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Article information:

To cite this document:

Eleonora Karassvidou Niki Glaveli , (2015),"Work-family balance through border theory lens: the case of a company "driving in the fast lane"", Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, Vol. 34 Iss 1 pp. 84 - 97

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2014-0038>

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Work-family balance through border theory lens: the case of a company “driving in the fast lane”

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Received 23 May 2013
Revised 11 June 2013
11 November 2013
27 May 2014
13 November 2014
14 December 2014
Accepted 21 December 2014

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to seek to provide support and extend work-family Border Theory (BT) in order to investigate organizational and individual factors that determine the complex nature of work-family balance (WFB).

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative research was conducted in a company in Greece. In total, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. Data analysis was guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Findings – The key findings illustrate that strong borders protect the investigated, powerful, work domain and expand only to accommodate its’ needs. In congruence with BT, employees choose to be central participants in the powerful, highly impermeable and inflexibly bordered, work domain. The deeply entrenched organizational culture, as well as leaders’ behavior and leadership style, support the development of an array of positive work attitudes which boost central participation in the work domain. Due to the strongly bordered work setting, employees were found to choose segmentation as a WFB cope strategy; however, shifts in the participants’ life phase, as well as unfulfilled expectations, lead them to reset priorities and reevaluate their central participation in the dominant work domain.

Practical implications – The present study has implications for HR practitioners. Communication and open discussions on work-family themes reveal issues that can positively contribute to WFB. Further to this, organizations need to consider individual differences when they deal with WFB issues and frame interventions to facilitate this process.

Originality/value – This paper adds to current thinking in BT by illustrating that organizational culture, leadership and work attitudes have a strong impact on the nature of the work domain and its borders, as well as on employees’ central participation in the work setting and the attained WFB.

Keywords Leadership, Work attitudes, Qualitative research, Organizational culture, Border Theory, Work-family balance

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Work-family interface is a topic that has generated interest over the last two decades because reality has shown that, although work and family are separate domains, they greatly influence each other. This ascertainment is supported by the growing body of research and publications focussing on the work-family interface (Glaveli *et al.*, 2013).

Five main models (segmentation, spillover, compensation, instrumental and conflict) have been used to explore the relationship between work and non-work/family life. These models have been criticized for being essentially descriptive, not emphasizing causes and consequences, and not providing a framework for the analysis of the



boundary between work and non-work (Guest, 2002). As a remedy to this criticism, Clark (2000) has brought forward Border Theory (BT). According to Guest (2002, p. 259) "Border Theory opens up a rich vein of analysis focussing on the nature of work and family domains, on the borders between these two domains but also on borders' permeability and the ease with which these borders can be managed or moved" so that individuals can attain work-family balance (WFB).

Although, borders' strength and permeability, and border-crossers' central or peripheral participation are important in work-family BT, Clark (2000) has provided little information on factors that contribute to these elements. For example, BT discusses only certain factors (i.e. spatial, temporal and psychological aspects) that influence the strength of the work-family border and its subsequent permeability although research evidence suggests that organizational-level factors (e.g. culture) could also contribute (Clark, 2001). Moreover, whether one is a peripheral or central participant in the work domain, could be also related to organizational (e.g. culture, employee attitudes, leadership style), as well as to individual factors (e.g. life phase; Clark, 2001; Guest, 2002; Lambert *et al.*, 2006) which again have not been discussed in-depth in BT.

The current study seeks to provide support for, and expand, work-family BT by conceptualizing organizational culture as an aspect that determines the nature of the work domain and its borders' strength and permeability. The study also aims to investigate the relationship between organizational and individual factors and (central) participation in the work domain, relationships that are expected to intervene in the balancing process and affect the choice of WFB strategy.

WFB through the lens of BT

BT conceptualizes work and family as two different, but interactive, environments that people have associated with different rules, emotions, values, thought patterns and behaviors. Individuals are seen as border-crossers who are managing and negotiating the work and family spheres and the borders between them to attain WFB. Adopting a rather situationalist perspective (see Reiter, 2007), Clark (2000) defines balance as "satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict." Under such a perspective, WFB is viewed as a state that leads to a variety of satisfactions which are valued by the individual and his/her stakeholders, thus providing the possibility of evaluating ones' actions within a situational context (Reiter, 2007).

