a critical aspect of boundary-crossing preferences is the degree to which individual preferences for boundary-crossing interruptions may vary in direction and symmetry. In essence, “What are an individual’s inclinations regarding the work role interrupting the family role, compared to the family role interrupting the work role?” As Kossek and Ozeki (1998) argued, specific measures of work–family conflict assessing the direction of role conflict (e.g., family to work

and work to family) are significantly more effective in predicting life and job satisfaction than general bidirectional measures of conflict. Drawing on this earlier work, we argue a similar rationale for measures to be clear in measuring the preferences for specific directions of boundary-crossing interruptions rather than global measures of overall extent of interruptions. A key antecedent of boundary management style relates to variation in preferences for the family role to interrupt the work role and the work role to interrupt the family one.

Some individuals are asymmetrical in boundary-crossing inclinations. For example, they prefer to take calls from a family member while on the job, but would rarely prefer to take a text related to work when off the job. Other individuals would have preferences for work to interrupt family time such as taking phone calls, emails, or texts during vacation but would rarely prefer to take personal communications at work. In contrast to these asymmetrical individuals, others are symmetrical in boundary interruption behaviors. They are partial to enabling work to interrupt the family role and for the family role to interrupt the work role whenever needed. For example, individuals who prefer to have one smartphone where work and personal emails can be comingled so one is constantly accessible to both work and family communications is an illustration. Other individuals have symmetry in separation preferences. They divide their lives to separate on work when at work and home when at home. They may have separate emails and phones for work and personal life.

### *Work and family identities*

The style one adopts for managing boundaries may also be shaped by the priorities placed upon the work and family roles, particularly the centrality of one’s role identities. Role identity refers to the construction of the self in a role and what are construed as core (essential) and non-core (flexible) features (Ashforth et al., 2000). Role identity is important for understanding

boundary management style as roles with higher salience and identity are likely to take precedence in regulation of stressful (and nonstressful) events (Thoits, 1991). Ashforth et al. (2000) maintain that what is relevant about identity to boundary management styles is that roles with which one has high identification are likely to have higher contrast in boundaries (and be less flexible and permeable) compared to others. This line of thinking is consistent with the traditional work–family literature which assumes that individuals have tendencies to be either “work centric” where work identity takes precedence or “family centric” where family identity takes precedence.

However, as Lobel (1991) argued decades ago, the work–family literature should be updated to recognize the growing fact that some individuals are dual centric, that is, they place a high identity on both work and family roles and have dual investment in each. Individuals may even be neither work nor family centric, but other nonwork-centric as a recent study validating boundary management profiles found (Kossek et al., 2011). Rather some other life role such as community service, exercise, church, or simply time for self may be the role of primary identification. This line of argument suggests that boundary management theories should be updated to account for the fact that increasingly individuals may simultaneously strongly identify with multiple roles, some of which may be neither work- nor family-related.

Further, as we will propose in what follows, an underexamined style for both dual centric and “other nonwork centric” individuals is to vary a boundary management style, so that they do not exclusively separate or integrate, but instead alternate between these two options to better give their best mental, physical, and temporal resources to their valued roles as needed. In particular, dual centric individuals may be likely to evidence more symmetry in their boundary-crossing preferences than individuals who are work- or family-centric, as they place equal importance on various roles and may vary patterns to separate to focus on one

role during peak times of demands and integrate at other times.

Proposition 1A: Boundary-crossing preferences (permeability, flexibility, interruption direction, and symmetry) and identities will relate to boundary management styles.

Proposition 1B: A dual-centric identity will be positively associated with an alternating boundary management style.

Proposition 1C: A dual-centric identity will be positively associated with a preference for symmetry in boundary-crossing interruptions (i.e., equal levels of W–F and F–W interruptions).

### *Organizational work–family climate regarding customization*

Work–family climate is an indication of how a work–family culture is interpreted including member perceptions regarding aspects of work–family boundary management (Kossek et al., 2001; O’Neill et al., 2009). Organizational work–family boundary management climates vary in particular in terms of their norms and values regarding whether work arrangements can be customized to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of workers, or whether a standardized approach prevails.

*Standardized versus customized work–family climates.* As Litrico and Lee have found (2008), organizations vary in the degree to which they exploit workers and expect employer preferences for managing the work–family boundary to dominate. In standardized work environments, members understand that the organization generally expects individual members to adapt to the organization’s preferred way of managing boundaries. Thus this type of work–family climate would be likely to have strong impacts on the type of boundary management styles enacted by individuals, and to lead to conformity among organizational members. Here work demands



take precedence and dictate a standard for boundary management enactment.

