Boundaryless work-life interface among working parents in Poland during COVID-19

Małgorzata Kubacka[1], Dorota Mroczkowska[2], & Monika Frąckowiak-Sochańska[3]

[1] Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Faculty of Sociology, Szamarzewskiego 89C, 60-568 Poznań, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0001-5301-878X, Email: malgorzata.kubacka@amu.edu.pl

[2] Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Faculty of Sociology, Szamarzewskiego 89C, 60-568 Poznań, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0003-4410-0276, Email: drmrocz@amu.edu.pl

[3] Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Faculty of Sociology, Szamarzewskiego 89C, 60-568 Poznań, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0002-8318-5295, Email: monikafs@amu.edu.pl

ABSTRACT: In this paper, we use qualitative research data to explore the phenomenon of the boundaryless work-life interface during the COVID-19 pandemic as perceived by working parents. We define a boundaryless work-life interface as the weak or virtually absent boundary between work and life domains. We look closer at the relations between space, time, emotions, roles and the boundaryless work-life interface among working parents. The first two subsections introduce the linkages between the boundaryless work-life interface, focusing primarily on time and space in what we call 'collapsed role boundaries'. The second subsection examines the issues related to mental and emotional tensions the perceived boundarylessness has caused during the pandemic. The paper's final subsection provides a summary with interpretations and conclusions.

KEYWORDS: work-life boundary, boundaryless, collapsed role boundary, COVID-19, Poland

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we examine the roles of working parents from the perspective of boundary theory. COVID-19 has dramatically changed the way individuals manage the work and non-work aspects of their lives, bringing additional challenges to the ways of working and living across the globe. During the pandemic, working hours became more flexible for each of our research participants: none adopted the eight-hour working rhythm as their primary one or the weekend as their time off. Throughout

COVID-19 permeability of work-life interfaces became more visible to our research participants. Due to legal regulations related to preschool and school education, performing work at home in the presence of children became a necessity. The Polish government's closure of schools and kindergartens in March 2020 proved a tremendous burden for working parents having to work and take care of their children simultaneously. Our research has shown that experiencing the boundaryless work-life interface among working parents during the pandemic is accompanied by a phenomenon that we termed a sudden and unexpected 'collapse of role boundaries'. Because of collapsed role boundaries, the working parents who took part in our research experienced a painful cognitive leap between the categories of work and life as the work-life interface became boundaryless during the pandemic. They undertook actions focused on the everyday battle with different temporal, spatial, mental and emotional realms to control or balance both domains. They strove to separate the work and life interface because they could not assume both roles of employee and parent at the same time during the lockdown. The role demands from at least one domain had to be temporarily rejected or suspended to fulfil (at least partially) the obligations related to the role from the other domain. These conditions resulted in working parents being in limbo between their roles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In our research project *On the treadmill of pandemic everyday life: dynamics of boundary areas in three types of organisations in Poland,* we identified three key research questions: (1) What kinds of changes to the work and life interface have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) How have Poles tried to adapt to the pandemic-induced changes in their everyday lives? (3) How has the pandemic experience changed social expectations towards managing the work-life interface? The project comprised four stages accompanied by different research techniques: (1) A survey questionnaire containing questions on socio-demographic variables and the professional and family situation of the respondents was conducted. (2) A spatio-temporal diary was used to record daily activities, their time and place, interactions undertaken within them, and self-observation of feelings associated with these activities. The data from the diary made it possible to obtain information on the quantity and quality of the time devoted to activities from the domains of work and family life and their separation, overlapping or interpenetration. The respondents filled in the diary for seven days (Monday to Sunday) and sent the results of their work to the researchers at a fixed time every day. (3) A projective technique of story completion about the combination of family and work roles for women and men during the pandemic was used. (4) A semi-structured individual in-depth interview (IDI) was conducted to describe the functioning of boundary areas during the pandemic (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Kvale, 2021). During the interviews, the research participants also had an opportunity to share their reflections and feelings about the whole week's work on the spatio-temporal diary and the story completion task. The interviews lasted about two hours and, for security reasons in pandemic conditions, were conducted remotely via video conferencing tools

(Zoom, Skype, MS Teams). The interviews were recorded as audio files and transcribed. In total, over 240 pages of material were obtained and then subjected to a qualitative analysis using a prepared code key (in the MAXQDA programme). The research was conducted between 12 November and 20 December 2020, and its participants recorded their experiences then (spatio-temporal diary) and made references to the pandemic situation of about nine months at that time (in-depth interviews).