The central focus of BT is that borders and bridges between work and family must be appropriately managed in order to create and maintain a desired balance. Physical, temporal and psychological borders define the border/borderline at which work and family begin or end. A borders' strength depends on its' ability to: prohibit flow from one direction but not the other (permeability) and bend toward one direction in order to accommodate the demands of one domain or another (flexibility) (Clark, 2000). In general, boundaries enable an individual to concentrate more on the domain that is currently stronger. As such, it is hypothesized that borders will be stronger in relation to the most powerful domain.

Border-crossers deal with the differences between the family and work domains on a continuum, with integration on one end and segmentation on the other. The more flexible and permeable the borderline is (weak), the higher the integration between these two settings which suggests that a person makes little or no distinction between what belongs to home and what belongs to work (blurring) which could create

conflict. In contrast, impermeable and inflexible borders (strong) lead to segmentation. The coping strategy that individuals choose to attain WFB depends on: their characteristics, the meaning they attach to work and family, their preferences for integration vs segmentation, contextual factors, and the fit between their preferences and boundaries brought upon by their social and local context. When domains are relatively integrated, transition is easier but work-family conflict (WFC) is more likely to occur; conversely, when these domains are segmented, transition is more effortful, but WFC is less likely to appear.

Border-crossers can be considered on the degree to which they are central or peripheral participant in either domain. A central participant is defined as having influence and identification. Influence suggests that the individual: has internalized the domain's culture, demonstrates competence in his/her responsibilities and is connected to other central members of the domain (Clark, 2002a). Identification occurs when individuals closely tie their own identity with their membership in the domain. When border-crossers identify personally with a domain, they are committed to it and desire to shape it in a way that allows them to contribute and excel, which leads to their higher motivation to manage borders and domains. In contrast, when border-crossers do not personally identify with a domain's responsibility or this identification is lost over time, they feel frustration and eventually may compromise their WFB and/or terminate their relationship with other domain members.

In both work and family domains, border-crossers co-exist, co-function, communicate and negotiate the nature of each domain and its borders with other domain members, called border-keepers (supervisors and spouses). Border-keepers play a significant role in a border-crossers' ability to manage the domains by providing support.

Taking into consideration that BT is a rather new thought stream in the WFB research area, it is not surprising that only a handful of empirical studies can be found (e.g. Clark, 2001, 2002a,b; Rau and Hyland, 2002; Lambert *et al.*, 2006). These studies provide initial support by illuminating the value of a family friendly culture in the quest for WFB (Clark, 2001). Also, the research findings indicate that contextual factors and individual differences and preferences influence employee perceptions about central participation and WFB (Clark, 2002a). Furthermore, efforts have been made to operationalize the terms border permeability and flexibility, and specify which combination of the two would lead to the highest level of WFB (Clark, 2002b). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the relationship between flexibility, permeability and WFC may be mediated by individual preferences (Rau and Hyland, 2002). Also, light has been shed on the individual and context-related determinants of central participation, illustrating its complex nature (Lambert *et al.*, 2006).

However, empirically based findings to date indicate that the main variables discussed in BT (WFB, border strength and permeability and central participation) are still poorly defined and operationalized whilst there is a dearth of research on their determinants. Moreover, issues related to contextual and individual factors which affect the nature and the characteristics of the settled borders between the work and family domains, as well as the choice of a coping strategy, are under investigated and remain as central themes for further investigation.

Research methods

This research is based on a case study of one of the largest Greek companies in the Lift Systems sector (employs over 600 employees). Despite the richness of data generated

by single case studies, they have been criticized in the literature due to their lack of generalizability. They are, however, a particular relevant research strategy in the present research since single cases are useful for investigating specific research questions, developing new theory and/or countering/expanding existing theory (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008).

The investigated work setting

The company we studied has been operating in Greece for over 20 years based on the know-how and license of a foreign partner. It is characterized by a continuous imperative for change related to the characteristics of the industry in which it operates. Additionally, it is a fast growing, innovative and international in nature organization whose growth potential calls for constant organizational development in terms of structure and practices and a continuous effort in attracting competent employees and effectively incorporating them into the organization. Additionally, it is a strongly male dominated firm (due to the nature of its products). This study seeks to provide support for, and expand, BT in terms of our understanding of borders' strength and permeability, central participation in the work domain, and choice of work-family coping strategy to attain WFB.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was applied in order to provide information rich cases focussing on the purpose of the research. In collaboration with the CEO and the HR Manager, the Sales and R&D departments were selected to participate in the research that was completed in 2011. The decision related to the participating departments was made on: their core position in the organization, the excessive working hours (due to hypergrowth) and their impact on employees' turnover as well as on WFB and the company's interest in employees' attitudes and performance.

