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## **Boundaries and role conflict when work and family are colocated: A communication network and symbolic interaction approach**

*Michelle Shumate and Janet Fulk*

**ABSTRACT**

As virtual workplaces and homework programs become more common, workers often find themselves inhabiting multiple worlds and multiple roles simultaneously. For these individuals, boundary transitions are both more frequent and more challenging. This paper expands current theory on work-related boundary transitions by: (1) conceptualizing role conflict in the logic of dynamic communication networks, and (2) reconceptualizing ritual and routine behavior in boundary transitions as not simply aids to mental transitions but also as communicative and symbolic performance that is oriented toward other role senders. Underlying the framework is the concept of time-space paths (Giddens, 1979; Heidegger, 1996) as critical elements of role boundary identification and demarcation. This paper contributes to a better understanding of boundary issues for homeworkers by using a communication framework and emphasizing the agency that homeworkers have to mold others' expectations.

**KEYWORDS**

organizational boundaries ■ organizational fields ■ organization theory ■ social networks ■ work/family

New communication technologies have enabled people to work 'here, there, anywhere' (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). These new work arrangements have allowed individuals the freedom to put a load of laundry in the washing machine between conference calls instead of taking a coffee break or hanging

out at the water cooler (Mirchandani, 1998). Despite an expanding literature on the impacts of telecommuting (Ellison, 1999; Kraut, 1989; McCloskey & Igbaria, 1998) and on the spillover between work and the family (Crouter et al., 1989; Piotrkowski, 1979; Zedeck, 1992), a greater understanding is needed of the challenges facing individuals who work at home. In particular, telecommuters, homeworkers, and persons who bring assignments home from the office make frequent role boundary transitions (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1996; Nie & Eribring, 2000) that can contribute to inter-role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964).

In this article we present a communication-based framework on (i) how roles and their boundaries are established via expectation-related communication, and (ii) how individuals use rituals and routines to mold the expectations of others in order to (a) facilitate optimal permeability among roles and (b) reduce role conflict. Role conflict and boundary permeability are conceptualized as dynamic communication network properties. We propose that homeworkers reconfigure those network properties through routines and rituals that serve symbolic and communicative functions for network participants.

### **A historical view of working at home**

Homework is not new. In agrarian societies, almost all work was completed in or near the home. A family worked together toward a common goal of subsistence farming (Beach, 1989). In later times, family trade was conducted in an adjacent structure or another part of the home (Beach, 1989). Once a geographic area made the step into the industrial era, a separation between home and work followed for men (McCloskey & Igbaria, 1998; Parr, 1999; Silver, 1989). Women were still responsible for homework, including working with textiles, lace, mending, and jewelry (Beach, 1989; Benson, 1989; Boris, 1994; Christensen, 1988; Parr, 1999; Silver, 1989).

During the industrial and postindustrial periods in western societies, production outside the home came to be considered as the only 'legitimate work' and a cultural and ideological shift occurred. As Christopher Lasch (1977) points out, marriage and family became a place of refuge from the heartless and sometimes dangerous conditions of the workplace. Home became a place where individuals could ' "be ourselves," "put up our feet," "let down our hair," relax among those who see us, "warts and all," but aren't supposed to hold it against us' (Nippert-Eng, 1995: 20). Home became a private place where the worker was free from outside expectations and surveillance (Dupis & Thorns, 1998). Home became a place of leisure and

entertainment rather than work, as people replaced the idea of 'going out' with 'staying in' (Levinson & Kumar, 1995). According to Hochschild (1997), the home in the western world has earned a touch of the sacred in contrast to the 'profane' world of work. Boundaries between home and work were rigid and socially sanctioned.

Giddens (1989) and Dupis and Thorn (1998) argue that the refuge of the home continues to play an important role for families and society. Home is a place of ontological security. Ontological security is 'confidence or trust that the world is as it appears' (Held & Thompson, 1989) and, thus a person feels secure relating to it. Home has become associated with family through the routinization of patterns surrounding the physical locale, such as holiday and birthday celebrations (Dupis & Thorn, 1998; Giddens, 1989). Home is a place for the construction of identity, in part because renting or owning a residence signifies coming into adulthood (Dupis & Thorns, 1998). The owner of the home marks his or her territory by placing identifying artifacts in the home. However, as homework evolves, this cultural construction is drawn into question, in part, because of an introduction of a work role into the physical/temporal location of the home, creating challenges to the rigid boundary structures.