This paper is based mainly on the data derived from the in-depth interviews, in which the respondents had the opportunity to structure their experiences retrospectively. The process involved assigning meanings to both past and present experiences. The sample for this study consisted of 12 participants proportionally selected in terms of gender, type of organisation as the primary place of employment and family situation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By selecting employees from 3 types of organisations: (1) small family businesses, (2) large corporations and (3) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in project mode, the authors aimed to gain an insight into the diverse working styles and the associated work-family relationships. The selected organisations differ in the degree of formalisation of work relationships related to the overlap or separation of personal and professional relationships. There are also significant differences in treating working time as contractual or task-related and in the integration or separation of work and family life. Most respondents started working from home when the pandemic broke out (some worked partly from home and partly outside the home). Also, several respondents had the experience of working from home before the pandemic; however, having to perform professional work and constantly care for children at the same time and place was a total novelty for them. In the research, the differences related to the family situation of the respondents concerned whether or not they performed care functions for dependent family members (which was associated with having or not having children). The respondents who were parents had at least one child under twelve. The analysis of research material showed that having or not having children were the variables differentiating the respondents' experiences the most. These variables proved much more significant than gender and the type of organisation the respondents worked in. Therefore, this paper analyses in detail the statements of working parents.

The analysis of the research material was conducted in several stages. Its starting point was open coding, which aimed to identify the data content, on which the authors proceeded to focus (targeted and selective) coding. Due to the specificity of the research material, the principle of coding by paragraphs was adopted essentially as a logical consequence of the interview questions and the themes introduced by the interviewees. The selection of the most frequent and relevant codes from the perspective of the emerging theory served the purpose of a comprehensive categorisation of data. The authors were also guided by the principle of theoretical saturation of categories, i.e. collecting data up to the point where data similar to that already collected appears in subsequent statements and where further exploration of the research material does not lead to new theoretical insights. The categories constructed in the course of the analysis were concerned with but not limited to (1) permeability of the work-life boundary, (2) flexibility of the work-life boundary, (3) role blurring, (4) segmentation, (5) integration, (6) the context of experienced emotions (situational triggers for specific emotions),

(7) emotions experienced by individuals together with their personal and micro-social consequences, and (8) actions taken by individuals concerning experienced affective states. The boundaries between these categories were often fluid. It was common for respondents to refer in a single statement to the external determinants of the experienced emotions, the intensity of feelings and their expression, and actions undertaken in response to emotions, roles and work-life boundaries.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Researchers have identified a growing interest in work and non-work facets of life as there is an increasing overlap of roles related to both domains challenging the balance in the work-life/family interface (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014). In this paper, we look closely at the role of working parents during the pandemic from the perspective of boundary theory. We use the term "work-life" rather than "work-family" or "work-home" to acknowledge non-work (e.g. community and social) roles as suggested by Moen (2011).

Boundary theory concerns the cognitive, physical, and behavioural boundaries between work and life outside work. Defining work-life boundary is challenging because boundary areas overlap where different logics of rationality overlap (Allen et al., 2014; Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Researchers have not yet agreed on a definition of 'work' and 'life', and the usual research practice is to follow the respondents' intuitions about defining 'work' and 'life'. Thus, we imply this approach and view the role boundaries through a social constructionist lens (Berger, Luckmann, & Luckmann, 1966; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Boundaries reflect how different spheres of action and role performance come together in one experience. We understand boundary areas broadly as processes of active movement of individuals between the sphere of work and the sphere of life (including family life) in situations where the blurring of roles is common.