In total, 20 employees (all mechanical engineers) participated in the interviews. In all, 11 respondents were from the Sales and nine from the R&D department. The selection of the interviewees was based on their demographic profile and hierarchical status (see Tables I and II). Seven respondents were female and 13 were male; 14 were under the age of 40, 13 were married and seven were single, ten had at least one child, and seven were managers.

Interviewee number	Title	Gender	Age group	Marital status	Number and age of children
Interviewee 1	Senior manager	Male	50+	Married	2: > 18
Interviewee 2	Middle manager	Male	30-39	Single	None
Interviewee 3	Senior manager	Male	40-50	Married	1: 5
Interviewee 4	Salesperson	Female	30-39	Married	3: 3-15
Interviewee 5	Salesperson	Male	30-39	Married	None
Interviewee 6	Salesperson	Female	30-39	Married	None
Interviewee 7	Salesperson	Female	< 30	Single	None
Interviewee 8	Salesperson	Female	< 30	Single	None
Interviewee 9	Salesperson	Male	30-39	Married	None
Interviewee 10	Middle manager	Male	30-39	Married	1: < 5
Interviewee 11	Salesperson	Male	30-39	Married	1: < 5

Table I.
Profiles of
interviewees in the
sales department

Table II.
Profiles of
interviewees in the
R&D department

Interviewee number	Title	Gender	Age group	Marital status	Number and age of children
Interviewee 12	Senior manager	Male	50+	Married	2: > 18
Interviewee 13	Middle manager	Male	40-50	Married	2: 14/19
Interviewee 14	R&D	Female	30-39	Single	None
Interviewee 15	R&D	Male	30-39	Married	2: 3/8
Interviewee 16	Middle manager	Female	30-39	Single	None
Interviewee 17	Designer	Female	40-50	Married	1: > 18
Interviewee 18	Designer	Male	30-39	Married	None
Interviewee 19	Designer	Male	< 30	Single	None
Interviewee 20	Designer	Male	40-50	Married	3: 5-18

Data collection and procedure

An interview guide was formulated based on the defined research purpose. To gain full access to the knowledge and meanings of the respondents, non-directive in-depth interviews were conducted (Creswell, 1994).

Attention was paid to ensure validity and reliability throughout the research process. For this purpose, interviews were organized into two phases (sequential triangulation) (Creswell, 1994). Seven trained interviewers with different professional backgrounds participated in the research (triangulation by investigators) (Smith *et al.*, 1995). In order to improve credibility, at least one of the two authors was fully involved in each interview alongside the trained interviewer (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interviews were carried out on the company premises, in a neutral-familiar environment.

Ethical issues concerning the rights, values, needs and desires of each respondent were also considered. The interviewees were contacted only after obtaining company permission. Chosen interviewees were initially approached via a letter that provided information about the research objectives, the potential benefits of the research and the interview procedure. Participants were then free to decline participation or quit any time they felt uncomfortable. Written scripts of the interviews and research reports were available to them. Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

Appointments were booked a week in advance. All interviews were, after permission, tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim to preserve the participants' original words. Each interview lasted between one hour and one-and-a-half hours.

Data analysis

The framework of BT and the stated research purpose were used to frame the analysis of the interviews, compare the results, and define the major emerging themes. Data analysis was guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith *et al.*, 1995).

In order to improve the internal validity and objectivity of the process of analysis, a three-level data analysis was applied (individual, team and intra-team) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). More precisely, two teams of two researchers were formed. A member of each team coded the data, based on pre-determined codes related to the study objectives, although unexpected themes also emerged, and categories were identified through constant comparison of the data. The second member of each team conducted "check-coding" which "not only aids definitional clarity but also is a good reliability check" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 64). For the same purposes the two teams

(intra-team) discussed and cross-checked coding and identified categories. Feedback from the interviewees and key informants (CEO and HR Manager) was also received.