Traditional homework continues to flourish in much of the world, although government actions in some westernized countries have curtailed many traditional forms among their domestic producers. For example, in the United States the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 banned homework in knitted outerwear, apparel, belts, and jewelry, primarily because of an inability to control working conditions in the home (Boris & Daniels, 1989). Advances in communications and computing have enabled a new class of homework in other industrial sectors, primarily in the westernized portion of the world. This article focuses on the boundary maintenance and transition challenges faced by individuals who work for someone other than themselves in the home in westernized countries, and whose relationships with a main office are facilitated by the use of new communication and computer technologies. Communication is seen as key to establishing work and home roles and maintaining role boundaries.

### **Communication establishes roles and demarcates boundaries between home and work<sup>1</sup>**

Social roles are perhaps one of the most studied concepts in social theory. Both Goffman (1959) and Kahn et al. (1964) define social roles as sets of activities performed by individuals. Roles are established by communicative

interaction. Other persons communicate role expectations that define that individual's role. At the same time, by enacting a role an individual communicates to others how to act in a situation (Kahn et al., 1964). As Goffman puts it

Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

(1959: 1)

Roles are the result of a negotiation between the focal person and those with whom he interacts. This negotiation is not merely a mental exercise, but a communicative one.

Communication is necessary not only for establishing roles, but also for maintaining boundaries among an individual's multiple roles, such as worker versus parent versus spouse. A role boundary is a set of acceptable or expected activities that are negotiated between people in specified and understood roles. For instance, a homemaker's 'work' role behavior might consist of conference calls, e-mail, and creating computerized documents. Taking care of a sick child or doing laundry would be considered outside the boundaries of that role, but within the boundaries of the role of 'parent', 'spouse', or 'family member'. Interactions with other persons communicate these boundaries between roles as well.

Kahn et al. (1964) describe a *role set* as a person in role and all other persons in roles directly related to it. The communications sent by the others in a role set to a focal person constitute the *sent role*. If the messages are not in agreement with each other, then the focal person can be said to have *sent role conflict*, the 'simultaneous occurrence of two or more sets of pressures such that the compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other' (Kahn et al., 1964: 19). There are two types of sent role conflict. *Intra-sender* conflict originates from contradictory messages sent by a single person. *Inter-sender* conflict is contradictory messages sent by multiple people within the same role set. If the contradictory messages are sent from multiple people who are members in different role sets (e.g. work versus spouse), the conflict can be said to be inter-role conflict. Such conflict is related to job dissatisfaction, marital dissatisfaction, and burnout (Bacharach et al., 1991; Chiu, 1998).

When an individual does not receive enough information about expectations or does not have the knowledge or resources to fulfill those expectations, Kahn et al. (1964) state that he or she experiences *role ambiguity*.

Role ambiguity is, in part, the result of communication from the role set. When Kahn et al. published their work on role conflict and role ambiguity the separation of work and family roles in both time and space was common. Work occurred during designated hours at a location away from the home, and transitions between work- and home-based roles were well scripted in societal expectations. Today, advances in computing and communication technologies have made it possible to conduct more work at home, to conduct personal business on the job, and to do both in the same time frame, swapping in and out of roles as needed. The time–space paths (Giddens, 1979; Heidegger, 1996) that enabled relatively easy role transitions are breaking down. Individuals are tied to multiple roles simultaneously. For homeworkers, these arrangements are codified in a formal agreement among the ‘work’ role set. The workplace has a legitimate claim to send roles into the sanctity of the home.

### **The function of time–space paths in role boundary maintenance**

Homeworkers must juggle their work roles with other roles, including caregiver, friend, significant other, and parent. They must negotiate multiple sets of role expectations without the support of established social norms surrounding homework, and without culturally determined time–space paths to assist with role transitions. Homeworkers must negotiate with many stakeholders regarding the legitimacy of conducting their paid work in the sanctity of the home (Hylmö & Buzzanell, 2002). Not only do they lack agreed upon cultural expectations to guide them, but also they are fighting an uphill battle against the historically established norms that home and work are separate and distinguishable spheres. The homeworker in western societies today is pioneering the model of how to demarcate roles associated with home versus work when they occupy the same time and space locations.