Boundary theory focuses on the meanings assigned to work and life domains (Nippert-Eng, 1996) and the conditions of transitioning between roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). Boundaries have a physical dimension (informing about where a behaviour typical of the role from a specific domain occurs), temporal (when actions typical of the role from a specific domain are undertaken) and psychological (patterns of thinking, behaviour and emotions typical of or appropriate for each of the domains) (Allen et al., 2014). Boundary theory allows focusing on the demands of work and non-work roles (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). According to these theories, individuals establish and preserve boundaries across their roles at a particular time and space. Creating boundaries is intended to decrease the complexity of working and living. When the roles are separated, the boundaries are more transparent. Role transitions occur effortlessly when the roles are integrated, but the chances for role blurring are higher (Desrochers, Hilton, & Larwood, 2005). Boundary flexibility (referred to as the degree to which spatial and temporal boundaries are malleable, for example, working hours and workplace) and permeability (psychological concerns regarding one domain occurring while physically present in the other domain) vary (Ashforth et al., 2000; Hall

& Richter, 1988; Kreiner et al., 2009).

Many researchers argue that during COVID-19, the interface between work and life has become even more blurred and boundaryless for many employees than before the pandemic and that this mainly affects working parents (Andrade & Fernandes, 2021; Kerman, Korunka, & Tement, 2021; Petts, Carlson, & Pepin, 2021). A loss of balance is mediated by the further blurring of existing boundaries between work and non-work facets of life, mainly due to telecommuting necessitated by the lockdown (Bick, Blandin, & Mertens, 2020). Research also indicates that working from home is particularly challenging for mothers with children. Their work time is significantly more reduced than that of fathers (Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner, & Scarborough, 2021; Myers et al., 2020) as they take on more responsibilities in performing emotional labour and managing household chores (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). In our research, the respondents' stories were less about gender differences and more about their role as parents. This paper aims to describe situations as reported by our research participants, although it is worth noticing that according to previous research, women (mothers in particular) were especially affected as they experienced more tensions regarding their work and family lives (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). At the same time, other researchers argue that the pandemic crisis served as a catalyst for changes in traditional gender roles (Hennekam & Shymko, 2020).

The pandemic has created conditions conducive to both the experience of confusion or difficulty in distinguishing the work from non-work roles—a phenomenon dubbed "role blurring" (Glavin & Schieman, 2012) and the weakening of domain boundaries, in literature commonly referred to as "boundarylessness" (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). Essentially, there is no distinction between work and non-work domains as both work activities and family activities occur in both domains. Not only did parents have more domestic responsibilities, but they also found themselves under the duress of simultaneously performing domestic and paid labour. The loss of childcare and the demands of distance learning have dramatically altered the personal and professional domains of most working parents' lives and are considered the major factors affecting role performance in both work and non-work domains.

Based on the conceptual framework of boundary theory and findings regarding changes to the work-life domains, we trace the main dimensions of the boundaryless work-life interface among working parents. Due to the wide range of social life spheres involved in making the work-life boundary appear as "boundaryless", we used categories of roles, behaviours, emotions and theoretically related concepts. The first two subsections introduce the linkages between the boundaryless work-life interface focusing primarily on time and space in the collapsed role boundaries. The second subsection examines issues related to mental and emotional tensions that the perceived boundarylessness has caused during the pandemic. The paper's final subsection provides a summary with interpretation and conclusions.

BOUNDARYLESSNESS OF THE WORK-LIFE INTERFACE
DURING THE PANDEMIC

The boundaryless work-life interface has emerged due to different changes regarding ways of working and living in post-industrial economies. The changes mentioned above refer mainly to (1) the development and dissemination of proliferating information and communication technologies, including technology-mediated work-related interruptions affecting both personal and professional life (Chen & Karahanna, 2014); (2) gender roles, especially the prevalence of dual-career family model (Rapoport & Rapoport, 2016) resulting in the increasing involvement of fathers in parenting (McGill, 2014); (3) flexible working arrangements, both offered by some companies and enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, long recognised as causing work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Boundarylessness does not mean that the boundary between work and life does not exist. It rather emphasises that the boundary is weak or perceived as virtually non-existent (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017).