It should be added that the authors co-operated closely with three experts in the field (well-known researchers from the UK and the USA who acted as tutors) during the research design and the implementation phases of the project.

Results and discussion

The research results and discussion are organized under the current study's objectives related to providing support to BT (as a framework that can be used to study and promote WFB) and expanding it by visualizing organizational culture as an aspect that determines the nature of the work domain and its borders' strength and permeability. Furthermore, the study aims to examine the relationship between organizational (organizational culture, leadership style, work attitudes) and individual (e.g. life phase) factors and (central) participation in the work domain, relationships that are expected to intervene in the balance process and affect the choice of WFB strategy.

The powerful work domain

The texts of the interviewees suggest that all (20) employees give primacy to the work domain and perceive it as more urgent and important than the family one: "I incline in favor of the job. My family comes second unless something serious happens" (Interviewee Number (IN) 5). The preceding evidence supports the view that work has dominated the lives of people (e.g. Guest, 2002; Lambert *et al.*, 2006). This is particularly relevant in the Greek reality due to the high unemployment rates and the acute economic crisis. The centrality of the work domain and its power in employees' lives are further strengthened due to: employees' deep appreciation for the founder/leaders, specific organizational culture elements (e.g. ideal worker norm, human centrality) and hypergrowth, characteristics that arise in the form of concertive control (Myers and Kassing, 1998).

A strong border protects the powerful work domain

The interviews produced an array of examples that provide support to BT's propositions related to the nature and strength of borders. More specifically, it was found that temporal and psychological borders do exist and protect the powerful work domain. The following excerpts are characteristic: "If a task has to be completed today you cannot say it is 4 p.m. so, I am leaving" (IN 9); "Having a bad temper at work because something went wrong at home is stupid! I get paid to do my job and I have to control my bad temper and be polite" (IN 16). Additionally, work distance (over 1 hour drive for most employees) invigorates physical boundaries and enhances borders' strength.

On the whole, as BT predicts, borders are strong to protect the powerful work domain from outside influences when they conflict with the interests of the organization. It is interesting to add, that in case of emergencies (e.g. sickness) interference is acceptable. In fact, supervisors become "co-crossers" (Clark, 2000), show a genuine interest and provide the necessary resources to help employees deal with it: "The company is very sensitive when serious family problems occur [...] I lost my mother recently [...] the company supported me [...] the President himself stood by me as a father [...] I will never forget it" (IN 19).

The customer-oriented and human-centric organizational culture determines the nature of the work domain and affects its border's strength, as well as employees' central participation in the work domain

The analyses of the interviewees' reports suggest that the company has developed a strong customer-oriented organizational culture. More precisely, the interviews revealed that "the privilege of the client" is a dominant norm. A senior male manager (IN 12), stressed: "It is very important to understand that the client is always right. He/she is the one who will help the company develop." Most of the interviewees (14 out of 20) talked of being driven and organizing their work by the imperative of what they termed "spoiling" the client (e.g. working at the customers' time schedule or fitting in with their unrealistic timelines, exhibiting "heroism" in order to meet customers' expectations).

The centrality of the client, is incorporated in the workplace norms and practices and supports the ideal worker norm (Mescher *et al.*, 2010). This norm is based on the anachronistic assumption that the ordinary worker is a man, signals behaviors that imply devotion to one's work (e.g. accepting long and unpredictable hours of work) and is part of the "deal" for pursuing career advancement (Kelly *et al.*, 2010). Simultaneously, the ideal worker model reinforces gender inequality in the workplace.

It is interesting to note that the collected data also shed light on the human-center aspect of the company's culture which is manifested in the good working conditions, the supportive climate, and job security (highly valued in Greece):

I believe that the company is human-centered. You are respected, you feel secure and have the necessary resources to accomplish your job. You are supported when you face, for example, financial problems at home [...]. To lay you off you must have either stolen or stabbed someone (IN 16).

The precedent factors contribute to the development of positive employees' perceptions and of an atmosphere of trust and respect, elements which boost employee identification (Raghuram, 2012). This could be also seen as an illustration of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964).