Time and space are important organizing mechanisms that are central to identity and ontological security (Giddens, 1979; Heidegger, 1996). They help to organize an individual’s day into perceived regions, and offer cues to appropriate role behavior. Take for example, Kahn et al.’s (1964) traditional factory worker, ‘Bill’. Bill leaves his home at 7 a.m. to drive to work and arrives by 7.30 a.m. In his commute, Bill enacts role behaviors of honoring the speed limit, stopping at stoplights, and driving on the right side of the road. These are behavioral expectations established by the state authorities and enforced by police who will cite Bill if he disobeys the rules. Other drivers count on Bill to drive safely by enacting certain role

behaviors. At 7.30 a.m., Bill punches in and begins his work. Through these role behaviors, Bill now has shown that he has entered another role, that of factory worker. His role set sends him certain expectations of both quantity and quality of work, as well as appropriate social behavior on a factory floor. At 10.30 a.m. Bill takes his union-prescribed 15-minute break. He goes and gets a cup of coffee and does no work on the factory floor for the full 15 minutes, fulfilling the role expectations of his fellow union members. The example might continue in this way until 4.30 p.m. when Bill arrives home and dons the roles of father and spouse. In this way, Bill receives cues from the time of day and his location as to which role he should enact.

Most times, according to Giddens (1979), individuals do not consciously reflect on these actions, but simply carry out the routines that are cued by space and time locations and remain in practical consciousness. Society expects individuals to enact these routines. Although individuals have the agency to step out of one role and transition into other roles in the same time-space path, most of the time they do not do so for the sake of their ontological security.

Goffman (1959) points out that setting is an important element in the enactment of role proper performance due not only to the resources in a certain setting, but also to the regional behavioral expectations held by others. A region is 'any place bounded to some degree by the barriers of perception' (p. 106). These expectations are context specific. A person may select a role that includes an already established setting and expectations. Before they began to work at home, homeworkers had selected a role and associated setting in the region of the home that met the expectations of their home role set. Now, these roles and expectations must be negotiated both at home and in the office.

### **Boundary challenges for the homeworker without time and space markers**

Many dystopian views of homework have acknowledged the problems with colocation of work and personal/family life. Allen, for example, states:

Indeed in many respects homeworking is more onerous than going out to work. This is partly because there is no spatial separation between paid and unpaid work. Homeworking is 'always on your mind, always there.' As homeworkers recognize, 'You do not come home from work and leave it behind you.' Moreover, while those going out to work are

allowed breaks, the homeworke<sup>r</sup>'s day is so dominated by simultaneous demand on her labor that a break in one kind of work is used to get on with another.

(1989: 282)

Theoretically, the different role sets from work and family spheres have increased ability to communicate simultaneously their different sent roles via communication technology. Boundaries between spheres are no longer distinct. This can easily lead to conflicting expectations, creating inter-role conflict.

In addition to the increased probability of inter-role conflict, the loss of traditional time-space paths and regions of working leads some homeworke<sup>r</sup>s to overwork. According to Hill et al.

Some virtual office workers notably have trouble setting boundaries, they seem to be consumed by work and headed for burnout. They lose the external cues that it is time to stop working.

(1996: 300)

Many homeworke<sup>r</sup>s lose sleep because of their inability to manage multiple roles during the day, especially if they have children<sup>2</sup> and especially if they are women. According to Menzies (1997), many women work late into the night after they put their children to bed, sacrificing both leisure time and sleep. Many individuals, according to Gringeri (1995), become homeworke<sup>r</sup>s because they hope to have greater flexibility to carry on personal and family tasks during the workday. However, this often means that homeworke<sup>r</sup>s must work off-duty hours in order to complete tasks. 'Home-based work is always there for the worker, regardless of what other tasks or activities took time during the day' (Gringeri, 1995: 76).

Despite many reports of homeworke<sup>r</sup>s who overwork, burnout, or experience intense inter-role conflict, scholars and ethnographers have observed that some homeworke<sup>r</sup>s have actively developed strategies to help manage the collocation of their roles in time and space. They found alternative temporal and spatial boundaries to separate their roles. For example, Hill et al. (1996) found that homeworke<sup>r</sup>s who had a personal office with a closed door felt that they did not have sufficient time with their families, but did feel less strain between their work and family roles. Thus Hill et al. suggest that homeworke<sup>r</sup>s should have a workspace away from the flow of family traffic, but not close the door. These findings point to small spatial changes that can enable homeworke<sup>r</sup>s to more effectively manage inter-role conflict.



