

## Article

# Control on the ‘Boundary-Work’ in Work-Life Articulation for Flexible Knowledge Workers. Insights into Gender Asymmetries

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**Abstract:** In the sociological literature, several studies have shown that the economic and organizational changes of the last decade, including the growth of the service sector and the diffusion of new technologies, have altered the productive and reproductive processes as well as their spatial and temporal dimensions typical of Fordism. In order to shed light on how knowledge workers facing job flexibility and insecurity position themselves with respect to the practices of (de)constructing the boundaries between productive and reproductive domains, specific analytical tools were applied, originating from the interdisciplinary field of boundary-studies, within a perspective focused on gender differences and the subjective experiences of time. With this approach, a discourse analysis was conducted on 37 qualitative interviews with knowledge workers who handle job flexibility and insecurity and who have care responsibilities to uphold at home. The results show that the permeability and flexibility of new (re)productive practices, often presented in neoliberal economy as new opportunities for knowledge workers, especially if they are female, are experienced differently by men and women: for men they represent a new control source, whereas for women they constitute a fictitious, if not constricting, process.

**Keywords:** boundaries; knowledge work; flexibility; work-life interface; gender; quality of working life; discourse analysis

## 1. Introduction

The sociological literature has demonstrated how changes of economic-productive processes and the organizational models have altered the traditional segmentation of (re)productive times and spaces (Chesley et al. 2003; Towers et al. 2006). A more mixed articulation of the time and the space dedicated to work and personal life has become diffuse. This is especially true for those carrying out activities involving a high level of knowledge, in which language and emotions represent the cornerstone of the productive process, and for those who use technologies, enabling the possibility to ‘work anytime and anywhere’ (Murgia et al. 2016). In the case of these so-called ‘knowledge workers’ (Butera et al. 2008), who generally make wide use of the most recent technologies, such working practices tend to cultivate a certain sense of organizational autonomy, albeit illusory—at least in part—considering the processes of intensification and precarization of their work (Murgia and Poggio 2012; Pérez-Zapata et al. 2016). As a matter of fact, in the organization research it has been highlighted that our wider life practices can become a neoliberal form of control and government (Fleming 2014; Fleming and Spicer 2014; McKinlay et al. 2012). There is a large critical debate on the greedy organizations’ mechanisms for activating loyalty and commitment (Coser 1974) and the excessive workplace demands on employees, including those who have greater autonomy and access

to resources (e.g., Burchielli et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2013). The ideal worker through which workers are indoctrinated to be good employees is a male model of work which reflects the traditional gendered division of labour (e.g., Blair-Loy 2003; Gatrell et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, work flexibility continues to be described as a «win-win solution» that guarantees greater control over one's time; for example, by allowing people, especially women, to work even when they need to stay at home to look after their children when ill (Fleetwood 2007; Mescher et al. 2010). Indeed, work-life balance discourse creates subjects as individual agents responsible for managing a successful work-life articulation. However, although, on the one hand, spatio-temporal dis-articulation seems to amplify the margins of autonomy and control over one's time, providing individuals with the possibility of mixing, separating or even alternating their investment in the different life domains, on the other hand, it is not clear whether this modality of managing social productive and reproductive times actually meets the needs of the subjects or is a form of contemporary organizing 'beyond organization' which has unequal implications for men and women (e.g., Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Fleetwood 2007). It is widely known that women bear the weight of conservative cultural norms and are mainly in charge of care work and housework (e.g., Bianchi et al. 2000; Maume 2008): this is the so-called 'stalled gender revolution' phenomenon (England 2010; Hochschild 1989). More recently, it has also been pointed out that neoliberal capitalism precisely rests upon the unequal distribution of production and reproduction work between men and women (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

Against the background of these debates, the article makes an original contribution to the literature by analyzing how knowledge workers facing job flexibility and insecurity position themselves with respect to the practices of (de)constructing the boundaries between productive and reproductive domains, with a focus on gender differences. The present work is drawn from a wider research on work-life balance (WLB) of the new generations of fathers and mothers experiencing work precariousness in Italy (Carreri 2015). Specifically, respondents are 37 Italian knowledge workers from couples with children surviving under precarious work conditions and working flexible and discontinuous hours. The Italian context is of particular interest because labor market deregulation in Italy has not been accompanied by any real adjustment of the welfare system to the new social risks associated with flexibility (Berton et al. 2012), and family constitutes the main care and welfare provider (Saraceno and Naldini 2011).

Considering the numerous modalities of managing the different domains of one's life and the increasing individualization of these practices (Gill and Pratt 2008), specific analytical tools were applied that originate from the interdisciplinary field of boundary-studies (Allen et al. 2014), within a perspective focused on the subjective experiences and qualitative dimensions of time (Adam 1990; Leccardi 2009). A discourse analysis was applied in order to shine light not only on the boundary practices of men and women, but also on their evaluation with respect to the management styles adopted. Discourse in this work is conceived as an activity through which one «makes a stand» within a social and cultural framework (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell et al. 2001). Specific attention was paid to the gender dimension (West and Zimmerman 1987); the «rhetorics» through which the actors discursively construct an image that is coherent with their daily experiences (Billig 1996); and the «subjective positioning» which reveals the level of freedom of action that the subjects attribute to themselves and to others in relation to the choices made (Davies and Harré 2001).