In line with previous research in the field, the organizational culture and the positive work attitudes, promote the socialization process of the organization's members; facilitate organizational osmosis, as well as employee identification (aspect of central participation). Additionally, these characteristics strengthen the work domain and its centrality to employees' life, help establish the impermeability of the work-family border and positively affect employees' central participation in the work domain. In our view the previous analysis expands BT in relevance to the impact of organizational culture and employee perceptions on workplace strength/power in peoples' lives.

Employees' participation in the work domain is promoted through leaders' behavior and leadership style

The two senior managers that participated in the interviews (IN 1 and 12) have joined the company from the year of its establishment, are central participants in the work domain and as border-keepers (according to BT) determine/define and carefully guard the work domain. They are committed to the founder, strongly identify themselves with the organization, have internalized the dominant organizational culture and are dedicated to contribute to company excellence. One typical comment was: "We are not here to work for 8 hours and leave. We have to work hard, to complete our tasks on time and contribute to the company's future development and success" (IN 12).

Referring to employees as “my children” or “my people,” supervisors seem to have adopted a paternalistic leadership style. They are supportive, care for and protect their subordinates, are constantly present and visible and lead by example. In return, they request obedience not in an authoritarian form but in terms of accepting and respecting the company’s values, the set unwritten rules and decision-making premises. Thus, it is not surprising that employees exhibit high degrees of respect and trust for their supervisors/leaders (border-keepers) which as Borgen (2001) suggests feature effective social bonds. Furthermore, trust in leaders allows employees to focus less on self-protection and on covering their backs and permits them to dedicate more time and energy contributing to organizational goals (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2013). A female, middle manager (IN 16), stated:

I am sure that my supervisor will support me in any case. It does not mean that I will not be accountable for my actions but that I will not be left hanging with my back against the wall.

In short, trust provides a mechanism for enabling employees to work together more effectively and be motivated toward higher organizational outcomes such as performance and satisfaction (Clark and Payne, 1997). Moreover, leadership style and trust create a strong type of affiliation among employees (work team identification and commitment) and between employees and central organization members (an element of central participation), creating a sense of community and identification with the team and the organization (Clark, 2002b). In addition to the above, trust and affiliation contribute to leaders’ perceived effectiveness and tendency to “imitate” a leader’s way of acting (Memili and Welsh, 2013).

Supervisory leadership style appears to have also elements of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). Leaders provide their followers with challenges and meaning for engaging in shared goals and undertakings, push them to be creative innovative and use new methods and mindsets to solve traditional problems and questions. They also appear to inspire their employees and create in their department a supportive, developmental, challenging, teamwork driven, high involvement (sub)culture, elements that have been identified as highly related to identification (Clark and Payne, 1997):

My basic role is to motivate my people. I want people to see me every-day so I drop in their office usually just to say hello. I have good relationships with my employees and they feel free to take initiatives at work (IN 1).

Within this frame, employees feel a sense of control at work (central participants’ characteristic) and believe that they can influence organizational outcomes:

I know I have put my own little stone to the company’s success. This makes me feel very connected to the company. I see it as my own (IN 20).

Supervisors also shape an environment which not only sustains and promotes the ideal worker concept, but also further empowers the work domain, makes its borders even stronger and positively affects central participation.

Employees’ central participation in the work domain is associated with work attitudes and employees’ expectations for personal gains due to the company’s growth state

All interviewees reported high levels of: job satisfaction (mainly intrinsic), job involvement, organizational commitment, job security, loyalty and trust in their supervisor and in the organization. The following quotes characteristically illustrate the aforementioned: “I would definitely recommend to my child or friend to work here,

particularly in our department” (IN 16), “At this moment I am really satisfied with my job and the opportunities I have to develop. I respect my job and my company” (IN 17).

It could also be supported that the positive work attitudes appear to override the reported negative/stressful contextual factors (i.e. working under constant pressure, unpredictable and long work hours). Additionally, they seem to “compensate” employees for the time and energy deprived from their family and personal life. Furthermore, the identified positive work attitudes (as stated earlier) are positively associated with employees’ identification and central participation in the work domain: “I am really enthusiastic when I see that my ideas are accepted and implemented. It is at these moments that I have no problem in sacrificing time from my family” (IN 15).

