

INVESTIGATING BOUNDARIES AND HELPFUL ACTIVITIES FOR MAINTAINING A  
HEALTHY WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Investigating boundaries and helpful activities for maintaining a healthy work-life balance: a  
qualitative interview study

Master thesis

Stefanie Klimow

University of Twente

S1684140

s.klimow@student.utwente.nl

Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences

Department of Positive Psychology and Technology

1<sup>st</sup> supervisor: Dr. Marijke Schotanus-Dijkstra

2<sup>nd</sup> supervisor: Dr. Tessa Dekkers

16<sup>th</sup> of September

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### **Abstract**

A healthy work-life balance is an essential indicator of mental well-being. However, qualitative research was rarely executed to investigate how and if individuals set clear boundaries between their distinctive life domains, such as their roles in work and non-work contexts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role boundaries of the working population and activities that help to maintain these boundaries by using a qualitative study approach with semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of four German participants between the age of 24 to 27. The results have shown a preference for having clear boundaries and separation between the roles of work and non-work contexts. The activities found to be helpful for maintaining these boundaries were the fulfilments of the three psychological needs according to the self-determination theory: having a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. These needs might be fulfilled by having time for the self, receiving social support and by engaging in hobbies. Additionally, participants showed the need for control over their available time for work and non-work matters to be important as well in order to maintain their boundaries. Although future research should further explore the causality between these activities and achieving a better work-life balance, the results can already be used as an inspiration for the working population to experiment with these activities and be more attentive towards their work-life balance.

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### **Introduction**

In modern times individuals often switch between multiple roles such as being an employee while also being a mother or daughter. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance can be seen as a challenge of today's societies because people are at risk to experience conflicts between their various demands and responsibilities (Otken & Erben, 2013). A healthy balance between different roles and their duties is essential for leading a satisfying and happy life (Bataineh, 2019). As research has shown, a limited balance between work and life can result in various conflicts between the several demands or responsibilities of the individual (Bataineh 2019; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). In order to minimize these possible conflicts, various studies focused on how organizational services or certain policies can help to reduce these conflicts. These services are, for instance, flexible schedules or parental leave (Bataineh, 2019). However, besides those organizational implications, current literature is lacking about the exact activities individuals of the working population carry out in private to establish a healthy work-life balance (Bataineh, 2019).

In the current literature, there are various definitions and interpretations of work-life balance. For instance, Sirgy & Lee (2018) integrate two dimensions to work-life balance. The first dimension refers to the engagement in multiple roles in the work context, as well as in the non-work context (Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Sirgy & Lee, 2016). The other dimension encompasses whether the roles are compatible with each other, thus whether the demands of one role make the demands of the other role more difficult (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). However, the definition of Sirgy and Lee (2016) is not fully applicable since it does not cover the exact life domains the individual has to integrate with each other. Therefore, the definition of Otken and Erben (2013) will be additionally used in this study. Their definition includes the achievement and

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satisfaction in four specific domains of life, which are work, family, friends, and the self (Otken & Erben, 2013). The balance is achieved when all domains are in harmony, thus when the individual is able to integrate all capacities, combines all accountabilities and is rarely experiencing work-life conflicts (Bataineh, 2019; Otken & Erben, 2013).

Yet, work-life conflicts might arise when the work responsibilities interfere with the responsibilities for the family or vice versa (Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Gisler et al., 2018). Frequently, these conflicts arise due to the time spent in one role which limits the available time for the other role. For instance, having longer working shifts reduces the available time that can be spent with the family. Another reason that these conflicts arise is the experienced stress or pressure to fulfil all the responsibilities. This perceived stress reduces the ability to fulfil the responsibilities of the other life domain (Gisler et al., 2018; Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Otken & Erben, 2013).

In case an individual is frequently experiencing these mentioned role-conflicts, various negative consequences for mental health could arise. These include an increased risk for depression and burnout, emotional exhaustion, hypertension, somatic complaints, withdrawal, low marital or family satisfaction, low mental and physical well-being and reduced resources (Bataineh, 2019; Otken & Erben, 2013; Sirgy & Lee, 2018; Gisler et al., 2018). In contrast, individuals can also experience positive consequences when achieving a balance between the various roles. These include greater life satisfaction, better physical and mental health, reduced fatigue, less experienced stress and a minimized risk of developing anxiety disorders or depression (Otken & Erben, 2013; Sirgy & Lee, 2018, Bataineh, 2019; Baltes, Clark & Chakrabarti, 2010). The positive consequences of having a healthy work-life balance are especially evident by the article written by Wayne et al. (2007) who concluded that the successful engagement in various roles of the life domains, results in the experience of positive emotions, better coping skills and the development of resources. In addition, Baltes, Clark, and

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Chakrabarti (2010) also found that juggling multiple roles can be beneficial for mental well-being since positive experiences in one role can facilitate the quality of life in the other life domain. Thus, establishing a healthy work-life balance seems to be an important component and predictor of the mental well-being of the individual (Baltes, Clark, and Chakrabarti, 2010; Wayne et al., 2007; Otken & Erben, 2013; Sirgy & Lee, 2018).