Research into boundarylessness during the pandemic is extensive but primarily concerns working hours, homeworking or technology (Contreras, Baykal, & Abid, 2020; Vieten, Wöhrmann, & Michel, 2021). Boundarylessness is most often used as a metaphor for blurred and overlapping boundaries, to the extent that they virtually cease to exist. We believe that a more concise understanding of this concept is required as the pandemic has created entirely new conditions in which the boundaryless work-life interface has started to be experienced on a large scale and probably more intensely than ever before. We argue that boundarylessness may serve researchers as a useful concept that creates an opportunity to explore both changes in the perceived work-life boundary during the pandemic and the struggles behind the attempts to maintain a known order under previously unknown circumstances. Based on these assumptions, we aim to discuss the pandemic catalysts of the perceived and experienced boundarylessness among working parents and its dimensions.

Our research identified that experiencing a lack of work-life boundaries among working parents mostly regards the phenomenon that we referred to as a sudden and unexpected "collapse of role boundaries". Previous studies that challenged the validity of the integration-segmentation continuum showed that collapsing roles (a complete overlap of roles, performing roles from different domains at the same time and space) manifest themselves in simultaneous role enactment (with one role becoming an extension of another) and role value fusion (using more than one role to advance identical values or beliefs) (Cruz & Meisenbach, 2018). Both forms contribute to collapsing work-life role boundaries and are the ways in which individuals manage time or space constraints resulting from being involved in multiple roles. In our research, collapsing role boundaries were not a result of a voluntary engagement in performing numerous roles (at least not initially). Work-life boundaries have practically disappeared due to the lockdown, which is intertwined with how the roles of the employee and parent have been performed. Therefore, we use the term 'collapsed role boundaries' instead, as the 'collapse' would be almost entirely forced by external pandemic circumstances.

(1) TIME AND SPACE

The COVID-19 pandemic has dissolved the spatial distinction between workplace and home. Working parents were forced to conduct paid work from home without support from public institutions: social services, schools, nurseries, or kindergartens. At the same time, their children started to study remotely, often expecting help from their parents or, in the case of younger children, were simply sent to their homes and needed to be taken care of. The collapsed role boundaries are mediated by physical space and the presence of dependants. They can also lead to conflict, both the conflict of roles from two different domains and internal conflict, i.e. tensions related to the inability to effectively perform both types of roles in the way envisioned by the individual. Boundarylessness took its most intense form in the realm of spatial and temporal conditions – there was practically no distinction between work and life domains. Working parents had no time and space either for work, family or self-care. One participant in the study, a father of two- and four-year-old children, indicated that moving his work home meant that he was working remotely while his children were physically present. The children expected their parents to give them time and attention and interrupted their work responsibilities. As a result, both parents had to reduce their working hours from eight to about three hours a day.

> Now suddenly I was at home. Everything stopped for a fortnight. Of course, everyone insisted that family, peace and quiet and health were the most important things. But then everything had to move again. Because work is work. But you have to keep moving things along. And when the work started, it became very difficult. Because with a two-year-old and a four-year-old, still three-year-old at that time, it is very difficult to work remotely. Because the children just don't understand what's going on at all. And they just need attention, which is, of course, normal. So, situations like this, where children come in front of the screen all the time while you are working, ask for something, spin around, squeal and so on, *are absolutely normal. And from an eight-hour working day, realistically, we were able to work three hours a day, not more.* (…) The work was very difficult. Mentally, we were very tired, stressed. There was no, as you know, outlet for all that tension. (…) The children want something all the time, they need something. They spend a lot of time in front of the TV because you can't just be with them all the time. [corporation, father of two children aged 4 and 2]

The parents were in a challenging situation. They could neither stop working nor stop taking care of their children. The collapsed role boundary was an inevitable consequence of living in a pandemic lockdown, making it impossible to fulfil both roles. In the case in question, the man and his wife chose to pursue their parental roles first. However, this decision had its consequences later. It became necessary to catch up on work regardless of their family situation. Thus, their children started to spend more time watching TV while they were working.