## 2. The Contribution of Boundary Studies: Potentials and Limits

By the term 'boundary-work' I refer to the process put into practice by subjects through (predominantly) discursive and narrative practices, by means of which boundaries are (de)constructed (Gieryn 1983). In light of this construct, adopted in various disciplines of the social sciences (Lamont and Molnár 2002), some scholars have focused on the way by which individuals create (or do not create) clear boundaries between the different domains of their daily lives.

The first and most fundamental study of this kind is provided by the work of Christena Nippert-Eng in *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries in Everyday Life* (1996). The author describes the process of 'boundary work', i.e., of constructing boundaries between life domains, as the sum of strategies,

principles and practices that the subjects adopt to create, maintain, and modify cultural categories (Nippert-Eng 1996, p. 7). The author identifies four different dimensions of ‘boundary work’ (cognitive, physical, temporal, and behavioral), and argues that the specific combination of them gives rise to individual configurations of boundary management, that can be positioned along a continuum that runs from the complete separation of life domains to their total integration. These extremes are only valid on the theoretical level: in fact, the managerial styles of the subjects can be placed at intermediate positions, in which behaviors of separation and integration are mixed depending on the specific restrictions and opportunities of a certain work organization, and on the social and cultural expectations associated with family and with work (Kossek and Lautsch 2012).

Nevertheless, in the field of *work-family border theory* (Clark 2000) and, more generally, in *boundary theory* (Ashforth et al. 2000)<sup>1</sup>, attention has mainly been directed at the organizational and policy level affecting the ‘boundary work’ of individuals rather than at the micro and processual level of individual practices (Kreiner et al. 2009). Only in recent years, some scholars have addressed this latter aspect to articulate to a finer level the analytical process and include new research questions. Different styles of ‘boundary work’, the relationship between structural and symbolic boundaries, and preferences and subjective evaluations of one own management style for example have started to be discussed.

For example, some scholars have applied the concept of directionality to the study of ‘boundary work’, highlighting in this way whether the individuals tend to integrate or separate from the family sphere to the work sphere (for example, by taking or not taking their children into the office) or vice versa, i.e., integrating or separating from work to the family (for example, by taking or not taking work home) (Ashforth et al. 2000; Kossek et al. 2012). Recently, research about the different styles of ‘boundary work’ has also shed light on additional modalities of managing the areas of one’s life other than separation and integration (Kossek 2016). Furthermore, some authors have distinguished between the effective boundaries between private life and work life in lived experiences and the type of articulation the subjects actually desire (Kossek and Lautsch 2008). In particular, Samantha Ammons (2013) analyzed the «boundary fit» between effective practices and those desired by individuals regarding how to combine their private with their work lives, also taking into account how the effective boundaries and the desired boundaries change over time in correspondence with changes in the workplace.

Finally, permeability and the flexibility of life domains deserve attention because they are aspects becoming increasing prominent in contemporary life. The first term describes the situation in which certain behaviors or emotions typical of one sphere (for example, answering a telephone call from a spouse or worrying about a child) invade another sphere of life (such as the work sphere); the second term, on the other hand, refers to the condition in which a certain social role (that of a mother, for example) can be put into practice in many, varying spaces and times (for example, the mother that routinely breastfeeds a child whilst working at the computer, in or outside of the home) (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner 2008).

Importantly, despite the explanatory capacity of the concept of ‘boundary work’, the focus in the literature has, for the most, remained on ‘mental’, ‘cognitive’, and ‘emotional’ boundaries, and ‘transitions’ refer to those between the fixed domains of work and home. Moreover, the attention has moved onto the temporal management of boundaries (to the detriment of spatial boundaries), and has considered a too-narrow range of occupations and family types. No in-depth exploration has been made into the practices, the meanings, and the power dynamics which link the structural drivers to the micro-level experiences (Hughes and Silver 2020; Williams et al. 2016). Williams et al. (2016) pointed out how work-life studies continue to move toward an individualistic direction, emphasizing issues of individual cognition, decision-making, and positive affect, while neglecting the power relations and macro-structural drivers of work and family life, also in the cultural terms.

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<sup>1</sup> While *work-family border theory* (Clark 2000) is specifically interested in the functioning of the family-work system with minimal role conflicts (Clark 2000 p. 751), *boundary theory* (Ashforth et al. 2000) addresses the cognitive processes through which subjects create their demarcations and by which they move between different social roles.