One frequently used theory which demonstrates the dynamics of work-life balance and its importance for mental well-being is the Boundary Theory (Baltes, Clark & Chakrabarti, 2010; Desrochers & Sargent, 2004). This theory refers to the general meanings people give to their work and home and how easy they switch between the roles of these two distinctive contexts (Baltes, Clark & Chakrabarti, 2010; Desrochers & Sargent, 2004). This switch happens on a specific role continuum ranging from complete separation of the roles (i.e., role segmentation), to having blurred role boundaries in which the individual experiences no distinctions in thought, time or space between the roles (i.e., role integration) (Baltes, Clark, & Chakrabarti, 2016; Desrochers & Sargent, 2004; Cowan & Hoffman, 2007). However, both role segmentation and integration serve as a strategy for minimizing or coping with possible difficulties that might arise between the various responsibilities and are both able to increase the well-being of the individual (Baltes, Clark & Chakrabarti, 2010). In case the individuals are separating their roles, managing various responsibilities is easier, while role integration facilitates the transitions between the roles which lead to better coping with possible difficulties (Baltes, Clark & Chakrabarti, 2010; Desrochers & Sargent, 2004).

So far, the most prominent studies about work-life balance include quantitative measurements. The few qualitative researches mainly investigated gender differences and cultural differences of work-life balance (Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Chandra, 2012). However, interview studies examining role boundaries and other helpful activities for maintaining these boundaries were not executed yet. Therefore, using interviews could create the advantage of a

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better elaboration about these concepts since it might provide a more detailed understanding based on a spontaneous interaction that includes questions which can clarify the mentioned aspects. Therefore, this study has two aims. The first aim is to examine the role boundaries of the working population via a semi-structured interview design. The second aim is to investigate helpful activities that maintain these specific boundaries. These aims were generated to close the gap in the literature by elaborating on the variety of activities the individual is engaging in by using a qualitative approach in which new insights and more details about their work-life balance can be investigated.

### **Method**

#### **Study Design**

A qualitative approach with four semi-structured Skype interviews was used. The interviews were analysed in form of a content and case analysis in order to show the allocations and frequencies of the established codes, as well as in form of case studies in which a more detailed view on the work-life balance of the participants was generated. The only interviewer of this study is the researcher. The study was ethically approved by the ethics committee of the University of Twente (approval number: 200337).

#### **Participants**

The participants were recruited via telephone calls by using convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were age above 18 and a full-time job. After telephone calls with six participants, five were included in the final study. However, one participant had to be removed from the study due to technical difficulties with the microphone, leaving a total sample size of four participants. The interviews were held in German, the native language of the participants in order to minimize the risk of misconceptions due to a possible language barrier.

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### **Data collection**

The interviews were executed virtually via Skype (Version 8.56.0.102) and took a maximum of one hour. The participants were asked to be at home during the interview in order to ensure a familiar environment which increased their feeling of comfort. It was assumed that this would lead to a more fluent conversation in which the participants felt safe.

Before the data collection, the researcher designed ten questions which should give an overall structure to the interview (see *Appendix*). It was not demanded to follow all these questions, although they gave general guidance for the researcher. The questions were developed based on the theoretical basis of the Boundary Theory but also included general questions about the participant's experiences with their work-life balance and what kind of helpful activities they engage in to achieve a healthy work-life balance. At the start of the interviews, the participants were asked for recorded informed consent, which was confirmed verbally. Following, the participants were told that they always have the opportunity to ask questions before, during, and after the interview. Furthermore, it was ensured that the participants have the contact data of the researcher in order to ask questions after the interview. Additionally, the participants were asked if they were interested in the findings of this study. In case they would like to know more about the results, it was ensured that they received a short summary of the results by e-mail after finishing the study. The interview was recorded by using the voice recorder of the researcher's laptop. The whole data collection took place within three weeks.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were verbally transcribed in German and participant's names were anonymised by using participant numbers. Citations used in the results section were translated into English. First, to analyse the answers of the participants, a content analysis was used. This process started with various rounds of reading the transcripts, followed by labelling important

