




# Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Employees' Boundary Management and Work–Life Balance

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**The COVID-19 pandemic altered the ways academics work and live by creating a context during the spring of 2020 when working from home was largely mandatory and where, for cohabiting workers, the home as workplace was simultaneously occupied by all household members during working hours (and beyond). Using a multi-method qualitative approach, we examine how academics experienced working from home during the unprecedented circumstances imposed by the first UK lockdown and social distancing measures. Our findings show that a working arrangement commonly termed 'flexible' – working from home – can actually reduce flexibility in a context of mandatory implementation, accompanied by the removal of instrumental and emotional support structures such as childcare and face-to-face (physical) social gatherings. Intensified workloads, increased employer monitoring, social disconnection and blurred boundaries between work and personal life collectively generate the reduction of employees' perceived flexibility-ability. Experiences may be particularly negative for those with low flexibility-willingness, whose pre-pandemic preference was to separate work and home as much as possible. Employee efforts to assert agency in this context include establishing 'micro-borders' and using time-based strategies to create 'controlled integration'. We discuss implications for border theory and outline directions for future research.**

## Introduction

The intersection of work and home has received considerable research attention over the years, with recent work highlighting how virtual remote working, supported by sophisticated information and communication technologies (ICTs), has contributed to reduced work–life balance (WLB) for many workers (Adisa, Gbadamosi and Osabutey, 2017). The boundaries between work

and non-work domains were significantly blurred in 2020 following the lockdown imposed by the UK government's response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) health crisis. COVID-19 is an infectious and potentially deadly disease, which was first reported in January 2020 and has since claimed more than 180,000 lives in the UK by late June 2022 (Public Health England, 2022). In an effort to save lives and slow the spread of the disease, the UK government imposed social distancing measures and a series of national lockdowns. The first of these took place in March 2020; all schools, restaurants, pubs, indoor entertainment venues, leisure centres and other non-essential businesses

[Correction added on 21 July 2022, after first online publication: Authors affiliations have been updated in this version.]

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were shut (The Health Protection Regulations, 2020). During the lockdown, working from home became a new reality for millions of UK workers, with just under 47% of the workforce doing so in April 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

This paper responds directly to the special issue call by examining the impact of working from home during a crisis on employees' boundary management and WLB. We highlight the need to re-examine border theory in light of new ways of managing and organizing work during crisis. Our analysis brings to the fore the impact of boundary management in employee attempts to achieve a satisfactory balance between work and non-work life during crisis. We use 'border' and 'boundary' interchangeably to represent the demarcations between work and non-work domains and we focus on a profession (academics within UK Higher Education, thereafter HE) where the notion of 'working from home' is not uncommon. Despite prior access to, and engagement with, this working arrangement, the unique circumstances presented by the pandemic created new and intense pressures for academics working from home during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020. Many academics were required to adjust almost overnight to design and deliver online teaching from their homes. Simultaneously, academics who had a family or were cohabiting had to negotiate daily family routines in the same space and time and with limited flexibility in prioritizing work and non-work tasks.

There is a growing literature on boundary management in a variety of work environments, such as those representing extreme integration of work and home domains (e.g. ministers whose homes are adjacent to their workplace and whose parishioners seek them out in both locations; Kreiner, 2006) and extreme segmentation (e.g. oil rig workers on 6-week offshore shifts; Basile and Beauregard, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to explore boundary management practices in another extreme environment, one represented by mandatory working from home alongside the removal of instrumental and emotional support structures such as childcare and face-to-face (physical) social gatherings. In this context, the characteristics of a working arrangement commonly termed 'flexible' can change fundamentally, reducing workers' flexibility in prioritizing work and non-work tasks.

Our empirical findings advance the understanding of academics' boundary management in this

particular context and show how they experience border blurring or employ 'micro' boundary management tactics to demarcate work and personal life, despite these domains overlapping in both time and physical space. We contribute to further theorization of boundary management by showing how a typically 'flexible' working arrangement such as working from home can in fact reduce employees' flexibility-ability in constrained circumstances, such as those experienced during national lockdowns. We identify a new form of boundary management whose emergence has been triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which boundaries between work and personal life are highly permeable (characterized by frequent interruptions) yet largely inflexible (with workers unable to adjust the timing and location of work and personal-life demands). This paper thus develops a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of work–life border theory (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996a), adding a novel practice gestalt that has emerged during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK.

The paper is organized as follows: next, we provide the backdrop for our focus on work–life boundaries and WLB in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its handling through the lockdown measures. This is followed by a review of work–life border theory and the impact of virtual working on WLB. Thereafter, we describe our research methodology. We present and discuss the findings and their implications, marking our theoretical and empirical contributions. We conclude by highlighting directions for future research while acknowledging the limitations of the study.