In contrast, some organizational work–family climates allow for more individual exploration and customization of work–family roles. This notion draws on theories of perceived organizational and supervisor support, which holds that individuals develop positive social exchanges with organizations that are supportive of them (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). As a function of these exchanges, employees develop perceptions of supervisor and organizational support. Here employees perceive that the organizational culture provides workplace social support, which is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive that their well-being is valued by workplace sources, such as supervisors and the broader organization in which they are embedded (Eisenberger, Singhammer, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002).

In such an organization, individuals are better able to enact styles in ways that fit their boundary management values, which is similar to what Valcour, Bailyn, and Quijada (2007) have written about customized careers. Under customized careers, individuals are able to enact careers in ways that fit their values in terms of workload and involvement over the career life cycle. We apply this same notion to boundary management in customized work–family climates. In firms with these climates, individuals are allowed to enact and customize boundaries to fit their values even if they are counter to the prevailing ways of working and managing boundaries. These organizations develop results-oriented work environments where members follow norms that focus on *what* is produced. People are less likely to be stigmatized for customizing how they manage boundaries to enact multiple roles as long as the work gets done. Under climates higher in support for customization, employees perceive greater social latitude to enact boundaries in a wider variety of ways to meet individual needs. Unlike standardized boundary management

climates, individuals have more give and take to negotiate or tailor boundaries in different ways to support employee preferences and identities for *both* work and family. We see organizational support of boundary management as a form of work–family facilitation, allowing work and family roles to be enacted in ways that enrich each other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), and not as competing demands.

We recognize that the ability to customize boundaries as “I-deals” may have some equity disadvantages as Rousseau has written about (2005). However, the ability to craft an individually tailored boundary management approach is of benefit to many individuals who might otherwise be out of alignment with their organizational work–life climate. When employees have some power to negotiate work and family relationships, it is possible for almost *everyone* to have an I-deal at some point in their life. Rather than having to leave the firm, an individual will be less likely to struggle with work–life conflicts, and be better able to adapt the situation they are in.

This does not mean that everything should be individually driven in organizational climates that customize work–family norms for individuals. Work groups or the overall organizational leaders may need to set parameters for *processes* for boundary management decisions to ensure that the system has fairness and transparency. There may also need to be group-level discussion of how to accommodate work scheduling needs, while juggling a greater variation in individual work and boundary arrangements.

Proposition 2A: The more that the organizational work–family climate supports W–F customization, the weaker the relationship between climate and boundary management style.

Proposition 2B: The more that the organizational work–family climate supports W–F customization, the stronger the relationship between individual identities, preferences, and boundary management style.

*Organizational climate determinants on boundary control.* Boundary control can be dependent on many things but for purposes of this paper, we focus on perceptions of work–family organizational climate and culture. Work–family research (Thompson et al., 1999) has long showed that informal work–family climate regarding support for the enactment of work–family roles is a key influence on the amount of discretion and stigmatization individuals perceive over their caregiving decisions (Kossek, Colquitt, & Noe, 2001). Organizational climate is a key influence on what creates or eliminates an individuals’ amount of perceived control. For example, some individuals such as managers have some formal decision latitude in their job design over how they manage boundaries. Most managers do not have to ask permission to flex their hours and call in the first 30 minutes of a meeting if a babysitter is late. There is some formal autonomy in their job design. However, if the workplace climate regarding work and family is one where individuals receive lower pay and promotion, are stigmatized or worse yet even fired, if they adopt a boundary management style that is not supported by the culture, they may perceive less control to adopt a boundary management style that fits their values.

Overall, if the organizational values and norms regarding work and family boundaries foster conformity to a standardized approach, where employer values regarding boundary management generally take precedence over family, individuals are probably going to perceive less control to regulate boundaries. If the work–family organizational climate is one where work arrangements and boundaries can be adapted to reflect employee preferences, then it is likely the employee perceives they have some control over boundary regulation.

Proposition 3: A work–family climate that supports boundary customization will be associated with a higher perceived level of boundary control.