During the lockdown, people were forced to use ICTs to adapt to the rapidly changing reality. Another difficulty encountered by working parents was technical prob-

lems, for example, with the Internet connection. Remote working and remote learning took place simultaneously, a situation for which network providers were not prepared. Lack of a high-speed Internet connection at home during the lockdown can lead to digital exclusion (Zheng & Walsham, 2021), and also contribute to breaking everyday routines. For example, one of the respondents would get up at dawn or work at night to fulfil her professional duties:

> At home (…) the kids have lessons. I connect to work, my husband connects to work and the network can't take it. This means that in order for me to work, I get up at 4-5 a.m. I'll do it because that's when the network works. Or preferably at night. Working during the day is simply not so good. And you know that so far the children have had to cope on their own and they have. [corporation, mother of two children aged 14 and 8]

The lack of work-life boundaries experienced by working parents is associated with multiple disruptions and nuisances. During the pandemic, the rhythm of daily life has changed. Temporal and spatial boundaries have dissolved. People have become more dependent on mobile devices that bring work and school into the home, consequently contributing to the further blurring of the existing boundaries. Boundarylessness, such as experienced during COVID-19, seems to stem from time and space distortions that are, inevitably mediated by new technology.

(2) MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL REALMS

Another dimension of the collapsed role boundary is related not so much to the presence of dependents in the same space and time and the consequent need to assume several roles simultaneously at home by working parents, but rather to the mental commitment to perform two different roles at the same time. Negotiating the order of work and life domains takes place not only at the level of practices and actions taken but also at the level of consciously setting boundaries in one's thoughts and emotions. Individuals constantly undertake the work of determining in which order they currently reside and, above all, how they should fit into the social context. Emotional and cognitive engagement in roles is, of course, not a new phenomenon. However, the pandemic seems to have contributed to the need for a more deliberate performance of roles from both domains. When research participants talked about their practices, thoughts and feelings regarding work-life segmentation or integration, they did so rather effortlessly, which may suggest that they had engaged in similar reflections by themselves prior to the study. The pandemic forced them to re-arrange their space, time, and routines on a previously unknown scale. They had to rethink and re-discuss issues that used to be taken for granted in their families. They had no other choice but to face the boundaryless work-life interface, including managing the subsequent emotions resulting from the chaos of the pandemic. It seems, therefore, that boundarylessness has become a part of a reflective process of their role performances. Permanent spatial overlapping of both (work and non-work) spheres caused temporal and spatial boundaries to cease to function effectively, and thus most boundary man-

agement was transferred to the mental and emotional level. It can take a well-known form of 'not being fully present' in a particular situation (sometimes it may also indicate some state of detachment from reality or the current course of events), as in the below example from our research:

> I bring work into my private life. Even if I don't physically work on my work stuff, my wife complains that I am absent. We go for a walk somewhere in the park, and instead of talking and enjoying the moment, giving attention to the kids, I have my topics to work through in my mind. [NGO, father of two children]

During the pandemic, most of the research participants thought about both the work and life domains at the same time. It is slightly different from "mentally taking" work into the home or home to work (in relation to, for example, unfinished tasks, as suggested by Kerman et al. (2021). This moves boundarylessness to a new level, where both domains' simultaneity of time, space, thoughts, and emotions occurs. It is no longer work-to-life or life-to-work interference. Instead, it is a vicious circle in which the desire to separate or integrate both domains by taking some action is intertwined with the inability to do anything at all because of the pandemic regulations, which only adds to the uncertainty and hopelessness experienced so commonly during the lockdown. This was well illustrated by one of the parents in our study:

> All the time I keep thinking about the fact that I have to send the work back, I have to scan it. Even though we set the hours, I still knew that I had to send off the homework of one son and of the other son too, by a specific time. I have a scanner in my office, and so I have to scan and send everything to them [school]. I was neither in one place nor the other. I had such a crisis in April that I actually cried through the whole Easter. [family business, mother of two children aged 14 and 8]