## **COVID-19: The transformation of virtual work, working and the workplace**

Prior to the pandemic, workers often had a choice about what and how much work to do from home and organizations had time to plan, manage and control such work. During the first national lockdown, both work and non-work activities took place in people's homes and engendered significant changes to the work environment. While the success of the lockdown in curtailing the spread of the disease cannot be denied, there has been widespread concern about the impact of changes to work and the workplace on employees'

boundary management and WLB (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Putri and Amran, 2021). In this section, we elaborate on these working conditions before we focus on the implications of these changes.

The term ‘virtual working’ is used interchangeably with other terms such as telecommuting, telework and digital work (Barber, Conlin and Santuzzi, 2019; Holtgrewe, 2014) and denotes the use of technology-supported work to be undertaken anywhere beyond the confines of a fixed workspace (Wheatley and Bickerton, 2016). Benefits to employers of virtual working have been identified as a reduction in organizations’ overhead costs, enhanced employee productivity due to time and space/place flexibility and autonomy over working conditions and access to a larger talent pool, given that employers can recruit workers without geographical restrictions (Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Campbell, 2016; Ciolfi and de Carvalho, 2014; Felstead, 2012; Houghton, Foth and Hearn, 2018). Individuals may also perceive benefits through virtual work, including not just savings in terms of travel times and costs, but also, at times, a better WLB and a chance to augment gender equity as well as to self-structure one’s own tasks more extensively (Currie and Eveline, 2011; Ferreira *et al.*, 2021).

Despite these benefits, research also highlights how traditional managerial practices prevalent in many organizations hinder the effectiveness of virtual working by prioritizing employee ‘face time’ over measurable output due to managers’ lack of trust in, and fear of losing control over, subordinates (Clarke and Holdsworth, 2017; Koivisto and Rice, 2016). It has been argued that virtual working increases employees’ workload and enables work to interfere more frequently with personal or family life, thus reducing employees’ well-being (see Beauregard, Basile and Canónico, 2019 for a review). Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Campbell (2016) note that virtual working curtails the prospects of forming social and informal exchanges with co-workers and increases feelings of social isolation and reduced workplace engagement. Moreover, Ciolfi and de Carvalho (2014) found that employees working from home experience reduced identification with their organizations, with detrimental effects on organizational commitment.

Against this backdrop of virtual work, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the home

became the new workplace across many professions, with the exception of furloughed employees and frontline workers. This study explores the implications of changes to work and the workplace, particularly in terms of academics’ boundary management and WLB.

## Work–life balance: Managing boundaries

Over 40 years ago, Kanter (1977) identified the ‘myth of separate worlds’ and called attention to the reality that work and non-work (especially home/family) domains are inexorably linked. This paper is guided by border theory (Clark, 2000) because its focus on how the borders between work and non-work domains are managed is critical to creating and maintaining a satisfactory balance (Adisa *et al.*, 2019). In ‘normal’, non-pandemic times, individuals use boundary management tactics that align with their preferences for integration or segmentation of domains (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2009). While segmenters establish strong borders between work and non-work domains and limit interruptions from one role to another, integrators are more likely to have weaker boundaries that allow for frequent transitions between roles (Kreiner, 2006; Nippert-Eng, 1996b). Basile and Beauregard (2016) describe how workers who prefer segmentation may employ boundary tactics when working from home. They may recreate the physical boundary of an office environment by restricting work activities to a dedicated room that is not also used for family or leisure purposes and create temporal boundaries between work and personal time by making appointments to meet friends after regular working hours, or by walking their dog at a set time every afternoon that signals the end of the working day. Behavioural tactics could include logging off work email and other systems at the end of the workday, and not checking personal emails or text messages before then. Finally, they may use communicative tactics such as setting expectations with colleagues and family members about hours of availability for each domain.

The strength of borders between work and non-work domains is determined by the permeability of boundaries and by individual differences in boundary flexibility (Ashforth, Kreiner and

Fugate, 2000; Bulger, Matthews and Hoffman, 2007). The greater the extent to which individuals experience physical or psychological interruptions (or transitions) between roles, the more permeable the boundary between domains. For instance, someone who takes a phone call from a family member and shops online for groceries while in the midst of a work task could be said to have a highly permeable work border, as it allows for frequent transitions between the work role and the family role. Flexibility can be assessed by the extent of an individual's ability and willingness to modify the physical and temporal restrictions of their work and non-work environments. These two elements can be aligned or opposed. For example, an individual whose job affords them the autonomy to adjust their work hours and/or location to accommodate family responsibilities has high flexibility-ability; that individual may or may not want to adjust their schedule or work location, however, meaning they may or may not have high flexibility-willingness. Equally, a worker may wish to organize work activities around non-work commitments and, thereby, we can say they have high flexibility-willingness, but this willingness may or may not be accompanied by the *ability* to be flexible (e.g. if their job affords them little autonomy to change work hours or location) (Matthews, Barnes-Farrell and Bulger, 2010).