### *Direct and moderating effects of perceived control over BMS*

Each boundary management style (BMS) has tradeoffs. Ashforth et al. (2000) have noted that, in general, integration facilitates transitions, while separation limits “blurring” of roles that can involve confusion and stressful spillovers from one domain to another. We argue that what is a less important influence on work–family conflict than whether one integrates, separates, or alternates between the two, is whether one feels in control of boundaries. A recent study of boundary management clusters showed that membership in a low-control boundary profile was differentially and statistically significantly related to lower individual effectiveness outcomes: job satisfaction, work engagement, work schedule fit, time adequacy, psychological distress, work-to-family and family-to-work conflict, and turnover intentions (Kossek et al., 2011).

An understudied moderator of linkages between boundary style and outcomes is perceived individual boundary control, defined as the degree to which an individual perceives s/he is in control of how s/he manages the boundaries between work and family life. Karasek (1979) has long noted the important role decision latitude or worker discretion in meeting job demands has in determining the ways in which employees go about performing job tasks. We argue that the degree of perceived control is a function of formal job design in terms of perceived job autonomy to control how, when, and where to enact the job in relation to the family role, as well as perceptions of organizational W–F climate (Kossek et al., 2006). This notion of control over job flexibility and boundaries builds on Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) Job Autonomy scale from the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS). The ability to control the timing and location of work is a newer job autonomy design facet that was not as prevalent in the work environment in the late 1970s when the JDS was fashioned but now is a critical part of

worker job autonomy. Thus, we posit that control has a direct effect on work–family conflict, because it allows the person to enact the boundary management style they wish. Individuals will perceive less conflict because they will feel they have the ability to manage work–family relationships. This linkage has also been suggested in Kossek et al.’s study of teleworkers (2006) where they found that perceived job control had a direct and significant relationship to work–family conflict.

Proposition 4A: Individual perceived control over enacted boundary management style will negatively relate to work–family conflict.

There is a long line of research on the importance of perceived control for positive work–family outcomes and lower job stress, particularly from the occupational health psychology literature (Karasek, 1979). One reason for this is that psychological control acts as a resource that enables individuals to perceive they have great supplies for handling job demands. Applying this research from job-demands models on linkages between job stress and work–family conflict, we argue that individuals with higher psychological control will perceive more resources to handle work–family conflict. Resultantly, the strength of the relationship between the benefits of the boundary management style and work–family conflict will be enhanced when individuals perceive greater control. Higher control perceptions may heighten the salience of the benefits of the style, which leads to a feeling of greater resources and self-efficacy to manage multiple roles and handle work–family conflict.

Proposition 4B: Individual control over boundary management style moderates the relation of boundary management style to work–family conflict such that the higher the control, the stronger the positive effects of the boundary management style on lowering work–family conflict.

Boundary management styles occur in a context. Thus, we theorize as shown in the model that the more that an individual perceives that s/he can control her/his style of boundary management and enact this style without cultural penalties the more likely the style will relate to lower work–family conflict. This is consistent with evidence presented by Kossek and Lautsch (2008). Table 1, which draws on their qualitative data, gives examples from their work on different boundary management styles and how they vary for a sample of occupations and organizational contexts. The table provides definitions of core boundary management styles (integrator, separator, and alternating), along with examples of individual styles in both standardized and customized organizational climates, where control is likely to be low and high respectively. These qualitative data illustrate how a given style (integrator, separator, or alternating) may lead to more positive or more negative effects, depending on the context in which it is enacted. We argue that the strength of the relationship between boundary management style and work–family conflict will be moderated by organizational context, such that it will be stronger in organizational contexts that support customization. In these climates, individuals will perceive greater control to enact preferred boundary management styles without penalties. This proposition is supported by research on work–family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), which suggests that added positive relationships may occur when work–family relationships are facilitated. For example, individuals will be able to reap the benefits of their boundary management styles when there are enhancing interactions between work and family roles. For example, separators will feel they will be able to focus on one role at a time without stigma. Or integrators can multitask and make a personal call from work to make sure a child gets home without penalty.