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phrases and sentences in order to generate global patterns of the answers of the participants. Subsequently, categories were created. By doing so, a mix of deductive and inductive approach was applied. The deductive approach is illustrated by searching for the theoretical concepts of the Boundary Theory in the answers of the participants. Thus, the code *Role Boundaries* was determined before analysing the answers. The inductive approach is illustrated by searching for common and new themes in the interviews without the theoretical background. Thus, new activities which are not covered by the Boundary Theory but are helpful for maintaining the boundaries. Finally, the categories found were then combined or differentiated into main-codes and sub-codes. The final version of the coding scheme consists of the two main codes *Role Boundaries* and *Helpful Activities* (See Table 1). *Role Boundaries* consists of the sub-codes *Role Segmentation*, *Role Integration* and *Mix of Segmentation and Integration*. The main-code *Helpful Activities* consists of the sub-codes *Me-Time*, *Social Relationships*, *Hobbies*, *Time Schedule*, *Fitness*, *Spontaneous Use of Time*, and *Flexibility in Arrangements* (See Table 1). The final coding scheme was used to analyse all interviews. First, it was determined whether a relevant fragment of the interview could fit one of the main codes. Second, it was categorized into one of the sub-codes. The unit of analysis was per given answer. However, it was distinguished whether the participant only repeated him- or herself or was talking about the same code but in another context. This can be illustrated with an example. In case a participant talked about doing a specific kind of sport as compensation, for instance playing football, it was coded for the code *Helpful Activities* and to the sub-code *Fitness*. When the participant repeated her- or himself in doing this kind of sport, it was not coded again. However, if the participant talks about doing another kind of sport as an addition, for instance, yoga, it was coded again for the code *Helpful Activities* and for the sub-code *Fitness*.

Finally, since the coding scheme enabled a better overview of the main themes discussed in the interviews, it was used for the individual case studies as well. This was done by first,



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using the analysis of the frequencies of the mentioned codes established during the content analysis and second, by putting these codes into the living contexts of the participants. Their statements were then summarized in form of written text. This way, every participant's work-life balance could be investigated in a more detailed way since their personal opinions and views of their own work-life balance were emphasized as well, instead of only focusing on the frequencies of the mentioned codes.

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Table 1. *Coding Scheme*

Categories	Subcodes	Definitions
Role Boundaries		Defines the boundaries between the roles in work context and roles in non-work context and how the switch between these roles is executed.
	Role Segmentation	Roles of work and non-work contexts are separated and perceived as distinctive. A clear switch is executed between the roles.
	Role Integration	Roles of work and non-work contexts are blurred together without distinctions in thought or behaviour between the roles. Thus, there is no specific switch between the roles.
	Mix of Segmentation and Integration	The individual does not clearly perceive segmentation, nor a clear integration of the roles. How the individual behaves at work or in non-work contexts depends more on the situation and the relationships to the colleagues at work or to the individuals at home.

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### Helpful Activities

Activities that help to maintain the specific boundaries between the roles.

Me-Time

Time taken explicitly for the self.

Social Relationships

Turning to social relationships and receiving social support.

Hobbies

Various kinds of activities which gives the individual pleasure.

Time Schedule

Conscious planning of the available time for work and for non-work contexts in form of a time schedule.

Fitness

Sport as a compensation for stress.

Spontaneous Use of Time

There is no specific planning of the available time for work and non-work contexts.

Flexibility in Arrangements

Accommodations and compromises made by the individual in case of role-conflicts. These include spontaneously changing appointments, for instance.

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### Results

The content and case study analysis demonstrate that regardless of working hours per week or profession, there are similarities and only minor differences across all participants (see Table 2). Regarding the *Role Boundaries*, three out of four participants engage more in *Role Segmentation*. Furthermore, two participants mentioned that they sometimes engage in a *Mix of Integration and Segmentation*. However, they only recognized this activity during the interview and after some reflection of specific situations at work or home. An interesting factor concerning the *Helpful Activities* was that *Me-Time* and *Social Relationships*, followed by engaging in *Hobbies*, were elaborated, and discussed to a very detailed extent by every participant, compared to the other activities. Furthermore, having a fixed *Time Schedule* which allows the individual to have a clearer overview of the tasks that have to be done, was mentioned throughout every interview more often than engaging in *Fitness*, *Spontaneous Use of Time* and engaging in *Flexibility in Arrangements*. In the following, the statements of the participants will be summarized in form of case studies.