In an attempt to overcome these limits and fill the gap in the literature, Hughes and Silver (2020) recently suggested to use the ‘mobility lens’ to investigate the new dynamics between family and work generated by employment-related mobility (ERM), i.e., by all the travel that today’s jobs necessitate (Roseman et al. 2015). In the mobility perspective, time and space are inextricably connected together as time–space, which is understood as dynamic, socially constituted, and shaped by power relations of domination and subordination. Of particular influence are the ideas of Doreen Massey (1993, 2005), who emphasizes the ‘power geometries of time–space’, showing how different social groups have unequal access to and control over time–space and mobility.

In general, the predominance of individual-based, rational, and power- and gender-neutral explanations in work-life studies resides in the influence that the positivist tradition continues to exert (Özbilgin et al. 2011). Critical sociological approaches must be adopted that are able to shed some light on practices, mechanisms and power processes at play, and, finally, to bring dimensions like gender, social class, migrant status, worker status, and social context to the core of the debate about work-life articulation. The present article aims to provide an original contribution in this sense by analyzing how knowledge workers facing job flexibility and insecurity position themselves with respect to the practices of (de)constructing the boundaries between productive and reproductive domains, and by paying attention to gender differences. I argue that it is crucial to put ‘boundary work’ into relation with the process of constructing gender boundaries. This means analysing the practices through which the subjects reproduce, challenge or traverse the lines of demarcation between those typical of the universal male and those typical of the universal female (Lamont and Molnàr 2002). In fact, we are dealing with practices, above all discursive practices, rooted in daily interaction and framed as ‘boundary work’, even in the absence of an explicit reference to this construct (Lamont and Molnàr 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987). As Lamont and Molnàr wrote, analyses concerning cultural narratives that play a crucial role in the reproduction of gender boundaries are needed since gender boundaries are a fertile terrain for the study of boundary crossing and boundary shifting as well as the institutionalization of boundaries (Lamont and Molnàr 2002, p. 177). Furthermore, a thorough empirical and theoretical investigation into gender represents a way to advance research towards the direction invoked by those scholars who have criticized the mainstream work–life research for its problematic assumptions about individualism, gender neutrality, the concept of ‘balance’ as something that should and could be reached, and more generally the binary thinking (e.g., Bloom 2016; Fleetwood 2007; Lewis et al. 2007; Ollier-Malaterre 2010).

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted as part of a wider research project on ‘work-life balance’ and work precariousness in Italy, which was aimed at investigating what (new) normative beliefs and taken-for-granted frameworks guide the ways of thinking, acting and evaluating of parents in dual precarious couples and with what work-life subjective consequences. This article is focused on a significant part of the project and investigates the subjects’ experiences of their ‘boundary work’ by using an interpretive qualitative approach, with discourse practices being the focus of the analysis.

#### 3.1. Data Collection

The sample was identified by its theoretical significance and not because of its representativeness. Respondents were recruited starting with a network of personal contacts and through snowball sampling, respecting the following criteria: participants are highly educated dual precarious worker couples with young children. They risk not being able to support themselves through the labour market or social protection in the medium-term (Berton et al. 2012). Moreover, the 23 couples were co-living heterosexuals in an urban context in Northern Italy, and were composed of highly qualified individuals (with at least the university degree). The sample is theoretically relevant for the purpose of this article as it sheds light on knowledge labor, in which we can easily observe ‘boundary work’ modalities that differ from more traditional ones due to the type of work involved, the type of contract, and the use of information and communication technologies.

At the time of the interviews, the subjects were working – some even doing more than one job contemporarily – within the realm of education, research, and socio-educational services (in the case of the women) with temporary employment contracts, “occasional collaboration” employment contracts, research scholarships or in dependent self-employment; others were in the process of changing jobs, and some were presently looking for work. Table 1 reports the respondents’ characteristics.

They were working flexible, discontinuous hours, alternating between periods of intense work and periods of very little or no work at all. Furthermore, their work often required a certain level of flexibility – also in spatial terms – and required that the individuals also worked in their spare time; for example, whilst commuting or at home in the evenings and weekends. It was often the case that the subjects had to be constantly available and appear ready to accept new work proposals, or that their children were involved in the working life of their parents.

The national context is particularly significant since labor market deregulation in Italy has not been accompanied by any real adjustment of the welfare system to the new social risks associated with flexibility (Berton et al. 2012; della Porta et al. 2015). Moreover, at the time of the interviews, the effects of the economic crisis were being strongly felt in Italy, and the unemployment rate was very high (ISTAT 2013). In particular, female participation in the labor market was (and still is) much lower than the European average (ISTAT 2018). Finally, at the institutional level, family policies are best characterized as “unsupported familialism” (Saraceno 2010), where the family (and the family network) constitutes the main care and welfare provider, and the few traditional forms of conciliation, such as paid leave or corporate services, are often not accessible to those in precarious working conditions (Saraceno and Naldini 2011).