Evidence of the added benefits of supportive organizational context allowing customization

**Table 1.** Examples of boundary management types in organizational context

Organizational work-family climate	Perceived control	Integrators	Separators	Alternating
Standardizing work-family climate	Low	Tendency to blend work and family roles	Definitions of individual styles Tendency to segment work and family roles	Tendency to have clear periods of defined separation and defined integration
		Examples of individual styles Managerial consultant who works out of a home office and feels she must always be available to clients.	Production manager who works in an assembly plant and who can't attend to personal needs on work time.	Project manager who travels and lives in a hotel Monday through Thursday, separating to focus on work while travelling and integrating on Fridays and weekends at home. Often experiences stress from the enforced switching of styles to location norms.
Customizing work-family climate	High	Managerial consultant who works at home, and who enjoys the freedom to go off line when needed to provide general supervision for children after school.	Engineer who puts family first by focusing on work when in the office and, even if work is not fully done, leaves office on time to take care of family needs and makes it a point to not take work home. Manager who values putting work first and delays going on vacation or starting the weekend until s/he feels work is done.	Human resources specialist who integrates domestic errands, personal time, exercising, and socializing with friends when working at home one day per week, separating in the office the remainder of her time. Satisfaction with the arrangement is high.

on linkages between work styles and work–family conflict is provided by a recent study of Best Buy which moved to a results oriented work environment (ROWE) that allowed employees to alter when and where they worked, based on personal preferences (Kelly, Moen, & Tranby, 2011). Individuals in a ROWE context perceived more schedule control and lower work–family conflict than similar employees in a naturally occurring control group. While this study did not explicitly examine work–family boundary styles, the researchers did find that professionals who had higher schedule control perceptions were in a ROWE context (supportive of customization) and these individuals were more likely to modify boundaries by exercising more, not working when sick, and going to the doctor when sick.

Proposition 4C: The relationship between enacted boundary management style and work–family conflict will be moderated by organizational climate such that the more that the context supports customization, the stronger the positive effects of boundary management style on lowering work–family conflict.

## Discussion

Although interest in boundary management is growing, existing theories do not fully integrate individual and organizational perspectives. In this paper, we address this gap by developing a cross-level model of work–family boundary management in organizations. Our model contends that work–family boundary management is a function of individual identities and boundary-crossing preferences regarding flexibility, permeability, and the symmetry and direction of interruptions, and the organizational work–family climate for customization. We argue that perceived control over boundary management style enactment moderates positive outcomes (e.g., work–family conflict).

Our model offers several contributions to organizational theory and practice. First, it

develops a comprehensive cross-level framework for integrating current theories of boundary management in organizations. We examine how individual preferences, control, identities, and the organizational climate shape boundary management style and linkages to work–family conflict. In particular, our model highlights the importance of perceived control over boundary management as having direct and indirect effects on work–family conflict. This emphasis adds to scholarship suggesting that both individual and organizational boundary control measures should be included in studies and models. We also develop some innovative concepts that provide fertile ground for improved work–family research measurement and theory that we elaborate in what follows: alternating styles, interruption symmetry, the consideration of dual-centric and other nonwork-centric identities in models, and the notion of organizational climate support for customization.

One key contribution is our introduction of the *alternating* boundary management style. We develop the notion that some individuals engage in both integration and separation, and argue that those with dual-centric work–family identity salience are more likely to enact alternating styles.

We also discuss the importance of *symmetry* in cross-role boundary interruptions and the need to incorporate richer conceptualization of multiple identities and new identity configurations into models. We argue that dual-centric individuals are likely to have symmetrical interruption patterns. The notion of symmetry and asymmetry may also enrich research on integrators as some individuals integrate work with family but not the reverse (work-centric individuals). Others integrate family with work but not the reverse (family-centric individuals). Measures of asymmetry and symmetry in patterns of boundary interruptions can be developed to allow a way to link research on individual regulation of boundary management to existing measures differentiating the direction and degree of work and family conflict and

spillover in different domains. This will then enable boundary management literature to be more closely linked to prevailing work–family constructs.

We suggest some new ways to think about work–family identities that updates constructs to keep up with trends in boundary management. In particular, models should be relevant to the growing number of individuals who are dual-centric, identifying equally with work and family, as well as clusters of individuals who are neither work- nor family-centric but have a passion for other nonwork roles (e.g., community volunteer, athlete).

We conclude that greater attention needs to be given to the growing variation in individuals' boundary management styles and their enactment in an organizational context. We develop the argument that a key aspect of organizational climate is the degree to which norms are established that support customization of work–family relationships to meet different needs. The tolerance for different ways of managing boundaries moves firms from a one-size-fits-all standardized work–family culture. We hope future studies build on our research to advance understanding of organizational support for customization of boundaries. Studies are needed on how to create work cultures that support people working in different ways, yet still be seen as effective on the job.