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Table 2. *Frequencies of the Main and Sub Codes for each Participant*

	P1 Male (26), Chef	P2 Female (24), Bookkeeper	P3 Female (27), Hotel worker	P4 Female (26), Web- Designer	Total
Role Boundaries	11	6	12	9	38
Segmentation	8	6	1	8	23
Integration	1	0	6	1	8
Mix of Integration and Segmentation	2	0	5	0	7
Helpful Activities	23	25	33	30	111
Me-Time	6	8	9	7	30
Social relationships	8	4	7	8	27
Hobbies	3	4	6	5	18
Time Schedule	2	3	3	4	12
Fitness	0	3	4	2	9
Spontaneous Use of Time	4	1	2	1	8
Flexibility in Arrangements	0	2	2	3	7

### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 is a 26-year old male chef cook in a restaurant. His working shifts are around 10 hours a day, four times a week. The participant is the life partner of the researcher with whom he also lives together. At the moment of the interview, the participant was not working for 2 weeks due to new safety restrictions because of Covid-19.

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### **Role Boundaries**

The participant perceives himself more as an individual who separates his roles at work and at home. He talked primarily about the distinctive behaviours at work and non-work contexts. He especially emphasized that after his work shift, he wants to go home and spend time for non-work matters instead of seeing his colleagues in private as well: “I see my colleagues all day, so I don’t want to see them after my shift or do something with them because all that they talk about is work stuff. After my shift I want to go home and leave the work behind, without hearing about problems at work. After work, it is time for my private life.”

Although the participant is separating his roles between work and non-work, he recognized during the interview that he behaves differently to his boss than to his colleagues. He mentioned that sometimes he talks about private matters with his colleagues with no clear difference between his behaviour in work and non-work contexts. Nevertheless, this is not the case when it comes to his boss with whom he acts differently and with more caution.

### **Helpful Activities**

The participant primarily mentioned the importance of his social relationships to which he can turn to when he experiences stress at work or needs some distraction from it. After talking about his workday with a significant other, he feels better and can let go of thoughts about the work. This helps him to focus better on the work itself, as well as to be more concentrated when it comes to the demands in his private life. Also, he mentioned that when there are conflicts at work with a colleague, he tries to resolve this conflict by talking to him or her. Another essential *Helpful Activity* to compensate for the stress at work and find a balance between the demands at work and private is to have time for himself. He actively arranges some time for himself right before going to sleep by watching funny videos by himself or by just doing nothing while his girlfriend is already sleeping. He emphasized how important it is to have this *Me-Time* where no one is talking to him and he does not need to answer anyone.

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Moreover, the participant uses his hobby to cook, which is also an important part of his job but still is his passion, in order to experience some fun after work and to receive a good feeling which helps him to calm down, compensate the stress and responsibilities in his working contexts. Other hobbies are watching movies or series and listening to music.

The participant mentioned that his working schedule determines 90 percent of his day while he tries to find some private time for the other 10 percent by meeting with his family, friends or is spending time with his girlfriend. Thus, sometimes he needs to plan how he arranges his available time for work and for family matters. Nevertheless, according to the participant, most of the time he cannot really set a time schedule because the time he is allowed to go home always changes and depends on the workload. Therefore, most of the time, he is not consciously planning his available time for work and for private things.

### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 is 24 years old and a female bookkeeper in a small company which produces different kinds of glasses. Her working shifts are around 9 hours, five days a week. Currently, she is still living with her parents. She is a childhood friend of the researcher. However, they do not see each other on a regular basis. At the moment of the interview, the participant only worked half-time due to the Covid-19 safety restrictions.

### **Role Boundaries**

The participant did not talk much about her role continuum and the range between segmentation and integration. Nevertheless, she mentioned that she is not integrating her roles at all and always tries to keep it that way in order to minimize the stress between her responsibilities and to be able to calm down after work. Therefore, she emphasized that role segmentation is important for her since “(...) work stuff belongs to work and private belongs to private”. She avoids mixing these two roles by engaging in different behaviour in the work

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context and the non-work context when being with friends or family, for instance. In that way, she said, she is able to keep a balance between work and private life and is able to have some form of distance to her various responsibilities in her roles.

### **Helpful Activities**

The most important *Helpful Activity* for her is taking time for herself. She consciously plans activities she is doing alone where she does not have to talk to anyone and can be by herself and focus on herself. Also, she emphasized how important it is for her to have time in which she is not doing anything. During the interview, it comes apparent how important the *Me-Time* is for her and how actively she tries to accomplish as much time for herself as possible to get some relief after work and to find the harmony between the several duties of her life. An important activity for the participant is turning to social relationships in order to get a balance between work and non-work. She talks with them when having problems at work in order to reduce stress, feel better afterwards, and concentrate on other things when she is home. Other things that are helpful for keeping the boundaries are engaging in hobbies, like reading, going for a walk or watching movies. These things are fun for her and important compensations after her working shifts and allow her to get her mind free and focus on other things than work.