**Table 1.** Participants’ characteristics.

Partner	Gender	Employment Status	Age	Professional Area	Number of Children
A_Marco	Male	in the process of changing employment status (for one with a fixed term)	35	marketing	1
B_Mary	Female	unemployed	41	human resources (previous one)	2
B_Mattia	Male	fixed-term work contract	43	education	
C_Cristina	Female	member of a cooperative + occasional work	41	socio-educational service	1
C_Thomas	Male	fixed-term work contract + occasional work	41	higher education	
D_Barbara	Female	scholarship	35	higher education	2
E_Elena	Female	fixed-term work contract	30	socio-educational service	1
F_Claudia	Female	project-based work contract + occasional work	29	socio-educational service	1
F_Paolo	Male	fixed-term work contract + occasional work	39	artistic sector	
G_Monica	Female	fixed-term work contract	39	engineering design	4
G_Cristiano	Male	research grant	43	higher education	
H_Giada	Female	member of a cooperative	32	socio-educational service	1
I_Anna	Female	member of a cooperative + occasional work	28	socio-educational service	1
J_Gabriella	Female	research grant + self-employed	36	higher education	1
J_Carlo	Male	dependent self-employed	35	artistic sector	
K_Aurora	Female	in the process of changing employment status (going into a scholarship)	31	higher education	1
K_Nicolò	Male	fixed-term work contract + self-employed	32	marketing	
L_Lara	Female	on-call contract	29	catering	1
L_Iacopo	Male	dependent self-employed	30	marketing	
M_Carlotta	Female	scholarship	33	higher education	1
M_Federico	Male	scholarship	38	higher education	
N_Erika	Female	in the process of changing employment status (going into a scholarship)	46	higher education	3
N_Giovanni	Male	fixed-term work contract + occasional work	47	non-profit sector	
O_Juliana	Female	unemployed	36	catering (previous one)	2
O_Diego	Male	dependent self-employed	35	legal profession	
P_Marta	Female	unemployed	41	marketing (previous one)	2

Q_Emma	Female	fixed-term work contract	35	education	1
Q_Fabio	Male	unemployed	36	higher education (previous one)	
R_Silvia	Female	unemployed	37	health care professional (previous one)	1
R_Luca	Male	fixed-term work contract	37	marketing	
S_Monia	Female	unemployed	40	post office (previous one)	2
S_Bruno	Male	occasional work + on-call work contract	40	artistic sector	
T_Luisa	Female	dependent self-employed	31	legal profession	1
U_Chiera	Female	dependent self-employed	33	education	2
V_Tania	Female	unemployed	32	catering (previous one)	1
W_Giulia	Female	occasional work	29	artistic sector	1
W_Emilio	Male	dependent self-employed + occasional work	31	education	
TOTAL: 37 PARENTS					

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Discourse analysis was used as the guiding analytical method to critically investigate the subjects' experiences of their 'boundary work'. It was conducted on 37 qualitative interviews made with parents separately in order to grasp differences between the partners and bring out their sense-making processes<sup>2</sup>.

During the interviews, I asked respondents about their typical day in the past working week. I focused not only on the content and structure of the day and social interactions, but also on feelings at transitional moments in the day, especially when crossing the physical and mental boundaries between home and work. I encouraged the respondents to relate their responses to flexibility and work instability, giving space to their understanding of situations and positioning. The interviews were conducted over a long period, from 2012 to 2015, and fully transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed using Atlas.ti ver. 8 (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany) software.

In the analysis I used a definition of discourse that recalls that proposed in social psychology. Among the many approaches, discursive social psychology (Potter and Wetherell 1987) was chosen for being particularly appropriate to analyze how, through the usage of some macro-discourses, such as work flexibility, precariousness, and neoliberalism that people have access to, individuals take positions within cultural and social frameworks, individually experience the work-life fit, and build their narratives and identities. In this frame discourse is not only a medium of meanings for social interaction but it is also constitutive of social life, and specifically it is an activity through which one «makes a stand» within a social and cultural framework (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell et al. 2001). More specifically, for the purpose of this article, the analytical tools used were the «rhetorics» (Billig 1996) and «subjective positioning» (Davies and Harré 2001). Human thinking is itself deeply rhetorical as the rhetorics are a source of order in discourse (Billig 1996). In this study I look at the rhetorics through which the subjects discursively construct an image to themselves and to others that is functional and coherent with their daily boundary-work experiences. From a critical perspective, rhetorics raise profound debate around power and agency (Wetherell et al. 2001). Moreover, discourse creates subject positions. The positions in culturally recognized patterns of talk, such as the 'fragile victim' and so on, construct ourselves by providing us a way of making sense of experiences and reactions (Davies and Harré 2001). Importantly, subjective positioning reveals the level of freedom of action that the subjects attribute to themselves and to others in relation to the choices made.

