Too Busy to Think?: The Erosion of Boundaries and Career Well-being for

STEM Academics

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Abstract (750 words)

Boundaries between work and life are eroding due to on-going connectivity creating an 'always-on' environment (Kreiner et al, 2009). Consequently, managing the work-life relationship has increasingly become "contested terrain" (Edwards, 1979) over transforming job demands grounding contemporary careers (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). These tensions are heightened in professional and technical environments such as STEM where jobs involve high-level knowledge work, requiring continuous updating, rising performance pressures, and long hours. STEM jobs are of critical importance to nations' economic growth. They are increasingly linked to universities becoming corporatized, adopting private sector practices to manage performance (Clarke & Knights, 2015). This work intensification (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004), ironically is occurring at the same time as universities promote efforts to enhance workplace diversity (Roberson et al, 2017) and work-life well-being. This paper aims to provide insight on the role of boundaries and how they are managed by organizations and individuals to support career well-being in professional knowledge work. We draw on interview data collected from a cross-national (US & UK) sample of 40 STEM academics from two major research universities, using methodological bricolage (Pratt et al., 2020) to address our objectives. Our findings extend theory on boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2001) by moving beyond describing how individuals integrate or separate work and nonwork roles, integrating this research with how organizations enact boundary control over workers (Perlow, 1998). We acknowledge the assumption that managing boundaries involves how work and nonwork tasks are delineated, but maintain that boundary control also relates to the management of professional competence and image (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015) and the synthesis of salient work and nonwork identities (Kossek et al. 1999). Our findings show that **organizations** use three types of boundary practices contributing to a perceived loss of control: 1) *structural resources*; 2) *cultural norms and technology*; 3) *symbolic gestures*, which influence workers' perceived ability to perform, and shape career well-being on and off the job. First, job boundarylessness is growing due to inadequate resourcing and structural supports. *Chronic understaffing* with insufficient staff for core tasks (research, teaching) leads to increased workloads and the requirement to take on *"low value work"*- (administrative, IT activities). Second, ratcheting career expectations by "moving the bar" for promotion, career security and connectivity norms create a boundarylessness culture. Examples included i*ncreasing job performance standards, and blurred work-nonwork permeability* norms involving electronic tethering. Third, organizations may give symbolic attention to work-life boundaries without enhancing boundary control. Here universities engaged in *performative surface actin*g espousing a commitment to work-life well-being but without addressing workload or culture. We identified three ways in which **individuals** were enticed to follow boundary control norms. First, *careerism motivations* led to compliance with normative pressures to "perform above one's pay grade" to succeed. Second, a *"flexibility paradox"* exists where despite acknowledging having some autonomy over when and where they worked, academics chose not to leverage their discretion to disconnect during personal time. Third, some (often women), espoused the narrative of buying into *the perceived incompatibility of STEM careers for working caregivers*. Notably our early results suggested few cross-national differences, despite UK legal provisions relating to institutional supports (paid leave, flexibility) (Piszczek & Berg, 2014). This paper identifies practices relating to the boundary management by individuals and organizations that contribute to erosion of career well-being in professional knowledge work. Although career well-being is often conceptualized as an *individuals' work phenomenon* (Arthur, et al 1989), we build insights into the role of boundaries and boundary control on career well-being as an *individual and organizational* and *work and nonwork phenomenon*. It involves how individuals perceive organizations culturally and the structural support to

control how they enact personal and professional demands to align with meaningful role identities. We extend research by identifying emerging organizational boundary control practices shaping career well-being, and by showing that individuals can be socialized to contribute to their own loss of control. Extant work has examined organizational and colleague boundary violations, but less on self-boundary violations. Although though doctoral training, academics are socialized in the professional cultures of overwork, a critical perspective might argue that universities take advantage of professional and personal identities being blurred and do little to counter overworking. In conclusion, we assert that work-life boundaries and boundary control remain an under-studied aspect of career well-being and success. These findings contribute to boundary management theory showing its embeddedness in evolving organizational work cultures and structures and that individuals can collude when socialized by organizations to behave in ways the result in boundary control self-violations even when counter to well-being and values.