The participant mentioned that she is consciously planning time for private things after work. This entails eating with her family or boyfriend, watch some tv series to calm down and not doing anything for work at that moment. Having a set time schedule is important for her to keep the boundaries between her various roles. However, there were various situations in the past in which the participant experienced conflicts between work and non-work contexts due to overtime shifts. In these cases, she had to adjust the private appointments she made by postponing them which gave her negative feelings. Nevertheless, she has a supporting and understanding social environment, which has empathy for her and her work duties.



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### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 is 27 years old, female and works full-time in a hotel. She lives together with her fiancé. Her shifts always change but in total, she works 9 hours, five days a week. Since almost two years she is befriended with the researcher. They see each other every three to four weeks. At the moment of the interview, the participant was not working for one week due to safety restrictions because of Covid-19.

### **Role Boundaries**

The participant emphasized right at the beginning of the interview that she does not separate her roles at all and behaves completely the same at work as in private. She mentioned that at work she is talking a lot about private matters and that she and her colleagues are very good friends who share a lot with each other. She does not perceive any difference in thought or behaviour between work and non-work. This is also evident in the fact that she is thinking a lot about work matters at home. Therefore, she often experiences difficulties to calm down after work due to her thoughts and concerns regarding her duties. She mentioned how difficult it is for her to have a clear cut in which she can merely focus on private things after her work. Nevertheless, during the conversation, the participant noticed some distinction in her behaviour and thoughts concerning the trainees at work, after all. Due to negative experiences with them in the past, in which they did not respect her as their leader, she decided to have a completely professional relationship with them in which she only talks to them about work struggles without sharing any private information. After some reflection about this insight, the participant acknowledged that her behaviour depends on the person she is confronted with and that they influence if she acts in her “private role” or “working role”.

### **Helpful Activities**

The participant talked about her very supportive social environment in which she can

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always talk about her problems and compensate for stress. Nevertheless, the most significant and important strategy for her to be happy and find the harmonization between her various duties is having *Me-Time*. She plans this time actively and consciously after her working shift in which she can be alone and can reflect the day while doing nothing specific. Furthermore, she engages in *Fitness* as a compensation for the stress at work and tries to devote herself to her hobbies, like cooking or reading. She mentioned that the combination of engaging in a hobby and thereby being alone is the most relaxing strategy for her to be happy despite different demands and responsibilities.

The participant is actively planning her time for things that must be done at work and things that she is doing in private. For instance, she always counts one hour more for her shift because she knows that sometimes she has to work over hours. By doing so, she actively sets a time schedule for her available time but also engages in some arrangements for more flexibility in order to reduce conflicts in case she has some private appointments after work she cannot attend to because of this over hour. Nevertheless, after this hour she tries to consciously take time for non-work things only, although her mind is often busy with work responsibilities.

### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 is 26 years old, female and works full-time as a web-designer. Currently, she is living alone. Her shifts include 8 hours a day for five days a week. She is also a childhood friend of the researcher and they see each other once every year. Despite the Covid-19 crisis, at the moment of the interview, the participant was working full-time as usual.

### **Role Boundaries**

The participant mentioned that from time to time she is not distinctive in her roles in work and non-work. This is shown by the fact that she is often talking about private things at work or is going out with her colleagues in her private time. Additionally, sometimes she is

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taking care of private things while being at work or is distracted by her private phone. Since she is also doing home-office from time to time, she has to take care of working things and responsibilities at home which sometimes hinders her to separate the roles.

Nevertheless, she noticed the blurred boundaries between her roles in the past and lately tries to actively separate these roles by turning her phone off or by actively saying to herself that she has to concentrate on the work now and afterwards has time for private things. Most of the time this works well for her and she is able to calm down at home without thinking too much about work. This way, she is able to maintain the boundaries between the roles.

### **Helpful Activities**

The participant intensely emphasizes the importance of turning to her *Social Relationships* in order to feel happy despite the various demands. When she experiences stress or conflicts at work she always talks to her family and friends who support her and give her a positive feeling and confidence for the future. Her social environment is very important for her and turning to them is the most efficient activity for her to calm down after work and find a balance between her responsibilities at work and non-work. Nevertheless, she also mentioned that before talking to anyone about her problems, she needs some time by herself in which she is engaging in relaxation activities. These include, for instance, doing relaxation techniques or just doing nothing. She emphasizes the importance of having *Me-Time* frequently. Furthermore, she actively and consciously tries to distract herself from the conflicts at work or in private by engaging in hobbies. These are, for instance, cooking and watching movies. Furthermore, she mentioned doing some *Fitness* as another compensation and distraction from her stress at work which gives her positive emotions and experiences. These activities help her to focus afterwards on possible solutions for conflicts and enable her to maintain the balance between work and non-work responsibilities.