The data analysis occurred in two main phases. First, I analysed the modalities of managing the areas of one's life in order to understand whether respondents tended to separate, integrate or adopt a more mixed approach. After this, rather than focusing on thematic categories based on topics

<sup>2</sup> I contacted 23 couples but in nine cases I was not able to interview both the partners for various reasons, such as permanent employment found in the meantime, moving abroad or to the south of Italy.

discussed such as ‘work-life integration’, ‘work-life separation’ or ‘permeability of life domains’, I looked for patterns in their *modes* of talking about their style of ‘boundary-work’. I analyzed the texts irrespectively of speakers’ gender, to avoid the methodological trap of fixing gender identities beforehand. In this phase, I was interested in how subjects reset their inner coherence and rhetorically built an image to others by paying close attention to the recurrent terms in the texts and the broader narratives they drew upon to contextualize their experiences. I was also interested in how they positioned themselves, especially if they attributed to themselves a leading role or a marginal role in terms of control and choice of their style of management of work-life articulation. This analysis shed light on two main ways that respondents spoke about their ‘boundary-work’ practices. The first modality depicts the ‘boundary work’ enabled by “non-standard” working hours, spatial and temporal flexibility, and the diffusion of new technologies, as a new neoliberal command space, whereas in the second modality it is described as a fictitious process of all-embracing encroachment of work life into the private sphere in which the subjects consider themselves to have a very marginal role in terms of control. As the first mode was found to be a prerogative of men while the second was most used by women, at this point of the analytical process the discursive approach enabled a consideration of how gender expectations frame the ways subjects make meaning about their daily boundary practices. Discourse analysis indeed involves identifying the ways in which the object under study is constructed and made sense of in texts but also goes on to consider the implications for power relations and social action (Edley 2001).

#### 4. The ‘Boundary Work’ in a Boundless Work-Life Context

##### 4.1. The ‘Boundary-Work’ as a Matter of ‘Personal Choice’ and ‘Freedom’

The men interviewed depicted their style of management of work-life articulation in terms of separation between these two life domains. Even when their discourses showed visible signs of interference between life and work—especially physical, temporal, or behavioral interference (Nippert-Eng 1996)—they stated that they were able to handle the boundaries, despite them being blurred, since they resulted from personal and intentionally made choices. In other terms, through their discourse the respondents constructed their own vision of their ‘boundary-work’, trying to give it a coherent and distinctive image, rhetorically constructed (Billig 1996; Gherardi and Poggio 2003) through what I call the «rhetoric of personal choice». As Carlo stated:

I’m trying to separate the two things as much as possible and I’m able to do so thanks to my son, who is a total joy, and so, I, if I’m here (at home), and I’m working here, I know I can work from 8.30 a.m. until 4 p.m. At 4 p.m., I turn my computer off and I dedicate myself exclusively to him. If I’m a bit behind, I put him to bed, then at 10 p.m. I start working again. But, when I’m with my son, I give him all of my attention. [Carlo]

In a more explicit manner, Fabio explains that, for him, completely separating work from family, or, conversely, letting the two domains blur into one another is simply a question of will. As seen in the following passage, he recounts how—when he was working for a research institution—he found himself in the situation in which his work was crossing the boundary into his home life, but he reports it as the result of personal choices that he himself had taken.

Well, it happens (...) sometimes, it just happens that at night you dream the solution to a problem, it happens to you, it just happens, everybody takes home problems or certain thoughts. (...) But if you want to you can detach yourself, and if you don’t want to take them home, well your brain has the arms it needs stop that from happening. It’s a question of will; if you ask me, it’s a question of being involved [at work] and of personal pride: every time that I wanted to be involved and to finish something, then I took the problems home with me; when I wasn’t particularly anxious, when I was relaxed, when I wasn’t stressed about work, I left it all at work and returned to it the next day. [Fabio]

By using the «personal choice rhetoric», the men apparently freed from interference in their choices and decisions assign to themselves a commanding role in their accounts of daily life (Davies and Harré 2001). The recurrent expressions in the male texts are «I decide», «I'm able», «I can», which suggest a leading role in terms of control and choice of their style of management of work-life articulation. In particular, their accounts beckon the ideals of individual freedom, autonomy, and entrepreneurship promised by neoliberalism when they speak about the transitions between life domains and about the construction of boundaries between them, even when recounting blatant examples of permeability. In other words, spatial and temporal flexibility are described by the men as a new opportunity that nourishes a certain sense of freedom and organizational autonomy, as well as allowing them to be present in domestic life in their role as fathers (Carreri 2014). To this regard, the words of Mattia are extremely clear. He is a precarious teacher at the high school, who prefers to take work home where he gets more peace instead of using a dedicated room at work. However, not having an office space in his home, Mattia has no choice but to work in the living room, where his two children are often playing. Mattia states that when he is at home, he can easily detach himself from work, but when he tells me about his work in more detail, he says:

I can easily switch off from work (...). Yes, I can say that I'm able to separate the two things pretty well. I can work pretty well even when the children are there (in the living room), more or less, even when they are playing. Let's say that the type of work I do, the work I do when I'm here, well it doesn't require much concentration, so even if I'm a bit distracted, it's not an issue; but if I have to study properly or go over some things, I'd prefer to do it at some other time: when the children aren't here or there's a quieter moment. [Mattia]