Mirchandani (1998) found that homeworkers could successfully limit the time demands of work on their family lives by referencing time patterns used while working in traditional jobs. For example, a homeworker might take a break to do some housework or answer a personal phone call. He or she could count this time as akin to an office coffee break or water cooler chat. These short breaks throughout the day to perform other role functions present an interesting theoretical question: How can homeworkers manage these micro-role transitions without experiencing the intense role conflict that some homeworkers report?

### **Boundary crossing between roles**

Transitions across the boundaries between roles have become an increasingly popular topic among those who study the work–family interface. Research has focused on micro-role transitions (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000), use of rituals to facilitate the mental transition between work and home (Nippert-Eng, 1995), and boundary crossing (Clark, 2000). The following section reviews this extant research.

Two types of role transitions have been studied: macro and micro. A macro-role transition occurs when an individual makes a significant change in work or family life, such as retirement, changing jobs, having children, or marrying (Ashforth, 2001). In a macro-role transition, the individual faces a change in the role set that sends role-related communication. Micro-role transitions are mental transitions between two roles with which a person identifies (Ashforth, 2001; Nippert-Eng, 1995). These transitions are different from macro-role transitions in two important ways. First, they are more frequent and recurrent than macro-role transitions. Second, they are less supported by social standards and conventions, and thus require ‘boundary work’ (Nippert-Eng, 1995) by the individual (Ashforth, 2001). Ashforth defines boundaries as ‘mental fences . . . [used] to simplify and order the environment’ (p. 262).

The difficulty of micro-role transitions depends on the degree to which boundaries between roles are permeable. *Boundary permeability* is defined as ‘the degree to which a role allows one to be physically located in the role’s domain but psychologically and/or behaviorally involved in another role’ (Ashforth et al., 2000: 476). A permeable boundary will make role transition easier, but it also will make maintaining a role boundary more difficult.

Boundary permeability is linked to two factors. The first factor is role identity, defined as a ‘socially constructed definition of the self-in-role’ (Ashforth et al., 2000). If role identities for two different roles overlap,

then transitions between these roles are less difficult, but maintaining low boundary permeability is more difficult (*role blurring*). If role identities are differentiated, then the boundaries are relatively impermeable and inflexible, and transitions between roles are more difficult. The second factor linked to boundary permeability is boundary flexibility, 'the degree to which the physical and temporal boundaries are pliable' (Ashforth, 2001: 262). Pliable boundaries facilitate role transitions, but may increase permeability.

To facilitate the psychological adjustments necessary for micro-role transitions, especially for impermeable boundaries, individuals often use rites (Ashforth, 2001), rituals (Nippert-Eng, 1995), and scripts (Ashforth, 2001). We argue later that in addition to facilitating mental transitions, these practices also communicate to the role set the limits of their expectations.

Clark (2000), drawing upon Lewin's (1951) arguments about life space, offered a more behaviorally focused view of micro-role transitions, or 'border crossings.' Borders are 'lines of demarcation between domains, defining the point at which domain-relevant behavior begins or ends' (Clark, 2000: 756). Clark identified three main forms of a border: temporal, physical, and psychological. She argues that the strength of the borders between two domains is dependent on boundary permeability, boundary flexibility, and the blending of domains. Her approach, however, does not incorporate the concept of a social border. We argue in the next section that social borders are important aspects of role integrity.

Previous work has focused on spatial, temporal and psychological aspects of role boundaries and micro-role transitions. We argue that a more behaviorally based approach is needed, for three reasons. First, as Goffman's (1959) and Kahn et al.'s (1964) classic works assert, roles are established through communicative behavior with others in their role set. Roles are created, maintained, and transformed through negotiation and communication with others. The current models treat communication with a person's relevant role set as secondary to a mental transition between static and understood roles. Second, if the boundary between the two realms is a mental transition and the role itself is a mental state, empirical assessment of boundaries and role transitions are limited to self-report or indirect measures. Third, we are limited to viewing rites and rituals simply as support for mental transitions. Yet, research in anthropology and communication shows that rituals serve instrumental and expressive functions for both participants and observers (Putnam et al., 1996; P. Riley, 1993). That is, rituals, rites, and routines are interpersonally communicative.