Prior to the current pandemic, working from home has typically (although not always) been voluntary, with this working arrangement rarely imposed on staff by employers (Beauregard, Basile and Canónico, 2019). Those working from home were, therefore, likely to have high levels of both flexibility-ability and flexibility-willingness. During the COVID-19 lockdown, however, virtual working became mandatory for most white-collar workers regardless of their flexibility-willingness, with the physical, temporal and psychological borders that differentiate academics' work and non-work domains redefined by the government's stay-at-home order that ensured all household members, including children, were sharing the same space 24 hours a day. This represents an entirely different context to that in which previous research on WLB and boundary management has been conducted and motivates our research question: How do HE academics manage work–home boundaries and experience WLB when working from home during a crisis?

## Research methods

### Research design

A qualitative approach was used to collect data for this study, allowing for an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research is valuable for investigating real-life situations in detail (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), providing a deep understanding of the phenomenon. A multi-method qualitative approach allows for more detailed accounts of the processes and nuances of lived experiences that multiple data sources make accessible, especially when complementary methods of data collection are combined (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). In this study, a combination of semi-structured and focus group interviews formed the core research design. Whilst the semi-structured interviews permitted flexibility (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012) and enabled us to gather specific and rich data that is vital to achieving the research's aim and objectives, focus groups helped in gaining diverse insights. In so doing, we checked for congruence (Bryman, 2012). By encouraging participants to share their lived experiences through its interactive mechanism, a focus group design can increase validity (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

### Sample

It was essential for the sample to be purposeful (Mason, 2002) to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on participants' boundary management and WLB (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). We focused on academics in UK HE because while they are often familiar with working away from the office, the COVID-19 pandemic raised new challenges to working from home. Few academics were familiar with virtual meeting technology or online teaching design and delivery before the lockdown, and the learning curve for teaching remotely was steep (Hodges *et al.*, 2020; Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). Finding a suitable space to work was not always straightforward; the Office for Students' (2021) digital teaching and learning review found that 31% of academics reported a lack of access to adequate workspace and Internet connection. For academics with dependent children whose schools and nurseries were closed, work time was curtailed due to childcare and home-schooling responsibilities. Therefore, the choice of the HE

sector in this research was deemed suitable to examine employee boundary management and WLB during the COVID-19 lockdown. Although this study focuses on academics, we acknowledge that the option to work from home is not available to all HE staff – some non-academic workers were still required to work on campus (e.g. key workers who provide essential maintenance services) (Apouey *et al.*, 2020). A total of 24 academics (university lecturers) participated in the study through semi-structured interviews, and a further 21 academics participated in three focus group sessions involving seven participants per session. Of the 45 total participants, 56% were women, 87% were married or cohabitating and 80% were parents. The majority of participants were aged 36–45 years. A range of geographical locations was represented. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the sample for this study.

## Data collection

Data were collected between April and June 2020 using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Having decided to focus on the HE sector, to which the researchers belong, we consolidated our pre-existing networks. As Brewis (2014) suggested, friend-respondents are more forthcoming in data collection due to the readily built confidence and trust. Although this comes with ethical implications, we did our best to ensure that fieldwork relationships were built along the lines of the research project (Tillmann, 2010). Hence, practical steps to preserve research integrity were in place prior to commencing data collection. Participants gave their informed consent to participate in the research after being contacted by email and given detailed explanations of the purpose of and procedures involved in the study, as well as assurances that their anonymity would be safeguarded. A topic list guided the semi-structured interviews and provided flexibility to follow through on themes that emerged during participants' accounts. The topic list was informed by a review of the literature and focused on the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the participants' boundary management and WLB. While we asked in general terms about difficulties participants faced and how they managed these, no questions about specific challenges or supports (e.g. home-schooling, employer interventions) were posed.

Based on the European Foundation's (2005) approach to understanding quality of life, which investigates the causes and consequences of work-related stress in Europe, participants were asked to describe their experience of the lockdown and the impact of new working arrangements on their quality of work and non-work life. The individual interviews lasted on average 60 min, and the focus group sessions lasted on average 90 min. We approached individuals for interviews until the point of data saturation was reached. We ascertained the saturation point when we observed that the data obtained from further interviews produced no new information (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). We manually transcribed interviews verbatim for analysis.

## Data analysis and procedure

A thematic data analysis approach was adopted, enabling the authors to conduct the iterative process of initial coding independently and then collectively searching, reviewing and defining themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We used open coding as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). At this stage, the data were broken down into discrete parts and were comparatively examined for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This was then followed by axial coding, whereby the researchers searched for the relationships among the categories, which then facilitated assembling them into higher-order themes. Subsequently, microanalysis, which includes both open and axial coding, was conducted. We adopted a sentence-by-sentence approach for the microanalysis. Furthermore, the data structure was developed with the aggregate dimensions of (a) the triggers of boundary weakness and flexibility in order to explore the viability of weakness in the border between employees' work and life domains; and (b) COVID-19 and the changes to work and the workplace.