The inclusion of boundary control in the model is also practically relevant as both employers and individuals can assess this construct to better understand how to enact boundaries in ways that lead to positive outcomes. Finally, this paper also challenges prevailing views that use of flexible work–family boundaries necessarily leads to positive outcomes. We maintain the control and alignment of boundary management styles with preferences and identities are likely to influence work–family conflict. One individual can check emails on vacation and feel good about integrating work with family, while another may be miserable about doing so. Organizations

particularly need to develop climates that allow individuals to recover or if desired briefly check in while on vacation (and then sign off) without being seduced into full time work mode.

### *Agenda for future research and practice*

Our paper will stimulate future research in a number of ways. We argue that because the topic of work–life flexibility is inherently interdisciplinary, studies on work and family should increasingly use measures and theories reflecting at least two or more disciplines to capture various roles (Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek, & Sweet, 2006). In this way, important antecedents or outcomes will be less likely to be omitted from studies, and scholars will have richer understanding of the phenomenon they are trying to understand. For example, we have focused on the work–family role from the individual psychological perspective. Looking to sociology and time measurement studies, we might examine how people allocate their time each week to roles (e.g., long commutes) and look at alignment with boundary management choices or the degree of lack of choice. Or turning to the family literature, research could look at how multiple stakeholders view a parent or spouse's boundary management style and how it impacts family relationships. Or looking to the occupational health literature, research could examine how boundary management styles shape health, exercise, and substance abuse, for example. This is just an initial list of many possibilities for future research.

Secondly, our discussion of contextual linkages demonstrates the reality that work–life research often involves at least two or more levels of analysis. Yet most studies on the individual have overlooked how their work–life attitudes and behaviors are enacted in a context. Our paper will help foster future research on how individual preferences may relate to multiple levels from organizational cultural level, to their work group climate, to their family system (Major, Fletcher, Davis, & Germano, 2008).

Third, our model will foster research where scholars will move away from viewing work–life variables such as flexibility use in isolation, but rather examine how use relates to job control, values alignment, identity salience and configuration, and organizational context. The interaction of the individual with the constraints of the context s/he faces must be considered to truly understand how to implement and gain benefits from flexible work arrangements. Here future research might draw on work–family enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), which did not discuss boundary management, to identify the individual and organizational processes and conditions that support facilitation of work and family roles.

Third, we identify a boundary management style, alternating, that has received very little discussion in the work–family literature. The notion of when and where to “alternate,” that is, adapt one’s style to integrate or separate, holds tremendous potential to open up work–family research at both the individual and organizational levels. However, additional empirical research is needed to assess whether alternating may have the long-term potential of having the best outcomes for individuals. Previous research on the outcomes of separation and integration is somewhat mixed, with some positive effects of each in limited settings (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008). To our knowledge no previous studies of an alternating style exist, but we believe it holds the greatest potential to minimize problems and benefit from the strengths of the two component styles within it, integration and separation. The inclusion of alternating styles in research also might allow more temporal analysis to be included in future studies as individuals may vary patterns of integration and separation over the day, week, season, year, or adult development life cycle.

The benefits for an individual of being able to be voluntarily engaged in an alternating style need to be identified, as well as successful tactics for an alternating style in different organizational contexts. For cross-level research, we suspect that

customizing cultures may lead to the best outcomes for individuals and organizations. It may allow for individuals to once again engage in vacations and breaks from work or family and it may force organizational climates to better identify what matters most for effective boundary management and well-being.

Research is also needed to better understand how individuals may manage work–life boundaries differently for different nonwork roles of varying identity centrality, and the role of the organizational context in supporting varying boundary management styles for different life roles. For example, it may be fine in some organizations to have a child caregiver interrupt work to attend to family matters, but one may be required to keep tighter boundaries when a teen problem or an elder care matter occurs. To date, the literature on boundary management does not differentiate between how boundary management style enactment and outcomes may differ for different types of nonwork roles.

Finally, more research is needed on the differential impact of control over the direction of boundary interruptions, timing, and frequency. For example, an individual may want integration, but only out of a desire to incorporate their family into their work day because of having a family-centric identity. If the organization climate limits the ability to enact this type of integration, and instead pushed workers to integrate work into the family (e.g., by requiring constant monitoring of cell phone or pager), this organizational expectation regarding boundary management style enactment could be a significant source of stress. Retaining individual control over the timing and frequency of such interruptions would be helpful (e.g., by negotiating limited hours of after-hours access to work), but may not do as much to reduce conflict as allowing the individual to avoid work interrupting home life entirely. Future research is needed to explore these nuances of boundary management practices and in particular whether there is a limit to how much customization an

organization can support before work–family conflict increases and productivity is hampered.