The following section builds on the strengths of previous boundary

theory and border-crossing research to propose a communication perspective to micro-role transitions that is grounded in classical and contemporary theory and that can be tested empirically using communication network concepts and methodology.

### **A communication-based perspective on role transitions and conflict for homeworkers**

The communication-based approach builds upon the following foundation. First, much like Ashforth (2001) or Giddens (1979), the communication-based perspective lies somewhere between structuralist and symbolic interactionist approaches. The structure of the role at a given time is one slice of a dynamic communication process that is influenced by all members and their relations.

Second, rituals and routines serve not only mental functions for homeworkers, but also to manage others' expectations. Initially, as routines and rituals are established or (re)structured, boundaries between roles are selected. As these rituals and routines are enacted over time, they become normalized and relatively subconscious. Through enactment of these rituals and routines, homeworkers mold cognitive schemas of appropriate expectations for themselves and other members of their role set.

Third, the communication perspective incorporates communication network concepts and theory. In these terms, a *role set* consists of role senders as nodes, and their role-related communication with the focal individual as links between nodes. For example, John in his role as manager would be the central node in his role set. His co-workers, boss, and direct reports might be the nodes in his work role set. The role-based communication between John and these other people are the links in this network.

Roles and role sets are often demarcated by space and time. From a communication network perspective, people activate different role set networks as they move through their time-space paths. For instance, there might be an 8 to 5 network of people a traditional worker interacts with while in the 'work' setting. After 5 p.m., the traditional worker moves to a different time-space position and activates another role set network that may or may not overlap with the previous network. The homeworker lacks the time-space demarcations available to the traditional workers. Thus, movement among time-space role set networks poses substantial boundary transition challenges for homeworkers, and often leaves them confronting several types of role conflict.

### Inter-sender conflict.

Kahn et al. (1964) defined *inter-sender conflict* as the strain a focal person feels when multiple people within the same role set send contradictory messages. Inter-sender role conflict involves the experience of contradictory expectations in the same time–space network. Social network concepts can be used to conceptualize inter-sender conflict as a social and communicative experience.

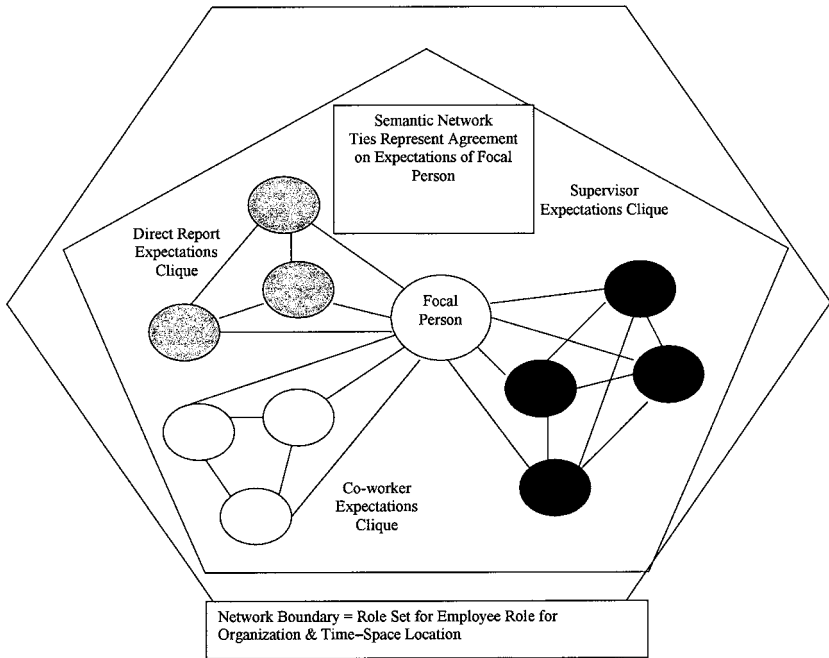
A *semantic network* is a network in which the links between nodes indicate shared meaning (see Monge & Contractor, 2003; Monge & Eisenberg, 1987 for a full discussion of semantic networks). In a *sender semantic network*, the nodes are a focal person and all the role senders in a time–space network. The network boundary encloses those who communicate with a person in a given time–space setting. The links between role sender nodes in this network are shared expectations of the focal person. Thus, in network language, inter-sender conflict is experienced when a focal person acts as a liaison between cliques. This means that the focal person is the only node that connects to other subgroups that do not themselves share expectations.