This description is one of many examples of struggles encountered by working parents during the pandemic. Work, school, and family obligations interfere strongly with one another, leaving people with an unsettling feeling of being at their limit. Tasks from different domains appear synchronously and accumulate, resulting in a constant feeling that there is still something to be done. As a result, individuals do not lower their tension levels nor restore their mental and physical strength. The pandemic has not changed the core issue: people still think about one domain while performing roles from the other domain and still do tasks from both domains simultaneously as they did before. Nonetheless, the pandemic generates much more stress for people, especially those with dependents, and thus it serves as a magnifying glass for problems experienced previously. The pandemic has intensified the pressure to think about multiple things simultaneously and the urgency of managing them under unpredictable circumstances. In other words, the collapsed role boundary has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

The collapsed role boundaries were accompanied by many complex emotions, ranging from fear through hopelessness to rage. New circumstances were perceived as a threat and caused much distress. The sudden change of circumstances led to in-

terpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts. The atmosphere of lockdown was rather tense and filled with uncertainty. It can be described as an escalating spiral of tensions. In the absence of adequate coping tools, the accumulation of challenges results in an eruption of emotions to a level that is beyond control in interactions with other people. This phenomenon, called "pandemic rage" (Kubacka, Luczys, Modrzyk, & Stamm, 2021), was quite common during COVID-19. One of our research participants described the tense atmosphere of pandemic rage in the following words:

> These emotions were so let off the leash that they were running wild and rampaging through everyone. It wasn't like I was the only one screaming. My children were screaming, I was screaming, the neighbours' children were screaming, and the neighbours were screaming, we were all screaming. It was one great atmosphere of hysteria. It was easy to lose control. [family business, mother of two children aged 14 and 8]

Another respondent reported experiencing major emotional distress regarding the ability to control the situation and manage his work and family life domains:

> (…) I was so emotional, maybe depression is too strong a word, but I was so unstable that I felt anxious and hopeless (…) Later somehow, it got better, but (…) I am very worried about the future. [corporation, father of two children aged 4 and 2]

We argue that strong and uncontrollable emotions may be related to unwanted boundarylessness of work and life interfaces. The collapsed role boundaries make it extremely challenging for working parents to manage work-life boundaries effectively. Moreover, COVID-related boundarylessness is particularly severe for these research participants who prefer to separate work and non-work roles or had the experience of separating both roles before the lockdown. The working parents who took part in our research experienced a painful cognitive leap between categories (Zerubavel, 1996) of work and life as the work-life interface became boundaryless during the pandemic. They undertook actions focused on the everyday battle with different temporal systems to cognitively and emotionally control or balance both domains. Unfortunately, the unstable and uncertain conditions of the pandemic crisis have rendered the management of the boundary between work and life domains virtually impossible. The boundary has been hard to define or manage, as the only things left for working parents were the overlapping demands and realities and a crippling quest for stabilising the separation of the boundaryless work and life interface.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis argues that working parents began to perceive the work-life interface as more boundaryless during the lockdown. The boundaryless work-life interface does not refer to the absence of boundaries but to perceived disruptions occurring between work and life domains. There are two main dimensions of pandemic boundarylessness: the first concerns time and space, and the second – mental and emotional realms. Despite the pressing need to separate work and life domains, we found that partic-

ipants barely distinguished between work and non-work time, primarily due to the lack of externally imposed physical boundaries, such as before the pandemic. Based on our findings, we also argue that the segmentation-integration continuum may be more complicated for working parents in times of COVID-19. Spatial and temporal boundaries have become more malleable, which means that the perceived flexibility of work-life boundaries has increased. The permeability has also changed for working parents—research participants reported many psychological concerns (both cognitive and emotional) regarding one domain occurring at the time of their presence in the other domain.

In the case of working parents, the roles are integrated into time and space. Still, the role transitions are highly challenging, up to the point that research participants were stuck in limbo between roles—being unable to assume both the role of an employee and a parent and simply have no time and space buffers between role transitions. Moreover, working parents had not actually had the time or possibility to prepare themselves and their children for such circumstances. One day they were simply sent home, where they found themselves forced to 'do it all' at the same time and place. As soon as the lockdown became a reality, the boundaryless work-life interface accompanied by the complete collapse of the employee and parent roles boundaries, manifested itself on a scale previously unknown to working parents. These two roles became utterly conflicted prior to the new challenges posed by the lockdown, especially in the matter of time, space and emotions. The collapsed role boundaries left working parents in role limbo: neither focused on working nor on parenting. What they seemed to be focused on, however, was the transition between the roles with collapsed, if not corrupted, boundaries. In other words, for working parents, both working and parenting at the same time was virtually impossible during the pandemic lockdown.