The participant also mentioned that she is actively planning her time schedule. After

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work, she first tries to take care of private things, which are for instance cooking or taking care of the household. For these activities, she usually plans one or two hours of her available time. Only after she distracted herself with private things that needed to be done, she is doing something for her work on her laptop. This is her way to improve the segmentation of her roles and her concentration on her work that she has to do from home. However, she also mentioned that sometimes she is doing private and working things on a more spontaneous manner in which she decides at the moment if there is still time to do something for work or not, without planning it too much. This, however, depends on the daily tasks she has to do.

Moreover, the participant mentioned *Flexibility Arrangements* she had to undertake in the past when she had to work over hours. In these cases, she had to postpone private appointments which gave her a negative feeling but there was no other way to resolve the situation. So, she just did the over hours and had the feeling to disappoint her friends. In these situations, she had the feeling of not being in a balance between work and private life and not being able to maintain the boundaries between these two contexts.

### **Discussion**

The current study investigated the *Role Boundaries* and helpful activities of the working population to maintain these boundaries for a healthy work-life balance. The sample consisted of three female and one male participant living in Germany who participated in a semi-structured interview study. Results have shown that the segmentation of the roles and clear boundaries between work and non-work is preferred. Furthermore, the most important activities for maintaining these boundaries reported by the participants were having *Me-Time*, turning to *Social Relationships*, and engaging in *Hobbies*, followed by having a set *Time Schedule*.

### **Main findings**

The first main finding of the current study was role segmentation to be frequently used

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and preferred by the participants in order to achieve harmony between the duties of their roles. However, when analysing the statements of the participants, it comes apparent that they still struggle to separate their roles completely since they might talk about work matters during their private, non-work time, for instance, or are working with their friends who they also see in private. Therefore, although they show a preference, the execution of role segmentation might be still a challenge for the working population, when looking at the interviews of this study. However, the preference for role segmentation is in line with the results from Schultz, Hoffman, Fredman and Bainbridge (2012) who used a qualitative study approach as well, although with electronic open-ended questionnaires sent to their participants. Their results indicate that young individuals with no children, similar to the sample of the current study, prefer role segmentation by setting clear boundaries between their different roles (Schultz et al., 2012). This strategy eventually protects one life domain from negative influence coming from the other life domain, which was already indicated as the “negative spill over effect” in the literature review by Poelmans, Kalliath & Brough (2008). Thus, by engaging in role segmentation, the mental health can be protected and better performances in roles can be generated, as Schultz et. al (2012) concluded in their study. Since the age range and the fact that the participants of the current study also had no children, it might be an explanation why their findings are in line with the current study. Additionally, another study which also used electronic questionnaires but included a wider sample with no differences in terms of age and variety in terms of gender, also found that role segmentation is strongly preferred and executed among the working population (Mellner, Aronsson, & Kecklund, 2014). Taken together the results of prior studies and the results of this interview study, role segmentation seems to be preferred among the working population regardless of age or gender. This might be due to the fact that the individuals try to avoid the negative experience of one life domain influencing the other life domain in a negative way as well (Schultz et. al, 2012; Poelmans, Kalliath & Brough, 2008).

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The second main finding is that, according to the participants of this study, the most *Helpful Activities* for maintaining their boundaries were having time for the self and receiving social support, followed by engaging in hobbies. The self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2008) might provide an explanation for this finding. This theory includes three basic psychological needs which need to be fulfilled for optimal human functioning: autonomy, relatedness, and competence, which can be found in the current study as well (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe & Ryan, 2000; Van den Broek, Vansteenkiste, Witte, Spoenens & Lens, 2010). First, the participants emphasized the importance of having *Me-Time*. This could be explained with the need for autonomy which might be achieved by having time for the self in which the individual is free to decide what to do without restrictions or distractions. Second, the participants also reported the need for social support, which is also indicated in the self-determination theory since the need for relatedness compromises the feeling of being close to significant others (Reis et al., 2000). The third *Helpful Activity* which was mentioned by the participants was the engagement in hobbies, which demonstrates the connection to the need for competence. The feeling of being competent compromises the feelings of being able to accomplish desired effects and outcomes, which in the current study might be represented with the engagement in *Hobbies* (Reis et al., 2000).