For example, in Figure 1, a focal person acts as a liaison among three cliques. These are the supervisor expectations clique, the direct report expectations clique, and the co-worker expectations clique. The network boundary of this network includes the period of 8 to 5, the spatial location of an office, and the role set for a particular organizational role. Because the focal person in this network is the sole liaison among cliques that hold different expectations, one would expect the focal person to experience high inter-sender conflict. If members of these separate cliques were to become more connected (i.e. develop more shared expectations across cliques), inter-sender conflict would decrease.

*Proposition 1:* The fewer the semantic links of perceived agreement across cliques of an individual's time–space and role set network, the greater will be the individual's experienced inter-sender conflict.

### Inter-network role conflict.

Individuals may also experience multiple contradictory expectations sent from *multiple role sets* that operate within the same time–space network. In this situation, the network boundary includes the time and space setting, but not the role set. This is precisely the situation faced by many homeworkers. Inter-role conflict arises from the confluence of the different role sets in the same time–space setting and the divergence of expectations of the focal



**Figure 1** Inter-sender conflict

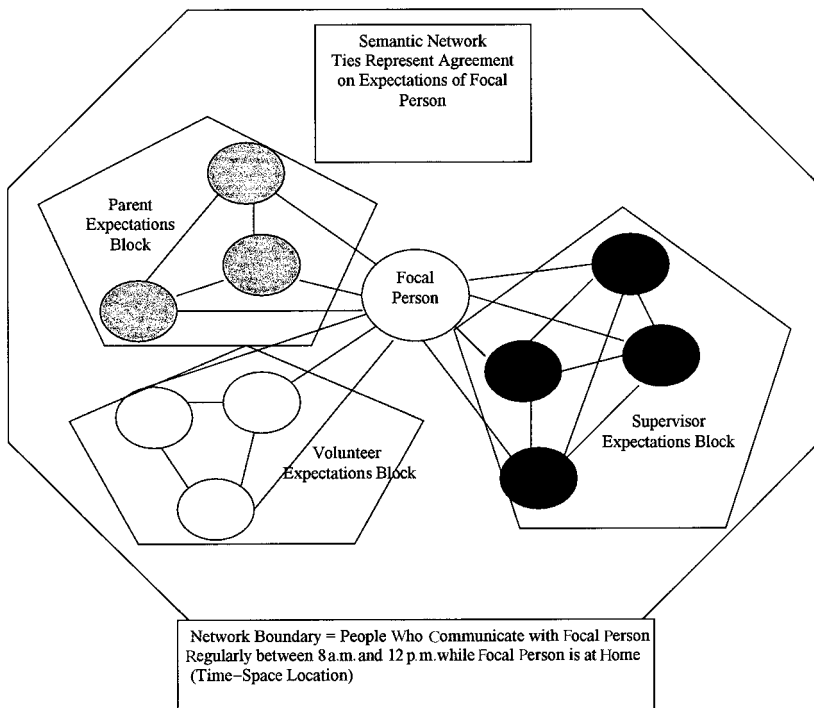
person held by the different role sets. In such a case, shared expectation links do not exist between members to the different role sets.

Inter-role conflict in this situation is related to boundary permeability. Ashforth (2001) defined boundary permeability as the degree to which a member of a role set could interrupt/communicate with a homeworker while that worker is temporally/physically in another role. The network perspective suggests that *boundary permeability* is operationalized as the numbers of role sets that communicate expectations to an individual in a specified time-space network. The fewer the number of role sets, the less permeable the time-space boundary is. That is, if sent expectations from different role sets do not overlap in the same time-space, the worker finds no need to step out of one role to respond to the demands of another. By contrast, as the number of role sets communicating expectations increases in a time-space boundary, then the boundary is more permeable and spanning it requires multiple micro-role transitions. Ashforth proposed that role boundary permeability would be positively related to inter-role conflict. This proposition can be extended to include communication behavior and social borders using a communication network frame. Thus, we propose:

*Proposition 2:* As the number of role sets communicating expectations within a specified time-space communication network increases, the greater will be the individual's experienced inter-role conflict.