The themes identified formed the basis of distilling the key findings which the authors reflexively critiqued to ensure that we accurately represented the lived experiences of participants in the study. We present our findings drawing on these themes in the next section.

## Findings

Our examination of worker experiences during lockdown (rather than during the pandemic more

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Pseudonym of institutional affiliation (UK geographical location)	Gender		Marital status		Years in service			Age bracket			Total
	M	F	Single (with/without) children	Married (with/without) children	1–10	11–20	25–35	36–45	46–55		
<b>Semi-structured interview participants' profiles</b>											
Key University (Greater London)	2	4	1 (1:0)	5 (4:1)	3	3	1	4	1	6	
Tea University (Greater London)	3	2	0 (0:0)	5 (5:0)	4	2	1	4	0	5	
Fix University (East of England)	2	1	0 (0:0)	3 (3:0)	2	1	0	3	0	3	
Joy University (Wales)	1	1	1 (0:1)	1 (1:0)	1	1	0	2	0	2	
Mix University (North West)	1	2	0 (0:0)	3 (3:0)	2	1	1	1	1	3	
Fun University (West Midlands)	2	3	1 (1:0)	4 (2:2)	2	3	1	3	1	5	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3 (2:1)</b>	<b>21 (18:3)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>24</b>	
<b>Focus group participants' profiles</b>											
Prim University (Greater London)	4	3	2 (1:1)	5 (4:1)	4	3	1	4	2	7	
Stix University (Scotland)	2	5	0 (0:0)	7 (5:2)	5	2	0	5	2	7	
Tim University (South East)	3	4	1 (0:1)	6 (6:0)	4	3	0	6	1	7	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3 (1:2)</b>	<b>18 (15:3)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	

Table 2. Emerging themes with indicative quotations

Themes	Indicative quotations	Implications
Boundary blurring	Most of the time I am in a meeting or in a lecture or marking or in a training session and I will be attending to my children or my husband at the same time. It can be physically and mentally exhausting. (Participant 6) It is incredibly difficult to separate work from life at the moment... Sometimes, for example, I am in the kitchen making food [for my family] with my laptop just beside me in a meeting or in a training session. (Focus Group Participant 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strain</li> <li>• Exhaustion</li> <li>• Inter-role conflict</li> <li>• Imposed integration</li> </ul>
Work intensification	[T]he psychology of dealing with the changes and managing the transition from the old ways of working to this new way is challenging. (Focus Group Participant 4) The lockdown has broadened my work. I work round the clock... Honestly, I'm struggling. (Focus Group Participant 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressures for e-presence and impression management</li> <li>• Physical, mental and emotional exhaustion</li> <li>• Burnout</li> </ul>
Boundary management crisis tactics	I deliberately have to sometimes shut down everything concerning work. So, rather than allowing the pressure to consume me indefinitely, I just tend to walk away from my computer. Besides, if I do not, my kids will eventually drag me away. (Participant 16) I, for one, get up early and work from my living room before my children wake up so that I have a bit of chance during the day, I do more sports (walking or cycling) during lunchtime but then work later. (Participant 14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved work–life balance</li> <li>• Less pressure</li> <li>• Controlled integration</li> </ul>

generally) shows that within the confines of government-imposed restrictions, worker experiences were dependent upon a combination of their personal circumstances (e.g. household composition and preference for boundary segmentation or integration) and their employers' response to the crisis in terms of work demands and supports. Clearly, some academics already had a preference for – and the opportunity to – often work from home pre-pandemic, but the onset of COVID-19-induced lockdowns meant that suddenly many more were prohibited from working on campus. The initial 'stay-at-home' order in March 2020 resulted in changes to many academics' work and their mode of work, reconfiguring the boundaries between work and non-work domains. These changes were characterized by work–life boundary blurring, work intensification and the enactment of boundary management crisis tactics. These themes and indicative quotations are provided in Table 2.

### Boundary blurring

Despite the previous experience that many academics have of working from home and achieving a satisfactory WLB (Currie and Eveline, 2011; Menzies and Newson, 2008), our findings demon-

strate how the COVID-19 lockdown eliminated opportunities for maintaining existing physical and temporal boundaries between work and home, blurred the boundaries between these domains and generated inter-role (work–life) conflict for the majority of our participants. Inter-role conflict arises when the demands of one role are incompatible with the demands of another, and has negative consequences for health and well-being (Borgmann, Rattay and Lampert, 2019). This conflict is often associated with high integration of work and non-work domains (Bulger, Matthews and Hoffman, 2007; Kossek *et al.*, 2012). In the lockdown context of our study, work–life conflict was often produced by the combination of multiple role-related responsibilities that needed to be fulfilled simultaneously. This represented a very different scenario from typical pre-pandemic homeworking arrangements, wherein work and non-work duties might have been performed in the same physical space but rarely at the same time:

I work all the time and at the same time attend to other non-work-related things at home. For example, I work through my lunch. The other day I was in a meeting and at the same time dressing my child. (Focus Group Participant 7)

The quote above demonstrates an enforced shift away from segmented work and family domains, where meetings were at the workplace and child-care was at home. The lockdown measures taken to curb the spread of COVID-19 mean that these activities take place in the same space (home) at the same time. Such a physical and temporal integration of domains created strain for many participants, because it was imposed and there was no scope for adjustment:

Most of the time I am in a meeting or in a lecture or marking or in a training session and I will be attending to my children or my husband at the same time. It can be physically and mentally exhausting. (Focus Group Participant 6)

It is very draining. It's like living in a bubble... everything is jam-packed in one place and under one roof. (Participant 7)

Imposed integration of domains with little preparation time is likely to be challenging for most, but perhaps especially for those with an expressed preference for segmentation who, pre-pandemic, evinced low flexibility-willingness:

I love to go to work in the morning and come back home in the evening leaving work and thoughts of work behind and enjoy the remainder of the day with my family... no more, as work and family now co-habit under the same roof. (Participant 24)

A number of participants spoke positively of extra 'quality' time spent with family members, even when this created additional pressures related to home-schooling children, meal preparation and cleaning. This indicates that the lockdown itself was not necessarily perceived as a problem; strain was produced by the additional caregiving workload created by the absence of schools and child-care facilities, in combination with the need to fulfil both work and family roles within the same place and time:

I have to create time to help my children with their online classes. I also have to make sure they concentrate because they find the learning environment weird. I like the fact that I am helping my children to learn but this has really added to my workload. (Focus Group Participant 3)

It is not all bad after all. It might sound stupid, but the lockdown has helped me discover certain things about my child. For example, I never knew that my

son does not like bananas and a particular brand of cereal. (Participant 18)

### *Work intensification*

Boundary blurring was exacerbated by the work intensification reported by an overwhelming majority of participants. Most participants attribute the intensification to working beyond their contracted hours as a result of the lockdown. Working from home was not unusual before the pandemic, but this work was typically confined to independent tasks such as teaching preparation, marking or research. Group activities, including meetings and teaching, were conducted on campus and our participants had little experience with online teaching of the type expected of them from the end of March 2020. For the majority of our participants, the learning curve for successfully conducting these activities from home was steep and involved not only formal training sessions but also time-consuming trial and error:

[T]he shift to virtual work exposed our inadequate knowledge of virtual technologies... long working hours were necessary for us to learn the ropes. (Participant 15)

Universities' focus on a 'business as usual' approach (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021), in which staff were expected to maintain or even enhance the student offering during a public health crisis when external supports for caregiving were suddenly unavailable, generated for many of our interviewees increased work hours and pressure. In line with other research on HE workers in the UK during the pandemic (Adamson, Beauregard and Lewis, in press; Wood, in press; Wray and Kinman, 2022), our participants' employers emphasized the need to continue delivery to students uninterrupted, and to transfer all activities online instead of evaluating which activities could be suspended during the crisis. While staff were often told to 'do what they could' during the time available, there was no meaningful reduction in workload or guidance provided about what constituted 'core' activities and what could be jettisoned. References to exhaustion and burnout were common in both the focus groups and interviews. This is consistent with previous research, which reports that excessive workload is a source of stress (Faulkner and Patiar, 1997; Lo and Lamm, 2005) and leads to emotional exhaustion (Karatepe, 2013):



Administrative meetings, catch-up meetings, many training sessions on remote working and student engagement almost every day, teaching, marking and other academic and administrative duties. It's crazy, isn't it? I feel burned out. (Focus Group Participant 3)

I never stop working. The lockdown has increased my workload... [it's] very stressful and emotionally exhausting. (Participant 10)

The speed and content of change also generated pressure for participants, who despite previous experience of working from home, reported difficulties in adjusting to new technologies and new working arrangements during lockdown. Psychological strain was frequently cited as an outcome of managing change:

Dealing with the changes and managing the transition from the old ways of working to this new way is challenging... really stressful. (Focus Group Participant 4)

For some, this strain was attributed to the difficulties experienced by students in coping with changes to teaching and learning mode:

I used to work online before the pandemic but online work during the pandemic is different... teaching a lot of students online with the majority of them either not fully engaged or not engaged at all. Sometimes it felt like I was talking to myself. It's psychologically traumatizing. (Participant 11)

In addition to the work–life conflict generated by boundary blurring, participants with caregiving responsibilities also experienced inter-role conflict arising from the impact of longer work hours spilling over into what would normally be considered non-work time, such as evenings and weekends. While several of the interviewed academics had also worked during weekends pre-pandemic, they did, nevertheless, experience substantial work intensification. In extreme, this prevented parents from fulfilling family commitments:

The workload is crazy. I am at home yet unavailable for my family, especially on weekdays. (Participant 19)