The complexity of work and life domains' demands for working parents rendered effective work and parenting impossible during the lockdown. As a result, role demands from at least one domain had to be temporarily rejected or suspended in order to fulfil (at least partially) the obligations related to the role from the other domain. In other words, the process leading to the collapsed role boundaries was taking place. Working parents found high boundary permeability cognitively, mentally, and emotionally stressful to regulate. Our research participants experienced the cognitive leap between work and life domains as painful. The boundaryless work-life interface led to boundaryless management that evolved among working parents. Boundarylessness proved particularly stressful and demanding since our research participants overwhelmingly favoured separation, whereas they found themselves working from home with children around. Previous studies on telecommuting support this view—having children and working remotely tend to decrease the integration preference (Fonner & Stache, 2012). The pandemic has brought into light the quest for boundaries—the need for working parents to see and feel the domains of work and life as separate. They struggled to maintain and separate boundaries during the lockdown and were not prepared for shifting boundaries in the way they were forced to by the loss of childcare and the switch to remote learning. Thus, working parents felt they lost their bearings; therefore, boundarylessness experienced during the pandemic is undesirable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Allen, T. D., Cho, E., & Meier, L. L. (2014). Work–Family Boundary Dynamics. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *1*(1), 99–121. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091330

Andrade, C., & Fernandes, J. L. (2021). Role boundary management during Covid-19 pandemic: A qualitative analysis of focus group data with working-student mothers. *Revista Psicologia*, *1*(5), 1–6.

Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a Day's Work: Boundaries and Micro Role Transitions. *The Academy of Management Review*, *25*(3), 472–491.

Berger, P. L., Luckmann, T., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (1st ed.). Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday.

Bick, A., Blandin, A., & Mertens, K. (2020). *Work from Home Before and after the Covid-19 Outbreak* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. ID 3650114). Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3650114

Chen, A., & Karahanna, E. (2014). Boundaryless Technology: Understanding the Effects of Technology-Mediated Interruptions across the Boundaries between Work and Personal Life. *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction*, *6*(2), 16–36.

Clark, S. C. (2000). Work/Family Border Theory: A New Theory of Work/Family Balance. *Human Relations*, *53*(6), 747–770. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700536001

Cohen, L., & Mallon, M. (1999). The Transition from Organisational Employment to Portfolio Working: Perceptions of `Boundarylessness'. *Work, Employment and Society*, *13*(2), 329–352. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500179922117962

Collins, C., Landivar, L. C., Ruppanner, L., & Scarborough, W. J. (2021). COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(S1), 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12506

Contreras, F., Baykal, E., & Abid, G. (2020). E-Leadership and Teleworking in Times of COVID-19 and Beyond: What We Know and Where Do We Go. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 3484. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.590271

Cruz, D., & Meisenbach, R. (2018). Expanding role boundary management theory: How volunteering highlights contextually shifting strategies and collapsing work–life role boundaries. *Human Relations*, *71*(2), 182–205. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717718917

Deakin, H., & Wakefield, K. (2014). Skype interviewing: reflections of two PhD researchers. *Qualitative Research*, *14*(5), 603–616. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113488126

Desrochers, S., Hilton, J. M., & Larwood, L. (2005). Preliminary Validation of the Work-Family Integration-Blurring Scale. *Journal of Family Issues*, *26*(4), 442–466. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X04272438

Ezzedeen, S. R., & Zikic, J. (2017). Finding Balance Amid Boundarylessness: An Interpretive Study of Entrepreneurial Work–Life Balance and Boundary Management. *Journal of Family Issues*, *38*(11), 1546–1576. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15600731

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *12*(2), 219–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Fonner, K. L., & Stache, L. C. (2012). All in a day's work, at home: teleworkers' management of micro role transitions and the work–home boundary. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, *27*(3), 242–257. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-005X.2012.00290.x