Mattia, like many of the other men interviewed, does not have a dedicated space where he can work undisturbed at home. Indeed, it is because of their being precarious workers with a discontinuous and uncertain income that, in the majority of cases, they cannot permit themselves a large house with a room that can serve as an office. Nevertheless, they prefer, when possible, to work from home, in the living room or bedroom. They describe this a «privilege», as a symbol of their freedom and deliberate autonomy. In fact, they stress how they are able to stop when they wish in order to play with their children or, as some of them assert, to «help» their partners, revealing the unequal gender distribution of production and reproduction work on which this privilege rests upon (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). In their accounts, the norm of the ideal worker who receives the backstage support of a stay-at-home wife (e.g., Blair-Loy 2003; Gatrell et al. 2017) clearly still persists. On the other hand, men recount how they are only able to do certain types of work that require less concentration when in the presence of their children, and to reserve the tasks that require more concentration for the evening when their children are asleep. It is important to highlight that, in the male texts, the 'boundary-work' between family and work is not only characterized by the «personal choice rhetoric», but also by the perception of having control over their time.

This does not mean that their job flexibility in terms of time is always autonomously managed. On the contrary, if we were to take a closer look at their working hours, we would see that they are more often than not decided by external factors (by their clients or employers) and the workers themselves are actually given organization autonomy, which is relatively marginal, depending on the type of work involved. However, discourse is functional and it is designed to be persuasive. The interviewees indeed place the emphasis on this part of their autonomy, as a new condition of control over their spaces and work times that allows them to reconcile their work obligations with family responsibilities without blurring the two life domains, even in the face of blatant examples of permeability (Ashforth et al. 2000; Clark 2000).

Over the course of the interview, some respondents, partly contradicting themselves, explicitly recognized the invasion of the family domain by their work, revealing somehow the illusionary nature of their autonomy (Murgia and Poggio 2012; Pérez-Zapata et al. 2016) but again they normalise work flexibility discourse and consider this invasion as a positive aspect of flexible working that is 'intrinsic' to their profession:



Sure, the risk is that... especially for a job like mine, well it's just like that, even if one doesn't want to call it intellectual, it still requires us to use our heads, so in some way, you're always there. (...) In fact... I make notes on my i-pad, even if I'm watching a film or eating, or even on a piece of paper or a note pad. So I am never switched off, that's how it is (...) Mentally, I never switch off; even before, even when I was working, let's say, as a creative type (...). I'm used to not having fixed working hours given to me by my employers: be it a good or a bad thing. I consider it a good thing and so I have always tried to continue in this way. [Thomas]

A consolidated line of research exists in the literature, which arose from the job demands-control model proposed by Karasek (1979), which underlines how the perception of control over work tasks is an important factor that has positive results in terms of work-life balance (Moen et al. 2016). In particular, the results of the present analysis go in the same direction as the study by Kossek and Lautsch (2012), in which they show how the perception of having control over one's own style of 'boundary work', if combined with the possibility of putting it into practice without cultural repercussions, constitutes a positive factor in the job of mediating between production and reproductive domains, which the subjects must constantly perform.

#### 4.2. *The 'Boundary Work' as a Matter of Constraints beyond the Work-Life Binary*

In contrast with the men, the reconciling between work and life is presented by the women as being demanding, to the extent that they are met with a series of difficulties in separating work life from their family life (and vice versa); the consequence of this is that the boundaries are perceived by women as being integrated, as one blurring into the other. As exemplified in the following interview excerpts, the difficulties of 'boundary work' are mainly presented in cognitive terms, i.e., in terms of mental energy rather than control over time, meant as clock-time. In the first excerpt, Anna, a mother who works as an educator in more than one institute, states that she is never able to switch off from her work mentally:

For better or for worse, I do what I do whole heartedly, so I don't think I ever switch off completely. Because, even when I get home and become Denise's mum, if we are playing a particular game, at a certain point it will cross my mind that I could also do it with Cristiano [the child she assists], that it could work with him. So, really, what I want to say is that there is never a moment in which I say: "Stop, I'm not the educator anymore". [Anna]

Anna's words offer a clear example of flexibility (Ashforth et al. 2000; Clark 2000). Anna does not perceive her roles, that of being Denise's mother and that of being the Cristiano's educator in a distinct way: when she is at home and when she is at work, family life and work life fuse into one. In a similar way, Barbara, a university researcher, highlights how the flexibility of her job is «actually» false by definition, because it results in the permeability of boundaries and unidirectional flexibility, i.e., in an almost all-embracing encroachment of work life into the private sphere. Work flexibility is described as a (nearly) boundless commitment to work, which ambiguously engulfs the individuals in a process of self-discipline of their own behavior that invades the private life. However, Barbara also associates this discourse with the specific character of work commitment, which is not expressed in terms of objective clock-time, but rather in terms of mental and emotional energy that the subjects invest in it:

Research work is substantially flexible; flexible, however, in that it occupies the space of an entire day. You work towards objectives, so you have objectives to meet... there is an aim to the research and you never switch off from this objective until it's been met. So... during the course of a day, any free moment, let's say that your head is always thinking about how to achieve that objective. [Barbara]