The association of work attitudes with central participation found in this study is in line with Lambert *et al.* (2006) who investigated WFB within the BT framework and observed that work attitudes are positively (job satisfaction and commitment) associated with central participation in the work setting. A point that needs to be stressed here, however, and which calls for further investigation (e.g. Ngo *et al.*, 2013) is whether commitment and other positive work attitudes are the outcome of organizational identification and/or central participation or whether the relationship is more complicated.

The data also revealed an unexpected theme related to the effect of company’s growth potential on identification and central participation in general. More precisely, hypergrowth prompted employees, particularly male ones, to invest in their work role. According to Lobel (1991), investment in a role is determined by the rewards and costs associated with that role. Indeed, hypergrowth seems to have increased expected rewards in terms of career advancement and financial returns and thus effort and primacy to the work domain: “It is a growing company. Sooner or later new departments will be established, new opportunities for advancement will appear” (IN 10).

WFB and cope strategies

The interviewees, despite the demanding nature of their work, and in line with Guest and Conway (2000), report that they are in a “satisfactory” state of balance. With the exception of senior managers, participants rationalized this statement by arguing that they are in a period of their career advancement and thus they have to prioritize work over home. Supportive to their rational seems again to be Lobel’s (1991) utilitarian assertion that WFB is possible when there are unequal net role rewards and therefore unequal role investment. Moreover, employees believe that the organization deserves their commitment, trust and respect. Both justifications can be considered as a cognitive balance crafting technique that individuals use to manage WFB (Sturges, 2012).

The interviewees deal with a situation where: work is the powerful domain, they are central participants in the work domain, strong, impermeable and inflexible borders protect the powerful domain, and borders expand to accommodate mainly the needs of the work domain. In congruence with BT, they seem to choose segmentation as a WFB coping strategy. In fact, interviewees demonstrated a paramount concern to keep the two domains separate and negative spillover effects to a minimum. Also, there are times that participants try to achieve segmentation through decompression before

entering their home roles (e.g. going to a gym or relaxing while traveling home on the company bus): “When something goes wrong I try to find ways to relax before I go back home. I might go to the gym. Work is work and home is home” (IN 14).

It should be added that the effort to keep the borders tight is not always totally successful and can lead to unsuccessful segregation (Bulger *et al.*, 2007). In some cases interference, particularly from work to home, might still be present. The following quote illustrates this: “I try to leave my work out of home. But actually I carry it in my mind. There are nights when I cannot go to sleep or nights I wake up thinking about my job” (IN 1). This outcome mirrors findings of other authors who suggest that family boundaries appear to be much more permeable to work than vice versa and that work to family conflict is much more common (e.g. Glaveli *et al.*, 2013).

A supportive home/family environment seems to buffer employees from the negative effects of WFC and to positively influence their effort to attain WFB (Neerpal and Barath, 2013). As BT suggests, and the current study provides support for, border-keepers at home and other home domain members play an important role in the border crosser’s ability to attain balance. A common theme, and a deeply rooted belief in the Greek context and south Eastern European countries in general (Glaveli *et al.*, 2013), is that male employees see their wives (home border-keepers) as having primary household responsibilities. This situation is considered as the glue that will keep the family tight. A male employee, married with children, characteristically stated: “My wife made a deal with her employer and works part-time. This is very important in order to keep the family together” (IN 15). In general, most married male interviewees found support for sharing demands in the family domain from their spouse/partner (flexi-time work arrangements or housekeepers) with beneficial effects on family-to-work conflict and WFB (e.g. Seiger and Wiese, 2009). A supportive spouse may not directly help in making the work role less burdensome, but indirectly assists in reducing work to family conflict by reducing family-to-work conflict. As such, men are utilizing segmentation as a coping strategy and are empowered in their attempt to keep the border between the home and work domain strong and impermeable.

Support may also be provided by other family domain members (mainly grandmothers). These members facilitate female employees to keep the work and family domains separate and effectively manage the borders between them: “In Greece grandmothers have saved us. We have 24-hour babysitters free of charge” (IN 4). In general, instrumental rather than expressive and personal rather than work-based social support seems to work better for female employees in attaining the desired WFB (Selvarajan *et al.*, 2013).