For some of our participants, the need to work long hours was predicated not only by workload but also by perceived managerial expectations for e-presence. Earlier research on virtual modes of working has argued that greater surveillance and

impression management techniques, respectively, by employers and employees have become more prominent (Barber, Conlin and Santuzzi, 2019). In the pandemic, our findings indicate that participants from more than a third of the universities represented in our sample perceived a heightened presence of such mechanisms as academics sought to comply with an emergent 'e-worker' norm:

The university monitors staff online presence and activities to be sure that they are not shirking their responsibilities. For example, I have been contacted twice since the lockdown started [and told] that I am not visible. They will ask you politely [so you] think that they care about you... but they are monitoring you. So, I have to stay logged in to show that I am at work and working. (Participant 9)

I am logged in and locked online for at least nine hours every day. Otherwise, it will look as if I am not doing anything. (Focus Group Participant 6)

These findings resonate with those of Siegert and Löwstedt's (2019) study, where ICT creates a pressure for e-presence and continuous work while at home. The performative work dedication alluded to by our participants is an updated version of pre-pandemic requirements for employees' physical presence at work for long hours, which often hinders employees' WLB (see Adisa, Gbadamosi and Osabutey, 2017). Participants also commented on the strain associated with being monitored online:

I have to stay logged online so that my manager sees that I'm working. He called me on the phone more than three times the other day when my Internet was down... for me, being monitored as part of online working brings about pressure. (Participant 18)

As seen in the quotes above, participants attributed e-monitoring to managers' mistrust of academic staff and emphasized how visibility was required rather than outputs to reassure management that work was being done. Expressions of care from management were perceived as being disingenuous, nought but a socially acceptable framing of surveillance. In combination with rapid change and a heavier workload in several of the universities where our participants were employed, as well as the strain associated with the national lockdown, perceiving that one was suspected of shirking was a bitter pill to swallow for some of the interviewees.

*Boundary management crisis tactics*

The majority of participants with caregiving responsibilities reported engaging in individual attempts to devise boundary management tactics that would enable them to meet conflicting demands from work and home. This is evidence of participants' resilience and ability when responding to social changes and expectations (Fellstead and Henseke, 2017). However, tactics differed greatly in efficacy and point to the key role of individual differences in determining boundary management outcomes. Some academics devised micro-borders within the home to separate work and family activities. For example, they built in time for family by employing behavioural strategies – such as physically distancing themselves from work equipment – reinforced by communicative strategies such as family members enforcing limits on work time (Basile and Beauregard, 2016):

I deliberately have to sometimes shut down everything concerning work. So rather than allowing the pressure to consume me indefinitely, I just tend to walk away from my computer. Besides, if I do not, my kids will eventually drag me away. (Participant 16)

Others employed time-based strategies to alternate in a predictable way between work and non-work activities, shifting work hours to times when children were asleep and thereby creating chunks of uninterrupted work time interspersed with periods allocated to exercise and home-schooling:

I, for one, get up early and work from my living room before my children wake up so that I have a bit of chance during the day, I do more sports (walking or cycling) during lunchtime but then work later. (Participant 14)

This can be conceptualized as 'controlled integration', an effort to exert control over involuntary integration – a context characterized by a near fully permeable boundary between work and home. The participants quoted above enacted measures to protect their work from intruding into private life, demonstrating the agency that Clark (2000) attributes to individuals navigating work and family domains and often creating positive effects in the eyes of the workers (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021).

Conversely, some of our participants found it challenging to create or maintain borders between

work and personal life. Instead, they felt subjected to imposed integration of domains, which involves frequent transitions between roles and attending to demands from each in rapid succession. Their perceived agency to successfully manage boundaries was low, and these participants, therefore, adopted a reactive rather than a proactive strategy of tackling demands as and when they arose:

I can't switch off from work and home duties... everything is thrown in my face. This minute is work duty, next minute is home duty. (Focus Group Participant 5)

Academics unable to avoid work conflicts with childcare often found themselves extending the work boundary to include evenings so they could catch up on unfinished tasks:

My concentration is affected during the day because the kids are around and always looking for attention. So, I work into the night when they have gone to bed. (Focus Group Participant 5)

Extending the work boundary was also a tactic cited by some participants without caregiving responsibilities, as a way to both keep up with their workload and fill the space created by the absence of leisure options outside the home.

Some academics actively responded to blurred boundaries by attempting to re-establish boundaries through the affirmation of rights. This was evidenced by those who claimed to ignore meetings held after normal working hours (particularly meetings where they felt their presence was less meaningful) and instead diverted their attention and energy to their private life. Others used sick leave as a tactic to temporarily exit the work domain:

Working from home is demotivating because I can't keep up with the demands of work and home... sometimes I have to call in sick to have my own space. (Focus Group Participant 8)

While boundary blurring is not a new phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown raised it to a more extreme level wherein multiple role responsibilities competed for employees' time, space and energy and everything took place in one physical location and often at the same time. In the face of such unprecedented pressures, we find innovative new tactics developed and deployed by our participants to exert agency over the management of boundaries between work and

personal-life domains. We discuss the implications of these findings in the following section for theory, practice and future research directions.