However, engaging in hobbies was not that important compared to having time for the self and receiving social support. This phenomenon can be explained with the results found by Schiffer and Roberts (2018). Their study indicated that although individuals know that flow activities, or hobbies, bring them long-term happiness, they still prefer leisure activities with low investment (Schiffer & Roberts, 2018). Thus, the activation of energy which is required to execute the flow activity or hobby might seem too high and intimidating (Schiffer & Roberts, 2018). This might be the reason why engaging in *Hobbies* is not equally important and not frequently addressed by the participants compared to the other *Helpful Activities*. Consequently,

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the psychological need of being competent seems to be less essential for having a work-life balance compared to fulfilling the need for autonomy and relatedness. Therefore, the self-determination theory in relation to work-life balance seems only partly applicable since not all three psychological needs were found equally important. However, combining the *Helpful Activities*, it is still remarkable that the self-determination theory is not only important for general human functioning but seems to be evident in having a healthy work-life balance across the working population, as well. So far, the current study is the first to found work-life balance to be related to the self-determination theory.

The third main finding of the current study is that the participants prefer having a set time schedule in order to maintain the boundaries between the different role contexts. So far, research investigating the importance of having integrated time schedules for work and non-work contexts rarely exist. However, the qualitative interview study by Tausig and Fenwick (2001) investigated the effects of having a determined working schedule. Their results have shown that it is not the exact working schedule which determines the work-life balance but more the individual's perception of having control over their schedule (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). Although their conclusions only include the working schedules of the employees, the need for control over time might also explain the findings of the current study. This is also in line with the literature review by Grawitch, Barber & Justice (2010), who analysed various articles about personal resources and work-life balance. One conclusion they have drawn was that individuals who decide how much time they spend for work and non-work matters experience greater control over how to manage their resources (Grawtich, Barber & Justice, 2010). Additionally, perceiving control over time by engaging in a certain time management strategy might be also an important coping mechanism for stress, as found to be evident across college students (Nonis, Hudson, Logan, & Ford, 1998). Although the sample differs in comparison with the current study, as well as the study aim, it is noticeable that the urgency of

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having control over the available time might be evident across the working population and their work-life balance as well. Consequently, setting a time schedule for work and non-work matters might give the participants a sense of control over their time which probably lessens perceived stress.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of the current interview study is that by using a semi-structured interview design, detailed information about the participant's activities of how they achieve their work-life balance could be obtained with greater attention to the individual's point of view. Another strength is the mix of the inductive and deductive approach. By using this kind of methodology, not only predetermined concepts were found, but also new insights could be generated, such as various *Helpful Activities*. This way, a detailed overview of important themes concerning the participant's work-life balance were found and analysed.

However, various limitations need to be considered as well. The first limitation is the insufficient sample size, as well as its lack of gender and age variety. The sample size consisted of only four participants, which results in low generalizability of the findings, as well as a low internal validity. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution and only serve as a starting point for further research. Second, the interviews and analyses were conducted by only one researcher. Thus, the way questions were asked could be inconsistent since there was no other person present to assess the interviewer's method to ask the questions. This could lead to rather low reliability and to the fact that the answers of the participants are difficult to compare to each other due to the possibility of inconsistency in the way the questions were asked. Furthermore, no interrater reliability could be calculated which questions the researcher's accuracy concerning her coding scheme, as well as the correct representation of the variables which were intended to be measured. Moreover, the close relationship between the researcher and the participants could also have a negative effect on the results of this study. Since the



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researcher and the participants knew each other very well, it might be that the participants gave socially desirable responses. This aspect could have a negative effect on the study in so far, that the participants withheld information because of the close relationship, and they did not want the researcher to know all the stress experienced at work or in private. Thus, the participants might withhold other strategies or activities they use in order to keep less socially desirable strategies hidden. Nevertheless, the close relationship could still make it more comfortable for the participants while answering the questions due to a more relaxed atmosphere.

Third, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the interviews were held via Skype since face-to-face meetings could not be arranged because of safety restrictions concerning new possible infections. This had the effect that one interview had to be excluded from the data collection because the voices of the researcher and the participant were not recorded properly, which made the coding of the interview impossible. Additionally, in 3 other interviews, there were some difficulties with the internet connection which, however, could be solved within a few minutes. Nevertheless, due to the insufficient internet connection from time to time, there were breaks during the interview which interrupted the conversation between the researcher and the participant. This could have had a negative influence on the answers of the participants because participants seemed to lose their patience to repeat the answer to the question multiple times. Therefore, they repeated their answers shortly instead of elaborating it the way they did the first time. Moreover, since the researcher and participant were not seeing each other in person, only limited observational and non-verbal information was given. Although the researcher was able to see the faces of the participants, information about their body language was missing, which would have helped to build a better connection with the participant and observe how they were feeling during the interview.