An intriguing issue observed from respondents’ reports is that WFB is rather fragile, providing support for BT’s proposition that WFB is an idiosyncratic construct. Most employees are ambitious young people, thus working in a firm in a hypergrowth state creates high expectations for personal development. Central participation, and eventually WFB seem to be at stake if the participants’ expectations related to career advancement are not met. This is in line with BT’s hypotheses that unrealized expectations and disillusionment could eventually lead to a lack of identification with the strong work domain and re-evaluation of the status quo. Eventually, as some in our research also declared, they might even choose to end their relationship with the domain itself (Clark, 2000).

The interviews further illuminated another aspect that might threaten employees’ central participation in the work domain and cause shifts in WFB, namely changes in lifecycles or phases which are of a particular importance (e.g. marriage and having

children). As expected in a collectivistic culture like the Greek one, starting a family was seen to be highly valued by participants: "When I get married and have children of my own I am not going to want all this stress, all these hours of hard work [...] with all the responsibilities and the extra work that will be waiting for me at home" (IN 16). Marriage and parenthood stimulate employees to reassess their priorities and provide new meaning to their lives thus supporting central participation in the home domain. One typical quote was: "I believe that children are above your job, above everything" (IN 5, male). In that case interviewees, as BT posits, are inclined to set stronger borders to protect the strong home domain and attain WFB. The aforementioned evidence highlights the importance of individual factors as determinants of work-home borders' flexibility and permeability (Clark, 2002b).

The previous evidence holds true particularly for women (caregiver stereotype) who strongly question the dominance of the work domain when they have demanding home responsibilities, particularly when their children are infants: "It is true that when women return after giving birth [...] for a period of a couple of years after they are absorbed by their family responsibilities" (IN 14).

Concluding remarks

The results of this case study provide support for, and extend, BT's current thinking related to the strength and permeability of borders, central participation in the work domain, and choice of work-family coping strategy to attain WFB.

This research demonstrates that, as BT predicts, borders between work and family are strong in protecting the powerful (work) domain from outside "threats" unless there is an emergency in the family sphere. Besides, as proposed by BT, the study participants seem to have attained a satisfactory level of WFB, which has been achieved because they primarily identify themselves with the strongly bordered work domain. Segmentation as a coping strategy has also contributed to this direction. Additionally, central participation in the company is boosted through the strong affiliation between the company's employees and the work domain border-keepers. Moreover, border-keepers at home play an important role mainly in the male border-crosser's ability to manage the home domain and borders with beneficial effect on family-to-work conflict and WFB, whilst female border-crossers depend mainly on other domain members' support. Lastly, the research also provides support for the idiosyncratic nature of WFB. Indeed, WFB was found to be a rather subjective, fragile and dynamic issue closely related to individual expectations and differences.

Contradictory to BT, however, although employees are central participants in the organization, they do not have the power to negotiate and make changes to the work setting and its borders. Organizational culture's components such as: spoiling the customer, ideal worker norm, human-centrality, teamwork, innovation, and trust/security can be considered as the main burden. These cultural elements provide a common ideological grounding, communicate values, objectives and means of achievement, facilitate osmosis and socialization of employees, and most importantly impose concertive control on employees' behaviors. Thus, it is suggested that organizational culture may need to be incorporated in BT as a contributor to the work domain power, border's strength and degree of central participation. Furthermore, leadership style (paternalism and transformation leadership) and behaviors strengthen organizational's culture validity/power and contribute to the development of positive employees' perceptions. Both elements were found to sustain central participation in the work sphere.

Two unexpected worth reporting themes have emerged. Work distance invigorates the physical boundaries and enhances borders strength. Similarly, company's hypergrowth state drives expectations for rewards in the work domain boosting thus central participation. Both issues, however, call for further investigation.

Practical implications

The present research findings have implications for HR practitioners when addressing WFB and the contribution of work settings to imbalance. Practitioners need to better understand and interpret the nature and dynamics of the work and family domains, of their borders, and of critical aspects of the WFB process. This knowledge provides perspective to expand their repertoire of potential antecedents of WFB and particularly of employees' central participation in the workplace. For central participation to be a powerful tool in the long run, however, the family friendly attitude of the organization should be reflected in the company's culture and values, a much more complicated and difficult issue to address. Communication and open discussions on work-family themes reveal issues that can positively contribute. The research findings are also supportive to the view that organizations need to consider individual differences when they deal with WFB issues and frame interventions to facilitate this process.

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