Bounded Flexibility: The Influence of Time-Spatial Flexibility and Boundary Management Strategies on the Work-Life Balance of Dutch Women Workers

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At present, many working women face an urgent need to achieve a better work-life balance, which means having both a fulfilling career and a satisfying family life with a minimum of conflict between their roles at home and at work (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). The present study focused on two seemingly contradicting concepts: flexibility and segmentation. ‘Time-spatial flexibility’ and ‘boundary management’ are assumed to be important means in the light of creating a better work-life balance (Crompton, 2002; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). Therefore, this study empirically investigated their possible effects on women workers’ work-life balance. Time-spatial flexibility is a work arrangement that entails sovereignty for the individual worker about the timing and location of his or her work. Typical examples of the concept are flexible working hours and telehomeworking (Peters, Den Dulk, & Van der Lippe, 2009). Increasingly, researchers and practitioners alike present timespatial flexibility as a possible ‘win-win’ for both work and private life, based on the idea that it is easier to develop an employment career in conjunction with caring responsibilities. First, time-spatial flexibility can reduce work-life conflict, which is a type of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are, to some degree, mutually incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Secondly, it might also be associated with positive work-home interaction, which means that participation in the work role improves the functioning and satisfaction of individual workers and their households (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). However, the effects of time-spatial flexibility may not always be positive. Many workers struggle dealing with a more integrated work and family life, caused by more permeable temporal and spatial boundaries between the two life spheres (Kossek et al., 2006). For example, due to time-spatial flexibility, it may be both easier to continue working for longer hours, which may increase experienced work stress and work overload (Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998), and to ponder over work at moments that used to assigned to family engagement, resulting into workrelated stress in one’s private life (Bakker & Geurts, 2004; Kossek et al., 2006). As, in general, the hindrances of time-spatial flexibility at the individual level lie within humans, and not within information and communication technology (ICT) or within laws, the present study, as recommended by Baruch (2001), focuses on the personal situation of workers. The dominant work-life balance discourse suggested that it is critical for workers to develop so-called ‘boundary-management strategies’ to optimally deal with work-related time-spatial flexibility (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012; Nipper-Eng, 1996). A boundary-management strategy refers to the principles one uses to organize and separate role demands and expectations into specific realms of home and work (Kossek et al., 1999). Although this definition places emphasis on segmentation, it has to be recognized that a strategy high on integration may also be used. In line with previous research (Kossek et al., 1999; Kossek et al., 2006; Tietze & Musson, 2005), it can be advocated that workers who have some degree of timespatial flexibility in their work should strive to counter work-life integration by means of a strategy that segments work and non-work roles. Building on Kossek and Lautsch (2008) and Kossek and colleagues (2012), the present study distinguishes between two types of interruptions: work interrupting private activities and private activities interrupting work. Employing the Job Demands-Resources Model as a theoretical framework, this study aimed to contribute to the work-life balance and flexibility debate by analyzing the relationships between Dutch (employed and self-employed) working women’s use of work-related timespatial flexibility and segmentation as a boundary-management strategy (i.e., limiting work-life and life-work interruptions), on the one hand, and work-life balance (time-based, strain-based and positive work-home interference), on the other, and how segmentation moderates the relationship between time-spatial flexibility and work-life balance. Multiple regression analyses were conducted using data collected in 2011 by means of an e-questionnaire among employed and self-employed Dutch women (N=448) registered at a work agency for virtual work in the Netherlands.

The analyses showed that time-spatial flexibility and work-private segmentation have negative relationships with time-based work-home interference. Time-spatial flexibility and both work-private and private-work segmentations were shown to have negative relationships with strain-based workhome interference. However, the interaction effect showed that private-work segmentation was less effective regarding reducing strain-based work-home interference when women had more time-spatial flexibility. Furthermore, time-spatial flexibility had a positive relationship with positive work-home interference, but boundary management strategies had not. Paradoxically, it can be concluded that both flexibility and segmentation have the potential to help women workers to improve their work-life balance, and, therefore, organizations and women employees may gain from developing ‘bounded flexibility strategies.’ As the study mainly comprised highly educated, for a large part part-time working, Dutch women, future research could also focus on other labormarket groups, in different national contexts. References: Bakker, A. B., & Geurts, S. A. (2004). Toward a dual-process model of work-home interference. Work and Occupations, 31(3), 345-366 Baruch, Y. (2001) The status of researchon teleworking and an agenda for future research. International Journal of Management Reviews, Vol3.Issue 2,pp113- 129 Friedman, S. D., & Greenhaus, J. H. (2000). Work and family–allies or enemies?: what happens when business professionals confront life choices. Oxford University Press, USA. Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. Academy of management review, 76-88. Greenhaus, J. H., & Powell, G. N. (2006). When work and family are allies: A theory of work-family enrichment. Academy of Management Review,