## Discussion and conclusions

This study contributes to our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 by examining the changes it has wrought to academics' work and personal lives and the imbalance between these two domains. Our findings illustrate how the experience of working from home has changed during the national lockdown. Before COVID-19, virtual work had different contextual determinants. Organizations could select suitable activities, plan ahead and enable employees to work from home (Guest, 2002). Employees often had a choice whether and how much to work from home; to shape their working patterns and create borders that provided 'balance' between work and home domains according to individual preferences for segmentation or integration (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2009). In addition, household demands were typically less taxing, with children at school or other adult household members working outside the home. During the lockdown, work demands increased, family resources decreased and employee preferences for particular working patterns or boundary management strategies were no longer a driving factor in determining modes of working and living. Adding nuance to the literature on boundary tactics, some of our participants exerted what agency they had to enact what boundary management tactics they could in severely constrained circumstances, creating micro-borders between work and family activities in the home. Other participants perceived their options as being limited to multi-tasking to accomplish work and family tasks simultaneously or in rapid succession. This demonstrates the complexity inherent in the effects of working from home during the lockdown, with variation within the overall picture of imposed domain integration.

Our findings have implications for current understanding of border theory and the relative importance of permeability and flexibility in determining boundary strength. According to extant theorizing, a strong boundary is both impermeable and inflexible and is exemplified by individuals employing a segmentation strategy between work and home domains, with work and per-

sonal life activities kept separate in terms of time and place and inter-role conflict minimized (Bulger, Matthews and Hoffman, 2007). An integration strategy, meanwhile, is characterized by frequent and often unpredictable transitions between roles (high permeability), and a high degree of flexibility in terms of where and when boundaries around work and personal life activities are drawn (Nippert-Eng, 1996b). Work can be rescheduled or conducted outside of the workplace to accommodate family commitments, or social activities can be moved or removed in order to fulfil work demands. This strategy is associated with greater conflict between work and non-work roles, as the demands from one are prioritized over those of the other, and greater perceived 'blurring' of work and non-work boundaries (Bulger, Matthews and Hoffman, 2007).

At first glance, the lockdown context of the current study reveals high levels of integration given the overlap in physical location of work and personal life domains. However, participant accounts depict a situation where work and home boundaries were both highly permeable, with frequent transitions between work and family roles, *and* highly inflexible with regard to time and place (rather than flexible, as would be expected with high integration). Many work activities – such as attending meetings, participating in online teacher training and delivering teaching sessions – were required to be performed at specific times, aping pre-pandemic conditions. Similarly, many demands of the home or family role, such as preparing meals for household members, caring for young children or helping older ones with their remote learning, arose spontaneously or were largely time-fixed and could only be delayed or rescheduled to a very limited extent. Both work and personal-life activities were restricted to one, shared physical location. This very specific context is not accounted for by current understandings of border theory and boundary strength, and the role of boundary flexibility in facilitating integration versus segmentation may need to be reconsidered in light of the unique circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. As we have shown, integration in a crisis context may be characterized by inflexible (rather than flexible) boundaries. Our work thus shows the emergence of a third distinct form of boundary management triggered by the lockdown. It consisted of a forced working arrangement in which boundaries between work

and home are both highly permeable and highly inflexible.

## Practical implications

Mindful that organizations tend to increase control mechanisms during crises, our analysis shows the impact of (academic) employees losing some of their control and responding with changed behaviours that led to different or more intense boundary issues. With ongoing variants of COVID-19 since the initial outbreak, organizations continue to cope with the changing conditions imposed by this health crisis. No wonder, then, that more organizations are considering virtual work as a pragmatic response that is relatively low-risk, effective and cost-efficient (Selmer *et al.*, 2022; Weale and Adams, 2021). This might mean that working from home is likely to be more common and, for families with school-aged children, those children return to their homes during the afternoon, increasing family demands and boundary issues for the remainder of that working day. Similar to (albeit less intense than) the pressures experienced during lockdown, tensions with regard to sharing physical space and satisfying simultaneous work and family demands will arise for working parents. This raises issues in relation to our temporal understanding of work–life boundaries amongst changes in our working technologies and, crucially, where there are stringent organizational expectations (Collins *et al.*, 2021). Workers who successfully established micro-borders during the pandemic to protect leisure and family activities from work interruptions are particularly well placed to continue working from home effectively during non-pandemic-related circumstances that might otherwise be considered sub-optimal, such as during children's school holidays or periods of home-based, online study (e.g. revision for exams). Workers developed new skills in exerting control over otherwise permeable boundaries during lockdown, and this agency can be carried over into post-pandemic work arrangements. How organizations manage homeworkers and seek to control the performance of virtual work going forward is a crucial issue for human resource management (HRM) policymakers.