A second element of inter-role conflict is the number of links (shared expectations) between members of different role sets. In network language, each role set in the time-space boundary can be thought of as a block. A homemaker who acts as a liaison between these blocks will experience high inter-role conflict. For example, in Figure 2 the focal person is the liaison among three blocks. Each of these blocks is a different role set. However, the focal person experiences the expectations simultaneously, and thus experiences high inter-role conflict. If more links of shared expectations were formed across these blocks, inter-role conflict would decrease.

*Proposition 3:* Inter-role conflict will be negatively related to the number of semantic links of perceived agreement across role sets within a time-space network boundary.



**Figure 2** Inter-role conflict

### Micro-role transitions

One way a focal person can respond to multiple demands of different role sets is to enact micro-role transitions. We expand Ashforth's (2001) definition of micro-role transitions to include their communicative functions. Role transitions help to segment roles, and thus to assist a homeworker in maintaining a level of ontological security in the midst of a sea of expectations from his or her role set.

### Rituals

Rituals are one way that homeworkers manage micro-role transitions. We argue that rituals are primarily, although not solely, performative. Rituals are comprised of several interlinked routines, a sequence of actions, or 'a simple action that develops a life of its own' (P. Riley, 1993: 119). The routine or action is 'concerned with meaning, affect, practices and instrumentality' (p. 113). Rituals 'make public the private values of the group' (Putnam et al., 1996: 388) and serve instrumental and expressive functions.

Nippert-Eng (1995) identifies several routines and rituals that individuals use to transition between their home and work roles. These include saying hellos and goodbyes, consuming realm-specific food and drink, and donning proper attire. For example, in the morning many workers have a cup of coffee and a high carbohydrate breakfast, put on work-specific uniforms (i.e. a suit, work overhauls, or occupational uniform), and say goodbye to significant others in their personal lives. They commute to work (or sit at a work-designated area in the home in the case of the homeworker). Once they make this transition between roles they will say hello to their network of 'work' associates and begin their tasks for the day. At the end of their specified work time, they travel home (or sign off in the case of the homeworker), consume an alcoholic beverage or other cold drink, and change into 'comfortable clothing.'

These rituals aid mental transitions, but also help the focal person communicate cues of the role performance to other persons in the role set(s). These cues are used limit their expectations. Although not all rituals serve to reduce uncertainty or act as a coping mechanism (Giddens, 1991; P. Riley, 1993), role-transition rituals do. They reduce uncertainty because they signify the transition from one set of expectations to another and communicate the significance of role entry and exits to others. Because the expectations of various role sets have been cued, the person performing rituals is likely to experience less inter-role conflict. For instance, a priest goes through the rites and rituals to begin his duty. His ritual washing, dress, and behavior help to mold parishioners' expectations that the priest will be acting as a holy

person, and servers' expectations that their role is about to begin. Thus, because the expectations of various role sets have been cued, the person performing these rituals is likely to experience less inter-role conflict.

In the same way, homeworkers can (and do) perform rituals to begin their days as an 'employee' or 'worker.' Many homeworkers religiously enact the use of rituals such as dressing for work, drinking a cup of coffee, and saying goodbye to a family member. These homeworkers, like priests, are likely to experience less inter-role conflict because they have used these rituals to mold the expectations of various role sets.

*Proposition 4:* Homeworkers who consistently perform rituals in their micro-role transitions between work and home roles will experience less inter-role conflict over time.

## Routines

Routines are another way that individuals manage micro-role transitions. Routines are distinct from rituals (Grimes, 1982; P. Riley, 1993) in that they lack symbolic information about the nature of the transition. For example, while ritual greetings inform the observer about the nature of relationships between a person and members of a role set, routine clocking in at 7.30 a.m. provides relatively little information about these relationships.