A related limitation resulting from the Covid-19 crisis is that three of the four participants were not currently working full-time due to extra safety restrictions. Therefore,

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they had to think in retrospect, which could also have a negative influence on their answers since they were not currently experiencing possible stress at work and did not have to engage in, for instance, role segmentation or helpful activities that maintain their specific boundaries. However, these two participants, who were not currently working, possibly experienced other forms of stress by experiencing feelings of insecurity and anxiety due to the risk of losing their job, for instance. Therefore, these participants might have experienced less stress because they had to stay at home and were not bothered by arranging a healthy work-life balance or experienced even more stress because they were afraid of losing their job. Due to these extraordinary circumstances, the results would possibly be different if their working situation would be as usual.

### **Future Research and Practical Implications**

For future research, it is important to examine possible differences between the helpful activities that maintain a healthy work-life balance between women and men. Additionally, the participants had the same range of age, which should also be considered for future research. By investigating different ages, a more general and detailed insight can be enabled concerning the work-life balance of full-time working individuals and future interventions based on this information could improve and support workers with maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Furthermore, the current study showed that role segmentation and having clear boundaries is preferred by the participants of this study. Additionally, the fulfilment of the three psychological needs derived from the self-determination theory seems to be important for the working population, as well as the sense of having control over the available time for work and non-work matters. However, the current study neither investigated the effectiveness of the *Helpful Activities* for improving work-life balance, nor if these activities indeed fulfil the psychological needs according to the self-determination theory. Future experimental studies are needed in which the participants are encouraged to engage in these activities and measure at the

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end of the study whether the three psychological needs are indeed fulfilled, as well as their perception of any improvement concerning their work-life balance. This way, further insights can be generated concerning the relatedness of the self-determination theory and achieving a healthy work-life balance.

Today, various policies exist to reduce work-life conflicts, as highlighted by Bataineh (2019). However, the focus of these policies is to provide assistance when conflicts arise or to avoid these conflicts, which include, for instance, childcare or parental leave (Bataineh, 2019). So far, these policies do not include any emphasis on role segmentation, the three psychological needs autonomy, relatedness, and competence, and getting in control over the available time. Although no effectiveness of these activities was investigated, the results of this study recommend providing the working population with suggestions to integrate these kinds of activities in their lives. This psychoeducation should include information about seeking for clear role boundaries by engaging in role segmentation, taking care of the psychological needs, and setting a specific time schedule. This can be done by distributing information sheets in various companies or develop an intervention program which consists of diverse stakeholders that visit companies and inform the employees, especially the companies' unions, about these activities and the importance of a healthy work-life balance. Additionally, websites could be designed which also contain information about this study and suggestions for a better work-life balance. On these websites, the individuals can also find psychologists which could help them to cope better with experienced stress at work and how to integrate the *Helpful Activities* into their daily routines. Social media could advertise these websites in order to reach as many individuals as possible. Although nothing is known yet about the effectiveness of these *Helpful Activities*, these suggestions will at least encourage individuals to investigate ways to establish their work-life balance by experimenting with these activities and reflect on the fulfilment of their psychological needs.

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### **Conclusion**

To summarise, the current study gave important insights into the role boundaries of full-time working individuals and their activities that help to maintain these boundaries for a healthy work-life balance. It was found that role segmentation was preferred among the participants for developing their work-life balance. In order to maintain the role boundaries and having a healthy work-life balance, the fulfilment of the psychological needs of the self-determination theory was found to be important. These needs might be fulfilled by taking time for the self, turning to social relationships and engage in hobbies. Additionally, having a sense of control over the available time for work and non-work matters by setting a clear time schedule for each life domain is another helpful activity for keeping the balance and boundaries between the different roles, according to the participants. Although no causality or effectiveness of these activities for the improvement for work-life balance was investigated, the results can already serve as a starting point for further investigations. Moreover, the findings can be communicated to the working population as an inspiration and encouragement to be more attentive towards their work-life balance and experiment with strategies to establish a healthy work-life balance, regardless of the various responsibilities they might have in their various roles.

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**Appendix**

Interview Guide

1. What is work-life balance for you?
2. How do you organize this balance?
3. Is there a difference between how you behave at home and how you behave at work?
4. Have you ever experienced some conflicts between the responsibilities at work and the responsibilities at home?
5. What do you do to resolve those conflicts?
6. How do you organize your time for private matters and work responsibilities?
7. Are there any specific activities you engage in in order to establish a healthy work-life balance?
8. Do you have developed certain strategies to experience a better work-life balance?
9. What are you doing to concentrate better on tasks for your work and tasks for private matters?
10. What are you doing when you have the feeling of a certain imbalance between your work and private life?