As for practice, we bring a unique perspective that “balancing” and synthesizing work–family boundaries means different things to different people. We believe existing models of work–family relationships do not fully capture the variation in how people construct and manage their lives. For example, one person who is family-centric and identifies more with the family role may choose to interrupt work to accommodate family demands. Yet another family-centric individual may protect the family role quite differently by creating rigid boundaries so that work occurs in work time and family time is respected. We argue that the work–family field (and perhaps the organizational field) has been too normative in suggesting that there is only one best way to find “balance” or to manage boundaries.

The implications of variation in boundary management styles are many. Overall, the model assumes that individuals whose values and identities have higher alignment with work–family boundary climate and who perceive higher ability to control boundaries will be expected to have higher well-being. This assumption is consistent with qualitative research (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008) showing that individuals with integrating, separating, and alternating styles who have control over their boundary management style have better experiences. It is also consistent with recent research by Rothbard, Phillips, and Dumas (2005), who found that individuals who have a preference for one boundary management style (e.g., segmentation) may actually become less satisfied if their employer institutes a policy that creates incentives for them to adopt another style (e.g., like telecommuting or on-site daycare that fosters integration of work and home). Research is needed that links the availability and use of formal flexibility policies and practices with informal preferences for boundary blurring and work–family conflict. Just as Karasek (1979) found that discretion over how

the job is done is linked to positive well-being and better job outcomes, we argue that perceived control over boundaries is linked to positive well-being and outcomes. If an organization has a norm where high integration is expected, (such as mandated teleworking), individuals who prefer to separate may have higher work–family conflict if they are not allowed to develop customized arrangements. Future applied studies are needed to link the implementation of work–family policies that support boundary blurring, or separation, or alternating with boundary management styles and the degree to which organizational cultures support customization. For example, research might further compare the prevalence and use of telework, which enables mixing of W–F realms (Kossek et al., 2006) with those practices that facilitate boundary separation (flex-time that allows restructuring of time to enable control and focus on one role at a time) with boundary management styles (Rothbard et al., 2005). Such research might compare different types of policies with boundary management styles and organizational cultural support of customization with cultures that value standardization. It may be that boundary management preferences interact with cultures as separators may prefer standardization more than integrators who want more flexibility in how boundaries are enacted. Or studies might examine organizational policies that support alternating styles such as allowing individuals to have different work schedules and arrangements in the summer—when children are out of school or when a person might train for a marathon—than they have during other seasons.

Lastly, the model also assumes that all aspects of boundary management, boundary-crossing preferences, identity centrality, and control, must be considered as a multidimensional construct. Lack of fit along any dimension between individual preferences and organizational culture is assumed to lead to reduced well-being. For example, an integrating individual who prefers permeable boundaries, and who controls the direction



and timing of interruptions, yet who lacks control over frequency, would have worse outcomes than other integrators who control all aspects of work–family role boundaries. Our model also assumes that there is no ideal style in and of itself, but rather that the style effectiveness is a function of control and the organizational context. Thus, individuals are likely to have worse outcomes in standardizing cultures where their preferences are less likely to be accommodated.

Lastly, tools and training should be developed to help managers to understand work–family boundary management styles and the different ways individuals enact these styles in order to better integrate work–family and work–life issues into teams, career management, and leadership education. Research suggests that effectively managing work–family relationships is increasingly an important leadership self-management competency. It is also an important part of collaborating with and leading others. People want to work in different ways and it is important for organizations to adapt to this to allow for job demands to better fit the growing heterogeneity of employee values and needs. Increasing managerial and organizational knowledge of variation in boundary management enactment and its implications will facilitate greater organizational effectiveness in adapting to the changing workforce. Most importantly, our cross-level model of work–family boundary management can provide a vehicle for understanding how to enhance the quality of work–family outcomes and experiences for individuals and organizations.

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### Note

1. We use climate and culture interchangeably as key thought leaders in the management and psychological literature have done (see e.g. Schneider, 1990). Climate refers to individual and

group members' perceptions of the prevailing culture or values, norms, and beliefs of organizational members.

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