Glavin, P., & Schieman, S. (2012). Work–Family Role Blurring and Work–Family Conflict: The Moderating Influence of Job Resources and Job Demands. *Work and Occupations*, *39*(1), 71–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888411406295

Hall, D. T., & Richter, J. (1988). Balancing Work Life and Home Life: What Can Organizations Do to Help? *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *2*(3), 213–223. https://doi.org/10.5465/ame.1988.4277258

Hennekam, S., & Shymko, Y. (2020). Coping with the COVID-19 crisis: force majeure and gender performativity. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *27*(5), 788–803. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12479

Hjálmsdóttir, A., & Bjarnadóttir, V. S. (2021). "I have turned into a foreman here at home": Families and work–life balance in times of COVID-19 in a gender equality paradise. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(1), 268–283. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12552

Kelliher, C., & Anderson, D. (2010). Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work. *Human Relations*, *63*(1), 83–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709349199

Kerman, K., Korunka, C., & Tement, S. (2021). Work and home boundary violations during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of segmentation preferences and unfinished tasks. *Applied Psychology*, *71*(3). https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12335

Kreiner, G. E., Hollensbe, E. C., & Sheep, M. L. (2009). Balancing Borders and Bridges: Negotiating the Work-Home Interface via Boundary Work Tactics. *Academy of Management Journal*, *52*(4), 704–730. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.43669916

Kubacka, M., Luczys, P., Modrzyk, A., & Stamm, A. (2021). Pandemic rage: Everyday frustrations in times of the COVID-19 crisis. *Current Sociology*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211050116

Kvale, S. (2021). *Doing Interviews*. London. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963

McGill, B. S. (2014). Navigating New Norms of Involved Fatherhood: Employment, Fathering Attitudes, and Father Involvement. *Journal of Family Issues*, *35*(8), 1089–1106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14522247

Moen, P. (2011). From 'work–family' to the 'gendered life course' and 'fit': five challenges to the field. *Community, Work & Family*, *14*(1), 81–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2010.532661

Myers, K. R., Tham, W. Y., Yin, Y., Cohodes, N., Thursby, J. G., Thursby, M. C., … Wang, D. (2020). Unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientists. *Nature Hu-*

man Behaviour, *4*(9), 880–883. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0921-y

Nippert-Eng, C. (1996). Calendars and keys: The classification of "home" and "work". *Sociological Forum*, *11*(3), 563–582. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02408393

Petts, R. J., Carlson, D. L., & Pepin, J. R. (2021). A gendered pandemic: Childcare, homeschooling, and parents' employment during COVID-19. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(S2), 515–534. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12614

Rapoport, R., & Rapoport, R. N. (2016). *Dual-Career Families. The Social Engagement of Social Science, a Tavistock Anthology, Volume 1* (pp. 351–372). University of Pennsylvania Press. /doi/10.9783/9781512819748-019/pdf

Vieten, L., Wöhrmann, A. M., & Michel, A. (2021). Boundaryless working hours and recovery in Germany. *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00420-021-01748-1

Zerubavel, E. (1996). Lumping and splitting: Notes on social classification. *Sociological Forum*, *11*(3), 421–433. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02408386

Zheng, Y., & Walsham, G. (2021). Inequality of what? An intersectional approach to digital inequality under Covid-19. *Information and Organization*, *31*(1). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2021.100341

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kubacka Małgorzata is a sociologist. Her research interests include qualitative research methods in the areas of housing studies, sociology of emotions, boredom studies and user experience. Her doctoral thesis examines emotional and strategic dimensions of boredom management. She published in *Current Sociology* and *European Societies*.

Dorota Mroczkowska sociologist, psychologist, assistant professor of sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. Her research interests focus on the sociology of everyday life, the sociology of leisure, sociology of emotions, the gulity of life and Work Life Balance, sociology of families and intimate life.

Monika Frąckowiak-Sochańska, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, interested in the sociology of mental health, gender studies, sociology of families, and intimate life.

JOURNAL'S NOTE: *Society Register* stands neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published figures, maps, pictures and institutional affiliations.