We conclude that while working from home is commonly perceived as a flexible work arrangement, for many of our research participants,

this arrangement actually reduced flexibility during a crisis situation. This was due to the context of mandatory implementation of working from home, accompanied by the absence of instrumental and emotional support structures normally available – such as childcare and face-to-face (physical) social gatherings. Worker perceptions of blurred boundaries, intensified workloads and employer monitoring of e-presence collectively generated the reduction of workers' perceived flexibility-ability. Academics were often unable to work around competing demands by rescheduling those from one domain to accommodate those of the other. Instead, they found themselves struggling to perform work and family duties either simultaneously or in quick succession to one another. Experiences may have been particularly negative for those participants with low pre-pandemic flexibility-willingness, who preferred to separate work and home life as much as possible. Going forward, flexibility-willingness among many academics may decrease if working from home is perceived as being as tightly controlled by employers as office-based work schedules.

## Limitations and future research

Our study focused on a single sector (UK HE) and a single profession (academics), to which and whom we as authors can directly relate. Whilst we remain reflexive in our research approach, we recognize the limitations of our study and invite further analysis of boundary permeability and flexibility and work intensification during crisis in other professions and in comparison to 'key workers' themselves.

As with other qualitative studies, this study is based on a small sample, which further reinforces our focus beyond generalizations and into the specific conditions that create the lived experiences of our participants. The use of Microsoft Teams and Skype as a medium for conducting the data collection via semi-structured interviews and focus groups presents us with some limitations in the areas of rapport and non-verbal cues, which would have been eradicated in face-to-face interviews. However, these technologies open new possibilities for data collection by allowing researchers to reach participants regardless of geographical location (or stay-at-home orders) in a time-efficient and

financially affordable manner (Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016).

One notable impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been the establishment of working from home, not only as a temporary response to crisis but as the 'new norm' for many workers and organizations. For those academics who struggled with imposed integration during the crisis, questions are raised regarding their approach to flexible working in future. Future research may wish to investigate how pandemic experiences of WFH inform workers' decision-making about WFH and boundary management. Are those who experienced imposed integration and little agency over boundary establishment and maintenance less likely to embrace flexible work or WFH in future? Are those who engaged in controlled integration likely to be more mindful of guarding against negative work-from-home spillover going forward? Has their self-efficacy with regard to managing the work-home interface increased?

When our data were collected, many academics were clearly struggling, while workloads increased and expectations for productivity remained high. For our participants, the employer's focus was very much on maintaining existing pre-pandemic student-focused activities and adding new ones was deemed necessary. In a social exchange such as the employment relationship, the expectation is that one party confers a benefit to the other and the other then reciprocates (Shore and Barksdale, 1998). Emerging research suggests that work intensification and/or perceived inadequacy of employer support during the COVID-19 crisis has ramifications for employee commitment and turnover intentions (Adamson, Beauregard and Lewis, in press). We invite further research to examine the impact of this social exchange imbalance as another dimension of the broader imbalance of work and non-work life affecting staff well-being.

As mentioned above, a concerning outcome of this study is the emergence of employers' online monitoring of academics' performance, experienced as surveillance within workers' homes. Corroborating Moussa's (2015) study, our participants reported that e-presenteeism generates increased stress due to the persistent fear of being monitored and judged by others (including managers and colleagues). According to Walther (2007), the impression management work required to navigate employers' expectations is detrimental to job

performance. Meanwhile, e-surveillance raises a number of important ethical and practical questions. We would argue that further research could examine the design of performance management practices and the extent to which these identify and resolve performance issues among academic staff, without relying on blunt proxies for performance such as time spent logged into university IT systems (Franco-Santos, Lucianetti and Bourne, 2012). Regular (but not overly frequent) check-ins with mentors or heads of department to discuss progress and/or challenges, accompanied by traditional methods such as teaching evaluations and performance appraisals, could be juxtaposed to account for the relative trust they instil (Farndale et al., 2014; Franco-Santos and Odley, 2018).

Despite its limitations, this study extends our understanding of WLB and boundary management beyond the UK HE sector. Our findings and their corresponding implications for the management of working from home arrangements may be generalizable to other sectors and organizations, particularly among mobile and knowledge workers such as those in the service industry, where ICTs are key to conducting business. Future research can build upon our work in several different ways, such as by investigating the relative weight of permeability versus flexibility in determining boundary strength and WLB; examining whether this varies according to situational factors and/or individual differences in preferences for integration/segmentation and either quantitatively testing or qualitatively exploring our proposition that individuals low in flexibility-willingness experience more negative outcomes of working from home.

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# Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on employees' boundary management and work-life balance

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2022-07-19

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Adisa TA, Antonacopoulou E, Beauregard TA, et al., (2022) Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on employees' boundary management and work-life balance. *British Journal of Management*, Volume 33, Issue 4, October 2022, pp. 1694-1709

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12643>

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