Another aspect of the new forms of work organization that contributes to cancelling the demarcation between life domains is the pervasive use of technological tools that have pushed towards a 24/7 economy, in which anyone can work at any time and from anywhere. In this study,

this phenomenon rather than generating virtuous effects of harmonizing between professional work and the family, in the case of women, tends to produce an invasion of work into the personal and domestic space, which is increasingly losing its boundaries. With regard to this, various new mothers recount using breast feeding time to work on the computer or their smartphone. However, what is most important to highlight is the way in which this coalescence of the life domains is described and undertaken. In the case of the men, flexibility and permeability (Ashforth et al. 2000; Clark 2000) are chosen to enable them to work from home with greater tranquility and, in some cases it seems, to escape the authority and disciplinary control of the work place, such that this possibility is described as a kind of «privilege». In the case of the women, however, flexibility and the permeability of boundaries are 'endured' in that they are considered forced choices necessary to enable them to cope with all the tasks required of them at work and in the household; or 'endured' because they are used as leverage by their superiors at work (Carreri 2015; Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Fleetwood 2007; Mescher et al. 2010). In the women's accounts, the 'boundary work' rather than being a matter of choice and a form of freedom, turns up to be a neoliberal form of systemic power (Burchielli et al. 2008). Women, more so than their partners, appear as sacrificial victims of neoliberal work flexibility, and this burdens them with contradictory expectations. They are required to provide for themselves and their families in a context of powers and contingencies that radically limit their ability to do so (Brown 2016).

For example, Monia, who at the time of the interview was unemployed and supporting her partner in his work (a creative who makes jewelry using recycled materials) by taking care of his website and client relations, tells me about the fact that she recently bought herself a smartphone specifically so that she could be contacted by clients at all times of day, even whilst breastfeeding their second child. However, rather than adopting the «personal choice rhetoric», she presented this choice as something that was necessary, «I do it because if I don't, well, you never know when I will be able to»:

Monia: I've just bought myself a smartphone, so that I can reply to clients, even with this I can work; I can reply, see the photos on the website... But it's very inconvenient. You know, I don't like working in this way at all (...). But I have to [use it] when I just can't do it in any other way! Often, I'm breastfeeding my baby whilst replying to an email on the computer ... because I swear, I just don't have a second free.

Interviewer: So this has happened even when you are breast feeding?

Monia: (...) Yes, yes, many times! (...) Yes, yes, I do it because if I don't, well, you never know when I will be able to! [Monia]

In cases like this, when work and child care activities have blended into one, what has happened to the 'boundary work'? The capacity to construct boundaries between life domains and to slide between them in the case of some women seems to almost result in the elimination of the boundary beyond the binary nature of work and private life (Glucksmann 2005; De Coster and Zanoni, forthcoming). Others, however, are constrained to juggle more than one job and to continually switch between them, even during the course of a single day:

Seeing as I have another 5 or 6 (jobs), it's very difficult... it's a bit, let's say, schizophrenic, because I have to keep swapping between mindsets, to change my state of mind; because in one moment you're working with kindergarten kids, then it's happened that I had to work with children in the high school, but then I do some editing work that has nothing to do with anything else, then I have my PhD work; so... in terms of time, let's say, it's not that I spend a lot of time working, but it consumes a lot of energy because it's never the same type of work! (...) The amount of time I work isn't a lot, and apart from all the travelling, more than anything it's that during the course of just one day I have to focus my attention on five completely different things! [Claudia]

Managing more than one job in addition to family responsibilities creates situations described by women as being able to «blow a fuse», in which the life domains become mixed in a chaotic way and the women feel that they are being bounced in all directions between one task and another. The

condition of simultaneity of different rhythms and social times (Brose 2004), in this study, only seems to generate difficulties for the female components. This means that in contrast to what happens in the male discourses, the women, when speaking about the (blurred) transitions between life domains, attribute to themselves just a marginal role in terms of control and choice (Davies and Harré 2001). The recurrent expressions in the female texts are indeed «I have to» and «I can't do it in any other way». Thus, the rhetorical construction of the 'boundary work' in the women's discourses (Billig 1996; Gherardi and Poggio 2003) is characterized by what I call «marginalization rhetoric» in which chaotic situations are represented in which «a great deal of energy is consumed» with the women feeling to have a marginal role in terms of control and choice. This rhetoric emphasizes the constraints of work flexibility rather than the benefits.