Medved (2002) examines many routines that enable women with children to cope with competing demands. These routines include connecting with a spouse about childcare, alternating childcare/housework duties, prepping for the next day, exchanging childcare services with friends or extended family, and evading the expectations of a spouse or caregiver. Routines tend to become part of an everyday schedule and were unquestioned. However, Medved describes how these routines sometimes must be altered in order to cope with shifting demands. To improvise or (re)structure demands, frequently women must engage in conflict and compromise. This highlights an important point about routines. Giddens (1979, 1991) and Banks and Riley (1993) call this the duality of structure. Initially, routines (such as alternating childcare responsibilities with a spouse) are the agentic response to a complex situation that is worked out with discursive consciousness. However, as these routines are repeated, they become reified and part of the practical consciousness of others within the role set. Then, as situations are altered, via changing expectations of others in varying role sets, these routines can become constraints and often require difficult negotiation because they have become expectations.

Routines can be used in order to reduce inter-role conflict if they reduce



role boundary permeability and/or increase the shared expectations among different role sets. It is important that negotiations to reduce role boundary permeability and/or increase the shared expectations among different role sets be translated into routines, because these routines require less discursive monitoring. This is key to reducing the number of factors a person must consider in order to act.

*Proposition 5:* Homeworkers who employ routines that reduce role boundary permeability and/or increase the shared expectations among different role sets will experience less inter-role and inter-sender conflict.

The communication perspective on role boundaries balances the structuralist and the symbolic interactionist perspective. The first three propositions demonstrate the way that role structures in time and space constrain an individual's behavior. Propositions 4 and 5 demonstrate two ways that individuals have agency to transform those structures.

Rituals communicate limits to role expectations of one role set, by demonstrating a micro-role transition in order to enact another role. This communication helps to create semantic links between role sets. These new semantic links in turn decrease inter-role conflict. Routines, in contrast, change the time-space network boundaries. By enacting a routine, an individual places limits on the time and space that sent expectations would be considered legitimate. Thus, new time-space network boundaries are drawn, reducing boundary permeability and in turn, inter-role conflict.

### **Practical implications and future research**

Hill et al. (1996) call on researchers to show trainers the importance of boundaries in order to help homeworkers set them. The current conceptualization is, in part, an effort to offer a conceptual basis for such training. The model we propose attempts to provide both an empirically verifiable picture of the structure of relationships between roles and a theoretically justifiable praxis for the homeworker. Additional research on specific practical methods for managing boundaries is highly desirable. Also, future research is needed on how homeworkers can transform their role relationship structures to reduce role conflict. Further research is needed on how social network structure is linked to other individual outcomes for homeworkers and their role sets, including life, marital and work satisfaction, work and home task productivity, and commitment to a homework situation. Also critical is

research on how role set networks co-evolve over time for the homeworker, and the impact of such dynamism for the homeworker's adjustment.

Although the present framework is primarily concerned with the role relations between home and work in communication networks that are colocated in space and time, similar issues are present in several other important domains. These domains include interorganizational learning alliances, biotechnology research firms that have research sites at universities, cross-functional teams where members are drawn from distinct groups within or between organizations; membership in multiple social organizations (i.e. church, social movement organizations, online communities), and virtual teams, whose membership is increasingly interorganizational. The concept of time-space paths is highly relevant to each of these contexts, as is the concern with roles, boundaries, communication networks, and associated symbolic behavior.

## **Conclusion**

The current conceptualization provides one way to move beyond the traditional boundary-spanning literature (Adams, 1980) that envisions a select set of roles in organizations as boundary spanners. The alternative perspective presented here argues that every person is a boundary spanner between roles sent from within and outside organizational time and space by multiple organizations. These organizations may be economic, social, family, or ideological, but all are legitimate role senders.

The conceptualization also moves beyond extant models of boundary work that primarily envision such work as a process of psychological adjustment for the homeworker. By focusing on the behavioral and communicative aspects as well as the communicative character of symbolic behavior such as rituals and routines, the conceptualization offers new and important avenues for investigating role boundary processes. This view offers many fruitful directions to explore in more detail regarding the important realm of home-working for 21st-century workers.

## **Notes**

- 1 Given Marks and MacDermid's (1996) critique that role theory in the work/family literature has lost its theoretical underpinnings, care has been given to incorporate classic works on role transitions and theory (Goffman, 1959; Kahn et al., 1964), as well as recognizing recent contributions (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1996; Montgomery, 1998, 2000).

- 2 Many companies have instituted policies that teleworkers should not take care of young children while working at home (F. Riley & McCloskey, 1997). However, these policies generally govern full-time teleworkers and not part-time teleworkers or those who take work home after a full day at the office.

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