Lately, work and family have become combined, by this I mean that I'm also working when I'm at home; I get home in the evening and I have a thought in my head, or I'm worrying about something. I would very much like to keep the two things distinct from one another: i.e., when work is finished, it stops there, so that when I get home I only think about and do other things. But it's not like that, the two things continue to get mixed up and I can't keep the two realities separate. (...) Very often, in fact, when the children get home from school, they play whilst I write. So that my work papers are there together with their toys and the sheets of paper they're drawing on; there is no distinction between my papers and theirs, they are all mixed up, yes, mixed up. (...) Our house is very chaotic. [Erika]

The words of Erika, a precarious researcher at the university with three children, well exemplify the women's subjective experience of powerlessness in the management of what is a total overlapping between the domains of life and between work and care practices.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions. Subjective Positioning of Command or Marginal Roles in the 'Boundary Work': Gender Asymmetries

The analytical perspective of boundary studies (Allen et al. 2014) opens up new ways forward in WLB literature, both on the methodological and the theoretical level, to explore how subjects relate to temporality, that is to social (re)productive times. Furthermore, the peculiarity of the target group herein—knowledge workers in precarious working conditions—allows me to focus on the modalities of work-life articulation that are distinct to the more traditional modalities characterized by Fordism (Murgia et al. 2016). In an increasingly boundary-less context in which capitalism benefits from the plurality of re(productive) times and spaces (e.g., Thrift 2005), this article analyzed the complicated process of 'boundary work', paying attention to the micro and processual level of individual practices and their link with the macro-structural drivers of work and family life (Hughes and Silver 2020; Williams et al. 2016). Specifically, the objective of the study was to understand how the subjects interviewed positioned themselves with respect to the practices of (de)constructing the boundaries between productive and reproductive domains, by focusing on gender differences, and in light of the expansion of "non-standard" working hours, spatial and temporal flexibility, and the diffusion of new technologies. The results have shed light on how the tendency to integrate the different life domains (and, above all, the blurring of work into family life) is interpreted by men and women through distinct rhetorics (Billig 1996), which reveal gender asymmetries in the capacity to put the style of 'boundary work' desired by the subjects into practice (Kossek and Lautsch 2008).

Specifically, this discourse analysis has outlined that permeability and the flexibility of life domains, often presented as new opportunities for working women (Fleetwood 2007; Mescher et al. 2010), are experienced differently by men and women. For men, they represent a new command space, whereas for women they constitute a process that is best described as fictitious, if not restrictive, and in which the respondents consider themselves to have a very marginal role (Davies and Harré 2001). Accordingly, in the case of the men, the flexibility and permeability of boundaries seem to generate virtuous effects of harmonization between personal, professional, and family activities; whereas in the women they produce daily situations of «blown fuses», i.e., situations that, in the words of the interviewees, are «chaotic» and «schizophrenic». Whereas the men's rhetoric—

the «personal choice rhetoric»-describes a greater degree of alignment between effective boundaries and desired boundaries (Ammons 2013), the «marginalization rhetoric», adopted by the women to describe their ‘boundary work’ practices, does not seem to allow any form of effective agency to arise. In the first rhetoric, the emphasis is placed on the men’s perception of having control over their managerial styles and clock-time (Kossek and Lautsch 2012); by contrast, in the second rhetoric, the emphasis is on their excessive load in terms of mental and emotional energy that requires the women to assume a ‘boundary work’ characterized by simultaneity of different rhythms and social times (Brose 2004).

Different social and cultural locations of women and men indeed condition the understandings and meanings that working mothers and fathers fashion through their agency. From a critical sociological perspective which sheds light on how gender expectations frame the ways subjects make meaning about their daily boundary practices and speak about the ‘boundary work’, this agency gap between men and women is seen as resulting from cumulative and often unnoticed and silent organizational processes. Men embrace the neoliberal rhetoric of ‘personal choice’, which in reality turns out to be a total commitment to work that to be enjoyed, even its positive sides, needs someone who daily takes care of family needs. This rhetoric is closely linked to the predominant organizational model of the male ideal worker (e.g., Blair-Loy 2003; Gatrell et al. 2017). Vice versa, women appear as ‘sacrificial victims’ (Brown 2016), and for them work flexibility is illusionary and it deprives them of a margin of real autonomy. Moreover, women perform a completely ‘entangled subjectivity’ as fully caregivers and workers in the coalescence of the life domains (Glucksmann 2005). The organization of work and life is embedded in a gender regime which makes ‘imbalance’ neither a matter of individual responsibility nor the consequence of ‘personal choices’ as instead neoliberalism proclaims (Brown 2016). This work is aimed at making a contribution to work-life boundary studies, by overcoming gender neutrality of the concept of ‘boundary work’ and the idea of balance as something that should and could be reached by power-neutral individuals (Carreri 2020).

To this regard, more research is needed to investigate deeper the historical and structural power relations at the micro, organizational, and societal levels. Given the peculiarity of the research target group, further studies will be required to investigate the ‘boundary work’ in the temporal and spatial articulation of work and life domains in other social groups, such as knowledge workers without children, knowledge workers with permanent contracts, and workers from other sectors in which spatial and temporal flexibility is relevant. In this growing field of research there is wide scope for an intersectional approach which captures the changing experiences of the work–life interface looking at other salient strands of diversity than gender, like social class or migrant status. Furthermore, since the last pandemic has entered our lives, our daily work-life practices have taken on completely different forms, which call for a re-consideration of the keys to interpreting the ‘boundary work’. We need to develop analytical tools able to catch the micro-politics of organizing (new spaces, times, and styles) and becoming in our new everyday lives, and their link with the changing model of capital accumulation and work organization.

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